

The Goldfish
By Marc Gorcey

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The Last Day of Summer

Every boy in the world wanted a dog, but only one boy in the world wanted his dog dead. His name was Michael, and he was my best friend. I met him on the first day of my eighth year of schooling.

The evening before that day I was in the park playing catch with my only friend – my mother. And as daylight started to trickle off and the sun tottered down over the tops of the old trees, I felt my arms grow sore from throwing. But I didn't want to quit. I was sad. I didn't want summer to end.

My mother knew. As we walked home together she took my hand.

Mother: "Jay, are you nervous about tomorrow, about your first day of school?"

Me: "A little."

Mother: "A little nervous, but not too nervous?"

Me: "Not too nervous."

I didn't want her to worry about me, but I *was* very nervous. The two friends that I had last year had both moved away in June. Tomorrow was the first day of junior high school and I had no one to protect me. Everything at the new school was bigger: bigger bullies, bigger teachers, bigger books. And I was small.

There were going to be courses like "industrial arts", which would put me, the bullies and power tools all in the same room. Power tools for murder.

The teachers at the new school weren't the hand-holding, crayon-dispensing teachers they had in elementary school. They were tough, with hard voices and hard eyes. I needed friendly voices and sympathetic eyes.

Worst of all, class bully Tommy White was going to be feeling these same pressures as I was, and would be looking to reassert himself. This he would do by terrorizing the weak, such as my now friendless self. It wasn't so much that I feared Tommy physically, it was the way that he synthesized violence, humiliation, and psychological treachery into an integrated approach. When he was on one of his campaigns, the fear consumed all of my thoughts.

I was tiny - physically, mentally and spiritually. I was an insect. A quiet insect. I wasn't ready for any of it. I just wanted to stay home with my mom.

Me at Home

I sat cross-legged on the carpet that night, moving my attention from the TV news to my comic book and back until the news anchor started to speak with balloons over his head

in my imagination. My mother was worrying quietly with a magazine, and my father was behind the newspaper.

Mother: "There's a new boy starting school with you tomorrow."

Me: "Yeah ? Who?"

Mother: "His name is Michael. I met his mother at the Ladies' Club this afternoon. I said you would drop by and take him to school with you. He only lives a few streets over."

Yes, I thought, this could be a good thing. True – a new kid was always a wild card but going through the first day with him would always be better than going through it alone. I had an idea - that I would keep this kid close to me until I could figure him out. If he turned out to be okay - a tough kid, or maybe even a popular kid - then I would try to stay close to him. If he turned out to be a liability, then I would cut him loose quickly, then try to break into another clique of friends.

Either way, I at least had somebody to walk into the schoolyard with - a measure of security to get me through that first morning. In order to survive, I had become a complete Machiavellian already at twelve.

Me: "Okay. I'll go get him in the morning."

I reviewed my first day strategies again as the television flickered through the nightly schedule. My father finished the newspaper, then read a book until it was time for his nightly three words.

Father: "Time for bed."

And with that, my last childhood summer came to a close. My summer of wonderful solitude, of reading comics in my room, or in the backyard after my mother pleaded with me to go outside. My beautiful serene summer had ticked off its final seconds. Tomorrow, I would be back in the world.

Our Town

The town in which we lived wasn't a town in the normal sense of the word.

First of all, it didn't have a name - it was just referred to as "the town". It had a classic small town business district, as is found everywhere on the North American continent. It had a town hall, homes, parks, a hospital, schools, and one large employer. But it also had a security gate at the town entrance.

The one employer in town was Omni corporation, the world's largest defense contractor and developer of various military confections. What exactly happened there ? I never knew, or even thought to ask. And no one else ever discussed it. It was the height of the Cold War. To live in the town you had to know how to keep secrets.

Since all town property (even the houses) belonged to Omni, their own internal security service patrolled it not a town police force. A few of these men did dress and act as the familiar cop on the beat would. Most, however, were dark suited secret service types referred to only as "The Men" by my schoolmates and me.

The Men walked, drove, and drank coffee all over town. They might be following you one second, then disappear down an alley to talk on their walkie talkies the next. None of the Men lived in town (for security reasons), but they knew all of us by name. Even the kids.

Everyone in town worked for Omni, or was related to someone who did. From the appointed mayor, to the TV and radio news readers, to the storekeepers, to my dad, they all opened an envelope every other Thursday and found a computer printed paycheck with the Omni logo.

Michael the new kid's family had just moved here last week. Mom told me that Michael's dad wrote a child psychology column that was syndicated to newspapers all over North America. He was in town for one year to write a book, with all expenses paid by the Omni Foundation for the Arts. He got an Omni house and car, and a biweekly Omni paycheck just like everyone else.

The Arts Foundation house was located in the management level two neighbourhood a few blocks over. We lived in the lower level four neighbourhood. I would have to go out of my way to pick up Michael in the morning.

Meet Michael

There's nothing I hate more than being late, and school started at nine a.m. so I had to be through the door by eight to allow time for picking up the new kid, goofing around on the way to school, and shmoozing in the school yard.

After consuming my usual breakfast - sugared cereal and orange crystallized liquid - I hugged my mother goodbye, and headed out to start day one. The clean rubber soles of my new sneakers slapped the sidewalk, and I checked my plastic watch. One minute after eight.

I reached the Arts Foundation house a few minutes later. It was a big, white Greek revival style house, much bigger than ours. All the houses in town were built at the same time, but the better neighbourhoods had this type – older style architecture, stately grand, with pillars and a big porch on the side, with wide steps out front leading to a luxurious lawn and solid old trees.

I rang the front bell, and a nice looking blonde mom type answered.

Michael's Mother: "Oh, you must Jay. Come in. I'll get Michael."

She was polite, but I noticed she spoke to me like I was a repairman or something. She let me in, and then disappeared to the back of the house leaving me at the bottom of the staircase in the front hall.

After a few seconds she came back out with a man who was a living dictionary picture of a dad - nerdy black plastic rimmed glasses, a tie, and an unlit pipe in his mouth. Michael's dad. The child psychologist.

He and the mom came to the bottom of the staircase and started playfully calling up to someone that I presumed to be Michael.

Michael's Father: "Why, our little guy hasn't even come down the stairs yet !"

Michael's Mother: "Well, where can he be ? Come on down here, you little rascal ! "

Then they started clapping their hands and laughing like idiots until a supremely dumb looking spaniel came bounding down the stairs with his tail wagging furiously. As he passed them at the bottom of the stairs, they laughed and clapped louder, then followed him to the back of the house, and out into the backyard leaving me standing there alone.

It was strange behavior from adults, I thought. Why the fanfare for the dog ? And where was Michael ? I walked to the kitchen at the back of the house and watched through a window as Michael's parents frolicked with the dog in the backyard. Eventually I heard the basement door open behind me, and I turned to see a sleepy looking kid standing in his pajamas and squinting at me.

Michael: "Who are you ?"

Me: "I'm Jay. Are you Michael ? I'm supposed to take you to school."

Michael: "Oh, right."

It struck me that Michael wasn't just tired, he was exhausted. He got a box of cereal from the cupboard and proceeded to make his own breakfast. I looked out into the backyard to see Michael's father rolling on the grass with the pipe in his mouth. The dog jumped all over him. The mom clapped.

Me: "Uh, you better hurry up. We're kind of late."

He stopped and looked at me, annoyed.

Michael: "Do you mind if I have breakfast first ?"

Hmm. Michael had an edge. How would that play in terms of my plans for him ? Tommy White was cutting too in a brutal way, and he used it to get to me. But Tommy was kind of big, and Michael was as much of a shrimp as I was. Perhaps Michael might be enough of a loudmouth to attract Tommy's attention away from me. That would certainly work well enough to achieve my ends.

Visit to Town Park Number Three

We hit the sidewalk at eight thirty five a.m., after Michael had finished his bowl of cereal and brushed his hair and teeth. We had about a fifteen minute walk ahead of us, which didn't leave much time for goofing around or schoolyard business. I wasted no time, quizzing Michael to try to figure out what he was made of.

Me: "So where did you guys move from ?"

Michael: "Ohio."

He wasn't interested in talking much, answering with single words, and nods and shakes. I tried playing the tour guide, telling him about our little world: the town, The Men, the school. Nothing. He was unimpressed and uninterested in anything I said. I didn't know yet what world weary meant, but if I did I would have attached that label to the boy in front of me.

As we passed town park number three, I stepped off the sidewalk and onto the grass.

Me: "I want to show you something."

Michael: "I thought we were late for school."

Me: "Come on, it'll only take a second. "

He rolled his eyes at me, then followed my steps to the bottom of Bobby's tree. We called it Bobby's tree because Bobby Beeman had single handedly built a tree house in it. There were wooden pegs nailed all the way up the trunk to help with the climb that led to a wooden platform half way up the tree. There, three young boys could sit comfortably and discuss matters of import.

I had to be careful when I used Bobby's tree house, since it was really his place, not mine. Bobby could drop by anytime, which was fine if he was alone. But sometimes Tommy White or someone else would be with him, and three might be a crowd. Tommy White sometimes dropped by all alone and ordered me out.

Even worse were the times when a lonely Tommy would demand that I sit there with him while he berated me in various ways. Bobby himself was untouchable in Tommy's eyes. Bobby's amazing feat of construction had impressed Tommy and all of us forever. The tree house was safe territory now, though, and Michael and I surveyed it and crouched.

Me: "Pretty cool, huh ?"

Michael: "Why is it pretty cool?"

Me: "Because you can be up here and nobody knows. Get it ?"

Michael: "Yeah, I get it."

That was sarcasm ! Right from the outset, Michael was turning the tables on me. Our disposition had rotated one hundred and eighty degrees from 'Jay helping Michael get oriented' to 'Jay trying in vain to impress Michael'.

From the tree house, you could look through the leaves and branches to a few homes on the other side of the park fence. The house right beside the park gave you a complete view of some upstairs and downstairs rooms with large windows. You could actually look into the house and spy on the occupants.

I pointed this out to Michael just as the man of the house appeared in one of those upstairs windows. I knew him – he was an Omni scientist, a typical bookworm type. Michael and I crouched there, watching as the man in the window went to a mirror, adjusted his tweed hat, then... kissed his own reflection in the mirror !

The House Beside Town Park Number Three

I knew that the man of the house was John French because he went to the same church as our family. He was rumoured to be one of the top scientists at Omni, but that alone didn't interest me enough to make me spy on him.

I was interested in the woman of the house. Many times on the way to or from school I stopped at Bobby's to watch her through the windows. Some days she would iron, or talk on the phone, or just look in the mirror. She never kissed her reflection in the mirror, though. Only her husband did that. There were no children in the house.

Often, after school, I would sit and listen to her play the piano. It was angelic. I would sit in Bobby's tree reading a comic book, quietly falling in love.

She was beautiful, too. Demure with a clean and perfect face, with clean cheeks like a soap commercial lady. She always wore a dress and low heels. She always looked composed, and slightly pleased. Yes, I was completely in love with her.

Roll Call Nine A.M.

We continued towards the school without discussing anything we had seen. In my mind I was already making plans to distance myself from Michael. My hope was that his snotty demeanor would make him a better target for Tommy et al. We hit the school yard at about eight fifty-five.

I introduced him quickly to a few people who were standing around. He gave a polite hello to John Wells, Susan Feeny and the irrepressible Jamie Palladium but the bell went off before any of us could progress beyond small talk. Tommy White was at the far end of the school yard with his henchmen.

And by nine oh three we were sitting at in our new home room, at our desks. A bulbous man with sweaty hair and bad glasses entered. Mr. Reddick.

Mr. Reddick: "Hello class. I'm Mr. Reddick your home room teacher for this year. I'd like to welcome you to the town junior high school. I have gone over all of your records extensively, and I think we certainly have some hard work ahead of us. So, heck ! If you're ready, I'm ready too !"

I wasn't ready, and I disliked Mr. Reddick immediately. First of all, he was incredibly unfit. He looked insecure, with insane blank eyes that stared straight ahead without any emotion. He was unfashionable too. He had these old fashioned glasses and a pair of beige pants that stretched out all wrong and wobbly. And he was too eager to impose himself on us. An unfriendly teacher always meant too much homework, low marks, miserable students and angrier bullies.

He imitated an army sergeant calling out roll call as he took attendance. He thought it was funny. I sat at my desk looking at an arrangement of colourful hand-drawn Omni logos pinned to the corkboard, done by students from the previous year. And I felt the anxiety thicken in me as the weak September sunlight streamed in.

Michael the Defiant

Now, every single day of school since kindergarten had started with the exact same ritual: the class reading of the Omni oath of allegiance. The oath was posted at the front of the classroom above the blackboard, but I knew it by heart.

We all would declare allegiance to Omni and promised to work hard to make the company proud, or strong or something. It didn't sound particularly offensive to me. It was just something you had to say, like prayers in church or the national anthem. Reciting this kind of stuff was just part of playing ball in the adult world. You just did it.

Mr. Reddick: "All right now class. Please stand and read the pledge of allegiance."

