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can affect all of us. You can never know what's going to happen."

George agreed wholeheartedly, as Jimmy knew he would. The old man regained some of the enthusiasm he had displayed when he first entered the house. He began to talk about what kinds of things he and Alice wanted to put in the shelter and how they wanted it well-concealed, so no one would know it was there.

Jimmy nodded and "hmmmed" as he half-listened to George's verbal meanderings. He heard the background noise of a distant airplane's engine.

" . . . and I think I know just the spot in the backyard where I'd like the shelter to be dug," George stood up and motioned for Jimmy to follow him.

Alice grunted unhappily as she struggled to resurface from the depths of the sofa. "Right when I was all comfortable," she muttered just loud enough for Jimmy to hear her, and she winked at him.

She and Jimmy followed George to the broad bay window at the rear of the living room. The three shuffled for position as George's speech hastened. Jimmy ended up standing between George and Alice. Each peered out a separate pane of glass at the small backyard. The grass was turning brown and shrinking at the insistence of winter's icy approach. The few trees stood naked, austere. In the center of the square lot an oddly conspicuous shovel, its spade almost invisible, jutted out of the earth.

George's arms were in the air, his fingers pointing out various features of the fortress he hoped to construct.

"As you see, I've put a shovel where I think the shelter should be dug. I want easy access and . . ."

He stopped suddenly, creased his forehead and raised his eyebrows. Jimmy looked at him and then at Alice, who wore the same expression of bewilderment upon her face. A whirring of sorts — a slowly crescendoing sound unlike any Jimmy had ever heard — captured their attention and silenced all speech.

its cradle. The bundle dropped closer, had four extensions, had a small bulb atop it which was not garbed in white. The extensions were limbs, the bulb was flesh, the bundle tumbled nearer, seemed to hang inert in the air outside the window for several seconds, then hit the ground with a soft thud. It lay sprawled next to the shovel. It was still.

Where had Alice gone?

She was outside, kneeling over the

tempting to lift itself, to reach out, but he would not let it. He could not let it.

He looked back outside. Alice was standing over the body, her back to the house, her head upright, her eyes looking . . . where? The horizon? All that lay beyond the boundaries of her small, safe world? All that threatened it?

George had collapsed on the couch. His breathing was loud, rapid, irregular. His knees were drawn up to his chest, and his face was buried beneath his arms.

Jimmy ran. He ran through the Springers' living room and out the front door. He ran across their shiny flagstone path and into his car. He started the engine and his heart raced with it.

He crumpled the sheet of directions which still lay on the seat beside him. As he drove away from the Springers' home, he turned on the car's radio, and when the faint sound of sirens in the distance became audible, he increased the music's volume.

He came to a red stoplight at an intersection in Greensdale and took the opportunity to comb his hair and straighten his sport jacket. His face was beginning to cool. The road around him was crowded. A small white poodle stared at him from the Cadillac to the right; four children romped in the backseat of a station wagon on his left. Three cars ahead sat a flashy red Mercedes, its immaculately polished metal shimmering in the fading sunlight. For a moment, Jimmy was envious, but he knew he shouldn't be. He would own one just like it someday.

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Jimmy sensed that something was out of place. Something was wrong. In a matter of seconds, he realized that the sound came from the sky. He pressed his face against the window and looked up.

High above, a white kite flapped in the wind. No, it wasn't a kite; it was a small white bundle, tumbling rapidly as it grew larger, as the sound of air displaced by its swift dive assumed a hideous, shrill, deafening pitch. It was nearer now, the earth relentlessly pulling it downward, snatching it from the sky like an angry mother yanking her baby from

fallen angel, poking at the knapsack attached to it and jerking up and down and up and . . . Her hands ran rapidly through her hair and her mouth opened wide and wider, but Jimmy did not hear any sound escape it.

George backed away from the window in half-steps, his face still, his eyes transfixed by the scene beyond the window. Jimmy wanted to say something reassuring, to discover some source of consolation in the tragedy, but he found himself speechless, impotent. He felt his arm at