

From UNDER THE DOME by Stephen King
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THE AIRPLANE AND THE WOODCHUCK

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From two thousand feet, where Claudette Sanders was taking a flying lesson, the town of Chester's Mill gleamed in the morning light like something freshly made and just set down. Cars trundled along Main Street, flashing up winks of sun. The steeple of the Congo Church looked sharp enough to pierce the unblemished sky. The sun raced along the surface of Prestile Stream as the Seneca V overflowed it, both plane and water cutting the town on the same diagonal course.

"Chuck, I think I see two boys beside the Peace Bridge! Fishing!" Her very delight made her laugh. The flying lessons were courtesy of her husband, who was the town's First Selectman. Although of the opinion that if God had wanted man to fly, He would have given him wings, Andy was an extremely coaxable man, and eventually Claudette had gotten her way. She had enjoyed the experience from the first. But this wasn't mere enjoyment; it was exhilaration. Today was the first time she had really understood what made flying great. What made it cool.

Chuck Thompson, her instructor, touched the control yoke gently, then pointed at the instrument panel. "I'm sure," he said, "but let's keep the shiny side up, Claudie, okay?"

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Not at all.” He had been teaching people to do this for years, and he liked students like Claudie, the ones who were eager to learn something new. She might cost Andy Sanders some real money before long; she loved the Seneca, and had expressed a desire to have one just like it, only new. That would run somewhere in the neighborhood of a million dollars. Although not exactly spoiled, Claudie Sanders had undeniably expensive tastes which, lucky man, Andy seemed to have no trouble satisfying.

Chuck also liked days like this: unlimited visibility, no wind, perfect teaching conditions. Nevertheless, the Seneca rocked slightly as she over-corrected.

“You’re losing your happy thoughts. Don’t do that. Come to one-twenty. Let’s go out Route 119. And drop on down to nine hundred.”

She did, the Seneca’s trim once more perfect. Chuck relaxed.

They passed above Jim Rennie’s Used Cars, and then the town was behind them. There were fields on either side of 119, and trees burning with color. The Seneca’s cruciform shadow fled up the blacktop, one dark wing briefly brushing over an ant-man with a pack on his back. The ant-man looked up and waved. Chuck waved back, although he knew the guy couldn’t see him.

“*Beautiful* goddam day!” Claudie exclaimed. Chuck laughed.

Their lives had another forty seconds to run.

The woodchuck came bumbling along the shoulder of Route 119, headed

in the direction of Chester's Mill, although the town was still a mile and a half away and even Jim Rennie's Used Cars was only a series of twinkling sunflashes arranged in rows at the place where the highway curved to the left. The chuck planned (so far as a woodchuck can be said to plan anything) to head back into the woods long before he got that far. But for now, the shoulder was fine. He'd come farther from his burrow than he meant to, but the sun had been warm on his back and the smells were crisp in his nose, forming rudimentary images—not quite pictures—in his brain.

He stopped and rose on his back paws for an instant. His eyes weren't as good as they used to be, but good enough to make out a human up there, walking in his direction on the other shoulder.

The chuck decided he'd go a little farther anyway. Humans sometimes left behind good things to eat.

He was an old fellow, and a fat fellow. He had raided many garbage cans in his time, and knew the way to the Chester's Mill landfill as well as he knew the three tunnels of his own burrow; always good things to eat at the landfill. He waddled a complacent old fellow's waddle, watching the human walking on the other side of the road.

The man stopped. The chuck realized he had been spotted. To his right and just ahead was a fallen birch. He would hide under there, wait for the man to go by, then investigate for any tasty—

The chuck got that far in his thoughts—and another three waddling steps—although he had been cut in two. Then he fell apart on the edge of the

road. Blood squirted and pumped; guts tumbled into the dirt; his rear legs kicked rapidly twice, then stopped.

His last thought before the darkness that comes to us all, chucks and humans alike: *What happened?*

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All the needles on the control panel dropped dead.

“What the *hell?*” Claudie Sanders said. She turned to Chuck. Her eyes were wide, but there was no panic in them, only bewilderment. There was no time for panic.

Chuck never saw the control panel. He saw the Seneca’s nose crumple toward him. Then he saw both propellers disintegrate.

There was no time to see more. No time for anything. The Seneca exploded over Route 119 and rained fire on the countryside. It also rained body parts. A smoking forearm—Claudette’s—landed with a thump beside the neatly divided woodchuck.

It was October twenty-first.