And we all stood up as we had done hundreds of times before. But Michael hadn't read the oath before. And now he had his hand up in the air. And he had that same annoyed look I had seen in his kitchen that morning.

Michael: "Sir ?"

Mr. Reddick: "Yes, Michael ?"

Michael: "Sir, is that the pledge of allegiance there on the wall ?"

Mr. Reddick: "Yes."

Michael: "Well, sir, I've been looking at it but I can't read that oath."

Mr. Reddick: "Can you not read, Michael ?"

A few girls in the class laughed.

Michael: "Oh I can read all right, but I can't say those things."

Mr. Reddick: "And why not?"

Michael: "Because that would be lying. And I won't do that."

Mr. Reddick: "No, Michael it wouldn't be lying. You would just be saying that you are loyal to Omni. You do know who Omni is, don't you ? That's the company where your father works, and the company that built this school."

Michael: "Oh, I know that sir. I just don't think I can say what's written down there without lying".

We all stood ready to say the oath, a little confused as to what was happening.

Michael: "Sir, I can't promise to be loyal to Omni. I can't be loyal to anything but my own principles. What if Omni's principals aren't the same as mine ?"

What was Michael saying ? I couldn't follow it.

Mr. Reddick: "Michael, Omni paid for your father to come here to write a book."

Michael: "I know that sir, but I can't promise to support something that isn't part of my principles - that would be lying, I think. You wouldn't want me to lie would you ?"

Mr. Reddick: "Michael, just say the oath."

Michael: "But isn't that lying, Mr. Reddick ?"

There was a crack in Mr. Reddick's voice that said "don't do this to me at nine a.m. of the first day of school".

Mr. Reddick: "No, Michael, it isn't. I'm ordering you to pledge allegiance to the company that is providing all of this for us. Now will you stand with all of us and DO THAT please ?"

All of us sat with widening eyes going back and forth from Michael to Mr. Reddick. Michael was speaking so gently, yet with a deep rooted power and self-confidence, while Mr. Reddick was looking more and more desperate and sweaty with each volley. He glared at Michael for several seconds waiting for his final reply.

Michael: "Mr. Reddick, those words will not come out of my mouth."

We all flashed back to Mr. Reddick, who stood hard with a straining squint. It was a stare-off !

After a long and silent minute, Mr. Reddick exhaled loudly and put his hands on top of his head. Then he put his chin down to his chest, and extended his arms directly forward, clasping his shaking hands hard together and wept. Slowly, a dark stain spread outwards from the crotch of his beige pants.

Then someone ran to get the principal and we all got to go outside for recess.

The Aftermath

Needless to say, Michael was the hero of the schoolyard. Everyone wanted to talk to him, or be near him. Even the quiet kids like Danny Lunch milled around him. And Michael moved among them as would a revolutionary or a returning expatriate.

He had spoken the truth, a truth none of us could have articulated ourselves, but a truth that we felt as he spoke it. It made sense. Why *should* someone be forced to lie like that every morning? It was wrong!

Mr. Reddick already had the reputation of a tyrant. The older kids had warned us about him. He famous for being cruel and unfair. Michael had broken him down by doing what we were all supposed to do, by following one of the bible's commandments: Thou shalt not lie. It was brilliant.

Of course, now I tried to stick as close to him as I could. He was *my* friend, after all. Then Tommy White walked up, egotistical and teenage tough, and put his hand on Michael's shoulder.

Tommy: "Hey kid. That was the coolest thing I ever seen."

There was an cheer from the irrepressible Jamie Palladium. Then we all started cheering and my heart kicked hard and everyone jumped up and down. We were all caught up in primal feelings of celebration - slapping hands and raising fists in the air. It was an intense communal pulse of - not just victory - but utter triumph like nothing else I've ever felt. Revolutionary.

We got to spend the rest of the morning in the schoolyard while the school secretary sat in a chair and watched us. Michael walked around with Tommy's arm around him until the crowd eventually split into dyads and triads of classmates discussing the events just passed.

By noon, it looked like a normal recess with the girls skipping and people playing ball games. But a few of us still gathered around the boy of the hour. Michael leaned on the fence, coolly reiterating to us that he was not going to recite the oath under any circumstances. We were only supposed to have half a day of school anyway, so at noon the principal herded us back inside and a couple of The Men came in to tell us to keep the day's events to ourselves. Then we were dismissed.

Some of us walked Michael to his house, with he and Tommy leading, followed by the henchmen, Bobby Beeman, Chris and Tony Panic, Donny Febbleston, the irrepressible Jamie Palladium, John Wells, Rick Dangelo, Susan Feeny, Danny Lunch and me at the back.

Through all of this Michael wasn't giving me any consideration at all, which didn't surprise me that much now that I saw what he was all about. I had hoped that Michael might be popular, but he was a superstar, a royal knight. Hopefully, when the dust settled I would still be close to him.

Welcome to Michael's World

On the sidewalk in front of Michael's house, everyone told him how great everything was, and Tommy even shook his hand. Michael thanked us, went inside, and we left. After following the crowd for a few blocks, I doubled back to Michael's house and rang the bell until Michael appeared.

Michael: "Yes ?"

Me: "Can I come in and hang around with you ?"

Michael: "Okay."

His reply was careless, like he didn't really care if I came in or not. We went down the basement stairs, through a dark stone room with some puddles, into Michael's bedroom. This was the most austere bedroom I had ever seen outside an institution. It was two walls of floor to ceiling bookshelves, neatly packed with books, an aquarium with a single depressed looking goldfish, a table and a bed. No decoration. No pictures. No toys.

Me: "Nice room."

Michael: "Thanks."

Me: "What's the fish's name ?"

Michael: "No name. It's just a fish."

He picked out a book, then flopped down on the bed and started to read. I examined the titles and authors names to no hint of familiarity. No story books. No space books. No cowboy books. There were two sets of encyclopedias. There were grown-up novels, picture books of science, and art books.

Me: "Have you read all these ?"

Michael: "No."

I looked at the book he was reading. 'Modes Of Interaction' by Dr. Arthur Baker. It was psychology. Michael stopped reading and looked directly at me.

Michael: "What did you think about what happened today ?"

Me: "I liked it."

Michael: "But what did you think ? Did you think that I was grandstanding ?"

Me: "What's that mean ?"

Michael: "Showing off."

Me: "No."

I was lying. I did think he was showing off a little, at least. It never occurred to me that Michael wouldn't care at all what the other kids thought of him.

Me: "Were you showing off ?"

Michael: "No. I was speaking my thoughts honestly and directly."

Me: "Yeah. Sure. That's what I thought."

Michael: "Do you know what's going to happen now ?"

Me: "No."

Michael: "Neither do I."

He went back to reading. After a few minutes I spoke up.

Me: "Do you want to be, like, you know, my friend ?"

I knew it was a desperate attempt, but it seemed like he was being cordial to me now so why not chance it? If I could secure a position as Michael's right hand man, I would be protected as the power structure settled in at the new school. He had let me come into his house, so maybe he really liked me.

Michael: "I thought we *were* friends."

Me: "Yeah. I knew that, I was just checking. Okay."

Michael looked directly up at me again. His stare was oppressive; it made me nervous.

Michael: "Jay."

Me: "Yeah."

Michael: "Those kids are going to stop liking me eventually."

Me: "Oh, no. They'll like you, Michael."

Michael: "No they won't."

I didn't understand, but I didn't question him any more on it. And later as I walked home I still had that strange declaration of his murmuring in my head. Why would the kids ever stop liking Michael?

I got home and told my parents that I had a good day, and threw in enough details to give my story the ring of truth. My mother was glad to hear it all, and dad just stayed quiet behind the newspaper. The television spit out the last of the summer reruns and I reread an ancient comic book I found in my old toy box.

In bed, I pondered over the alarming social collisions that had transpired that day. An image of Michael stuck in my head. When I had first met him that morning, he was in his pajamas, like a little kid. But at day's end he seemed as grown-up to me as any adult.

I had already forgotten about that dog. That stupid oblivious spaniel who, unbeknownst to me, was already marked for death.

Meet The New Teacher

The next day started much like the previous one. I walked over to Michael's, then sat in the kitchen as he fed himself and his parents threw a stick for the dog over and over again in the front yard.

He got dressed, then we went straight to school, bypassing Bobby's tree house. I told Michael that we didn't have time to stop by, but I actually just wanted the other kids to see us arrive together. At the school yard we were greeted with due warmth and several kids started to query Michael as to what he thought would happen to him that day. Michael told them that he really didn't care, and we all remained impressed with him.

At nine a.m. we were back at our desks when the principal walked in. He told us that a new teacher would be coming in shortly and that we would be expected to treat her in a manner that befit respectable young people. And he kept throwing suspicious glances over towards Tommy White.

I realized there and then that the principal had no idea who had caused the ruckus of the previous day. Neither The Men, nor any teachers had yet asked any of us about the incident yet, as far as I knew. And it may have taken the entire day to get Mr. Reddick to

speak again after his little breakdown. Maybe he didn't remember anything. Maybe he was in a coma.

Michael sat there like a little angel, with his hands folded on his desk. Was he going to get Tommy to take the fall for him somehow ? Was that what he meant when he said earlier that the kids weren't going to like him any more ?

Principal: "And now class, please stand and say hello to your new teacher, Mrs. French."

It was her ! The tree house lady ! The piano player ! The wife of the mirror kisser ! The object of my crush !

Mrs. French strode into our classroom and flashed us a heart melting smile. The love of my life was going to be my homeroom teacher.

Help Wanted - Teacher

There was no way I could have known at the time how Mrs. French came to be standing in front of our class that morning. It wasn't until years later, when certain documents were made public, that I did find out. I have tried to piece this part of the story together from the transcripts of the various trials and inquiries that took place later on.

When Mr. Reddick cracked, the principal was summoned, and we were all sent to recess as I said. The principal then had the janitor help him drag Mr. Reddick to the nurse's station. After several hours of having cold water thrown in his face, and being slapped by the gym teacher, Mr. Reddick finally uttered a few words.

Mr. Reddick: "The kid wouldn't take the oath."

Principal: "Who, Don, who ?"

But that was all he said that day.

The principal had enough good sense to realize that a student (whoever it was) refusing to take the oath was a problem that warranted a call to The Men. They arrived, assessed the situation, and decided the best immediate course of action was cover-up. And so our homeroom class was gathered together and told to keep our mouths shut.

After The Men had left, and Mr. Reddick had been taken away, the principal was left with a vacant teacher position. This was no small problem. The labour pool in our town was incredibly shallow. In fact, there was no unemployment. Everyone worked for Omni, and if you left the company you left town. The principal had to work very quickly, as he only had one supply teacher in his stable.

Margaret French had dropped her resume off last year, when she gave up trying to get pregnant. According to later testimony, John French came home one night and announced to her that his boss had requested that he not conceive a child. He was too important to his projects to take time out for personal matters.

John took this request as a compliment, and intended to heed it. Mrs. French was distraught but after some strained discussions she eventually had to accept the fact that John's devotion to work superceded everything else in his life. And so she decided to start a career.

On the evening of our little incident she sat through an unprofessionally short interview in the principal's office, then accepted the offer for the teacher position.

The forms were signed, and the principal explained the current situation to her. Mrs. French listened thoughtfully, then assured the principal that she could handle her students. She must have expected the source of the problem to be a malicious brat, and certainly not a twelve year old conscientious objector.

Michael The Defiant II

Mrs. French: "Good morning class. Please stand to read the oath of allegiance."

Michael: "Mrs. French ?"

Mrs. French: "Yes ?"

Michael: "I won't say the oath of allegiance."

The principal's head twisted towards Michael.

Mrs. French: "What is your name young man ?"

Michael: "It's Michael ma'am."

Mrs. French: "Well, Michael, we have rules to follow in my class. And anyone who doesn't follow the rules will have to stay after school. Do you understand that ?"

Michael was conciliatory and quick with his answer.

Michael: "Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. French: "Good. Now class please stand and recite the oath."

That was it. It was done. Both Michael and Mrs. French were as cool as frozen peas. But it looked to me like Michael had presented his case to her and had lost.

It bothered me that he folded so easily. He was laying down without any sort of fight at all. Why ? Was the principal intimidating him ? Did he have a crush on Mrs. French too ? I started to wonder about his character all over again.

The class, including me, stood to recite the oath. I couldn't see if Michael was saying it, because he was in standing front of me. But of course, he wasn't. He was standing politely in silence. When it was all finished Mrs. French informed Michael that had to stay after school.

The Aftermath II

We had Mrs. French for English in first period, and Mr. Poultry for math in second period. Then came recess. But the principal came and got Michael before he could go outside, and took him to his office where a couple of The Men wanted to speak to him.

Mrs. Quail gave us history for period three, then Mr. Cornish for period four geography. I sat through each class itching to speak to Michael, to find out what was happening.

At lunch hour, we all hurried to the lunch room but Michael wasn't there. The Men had decided that he should eat with them in the principal's office to continue their discussions. So I sat and ate in silence with Danny Lunch.

