



CASTLES

By FRANK BRUNI

Jimmy wrestled with the rusty door of his '67 Chevrolet. For fifteen years, he thought, I've been driving this damn wreck. But not much longer. This is going to be the year of Jimmy Cooney.

Jimmy had put a great deal of thought into his current line of work. While he had started selling skateboards only weeks before they joined the list of forgotten fads and had invested in citizens band radios when he should have been looking forward to Sony Walkmen, this time he was sure he was right on top of the market. Bomb shelters were coming back.

He contemplated all of the reasons for their resurgence as he drove along Route 119 towards Greensdale. Amidst the forgotten, deserted factories of Fall River, he prophesied a full-scale nuclear war in Nicaragua. He saw a nuclear holocaust in the Middle East when he gazed at the shopping malls of Richfield. And when he looked into the large display windows of the car dealerships off the road in Greensdale, he envisioned a new, wealthy lifestyle for Jimmy Cooney.

Jimmy reached over to the passenger seat and grabbed a white sheet of directions he had written out when on the telephone with George Springer that morning. He alternated glances at the road and at the almost unintelligible scrawl in his lap. Left at the stoplight before the service road to the airport. Good. That would be just a minute or so up the road.

The well-polished, seductive facades of the buildings in Greensdale's small commercial district gradually flattened and softened into the short, dark-leaved trees and dying tobacco plants of Bloomfield. These, too, shrank and disappeared until all that remained were barren stretches of hardened soil and brown grass. And then, as oddly and suddenly as the appearance of a redwood in the desert would be, the community of Hoppesville sprang up.

Jimmy looked once again at his directions as he turned onto Soundview Avenue. He commended himself for attaching an address to the description of the Springers' home, for their house was a cookie-cutter clone of the houses surrounding it — split-level, aluminum-sided boxes with the same placements of windows, doors and garages. There were very few trees, an especially peculiar feature for a New England neighborhood. The land had obviously been leveled by contractors looking for the easiest methods of construction. There was little, save an occasional variation in color, to distinguish one home from another. No individual identity except for the small, black, wooden digits nailed to the mailbox at the end of each flawlessly tarred driveway.

Jimmy laughed because he knew that this neighborhood was nothing like the kind that awaited him. Rolling green lawns, brick walls, sculptured fountains and backyard pools. Yes, all of it, all of that happiness and distinction would someday be his. And George and Alice Springer were going to help him see to that.

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Jimmy remembered what his mother used to tell him time and time again. "If you put your castles in the air, make sure you build foundations under them." Jimmy had never doubted her wisdom. He was, he thought, moments away from the beginning of the brickwork.

As Jimmy twisted the key in the ignition and heard the motor of the car die, he felt his stomach float, his bowels waver. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a comb and a roll of breath mints. After popping three — one had to be absolutely sure in matters of such importance — mints into his mouth, he reached up to the rear view mirror and watched his face slide sideways into it. A few clean sweeps with a comb, he thought, and I'll look like a million. I'll be able to talk a priest into buying condoms.

A Christmas wreath hung on the Springers' front door. Jimmy checked his digital watch for the correct date. November 15, just as he had thought. Some people, he thought, jump the gun.

Jimmy lifted his arm to knock on the door, but before his fist had even begun to descend, the door swung open to reveal a tall, lean man with only a few locks of silver hair and a pair of glasses with large round lenses which accented the enormity of his blue-gray eyes.

"You must be Mr. Cooney." The old man thrust his right hand forward. "George Springer. I've been watching for your car for some time now. Been looking forward to talking with you."

George's abrupt appearance and alacrity left Jimmy speechless for a few seconds. "Um, oh, excuse me. I'm Jimmy Cooney." He laughed one of his friendly, hopefully ingratiating laughs. "It's great to meet you, Mr. Springer."

