

## *Digging a Hole*

by Taryn Fagerness

Mr. McNally trotted out to his backyard with a shovel resting over his shoulder. I was on the back porch of my own house, sipping an ice tea and reading last month's issue of the *New Yorker*, when I saw him come out. He stood in the center of his manicured yard and twisted his neck like a beagle inspecting his behind. I eyed him over October's fiction piece, entitled "The Last Parakeet," pressing my thumb to hold my place. He squatted, and I could only see stripes of him through the fence. His palms grazed the grass softly and his eyebrows furled. Suddenly he stood rigid, at attention to the world, and began digging.

"Ho there, Mr. McNally," I called, setting down my tea. "What are you up to?"

"Buildin' a bomb shelter," he replied.

"Hmmm." I rubbed the prickles on my chin. "What for?"

He sauntered to the fence and put his hand to the side of his mouth, although no one else was about. He shifted his eyes and clenched the shovel.

"Pakistan, Bolivia, Luxembourg, Greenland ... they all got missiles as big as buses pointed straight at us," he whispered

across my patio to me, his eyes bulging. He pointed at me when he said "us."

I ended the conversation there, simply nodding, and slouched lower in my chaise lounge. Mr. McNally was obviously politically confused.

He continued to dig, piling up the deep brown earth neatly over his left shoulder. His body began to sink into the ground. What I could still see of him became a series of creases through the fence.

After finishing an article on a Russian theater production, I dumped my lukewarm ice tea in a nearby flower pot and heaved myself to a standing position. I shuffled to the fence and perched my hands on the pickets to view my neighbor's progress. The shovel bobbed up and down in the hole, spitting dirt on the neat pile.

"Ho there," I called. "How big you making that thing?"

"Big enough for me," he answered without stopping his work.