Michael finally emerged from the school about fifteen minutes into our lunch recess. As soon as he appeared, our ball games and skipping ended and everyone clustered around him.

Me: "Michael, what happened ? "

Michael: "Well. I said I wasn't going to say the oath, and I didn't say it."

Tommy: "You got a detention ! You shoulda made French crack up like you did to Reddick."

Michael: "I just didn't want to say the oath. I don't want to crack people up, and I don't want to get kicked out of school. If I have to serve detention to stay in school, then I'll serve detention. I want to learn. Don't you want to learn ?"

This last retort from Michael towards Tommy was strange and slightly hot. Tommy retreated a step, gave Michael a dirty look, then walked away in a sizable huff.

Yesterday, the kids had seen Michael as some kind of messiah. Even the quiet kids had stood beside him smiling. Now they didn't know what to think of him. With a general feeling of anticlimax the crowd trailed off leaving Michael and me alone.

Michael: "You see. I told you this would happen."

My All-New One and Only Friend

I voluntarily sat in detention with Michael after school. One half hour of watching Mrs. French writing at her desk made it more than worthwhile. I paid psychopathic amounts of attention to every movement she made.

On the way home that night, Michael filled me in on his debriefing by The Men. They had asked him if he was a Communist and so forth, and he told them that he wasn't. They asked him if he was a spy, or an anarchist, and he said no. They eventually concluded that he was some kind of Christian zealot who was bound by the ten commandments, and who couldn't lie under any circumstances. I didn't understand anything of his explanation but nodded along anyway as he spoke.

The incident was thus buried. They added the relevant documents and transcripts to his personal record, a file that would become fatter and fatter as the school year progressed.

We passed by park number three. Bobby and Tommy stood at the base of the tree house, and shot us a look. The situation was sinking fast. Tommy was starting to dislike Michael. And I already knew how he felt about me.

I saw that I had completely mishandled the situation. Instead of finding a protector to help me through the school year, I had tied myself to an outcast who was destined to be ostracized forever.

But I couldn't help it. There was something about Michael that still made me want to get to know him. He was so sure of himself, so unafraid. I hoped that we could stay friends, even though it was going to get dangerous at some point with Tommy.

Back in Michael's room, I watched the goldfish and pondered as he read on his bed.

Me: "So are these books any good ?"

Michael: "All books are good."

Me: "What's your favourite ?"

Michael looked at me like a father might look at a son, then smiled. This was the first time I had seen him smile. He rose and walked to the far end of the bookshelf where there was a long line of books with shiny black jackets. They were numbered one to thirteen on the side in Roman numerals.

Michael: "I like these ones. Would you like to read them ?"

There was a challenge, an invitation to adventure in his voice. I nodded.

The Thirteen Tomes of Life and Death by Hermann Pustul

Hermann Pustul was born in Prague in eighteen seventy three. His family were fairly wealthy Jewish merchants, and he worked for them after completing his studies. When he turned to literature, his first love, they turned their backs on him and he was forced to accept work in various government offices.

His literary career went nowhere, and depression set in. By the time critical recognition reached him, he was old, poor, and almost friendless. He was homosexual, and probably spent his entire life in abstinence.

The Thirteen Tomes of Life and Death were his last written works. As he wrote them, his reputation was growing in the literary community and his earlier works were being re-examined. He spent his last ten years completing the Tomes, and died shortly after in nineteen thirty five. Only a few years after his death his morbid philosophical tales were being hailed as classics.

The Thirteen Tomes were a series of allegorical tales for children. In them, a child known as The Child had some discussions with various animals about the problems of the adult world. There were goats and turtles talking to the child, asking and answering questions and so forth. Michael's edition had illustrations added to it.

I pulled the volumes out one by one, flipping through the pages and looking at the covers. Each Tome had a different picture of Pustul on the back cover, looking progressively older and older as the volumes went on. Volume thirteen just had a picture of his tombstone on the back cover.

Michael insisted that I read them in order, and lent me volume one to take home with me. I sat on the bed feeling the cover with my fingertips.

Me: "Thanks. It looks like a fun book."

Michael: "It's not fun. It'll show you how to live your life though."

And he was giving me that stare again. Michael scared me as much as he intrigued me.

And what was this strange attachment to these books ? I had met bookworms before, like Susan Feeny (who liked reading junior detective books) but I had never met someone who cared so passionately about them. I had never known a true intellectual.

School Day the Third

I picked Michael up in the usual way, with his parents nowhere in sight this time. We spent a few minutes at Bobby's tree on the way to school, mostly watching through the window as Mr. French put his hat on and took it off over and over again.

When we got to the schoolyard, I saw Tommy and the henchmen moving over towards us. Some other kids trailed behind, sniffing out the high drama of a fistfight. Tommy walked up to us and put his hand on Michael's chest.

Tommy: "You think you're pretty smart don't you?"

Michael: "Maybe."

Tommy: "You think you're smarter than me ?"

Michael: "Probably."

Tommy: "Oh yeah ? You're not so smart if I can pound you."

Tommy gave Michael a shove. The henchman were grinning and I stood there quaking. But Michael looked utterly unafraid and even bored !

Michael: "So if you hit me, you're smart ? That sounds stupid to me."

Tommy: "Shut up."

Tommy shoved Michael, but he stood straight.

Michael: "Why ? Are you afraid I'm right ? That I am smarter than you ? You're going to hit me because you're afraid I'm right aren't you ?"

Michael was completely unafraid. It was amazing. Tommy could just flatten him if he wanted to, but Michael had turned the situation around so that if Tommy hit Michael, *Tommy* would look like a coward. It would look like Tommy was afraid to look stupid !

This was pure witchcraft on Michael's part and Tommy looked at Michael like he was the devil. But now, Tommy was in a bind. He didn't want to hit Michael now, but he couldn't back down either. The other kids were watching. Force had to be shown.

Tommy: "You just better watch it !"

Then Tommy turned to me.

Tommy: "And *you* !"

He knew that I didn't have the fortitude to stand up to him, and he needed to demonstrate his authority again in the worst way. So he lunged at me. I evaded him and tore off with Tommy and the henchman chasing. Michael strolled off like nothing had happened. Tommy eventually caught me and put me in a headlock. He then paraded me around in front of the assembled kids taunting me and making me beg for mercy. The schoolyard supervisor eventually wandered over and told us to play nice and Tommy let me go with a laugh.

I stood up with my hair mussed, to see the blank faces of the kids who had been watching my humiliation with bemusement. Some of the girls giggled.

My fate had been sealed. As long as Michael stood up to Tommy, I was going to take the heat for it over and over again. I looked over at Michael, who was standing with Danny Lunch off in the distance. My friend had not done a single thing to save me.

After School Special

I didn't take Michael to task immediately for what he had done. In fact, I spent the remainder of the recesses that day alone, trying to stay at the opposite end of the yard from Tommy and his gang. I noticed that he had grown some over the summer and was now much stronger than I was. There was no sanctuary.

We had our first biology class that day, as well as music. The biology room had giant pictures of insects on the wall, and I was assigned the saliva-oozing trumpet in music, so it was a very disgusting afternoon.

After school, I served detention with Michael again mostly so I could stare maniacally at Mrs. French. Later, as we left the schoolyard I decided to address the issue of Michael's abandonment of me that morning.

Me: "Why didn't you say anything to stop Tommy from getting me?"

Michael: "You should have just ignored him."

Me: "He'll just pound me."

Michael: "Not if you're unafraid."

Me: "Well, I am afraid."

Michael: "Read the Tomes, and you won't be afraid."

What was in these books that would make me unafraid? From what I had seen of them, they were just stories. There weren't any karate diagrams or exercises or anything to make you strong. As we walked home in separate silences, I wondered what The Thirteen Tomes had to say.

The Thirteen Tomes of Life and Death - Book One

I cracked open the first book after dinner, while sitting on the floor in front of the TV. Dad was behind the paper. Mom was curious.

Mother: "What's that dear, a school book?"

Me: "No, it's a book Michael gave me."

She seemed pleased. Not only was I NOT reading a comic book, but I was sharing something with a friend - my own friend. It made me feel good to see that pleased look on her face. I turned to page one.

The first story introduced the main character, a nameless child who lived near a nameless forest. There were no adults anywhere in the story. The child wandered into the forest and found a clearing that he had never seen before. After a few moments, a turtle came out of the woods and engaged the child in conversation. Soon, the turtle offered to teach the child a lesson.

The child accepted the offer, and the turtle showed him some ants that were crawling nearby. The turtle asked the child what he thought of the ants, and the child gave him an obvious description of them: small, black, and generally unimpressive.

I had read enough children's books to anticipate the lessons that were contained in a story. I assumed that the turtle was going to tell the child that he was wrong, and show how magnificent the ants really were. To my surprise the turtle didn't do that.

He *agreed* that the ants were unimpressive, and began to expand on their shortcomings. After many pages of ant criticism, I was starting to lose interest. None of this was going to stop Tommy White from pounding me.

Then the turtle began to speak of the ants' commendable qualities. The ants worked together, they had stamina, and they didn't get depressed easily. The child stopped to ask questions here and there, and the turtle answered, and I fought the urge to skip ahead twenty pages.

Then the turtle told the child a story about a man. He called the man The Human Ant. He explained how the man had all of the qualities, bad and good, of ants. The Human Ant worked hard, had stamina, and never got depressed.

The turtle explained the nature of The Human Ant's relationships, which weren't very fulfilling. He then explained that although The Human Ant looked and acted like a human, he was really more like an ant. This situation occurred because The Human Ant had no "self-picture". "What was a self-picture?" the child (and I) wondered. A "self-picture" was like an invisible mirror you could hold in front of your face and see the real you. You didn't just see what you looked like, you saw what you really were.

The Human Ant thought he was a human, but in reality he was a human ant. How could The Human Ant become human, the child wondered? In response, the turtle mapped out the various things that The Human Ant could do to improve his life, to become "self fulfilled".

This portion of the story was fascinating to me. The turtle painted a portrait of real adult life, complete with all the adult problems. I had never had the adult world explained to me so clearly before. This book was like a manual on how to grow up! I felt a strange sense of power.

I reread the story again. I felt as though I had met The Human Ant somewhere before. My dad was a kind of Human Ant. I wondered if the security guard at the gates of town was a Human Ant. Then I wondered if Mr. French was a human ant. Maybe if Mr. French was a human ant, Mrs. French would get sick of him and divorce him and we could be married.

After the lesson was complete, the turtle invited the child to come back the next day for another lesson.

I looked at the book. I had finished one half of it, but it was time for bed. When my father gave the bed call I went upstairs, brushed my teeth and put on my pajamas. I crawled into bed with the book, turned on the night light and read, eventually falling asleep with the first Tome open at my side.

School Day Number Four

By Thursday, Michael was much better at getting up for school. He was there waiting for me on his porch when I arrived. I could hardly wait to talk about what I had read, but he didn't want to talk about it until I had read some more. I was convinced that if I kept reading the Tomes, I would become like Michael - impervious to any sort of intimidation.

I had hoped that yesterday's thrashing would hold Tommy for awhile, but it wasn't to be. As we entered the schoolyard Tommy caught sight of me and gave chase, as Michael kept walking straight forward without a worry in the world. I got the usual mix of taunting, finished off by a Charley Horse - a knee in the side of the leg - that kept me limping all morning.

Michael's silence during the Omni oath and the subsequent detention were already passé - business as usual. There were a couple of novelties that day - were given an introduction to the very scary industrial arts that day, as well as physical education - but we were already settling into the autumn routine.

After detention though, Michael was to let me in on a secret that would completely flatten any normalcy in either of our lives. The secret of the doomed spaniel.

To Kill A Mocking Spaniel

It was late afternoon, after the fourth day of the school year. We were in Michael's room, with Michael reading and me looking at the goldfish. Michael put the book down casually.

Michael: "Did you know that goldfish grow according to the body of water they're in?"

Me: "What do you mean?"

Michael: "Well, if they're in a tank they'll only grow to be that big, but if they're in a lake they grow to be bigger. In a bigger lake, they'll grow to be bigger still."

Me: "Oh."

Michael: "You're interested in the things I have to say, aren't you Jay?"

Me: "Yeah, sure."

Michael: "Can I trust you, Jay?"

Me: "Yeah. Sure you can Mike."

Michael: "Call me Michael, please."

Me: "Sure, Michael."

Michael stood up and gave me the stare again.

Michael: "Good. Jay I have something very important to explain to you. Put your coat on, and follow me."

He led me out, and up the basement stairs. Once outside, we started walking back towards the school.

Me: "Where are we going?"

Michael: "We're going to Bobby's tree house."

Me: "What for?"

Michael: "To talk."

We got there, and climbed up, and sat cross-legged on the platform. As Michael began to talk, I noticed the exquisite Mrs. French walking by the windows of the house beside the park. She was wearing a blue cotton dress, and looked a little sad. I tried to pay attention to Michael though.

Michael: "Jay, I asked you to come here to talk about something very, very important. I need your help. As you may have noticed, my parents have been acting very strangely lately."

Michael brushed the floor of the tree house with his fingers.