George's smile revealed the absence of several teeth. For a moment, Jimmy let himself take a liking to this old man with such a charmingly whimsical appearance, but then he reminded himself that this was business, and there was no room for sympathy or any other potentially dangerous emotion where business was concerned.

"Please, Mr. Cooney, come in. My wife, Alice, is making a fresh pot of coffee. It'll take that winter chill out of your bones. November's a nasty month. The cold creeps up on you faster than you know it." George laughed and Jimmy echoed him. We'll get along fine, Jimmy thought. We'll get along just swimmingly. He let the image of a new car — a Ferrari, perhaps — pop into his mind.

Jimmy wiped his shoes on the bright green WELCOME mat inside the front door. Looking up, he took a quick survey of the Springers' home. Traditional — no, make that boring — furniture, distinguished only by its orderly arrangement. A simple brass chandelier hung in the dining room to the left while the center of attention in the living room to the right was a large mahogany coffee table, around which the couch and chairs were arranged as symmetrically as possible. Powder blue carpet screamed out from beneath the furnishings in both rooms.

"You have a lovely home, Mr. Springer," Jimmy said. "Your wife has a real eye for coordination, doesn't she?"

"Yes, she does. She's a wonderful woman. Thirty

years together — yeah, it's been that long — and every moment's been a pleasure. I'd like thirty more of the same. That's one of the reasons I called you."

Jimmy immediately recognized and appreciated George's willingness to open up, his generosity of self. Jimmy knew he could use it to his advantage. "And where is your wife? I assume you'd like for her to join in our discussion. It's certainly a matter of the utmost importance," Jimmy said. Mentally, he patted himself on the back. Jimmy Cooney, he thought, you're an eloquent bastard.

"Alice, come on out here and join Mr. Cooney and myself."

From nowhere, a loud voice announced Alice Springer's presence in some nearby room. "Oh! I didn't hear him come in. I'll be out in just a second."

Jimmy smiled. "I'm looking forward to meeting your ..."

"Oh, Mr. Cooney, please forgive me," Alice Springer's invisible presence rang out once again. "I didn't welcome you to our home. Please, make yourself as comfortable as you'd be at your own mother's place. I'm coming out in just a bit with some coffee and I've even rounded up a few cookies. Give me just one minute."

Jimmy opened his mouth, expecting, as always, to have the perfect response on hand. Instead, he felt his body fill with warmth and melt to a chuckle. "Thank ... thank you, Mrs. Springer. That'll be just fine."

Mr. Springer began to walk into the living room and gestured Jimmy to follow him. "Mr. Cooney, please don't call us by our last names. I'm George and my wife is Alice. I really do insist."

"Fair enough, but then I'm Jimmy. I too insist." Jimmy took a seat in the chair next to the couch on which George sat. It may not look like a whole lot, Jimmy thought, but this furniture is comfortable. Lived in.

Jimmy looked at George. The old man's eyes still sparkled with a blueness which refused to dim, a blueness which suggested youth and innocence and betrayed the reality of old age. Catching Jimmy's gaze, George smiled and shrugged. Jimmy started. Damn it, he thought, this guy's just trying to make me forget what I came here for. But I'm here to make a sale. And I'm going to make a sale.

"Mr. Springer — I mean, George — I've brought some information which elaborates on the pamphlet you must have seen before you contacted me." Jimmy pulled a manila folder from beneath his sport jacket. He never used a briefcase. Didn't believe in them. Thought they were too formal, made the customer slightly uneasy.

Jimmy's eyes leaped from the folder when a small woman suddenly emerged from behind the swinging door off the dining room. She moved frenetically, readjusting a vase on this table and a photograph on that one. Her features — a short, wide nose, lips with all of the color and apparent softness of youth, and camel-colored eyes — grew more and more distinct as her tiny frame approached Jimmy in a weaving, stop-and-go fashion. Then, just when Jimmy could see her well enough to feel a vague familiarity with her presence, she came to an abrupt halt, opened her mouth wide and then