Michael: "Do you know what obsession is ?"

Me: "Is that when the devil is inside you ?"

Michael: "No, Jay. That's possession. And it doesn't exist. It's made up. It's comic book stuff. I'm talking about real life here, Jay. Do you want to talk about childish things, or do you want to talk about something real ?"

Me: "I'm sorry. I want to talk about something real."

Michael: "That's good, because we have a serious problem on our hands Jay."

Me: "You mean Tommy ?"

Michael: "No ! He's nothing. He's insignificant. He's just a stupid kid."

He looked at me again. Not the stare this time. Softer.

Michael: "I'm talking about something real - my parents. My parents are having some problems, Jay. They're obsessed. They're obsessed with that stupid dog, Jay. It means that they can't think of anything but that dog. All they do all day is pay attention to that stupid dog."

The stare got more intense.

Michael: "They're unhinged, Jay. *Crazy.*"

These words were spoken deadly serious, calculated to unnerve me. This really WAS serious. Michael sat back and sighed like an old man.

Michael: "I've thought about it, and there's only one thing to do. My dad's a psychologist so no one would believe me if I told them he was crazy. I have to handle this by myself."

A bird flew away as a car drove by in the distance. Michael looked up at the sky and his voice changed to the whisper of a conspirator.

Michael: "I've been doing some reading, and sometimes people who have this problem get better if you remove the source of the problem."

Me: "Like if you gave the dog away ?"

Michael: "No, Jay. I couldn't even suggest that. My parents wouldn't hear of it, and besides, it would show them what I'm thinking right now."

Me: "Well, what are you going to do?"

Michael: "Well, Jay, I'm thinking the life of a dog isn't really that important when you put it up against the lives of two people. And I'm thinking that maybe that dog should..."

He looked directly at me.

Michael: "Should die."

Every moral alarm bell I had rang loudly in my head. This idea was wrong, wrong, *wrong*. I protested this to Michael, but he was ready. He was ready with many well thought out arguments. These were moral arguments that were very simple and reasonable, even to my young mind. And they all led to the same grave conclusion.

Slowly and surely, over the next hour, Michael convinced me that his parents' lives were in danger of being completely ruined. His father wasn't writing, and his mother wasn't doing much of anything. Their days were being wasted throwing sticks, brushing the dog, paying disquieting amounts of attention to it.

Slowly he brought me around to his dark conviction. There was no other way. Michael was right. The dog had to be put down, he had to be sent to his demise. I finally had to concede the point to Michael. But there was more.

Michael: "We have to kill him together Jay. I need your help."

Me: "Oh no, Michael, I can't."

Michael: "I know it's a lot to ask. But it's important, Jay."

It was late, and this conversation was exhausting me. So I told him I'd think it over. He gave me a thankful nod, and we climbed down the wooden pegs to the ground. I bid Michael goodbye in front of his house, then turned to go - but paused back with last question.

Me: "Michael - what's your dog's name anyway ?"

He made a 'shush' motion, putting his index finger in front of his mouth, then approached me and whispered.

Michael: "Mr. Smith."

Meet Mr. Smith

Even as spaniels go, Mr. Smith was ridiculous looking. His coat was nice enough, white and brown and smooth. But his head was constantly cocking back and forth to one side or the other to look at things in his periphery. It gave him an air of absolute stupidity. He also had that dog smile with a long dripping tongue hanging out of it. He would never calm down, either. He was always excited by the most plain things. A tree, a wall, or a chair could thrill him into running in circles. As soon as he came to a rest, his head would wheel around to see an umbrella stand, or a clock, and he would race to it, and the whole cycle started again.

The situation wasn't helped by the fact that Michael's hyperactive parents were always spinning around Mr. Smith like electrons to an atom. Michael's father would charge around the front yard (wearing shirt and tie, pipe in mouth) with Mr. Smith at his heels, the two of them laughing like they were in love. Then Michael's mother (bright cotton dress, low heels , Jacqueline Kennedy hairstyle) took over for awhile. It was an odd enough scene to witness, and after Michael's explanation, it edged towards terrifying.

Michael and Mr. Smith had no relationship whatsoever. I'm sure even the best dog would have been a bore to Michael, though. Dogs are, by nature, simple, subservient, and obvious; all anti-Michael qualities.

Maybe a cat could have made Michael a good pet, but I doubt it. Even cats with their purring and rubbing against you would have been too emotional for him. The goldfish was about as warm a pet as Michael could handle. The goldfish had no name.

The Week Plays Itself Out

This week of unequalled excitement in my life was drawing to a close. I spent Thursday evening with Mr. Smith's death sentence chiming through my head, trying to get through the first of the Thirteen Tomes of Life and Death.

I fell asleep just short of the goal, midway through the story of The Human Goat. The Human Goat was a simple minded man who applied a rigid methodology to everything he did, not really that different from the ant. I fell asleep as the turtle preached on and on.

Friday was the first uneventful school day of the whole year. Tommy wasn't in class, which made my day stress free. Michael wouldn't say the oath again, and I again I served detention with him after school. As we left our homeroom with our coats, and lunchboxes I noticed Danny Lunch standing in the hallway. Michael nodded at Danny, then spoke to me like we were doctors consulting on a case.

Michael: "Jay, I hope you don't mind. I've asked Danny to join us at Bobby's on the way home."

Meet Danny Lunch

On the way to Bobby's I reflected, and realized that Danny Lunch had been hanging around us silently for three days, and I hadn't even noticed. As we walked, I reviewed what I knew about Danny Lunch.

Danny had always been just another face in the crowd. He almost never said anything. When he did speak, he had a droopy voice. Other than that, he was average at sports, and everything really. He was never picked on. He was just... *there*.

There were only two things that I could ever remember happening to him.

The first was a fight he had in grade four with the master tree house builder, Bobby Beeman. This was the only fight I ever saw either one of them in, but it was a fierce one. They didn't throw any punches, but wrestled around on the ground pretty hard. The teachers separated them, and by the next day Bobby was patting Danny on the back admiringly, saying that Danny was "okay". It was all very gentlemanly.

The second thing that happened to him was last year. After a year of straight C's in arithmetic, Danny turned in a 'D' test. The math teacher Mr. Cheese, was furious with him. He made Danny come in every night for two weeks, coaching him towards the next test. The test was a killer, but Danny turned in a perfect paper. Mr. Cheese spoke for half a class about Danny's example, then returned to ignoring him for the rest of the year. Danny got straight C's from that point on, of course.

The Tree House Summit With Danny

We arrived Bobby's and crawled up the tree. Michael chaired our little meeting with a distinct formality. It seemed to me like he was interviewing Danny for some reason.

Michael: "Do you like to read?"

Danny: "Uh, not too much... mumble, mumble."

At the time, I suspected the Michael was recruiting Danny to help in the murder plot. But the whole affair ended up being more of a 'get to know you' session. Michael chirped

away with his questions as got bored and starting picking away at the bark on the tree. I looked over at the house beside the park to see Mr. French waltzing around the room by himself.

Michael: "Oh, Jay are you free for lunch tomorrow ? I want to talk about that problem we were discussing."

This was a clear reference to the planned assassination of Mr. Smith.

Me: "Yeah. I can make it."

Michael: "Great. I know a nice place we can go."

With that, this curious little vetting was over. Danny headed down the tree, and just as I set out to follow him down I glanced over at Michael and noticed he was staring at something. It was Mrs. French in the large upstairs window, gazing into that mirror with an expression of such elegant sorrow that I felt my own heart sink.

The First Weekend

Friday night closed out watching television with my parents as usual - a dusty old variety show that was being re-run. I finished off the first Tome, sitting on the floor at my mother's feet. The turtle's explanation of the goat story had finally come together and again it made good sense and shed light on problems of the adult world.

In bed, I drifted off in the unseasonably warm air and cricket sounds, and carefully considered all the adults I knew. What animals were they ? My mother ? My father ? Michael's parents ? Mr. and Mrs. French ?

And underneath these drifting thoughts, a pervasive worry about a plan in a young boy's mind to kill an animal. Anxiety. Sleep.

I awoke with fading dreams. It was Saturday ! Saturday morning always began with a splash of colour – the newspaper cartoons and the box of sugary cereal that I gorged on while I read - then upstairs to bathe and change. My mother gave me my allowance, and reminded me to cut the lawn with the push mower before dinner. I hopped out the door and on to Michael's house, with the first Tome in my hand.

His parents were absent, so after much knocking I let myself in, and went down to the basement to get Michael. I found him in his room, still asleep.

Me: "Michael, wake up. "

Michael: "Huh ?"

Me: "It's Saturday ! Why are you sleeping so late ?"

Michael: "Oh, I was up late reading."

I looked down, and saw 'Personality Development and Psychopathology' by Jerome Cameron sitting on the table. As I thumbed through the illustrations of the second Tome, Michael tramped upstairs and bathed, then came down, changed, and ate an apple.

We headed out with some time to kill before lunch. I tried to get him to discuss the stories in the first Tome, but he wouldn't do it. He did seem very impressed that I had finished the book so quickly, or maybe it was because I had returned it so promptly. I proposed that we go to Town Park Number One, also called Central Park, and he agreed.

I was relieved that he wasn't bringing up Mr. Smith, and hoped that he had forgotten the whole affair. My hopes were dashed, though, when we arrived at Central Park to find Michael's parents there, playing ball with Mr. Smith. Michael bristled and hissed at me.

Michael: "Let's get out of here."

Michael wanted to go to the library, but I convinced him to continue to a part of the park I wanted to show him. We took the long way around, so as to avoid his parents.

Central Park had a most royal presence in our community. It hoarded a lush portion of the center of town, bordered by the central business district on one side and by the wide Ganasaga River on the other.

That wonderful river was one of the few things in our town that had a real name. All the way from its source, every other town it passed through called it that – Ganasaga – so our town had no choice but to import that name. It wound through the park's well manicured portions, then gradually became rougher and more free as it made its escape.

This was what I wanted to show Michael: at the southern tip of Central Park my favorite spot, a giant tree hanging over the wild river. He liked it enough, but not especially and I got the feeling that Michael would never been impressed with anything I showed him. The nature of our relationship was to be Michael - teacher - and Jay - student.

We threw some rocks in the water and investigated some more trees, then headed back into civilization to 'the nice place' he had in mind for lunch

Lunchtime Planning Meeting

Pete's was a old diner-style lunch counter that was mostly empty on Saturdays. We called it Pete's or Pete's Lunch but Omni had simply christened it 'Lunch' and so the sign read simply 'Lunch'.

Michael: "They know me here."

Michael picked a booth, and the waitress came over to us with an air of irritation and threw menus in front of us.

Waitress: "Can I get you children any drinks ?"

Why was she being so sharp ?

Michael: "Could I get a cola, with no ice please ?"

Michael was calling it cola, like a real grown-up might. Every affectation he had, consciously or subconsciously, made him look more mature in my eyes. But the waitress was frowning at him.

Waitress: "Look. You know you can't have it without ice."

Michael: "We have been through this discussion before. I am the customer. I don't want ice."

Waitress: "You gotta have ice !"

Michael: "I ordered without ice last time, and you brought it."

It was the usual cold matter-of-fact tone from Michael, and of course he got the drink without ice. I had a ginger ale which was mostly crushed ice cubes. (I was taking the backlash for Michael's troublemaking once again.)

We lunched on tasty tomato sandwiches, then pushed the plates aside and Michael produced a folded piece of paper, and red pencil crayon from his pocket. His voice lowered once again to that murderous whisper.

Michael: "I have come up with a plan to take care of the problem."

Me: "Wait a second. I didn't say I was going to help you yet."

Michael: "Keep your voice down. You don't have to do anything at all. Just listen."

He opened the piece of paper to reveal a schematic drawing of his kitchen, neatly done with a school issued HB pencil. The red pencil crayon hovered over his sketch. The plan ? To *poison* Mr. Smith !

Michael's mother kept a metal tin of red powdered poison "for rats" in a cupboard under the sink. He put a red 'x' on the map where the sink was. The plan was to mix the noxious powder into Mr. Smith's red dog food, where it would be undetected. Michael would then make it look like the can had tipped over in the cupboard, and had emptied into the dog dish by seeping through the crack at the bottom of the cupboard door.

All I had to do was say that I was there with Michael when it all happened, and that he had fed the dog normally, and that the can must have fallen over inside the cupboard somehow. All I had to do was lie.

There were a few hitches, though. Michael never fed the dog. He would have to start getting in the habit of performing that chore, somehow. It would take a few weeks of him feeding Mr. Smith before he could plant the poison.

The second hitch was that Michael's parents liked to watch the dog as he ate. So we'd have to wait for an opportunity, a night when they weren't around.

The last hitch was that I was still unsure whether I wanted to be involved in any way. Michael said that he understood, and explained that he wouldn't be making his attempt for several weeks anyway. He was going to set the plan in motion by starting to help with Mr. Smith's feeding.

I was feeling uneasy with this whole business again and Michael must have noticed, as he made several efforts to lift my spirits. First, he picked up the tab for lunch - much to my surprise. I had never been bought lunch before. Next, Michael agreed to come to the comic book store with me and even feigned an interest in my favourite comics.

The prospect of introducing Michael to something new, as he had introduced me to the Tomes, was very exciting for me. As we walked to the store together, I expounded on the virtues of the comic book medium and he listened intently. We arrived and I took him through all the titles on the racks, and we studied the covers like we were art collectors shopping for a showpiece. I recommended an *Archie* comic, and he actually bought it ! For the first time, I felt a semblance of respect from Michael.

I blew my whole allowance on eight books, humour and action comics. We went back to his house via Bobby's, but Bobby was up there so we left him alone. Bobby used to

spend a good part of Saturday in there working on his projects with a screwdriver or a pocket knife.

We continued to Michael's house, but that insane trio of parents and spaniel was at home now. They ignored us as Michael fetched me the second Tome from his room.

Packed with new reading material, I rushed home to mow the lawn before dinner. It went easily, as there wasn't any rain that week. Dinner was roast chicken, peas, baked potatoes, and apple pie for desert. I read six comic books in front of the television that night, happy that I didn't need to think about killing Mr. Smith, at least for awhile.

That night, I dreamt that Mrs. French and I were engaged to be married.

Michael on Archie

Michael was the first friend I had that ever telephoned me. None of the other guys I hung around when I was younger ever did. He called me on Sunday morning as we were getting ready to leave for church. My mother, looking pleased again, handed me the phone with a 'that's cute' look.

Mother: "Your new friend is on the phone."

I took the phone.

Me: "Hello ?"

Michael: "Jay, this Archie comic book is stupid."

Me: "What ?"

Michael: "These people are insipid."

Me: "Well, it's supposed to be funny."

Michael: "Jay, they're a bunch of idiots. I can't believe you like this."

Michael sounded almost angry.

Me: "Uh, I've got to go, Michael, we're going to church now."

Michael: "Church ? Are you kidding ?"

I hung up the phone. I should have known better than to foist a children's comic like *Archie* on Michael. I knew that he wouldn't like action or fantasy, but I thought that *Archie* comics might be something new to him – like a light comedy of manners. But the humour was beneath him. The next view days would be spent listening to Michael criticizing every story at length.

As I sat in church I tried in vain to think of a comic book that Michael might like. I then tried to think of *anything* that Michael might like. It occurred to me that the dour piety and moral questions presented at church service should interest him.

But he had already spend the better part of one recess walking around with me expounding on religion, saying that there was no God, and it was all fake voodoo for the weak masses, or something like that. Michael's family never went to church. I believed in God, though, and I spent a good part of the service that day on my knees, praying hard that Mr. Smith would get hit by a car.

Week The Second

The important events that make up the frame of this account began to spread themselves out after the first week. The second week saw a steady flow outward from the occurrences that had already happened in week one. On Saturday, Michael had started to make overtures towards feeding Mr. Smith. His parents were dumbfounded by this gesture, and initially resisted it. But by Wednesday, they were letting him feed the dog under their direct supervision.

I noticed, when I went to pick Michael up, that his mother and father were starting to become more aware of him. On Friday, his mother even said goodbye to him ! I took this to be encouraging, but Michael pointed out that they were still well in the grip of Mr. Smith's evil paws. In his mind, there would be no real progress with them until Mr. Smith was dead and buried.

Danny Lunch was now hanging around us constantly at school, but he only spoke up when Michael prompted him to do so. Nonetheless, we were a regular trio - Danny, Michael and Jay.

Tommy White threw a scary look my way now and then, but he was distracted by a new power struggle with Mike Rank, a tough new kid in the other homeroom. I had missed the start of the whole thing - it happened during a ball game in the school yard. Mike Rank was undoubtedly a more engaging opponent than me, so I was safe for now.

My mind began to focus squarely on the two issues before me: I worried about the Mr. Smith issue and I obsessed over my quenchless thirst for Mrs. French's love.

I got through the Second and the Third Tomes that week. They consisted of even more stories about adults who were stuck in their lives, but unaware of the fact. It was as fascinating as ever, especially after I identified my father as being an example of the Tomes' Human Mole. It flashed in my mind for a second or two to show him the story, but I reconsidered and decided to let it lie.

The second week was also the week that my imaginary romance with Mrs. French started to go off in the absolute wrong direction.

I Love You, Mrs. French

My unrestrained passion for my teacher was swirling in my heart with more violence than ever. I had always been attentive enough in class, but I was now completely lost. I now spent my time daydreaming the most ridiculous romantic pubescent spectacles imaginable.

Many of these fantasies began with Mr. French being killed or hospitalized. I would then rush to Mrs. French's side to console her. She would fall in love with me, and would ask me to marry her. We would then be wed in a lavish ceremony. I even fantasized about the wedding. I was long gone.

Later, I would develop an full story line that took a good half hour to fantasize through. Mr. French was committed to an asylum in the final version because I started to feel guilty fantasizing about his death. That version of the fantasy included a vivid picture of Mr. French being wheeled out of his house, bound upright to a cart. An ambulance waited out front, in the street. In the end, Mrs. French and I would be married of course,

and living in her house. I saw us sitting in front of the fireplace, reading portions of books to each other and laughing quietly.

Monday, however, saw the first roadblock to this marriage ever happening. A conflict occurred between me and Michael that caused Mrs. French to turn against me. I had been wondering about Michael's feelings towards Mrs. French ever since I saw him staring at her from Bobby's tree house on Friday. The thought of him liking her was a real threat to me. He would never be noble enough to stand aside and allow Mrs. French and I to realize what I believed to be our natural and inevitable love. His philosophy, as evidenced when he abandoned me to Tommy White, was 'every man for himself'.

I saw Michael looking at her (*again !*) in detention on Monday, and my jealousy welled up and I became very angry. I poked him in the back.

Me: "What are you doing ?"

Michael: "Nothing."

Me: "Cut it out. Stop it."

Michael: "Stop what ?"

Mrs. French: "No talking."

Me: "Mrs. French, Michael is bothering me."

Michael: "What am I doing ?"

Me: "You know what you're doing. Cut it out."

Michael: "I'm not doing anything."

Me: "Yes you are !"

Mrs. French: "That's enough."

She was annoyed, more me than with Michael. I wasn't even supposed to be in detention after all. She looked irate with me, and I started to quiver. I tried to explain myself, but I protested too vigorously and nervously and she became even more annoyed.

I tried again, but I was digging a deeper hole for myself with every high pitched pleading whine. Then stood up and made the pronouncement.

Mrs. French: "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave, Jay. You're not supposed to be here, anyway. Michael is serving a detention, and your presence here is only distracting him. From now on, only students who have been assigned detention may come here. You'll have to wait outside."

I was banned. I was given detention from detention ! There was nothing more I could do. I walked out of the classroom, out of the school, and straight home to my house, my room, my bed. My stomach hurt the whole way.

The dinner call came, and I hated the fact that I was hungry - that I had to physically leave my room to go downstairs to eat. I ate part of my chicken, and part of my mashed potatoes. Then I returned to my room with a heavy countenance.

I tried to read some more of The Tomes, but I couldn't stop wondering what Michael's intentions were towards Mrs. French. He was so closed-hearted, so private. Was I his friend or not ? I changed into my pajamas, and a sad sleep came around nine thirty.

On Tuesday morning as Michael and I walked to school, I gave a weak apology for my rude behavior and he accepted it. I had to do that first (even though I wasn't truly sorry)

so that I could ask him a candid question: I asked Michael what he thought of Mrs. French.

Michael: "Well, she's in The Thirteen Tomes, I can tell you that."

Me: "Which one?"

Michael: "You'll see."

What great relief ! If she was in the Thirteen Tomes then she had some kind of problem, in Michael's eyes anyway. And Michael would have no time for anyone who was a Human Ant, Goat or a human anything. So I was convinced for the moment that his relationship with Mrs. French would never progress beyond a professional student-teacher type relationship.

But I was wrong.

I Join the Conspiracy Against Mr. Smith

By Friday of that week everything had been patched up between Michael and me. He lent me some more Tomes, and although he kept me up to date on the progress of his murder plot he wasn't trying to push me into it. So it was all good cheer when we agreed to meet on Saturday, Danny Lunch included.

Saturday was quite hot for September, so I wasn't surprised at all when I arrived at Michael's to find his mother and father in swimming attire. They answered the door, though, and that did surprise me. And they spoke to me ! Michael's father actually greeted me !

He still didn't seem completely normal, that was true. He didn't smile, or make father-like small talk; but nonetheless it appeared that this child psychologist was making some measurable progress.

It's a little disturbing to be in the presence of a grown man in a bathing suit with an unlit pipe in his mouth. Michael's father stood that way in the kitchen, calling down to Michael. The back door to the house was wide open, leading out to an in-ground pool in the back yard. Michael's mother was there at the pool testing the water with her toes, and speaking full sentences to Mr. Smith who sat on the lawn nearby.

Michael eventually walked into the kitchen in his usual half-asleep, pajama'd state. He rubbed his eyes in that familiar way, and his hair was sticking all up. What followed was the first real interaction I had ever witnessed between Michael and his father. The father spoke quietly, but I could make it out.

Michael's Father: "Michael, I thought we should have a talk today."

Michael: "About what?"

Michael's Father: "Michael, I have been thinking that we should speak about the... the facts of life."

I could Michael's father was trying to relate to his son. He had a hopeful aspect. It may have been his first attempt at parenting in a long while. But it was met with an impatient look from Michael. And as they continued their hushed discussion, his father slowly started to look nervous and awkward as he stood there in the kitchen in his swim trunks.

Michael: "It's okay. I've read all about it on my own."

Michael's Father: "I thought I could give you a father's perspective."

Michael: "That's not necessary. Thank you just the same."

Michael's Father: "Michael, it may help if..."

Michael: "Look. I've already been masturbating for over a year, okay ?"

With that, his father's face went into blank shock momentarily, then recomposed into a false front of composure. Then he shook his head like he was trying to get water out of his ears, paused, and slowly drew another face – a look of either utter bliss or utter despair, I couldn't tell which. But it was a look of madness either way.

He clearly had no idea what to do next. Standing there looking for a reason to leave but not finding any, his grimace grew a slight tremor. And - I heard it - his teeth started to chatter ! He stood up very straight, and fairly much screamed.

Michael's Father: "WELL NOW ! TIME FOR A SWIM !!!"

And with that the child psychologist bolted out of the kitchen towards the back of the house, pounding through the back room and it's screen door, and dived into the pool full force. He was still wearing his glasses, and still had the unlit pipe in his mouth. The splash scared off Michael's mother and Mr. Smith both. The ruckus continued as Michael's father thrashed about the pool in a futile flight from reality.

I didn't understand the offending word he had told his father but I couldn't see what it could have meant to make the man come unglued like that. It couldn't have been that bad, could it ?

As Michael's dad climbed out of the pool and gave chase after Mr. Smith, I realized that something frightening was happening here. Michael was indeed living in the domain of the unstable and something had to be done about it. As I looked out at the parents mauling Mr. Smith with hugs in the backyard I knew what I had to do.

Jay: "Michael, I'm going to help you."

Michael gave me a serious look. We both understood what I meant.

Danny's Big Score

There was an ugly task ahead of us now, and it coloured everything we did. With the ugly task that was ahead of us, life had a permanent backdrop of conspiracy behind it. And so today's planned recreational activities now felt to me like we were soldiers on a weekend pass rather than boys being boys.

We met Danny Lunch at school, then agreed to go down to the bowling alley to pass the afternoon. The bowling alley was 'downtown', as we called it, situated above a flower store and marked with a generic Omni-fashioned sign that simply said "bowling". It was run by a grumpy middle-aged man named Carl. Besides bowling, Carl's recreation facility also provided some candy machines, and several coin amusements.

There was a target game called 'Gallery of Ghosts', where you aimed a mounted wooden rifle at several fluorescent painted ghouls that floated around with a 'wooo' sound. There were stationary targets as well, such as a skeleton that danced when you hit it. We took our turns playing the game.

I went first, and fired my fifty shots haphazardly, missing most everything. The whirring, and woo-ing and clicking continued until my last (missed) shot. My score was twenty seven. Danny had no money so Michael paid for Danny to play, observing the results like a behavior scientist.

And play he did. Danny couldn't have missed more than five shots out of fifty. He tagged the ghost every time it appeared, likewise with the floating ghouls. He hit the stationary targets every time. When the clicking stopped, and Danny had fired his last shot, his score read two hundred and twenty. There was a rare look of accomplishment on Danny's face. I knew because I had seen it once before, when he received that perfect score on Mr. Cheese's math test.

The pinball machine was out of order, an anomaly for a vending machine in our town. The town's machinery was unusually well attended to, as Omni decreed. The only other machine was older, a baseball game with the plain name 'Coin Baseball'.

In this game, a steel ball bearing shot out of a trap door down the inclined playing board. You had to hit the ball with a steel 'bat', which was kind of like a single pinball flipper. If you hit the ball hard enough, it flew up a ramp at the back of the playing board and smashed into some targets. They were marked single, double, home run and so forth.

Above all of this, behind the glass underneath the score total, there was a little display case that contained an entire baseball infield. On it, little tin players in blue uniforms circled the bases with a mechanical noise and rhythm. There was no ball in the glass case. This display was just there so that you could keep track of your base runners. There were little red basemen standing there in red uniforms, with their hands on their knees, unable to do anything but watch as you slapped the ball towards them.

There was a cardboard card taped to the front of the glass that read 'Win A Free Bowling Game for Score Of Eighteen or Higher.'

I was up first again, and played my usual limp game. Danny was encouraging and Michael just watched with his quiet clinical smile. I had two outs, with men at first and second when I hit a triple giving me my first two points. The moment died, though, when my next hit went directly into the 'out' hole and the machine went quiet. I finished with a miserable score of two.

Danny stepped up and put his hands on the fat round bat button at the base of the playing area. It was made out of bumpy metal that would give a little bit when you smacked it. Michael put a coin in the slot on the side of the machine, and we were off. Danny applied himself to the task with total abandon, grunting and gritting his teeth as he pounded that button, sending ball bearings flying up into the top line of targets.

As the score clicked up past ten with no outs, I started shouting and Michael even chimed in some words of encouragement. As the score clicked to seventeen with one out, my voice went higher and louder and Carl scowled at the commotion. Danny hit the next ball directly into the 'out' hole with only one run needed to get a free game of bowling ! But there was no reason to worry, as Danny pounded the next pitch straight into the home run target. When the game ended Danny had twenty two points and I was jumping up and down patting him on the back.

Carl defined the term 'begrudgingly' in the way he handed Danny his bowling shoes and score sheet for his free game. Michael and I had to pay to rent our bowling shoes, though.

We bowled a leisurely game, laughing and sitting on the plastic chairs beside the lane like Florida retirees enjoying the sun.

Michael looked content. Danny too. He was one of us now. A comrade. On the team.

It was the perfect contentment of a youthful Saturday afternoon, and it still glows in my memory.

Welcome to Danny's World

We peeled down the stairs out of the bowling alley, (well, Danny and I did) yelling and almost falling down. When we got outside, Danny made a significant gesture.

Danny: "Do you guys want to see something really cool ?"

Me: "Sure. Where ?"

Danny: "My house."

And off we went, to the part of town where the blue collar workers of Omni resided. As Danny led us past town park number four I saw Tommy White and his henchman milling around there and generally looking tough. They didn't notice us.

Me: "I hate that Tommy White."

Michael: "You don't hate him, you fear him. If you didn't fear him, you would feel the same way I do about him."

Me: "Well, how do you feel about him ?"

Michael: "I feel sorry for him."

Danny spoke up.

Danny: "He won't try anything with me, 'cause he knows I won't take it. You should just pound him."

Now Danny was giving *me* advice. What was it about me that everyone thought they could help me ? My mother, Michael and Danny seemed oblivious to the fact that Tommy White could easily beat me. As we walked, I wondered again if The Thirteen Tomes were going to give me an idea about how to stand up to him.

Danny's house was a plain bungalow with aluminum siding and a sad tree out front. He took us, not to the front door, but around the side to the back yard. I guessed that Danny was one of those kids that stayed clear of his parents. At the end of the back yard was a tin tool shed with a sliding door. He took us in, and we squatted on the floor beside the lawn mower and hedge clippers.

Danny: "Take a look at this."

Danny reached behind a pile of roof shingles and pulled out a glossy colour magazine with a pouting blonde woman on the cover. He opened the magazine and plopped it in front of us on the floor. A beautiful woman looked up at us, splayed on a white bearskin rug, nude except for a pair of blue bikini underwear. She had long black hair alighting on her pale shoulders, chilled blue eyes, and candy lips. My eyes and mouth opened wide.

But Michael grabbed the magazine and threw it back to Danny.

Michael: "What are you doing ? Are you sick or something ?"

Danny: "It's just naked girls."

Michael: "How would you feel if you saw your sister like that?"

Danny: "I don't got a sister, I got a brother."

Michael: "Well, your mother then. Where did you get that ?"

Danny: "My brother."

Michael: "Well, Danny, you know what ? I don't ever want to see that garbage again."

I wanted to see that garbage again, but Michael had thrown cold water on the whole adventure. He got up and left, and I felt obliged to go with him.

Me: "Hey, Danny, it's okay. Well see you Monday, all right ?"

Danny only looked confused as we left him there in the tool shed and headed home. I would find out later that Michael took the cue for his reaction from a story in *The Thirteen Tomes* that dealt with lechery. The author of the books, Hermann Pustul, was a homosexual who had probably been chaste his whole life and held sins of the flesh in a high disregard. To Hermann and Michael, lust was another sign of weakness, another failure of the intellect to act correctly and reasonably.

Michael The Strong fumed as we walked back to his house. Once there I picked up Pustul's fourth Tome and left as he went to feed the dog. His parents sat in the living room reading, without a care to Michael's new chore. He was now able to feed the spaniel without any supervision. They had let their guard down after only one week. Mr. Smith's time was soon.

Sunday

Nothing happened on Sunday.

Week the Third

Week the Third was about settling down into a routine that would last all fall and through the winter. Summer was gone, and Autumn was here - it was cooler now and the time had come to get down to our school work.

On Monday, our teachers started giving us homework assignments, and I prepared myself for a winter of dull, dark, evenings. We had to read two stories for English class, and answer some questions about them.

I could never do this task properly. The stories were always dull, and preachy. The questions were so obvious, time after time, yet I continually missed the point and misunderstood them. There was a math assignment as well. My mathematical skills weren't too sharp because I was careless, and didn't check my work. Monday weighed me down.

After school I waited outside for Michael's detention to finish. Tommy White and the henchmen came over to hassle me for awhile, but left without actually doing anything. When Michael emerged, I examined his face for any sign of a crush on Mrs. French and, satisfied that there was none, I walked with him.

My mother was going to be out that evening, and I didn't feel like another silent night with my father. I dropped a few hints and Michael accommodated them by inviting me

over to hang around with him that evening. I suggested we do our homework immediately – before dinner - so that we would have the evening free. He suggested we go to the public library to work, and off we went.

The library was a majestic stone structure downtown. I had only been there a few times, but Michael knew the place well even though he had only been in town a short time. On Sundays when I was in church, Michael was at the library. He offered to give me a tour at a later date, but for now we wanted to get our homework done quickly.

We sat at a wide wooden table, rushing through the task. Michael wouldn't help me with any of the answers, of course, because that would be cheating. After half an hour, he announced that he was finished, and left to wander around the shelves. A half an hour after that, I completed my assignments with my usual half-heartedness and we headed home for dinner.

My mother was just about to put dinner on the table when I arrived. On Monday nights we ate early so that mother could leave the house by six thirty. For Monday evening was the night my mother left the house to meet with a local organization. That now-infamous organization was simply known as The Ladies' Club.

The Ladies' Club

I didn't know the difference between ladies and women, and both entities were as mysterious to me as anything in my world. And The Ladies' Club was a complete mystery to anyone who was not a member.

The records showed that they held a bake sale once a month to raise funds for national charities. (There were no local charities required in Omni's perfect town, of course.) But why would a monthly bake sale require weekly three-hour meetings ?

As it came out later at the judicial hearings of course, the club was much more than a benevolent service group. It had all the hallmarks of the secretive men's clubs that were popular at that time. There were passwords, ranks, rituals and even strange pledges to things other than Omni. And there was gossip.

The Ladies' Club was headed by a person known to the assembly by the secret title 'The Principal'. The person was known to the rest of the town as Mrs. Balbanov. She was supported by the Omni company via a widow's pension – her husband had worked there. As much as there was an air of outsider about her, she was regarded as an upstanding woman of the community, a gracious and well-meaning matron.

I don't know if the town thought Mrs. Balbanov was beautiful, but I did. She was a slightly large, tall, shapely Polish woman in her mid forties. I was in love with Mrs. French, but I had a certain dark curiosity for Mrs. Balbanov. To my boyish gaze, it seemed that she always had a certain look on her face. A naughty look, made dramatic by with pale skin, cat eyes, fresh blonde hair and a healthy amount of makeup. The pictures of her that later appeared in the national magazines did her an injustice.

My mother went there every Monday night, and returned refreshed and well prepared for another week of household boredom. According to her testimony at the trials, my mother had served as treasurer for an extended period, but had stepped aside after awhile to 'let someone else have a chance'.

So all the important and semi-important ladies in the town went to Mrs. Balbanov's house every Monday night from seven until ten p.m. On the last Friday of the month they held a bake sale in the school auditorium. That's all we knew of the Ladies' Club then.

The Young Spies

I arrived at Michael's straight after dinner that Monday night. We chatted in his room for awhile. Then he whispered to me.

Michael: "My parents didn't watch Mr. Smith eat tonight."

My stomach started to knot. The assassination was nigh. How long would Michael wait? A week? Two weeks? A month? He fed the goldfish, and we went outside into the fading light.

Eventually the conversation turned to my mother's absence that evening, and I told him the facts about the Ladies' Club, as I knew them.

Michael: "Let's go spy on them!"

Me: "No. You're kidding, right?"

Michael: "No, I'm curious about it."

The only explanation I could build from Michael's weird suggestion was that he was hoping to eavesdrop on some interesting adult conversation. In any case, this was a far more exciting activity than sitting around and reading books so I agreed.

We waited at Bobby's tree house until it got dark, then doubled back towards Mrs. Balbanov's house. She lived between my house and the downtown in a nice stone two storied home. When we got there, we tiptoed around awhile, then hid in the bushes to spy on the Ladies' Club. From our dark lookout in the bushes we could see them gathered in the living room, but we couldn't hear a thing. So we prowled around outside some more, until I noticed a strange sight.

Me: "Hey, the basement windows are covered over!"

It was true, there were wide sheets of wood painted black and nailed up on the *insides* of the basement windows. Strange. We were able to pry open a couple of storm windows and reach our hands in to grab at the wood. On the grass beside the house, on our hands and knees, we pushed at the inner window cover. It was thin, but it wouldn't move. And we would probably have had to give up our investigation if it wasn't for a miraculous event.

It was right then that we experienced the only power failure that ever occurred in our town. The street lights went dark and all the houses. As Michael and I crouched in the darkness. I was afraid.

Me: "Can you see anything?"

Michael: "Shhh."

And we waited there perfectly still for fifteen minutes. I remember looking over and seeing candlelight shining on the lawn nearby. The Ladies were in the living room right above us. We strained to listen, but only heard murmurs of soft cackling.

And finally the power came back on. As the streetlights flickered, I saw Michael's eyes grow wide and he put his ear to the wood.

Michael: "Listen !"

I did. It was the sounds of some heavy powered machinery of some kind starting up. It sounded like the noises that happened when the industrial arts teacher powered all up the tools in the shop. Michael and I looked at each other. There was some kind of huge machinery in that basement, that was for sure.

Suddenly, loud piano music boomed from the living room. Mrs. Balbanov was leading the procession in a sing-song. Looking back on it, I think she must have been aware of the basement sounds, and was trying to cover them up. We closed the storm windows back up and slinked away, back towards home with Mrs. Balbanov's melodies fading behind us.

Tuesday's Double Plots

The next day at morning recess, Michael asked Danny to leave us so that we could speak privately. Danny dutifully consented, and Michael and I walked around the schoolyard with our hands behind our backs.

Michael: "Jay, we have two items to discuss. Firstly, last's night's business. Secondly, the problem with my parents. Do you follow me ?"

Me: "I follow you."

Michael: "Good. I've spoken to Bobby about getting a tool to cut through the wood on Mrs. Balbanov's windows. Do you follow me ?"

Me: "We can't do that !"

Michael: "Aren't you curious, Jay?"

Me: "It's none of our business !"

Michael started to walk away nonchalantly.

Michael: "Fine, I'll get Danny to help."

He was playing dirty, playing me off of Danny, implying that he could replace me with Danny as his sidekick. It was an effective tactic.

Me: "No, wait. I'll do it."

Michael: "Good. Bobby will be over to discuss tools momentarily. Now, there's the matter of item two. My father is going to be out late Monday night. If we can get my mother to go to the Ladies' Club with your mother, then we can make our attempt on Mr. Smith."

Me: "What's attempt mean ?"

Michael: "It means try, Jay. We can make a try for it. Do you follow me ?"

Me: "I don't think we should tell your mother to leave the house. She'll know something's up."

Michael: "I know. So you'll have to tell your mother tonight that my mother wants to go to the Ladies' Club but she's shy about it. I'll tell my mother that your mother wants her to come to the club but she's shy about it. Then we'll get them talking on the phone. If we can get my mother to go, we'll be alone with the dog. Do you follow me ?"

Michael stopped and looked at me, cold and determined. I took a breath and nodded.

Michael: "Tonight. You talk to your mother. No screwing up. Now, here's Bobby."

He waved Bobby over to come join us. We all had very serious looks and had our hands in the pockets of our winter coats, like convicts in the exercise yard discussing an escape.

Bobby: "What's up ?"

Michael: "We need to borrow a tool. Something to punch a hole in a sheet of plywood."

Bobby: "Like a power drill ?"

Michael: "No, it can't use power. It has to be quiet. And the hole has to be cut out and replaced as though it was never there. And this whole thing has to be kept secret. "

Bobby: "That's a tough one. I don't have anything like that. My dad has some weird tools. I'll check. It's gonna cost you, though."

Bobby named his price, and Michael flipped a few bills out of his pocket. He put half the amount in Bobby's hand as they glanced around to make sure no one was looking.

Michael: "Secret. Understand ?"

Bobby: "I'll meet you after school."

I hoped that Michael knew what he was doing. We were edging getting closer to the realm of the illegal – break ins, and dog murder. I felt tense.

Welcome to Bobby's World

Bobby and I waited for Michael to emerge from detention and we all walked to Bobby's actual house, not far from his tree house. None of us spoke aloud about what we were doing. The conversation revolved around about teachers and school.

Bobby's house was nice, though not as nice as Michael's. His dad may have been some sort of scientist at Omni, I think. We went right in and met his mom, then went down to the basement workshop. The workshop was an amazing place. Bobby and his dad shared it. He knew how to use all of the dozens of tools that were hung or mounted everywhere around us. We went into a back room where a motorized cart sat in a state of mid-assembly, and Bobby dragged a wire basket out from under a bench. There were all kinds of strange tools in that basket, none of which I had ever seen before.

Bobby: "This is just some stuff that my dad picked up at flea markets and auction sales a long time ago. He says some of them are one of a kind. Here's what we need."

He pulled out what looked like a compass (the kind you use to draw circles) with a tiny saw on one end, and a spike on the other. Then he went to a woodpile and came back with a thin piece of wood. The demonstration followed. Bobby pushed the spike into the wood, then he turned the saw end in a perfect circle to cut away a small circle. He pulled the tool away and the wooden disc clung to the end of it. Then we watched in amazement as Bobby put the wooden roundling of wood perfectly back in place.

Bobby: "Be careful, that saw's sharp."

Michael pulled out the rest of the cash in his pocket and slapped the rest of Bobby's fee into his hand.

Zero Hour at the Ladies' Club

Michael and I decided to go back to Mrs. Balbanov's that evening. The idea was that we would cut a hole in that plywood window covering, have a look at what was in there, then put the piece back into the eyehole undetected.

So after dinner, I told my mother that I was going to Michael's to get help with my schoolwork. I wasn't exactly lying to my mother. Although he would never help me, we *were* going to work on homework before leaving to spy on Mrs. Balbanov. Michael and I rushed through Math and History, then packed the cutting tool and snuck up the basement stairs and out into the dark backyard. Michael's parents were both asleep on the couch with Mr. Smith.

The air was seasonably cold and invigorating as we crept up to Mrs. Balbanov's darkened house. She was out, which was good, but we didn't know when she would return again. My heart was beating fast. Michael was cool and in control.

We snuck over to the window and got to work. Michael had already practiced using the tool and was familiar with it. It took five or six minutes of breathless fiddling - prying the window open, trying to affix the compass properly. But finally it worked. Michael began to cut the circle as my trembling hands held a penlight on him. It worked ! He pulled out a quarter-sized wooden dot, and light poured out through the hole.

Michael put his eye up to the hole.

Michael: "Wow."

Me: "What is it ?"

He let me look, and I pressed my cheekbone against the cold wood. I could see the back of what looked like a stack electronic components. The word 'Arkon' was written in black on a steel plate a few inches long, and there was a red power indicator light.

Me: "Arkon."

Michael: "That's what it says."

A car was coming, so Michael carefully popped the circle of wood back in. I quickly doused the penlight, and we closed the storm window and ducked into the shadows. The car stopped in front of the house. I could see Mrs. Balbanov was in the front seat talking to a man. She got out of the car.

Mrs. Balbanov: "Goodbye, son."

The guy didn't look like anybody's son. He was too old to be her son, I thought. And he didn't look like her. He was gaunt and scary looking with receding dark hair and darker mottled skin. He drove off and Mrs. Balbanov walked up the path to her front door.

We bolted as soon as she was out of sight. We walked home taking the cold air in big nervous breaths. What did it *mean* ? What was Arkon ?

Lying To My Mother

I had one more task to complete that night, Michael reminded me. It was time to tell my mother that Michael's mother wanted to join the Ladies' Club. And I dreaded this task - lying. I rehearsed the lines over and over in my head, certain that my mother wouldn't be fooled.

When I got to my house my mother was in the hallway.

Mother: "You were working quite late !"

Me: "Homework was hard."

Mother: "Did you work hard ?"

Me: "Well, we goofed off a little."

Mother: "Uh-huh. Didn't Michael's mother mind you being there ?"

Me: "Uh, no."

I was already sweating, and I hadn't even told the lie yet. I hesitated, and an inspiration hit me.

Me: "Michael wanted me to tell you that his mom wants to join the Ladies' Club but she's shy and she wouldn't want you to know that. He wanted me to get you to try and phone her."

I had told a lie without lying ! All I had told my mother was what Michael wanted me to say. I didn't add the fact that none of it was true, of course, but everything I said was, itself, factual.

Mother: "Well. Michael is a very sensitive and intelligent boy. You tell him I'll call her tomorrow."

I sighed and happily bounded up the stairs. It was done. In bed, I read some of Tome Five, but it kept coming back to me: Mr. Smith probably had less than one week to live.

Week The Third Comes To A Close

Michael and I laid low for the rest of the week. There had been enough sneaking around done, enough shady planning. We spent the next three days as good little school boys. We walked around with Danny, and Jamie Palladium too, at recess.

The way Jamie had gravitated back to Michael showed me that Michael still had the charisma to draw people to him. It had worked at the very beginning, with the incident with Mr. Reddick and it had never really left. True, the kids had turned away from Michael right after it happened, but his character had been established. He was serious. He had integrity. Jamie and Danny picked up on that.

Tommy punched John Wells in the stomach at lunch on Thursday. I took that as a sign that he was recruiting new victims. With this new group - Michael, Jamie, Danny and me all together, I felt safe for now.

It was around this time that Michael and Mrs. French had started speaking to each other for short chats during detention period. It had all started innocently enough with Michael commenting on the author of a book she was reading. Mrs. French was a

literature major, so she knew her books. I suppose she must have initially thought it was cute how Michael could discuss these things with her.

Mr. French wasn't acting so weird anymore. When we saw him through the window from Bobby's tree house, he just kind of shuffled around his house. And he was there at four in the afternoon sometimes now, instead of being at work.

On the last day of the week, after his detention, Michael met me so we could go to Bobby's and finalize our plan to move against Mr. Smith. The air was cold as we grappled up the tree and my fingers hurt. We thumped down on the platform. Michael crumpled a dry leaf in his hands.

Michael: "So you're ready, then ?"

Me: "Can you go over the plan one more time ?"

Michael: "I'll do everything. I'll put the poison in Mr. Smith's dog food. You just have to be there to tell everybody that nothing strange happened."

Me: "Yeah. I just have to lie, right ?"

Michael: "It's for a greater good, Jay."

I looked over at Mr. French shuffling around. His hat was sitting oddly sideways atop an utterly expressionless face.

Me: "Do I have to watch you do it ?"

Michael: "No."

Me: "Okay."

Michael: "They're letting me feed him alone every day now."

A wild wind started to blow. That idiot dog was done for, and the reality of the situation struck at me again. I looked at Michael, thinking I might ask him to reconsider. But I knew from the look on his face that he wouldn't listen.

Michael: "Jay, you have to be normal. If you act out of the ordinary, someone will notice."

Me: "Okay."

Michael: "We have to do this. It's for my parents."

But he didn't say this with any emotion at all. His voice carried no care for his parents at all. Instead, it sounded like a solemn vow of duty. He sounded like me when I gave my allegiance to Omni every morning.

Saturday's Respite

It was cold on Saturday. Mom drove down to pick up the groceries, and I decided to help her. That way, I could get a ride to the comic book store. I had almost an hour to browse comics while she shopped.

The comic book store was one of my very favourite places. It was modeled after those big, old-time variety stores. It had a lot of wood inside, and high ceilings. The comics were displayed on a long magazine stand that went the length of the store. Mr. Weight was the operator. He was nice to me, and always called me 'Mr. Customer'. I flipped through about thirty books there before settling on ten that I liked.

I caught up with my mom at the supermarket just in time to help pick out a breakfast cereals. We paid and carried the bags out, then mom pointed the station wagon towards home and off we went. It was pouring by the time we carried the last bags in to a ringing phone. Mother answered, then handed me the phone. It was Michael.

Michael: "Come down here."

Me: "Where are you ?"

Michael: "I'm at the library. I have information about Arkon."

A picture of the word, as it appeared on the steel plate on the radio in Mrs. Balbanov's basement, popped into my memory. I got my mother to drive me back downtown to the library. She let me out of the car with a kiss, and I climbed up the front steps to where Michael stood with an umbrella. He looked like a London spy.

He brought me inside to a table with a pile of books he had been looking through. One of the books was open, but I couldn't read it. It was written in another language.

Me: "What is it ?"

Michael: "It's a Czechoslovakian encyclopedia."

Me: "So ?"

Michael: "Look at the picture."

I saw a black and white photo of some kind of radio apparatus on a table. In tiny letters, the word Arkon appeared under the speaker grille. What did it mean ?

Me: "So, Mrs. Balbanov has Czechoslovakian radio ?"

Michael: "No ! That's the thing. I copied out the writing and went to show it to Carl at the bowling alley. He's Czechoslovakian. These words describe a German radio - a German *military* radio !"

Me: "Neat-o !"

I didn't use that expression very often.

Michael: "But I can't find any trace of it in any of the German radio catalogues. If you help me, I'm sure we can find a picture of it in here somewhere. I'll show you where."

Michael took me to a group of shelves with radio catalogues. There were dozens of them, and for the rest of the afternoon Michael and I looked through every radio catalogue we could find. And at around five o'clock, we gave up. We put all of the catalogues back on the shelves, then walked out into the rain. We stood at the top of the stone steps, the rain tapping on the top of Michael's umbrella.

Michael: "So are you ready for Monday night, Jay ?"

Me: "Sure."

I wasn't really. And as we splashed home through the gray streets, I felt the arrival of a new stomach ache that would last the whole week.

Sunday's Sickness

Sunday was a day of cataclysmic tension. I didn't have to feign illness to get out of church - I really was sick. My mother, whose concern for me had visibly subsided since

I landed Michael as a new friend, went back to worrying about me again as I lay in bed throwing up. My father read the paper downstairs.

The clock raced through a gloomy afternoon. I wished in vain that the sun would never set and I wouldn't have to see the next day.

Mother: "No school for you tomorrow."

Me: "What?"

Mother: "You heard me. No school."

This was going to screw up the whole plan. There was no way I was going to have Mr. Smith's murder postponed only to go through this stress again later.

Me: "I have to phone Michael!"

Mother: "Why? You're sick."

I thought fast, and came up with a weak excuse.

Me: "I have to tell him I'm not going to be picking him up!"

I went downstairs and picked up the phone receiver, dialing with sweaty fingers.

Michael: "Hello?"

Me: "Hi. It's Jay. My mom won't let me go to school tomorrow because I'm sick."

Michael: "Oh."

There was a very long pause at this moment. I was sweaty and my stomach felt awful. Michael spoke in a tentative manner.

Michael: "Do you still want to come over after school if you... feel better?"

Me: "Yeah."

Michael: "Okay. If not, we'll do it another time."

I understood what 'it' meant. And I over the phone I heard Michael speaking to Mr. Smith.

Michael: "Good dog."

The Worst Day of My Life

It was Monday of the fourth week. I opened my eyes at the regular time of day for getting up for school, then quickly closed them again. I wanted it to be Tuesday, or to have never have been alive, or to be teleported to another planet.

I stayed in bed all morning, trying my best to think of nothing at all. My mother looked in on me from time to time. My throat was dry, I was sick to my stomach and hungry at the same time, and I had the worst headache in human history. It felt better if I buried my head deep under my pillow and my blankets, cut off from the world. But it still didn't feel good.

At noon my mother came in with a bowl of soup, and set it on the table beside the bed. After she left, I sat up and slurped down about half of it. To my surprise, it did make me feel better. And I started to resign myself to the fact that this awful deed was going to

be done. Michael wasn't going to stop. The dog was hurting his parents, so the dog had to go.

Yes, that was it. *He* was going to do it, not me, and it wasn't going to be MY fault. I felt better still. Time crawled. By the time supper came, I was weak but stable. My mother came in and took my temperature. It was normal. I got dressed, and went down to poke at my dinner.

Me: "Mom, can I go over to Michael's after dinner ? I have to find out what homework we have."

Mother: "Okay, but I don't want you to walk. I'll give you a ride over when I go to pick up Michael's mother for the Ladies' Club meeting."

Everything was coming into place exactly as Michael had predicted it would. I washed up after dinner, and looked at myself in the mirror as I had seen Mr. French do the morning he kissed his reflection. To my surprise, I looked completely normal.

Zero Hour at Michael's House

Mother and I drove to Michael's and she came in with me to meet his mother. There were a few polite, "nice to meet you's" in the front hall. Michael and I didn't even look at each other.

Michael's Mother: "Did you feed Mr. Smith, dear ?"

Michael: "No, mother."

Michael's Mother: "Well, don't forget !"

Michael: "I won't."

Then they were gone and we were alone with Mr. Smith. The dog looked up at us with that idiot tongue hanging out. Then I changed my mind about the whole thing.

Michael: "Let's go."

Me: "Michael, let's not do this."

Michael: "It's too late, Jay."

Me: "No, it's not. Maybe we can just get him to run away or..."

Michael was already walking to the kitchen. Mr. Smith's bowl was on the floor beside the cupboard that hid the evil poison. Michael opened the cupboard and pulled out the canister. It was silver with a plain white label, which Michael's mother had marked 'POISON' with a skull and crossbones.

He pulled the lid off and we looked inside at the deadly rich red powder. It had a sort of sweet smell to it that made me feel ill again. What would it feel like to die from this poison ? The image of Mr. Smith writhing on the floor turned in my imagination.

Me: "Michael, no ! "

Michael: "Jay, it has to be done. It's for my parents."

He wasn't even looking at me. He methodically put the powder down on the kitchen counter then reached under the sink and retrieved a canister of dog food. As he turned the key of the can opener, I was still pleading for Mr. Smith's life with tears welling up in

my eyes. Michael put the dog bowl on the counter and poured the canister of food into the bowl.

Michael: "It's the only way, Jay."

When he started to mix the red poison into the bowl, it was too much for me. The tears spilled over my eyelids and down my cheeks. I bolted from the kitchen, out of his house and ran out into the night crying.

It's All Over

I cried all the way home then stopped on my front step to regain my composure. When I finally went in, I met my father in the front hallway holding the newspaper in his hand. Our eyes met, and the usual awkwardness hit us. I knew he could tell something was wrong, but he didn't know what to do.

Me: "Hi Dad."

He didn't say anything. He just stood there, curiously examining me.

My father: "Everything okay?"

I nodded, then I held the tears back as bolted up to my room. There, I sobbed into my pillow for a long time. After I had stopped, I heard my father creep up the stairs to the door of my room. He must have heard me sobbing.

He stood outside my door, and I stopped breathing. We were both very still and the house was completely silent for a full minute. Then he turned to walk back down the stairs and I sighed in relief. I'm sure he was relieved too.

At about ten thirty my mother pulled up in the car. I heard her come in, and confer with my father for a short time. Then she climbed the stairs to my room and came in. I pretended to be asleep.

Me: "Mom?"

Mother: "It's me Jay."

Me: "How was your meeting?"

Mother: "Fine."

Me: "Did Michael's mom like it?"

Mother: "Yes, Jay. She liked it fine. She had a bit of a scare afterwards, though."

Me: "What?"

Mother: "When I took her home, their dog was very sick. They took him to the vet but he's all right. That family certainly loves that dog, don't they?"

So Mr. Smith was still alive! I was elated. My mother came over to the bed and sat down. She looked beautiful in the dark, and I was glad she was home. I kissed her good night.

Mother: "Are you okay?"

Me: "Yeah."

Mother: "Hey, would do you feel about getting a dog?"

Me: "I don't want a dog, mom."

What Went Wrong ?

I got the whole story on the evening's events from Michael on the way to school on Tuesday. He related the events matter-of-factly, like he was recounting a police report.

Michael had spilled almost the entire can of poison into the dog dish. He set the can on its side inside the cupboard, as planned, and the whole scene really looked like a complete accident. As Mr. Smith gobbled down the deadly meal, Michael sat down in his room reading.

Michael's dad came home at about eight-thirty to find Mr. Smith looking slightly ill. He carried the dog out to his car in a panic, then sped him to the vet clinic. The vet on duty proceeded to pump Mr. Smith's stomach of the gooey red death serum.

The vet's diagnosis was that the dog had ingested a large amount of sugar, and it was giving him digestive problems. *Sugar !*

We didn't know that Michael's mother wasn't storing poison in that canister after all. It was her own secret cache of cherry flavoured drink crystals ! She had labeled it "poison" to keep Michael from drinking it.

Michael's dad returned at about ten, with Mr. Smith, and several tubes of diarrhea medication for spaniels. With Michael looking on, his dad inspected the dog bowl and cupboard. Suspicion. The young assassin made his best attempt to look concerned, worried, and generally innocent but Michael couldn't tell whether he had convinced his father or not.

That was it, as far as we knew. The attempt had failed. We could still be found out by Michael's parents, or the authorities. We didn't know.

Furthermore, there would be no other chances for a long time. Michael even mused allowed on how he would handle his parents' now certain descent into complete madness. They had stayed up all night with Mr. Smith.

There was one tidbit of information that was outside our awareness, though. And that would become very important to us all later on. It was the beginning of an ongoing investigation by Omni security into some curious matters.

Michael's father had started it on his own, completely by accident. When he was registering Mr. Smith at the vet clinic, the following exchange took place between the attendant and his father:

Attendant: "Name ?"

Michael's father: "Mr. Smith."

What Michael's father didn't realize was that the attendant was asking for *his* name, not the dog's. Later that night, when the paperwork was being processed, an administrator performed a routine check of the patient's owner.

When the name 'Mr. Smith' did not appear on Omni's list of town dog owners, it appeared to them that Michael's father had used an assumed name when checking in.

They promptly turned the matter over to The Men in security, who used the security camera photo to positively identify the dog owner as Michael's father. When they also discovered that said owner was the father of the child who had refused to pledge allegiance to Omni, they jumped.

There was definitely something going on here, but what ? Why would someone use an assumed name to admit a dog to a vet hospital ?

The Men opened a file on the incident with references to the first file on Michael. This file, too, would eventually become thick with documents, photos, and transcripts of taped conversations.

Week The Fourth Continues

The fourth week of school saw Michael and I treading very lightly. After school on Tuesday, I went over to Michael's and his father casually quizzed me on the events that led up to Monday's poisoning.

I opened my eyes wide and lied as best I could, telling how Michael had fed the dog normally and how the dog kept pushing his bowl - no, *bumping* his bowl - against the cupboard with great force.

Michael's dad had no choice but to buy the story, but Michael's dog feeding days were over. He kept up trying to be nice to Mr. Smith, but his parents no longer trusted Michael and watched him at every turn.

On the school front, Tommy White pushed me around on Wednesday and Thursday but no physical violence took place. It was just pushing. And I had wandered far away from my three schoolyard comrades, so I took the whole thing as a lesson to not stray. I was finishing up Tome Six and still hadn't retrieved any method from the Tomes for dealing with Tommy.

Also on the school front, Michael and Mrs. French were getting friendlier. It was around this time that I noticed something was up with him. Sometimes when he walked out of the school after detention he spoke enthusiastically of her. Also, in class Mrs. French was giving him more consideration.

She had previously treated him with a sort of cold detachment, but now she was asking him to give our class his interpretations of our latest assignment. This he did with full relish and piety.

Some of the other kids started to think he was a genius but I jealously suspected he was trying to impress Mrs. French, and I eventually confronted him on it.

Me: "Michael, why are you acting so nice to Mrs. French these days ?"

Michael: "I don't 'act nice' to anyone."

Me: "Well, you two sure seem like you're pretty good friends."

Michael: "I think she just appreciates my point of view. We have interesting discussions, you know. Literature, psychology, things like that."

There was something in that I didn't like.

Me: "Uh huh. Do you think she's pretty ?"

Michael stopped and looked at me. He looked ticked off for some reason. I must have touched a nerve.

Michael: "That's beside the point."

Me: "Well, do you ?"

Michael rolled his eyes, a common reaction he had to anything that came out of my mouth.

Michael: "She's a presentable woman, Jay. That's obvious. But if you think that I could have anything but a professional relationship with her, then you are plainly delusional."

With that he walked away leaving me wondering what the hell he meant. Michael could really get the big words out when he wanted to. What I got from it was that he was mad at her, and he thought that she was beautiful, and that I would have to do something about all of this very soon.

French Fried

Saturday came, and as Michael, Danny and I walked to Bobby's to check out the scene there we saw an ambulance parked in front of the Frenchs' house. Our pace quickened as we approached. Then we stopped.

Mr. French was being led out, walking, from the house. I didn't know what a strait jacket was then. It looked to me like he had some kind of formal shirt on. He was very happy looking, smiling away calmly. In fact, he looked more normal than ever. He had his hat on straight and wasn't talking to himself or anything.

I felt guilty. I had always prayed for Mr. French to drop out of the picture, it was true. I mean, this was a nearly perfect recreation of my very familiar fantasy. But now that it was happening, I felt bad.

The attendants loaded both the French's into the ambulance then sped away, with lights on but no siren. We hadn't been seen. The three of us climbed up to Bobby's tree house.

We sat there for awhile saying not much, then walked downtown to look at the store windows and generally do nothing. Danny was probably unsure why we were so sad, but he followed our lead and kept quiet.

Danny's Pinball Talents

We trailed back to the bowling alley, and climbed the dingy stairs looking for fun, to lift our spirits. Danny motioned to the pinball machine in the corner, and Carl gave us a nod of acknowledgement as we walked past. Michael plinked a quarter in the slot for Danny to play.

Immediately, the somber afternoon lit up with ringing bells as Danny hit spotlight, every bonus, every 'special' on the very first ball. He was performing for us, working the machine the best he could to put us back in a good mood and it was working. What a good friend, I thought.

As the game came to a close, a 'thwack' sound indicated that Danny had won a free game. We let out a volley of congratulations.

Me: "Way to go !"

Michael: "Well done."

Danny: "Thanks man."

And with each game our mood lightened. Danny eventually won enough games to let Michael and me play. I was average, but Michael was a complete flop at pinball. It didn't seem to bother him, though, even when I laughed at his inept flipper control. It took two hours for us to finish all of the pinball games Danny won.

When we started to head out, Carl called after Michael.

Carl: "Hey Mike ! Did you find out about that radio ?"

He was referring to the Arkon radio that had appeared in the encyclopedia from Czechoslovakian. We walked back towards him.

Michael: "No. I looked it up but here isn't anything in any of the radio catalogues."

Carl: "Hmmm. Did you look in the Russian catalogues as well ?"

Michael: "No. Just the German catalogues. Why would a German radio be in the Russian catalogues ?"

Carl: "I dunno. Maybe it's a communist radio !"

Carl slapped the counter with his hand then pointed at Michael, a sly look on his face.

Carl: "When you read in a Czechoslovakian encyclopedia about a German radio, you must keep in mind that there are *two* Germanys."

Michael: "Right. West Germany and East Germany !"

Carl: "What were these catalogues that you looked in ?"

Michael: "West German !"

Carl: "You see !"

Michael might have been expected to be embarrassed by the wrong turn he took in his investigation, but he wasn't. As much as he knew, as much of a 'know it all' as he was, Michael always accepted that he could be mistaken. He was always open to learning.

Next, we headed out for the library, all three of us. Danny looked uneasy at the idea of spending Saturday in the library instead of the bowling alley. But Michael's enthusiasm soon infected us, especially after he offered to give us a guided tour of the entire library.

Research at the Library

Before he could renew his search for Arkon, Michael had to show us every corner of the building. He started with the boring sections that I had seen before. We saw the children's section, and the fiction section first. Next, he started taking us through the non-fiction sections.

Danny loaded up on a bunch of warplane books, and we continued. Next, Michael showed us the periodicals. There were magazines on every topic, including some pretty cool ones like guns and kites. Finally, we went into the microfilm room. Here you could

look at every single issue ever of the town paper. Years and years of comic strips. Nirvana.

I stayed there to read microfilm comic strips, and Danny went off with his warplanes, as Michael set out to do some heavy research. When he returned an hour and a half later, he came to me with a look of concern.

Michael: "I found something."

Me: "What?"

Michael: "I'll show you."

We let Danny be, since he wasn't in on this secret, and Michael led me to a table where he had been rifling through more than a dozen books. One large book was open in the center of the table.

It wasn't exactly right, but it was very close. Under the heading 'Military Electronics', a black and white picture of a radio with the words Arkon on it. The description said that it was an East German short wave radio receiver for military use.

Me: "What does it mean?"

Michael: "I don't know. Mrs. Balbanov has a basement room full of machines, including an East German short wave radio. I don't know."

Me: "Do they make good radios in East Germany?"

Michael: "I'm sure if the radios in West Germany are good, the ones in East Germany must also be good."

Now, Michael knew a lot for a little kid, but not enough to piece together the answer to the mystery. For Mrs. Balbanov, kindly and grandmotherly Mrs. Balbanov, was a spy.

Mr. Smith Has Bugs

When our work at the library was finished, Michael, Danny and I went to the diner for a Coke. There was the usual debacle with the waitress about ice, and some conversation about what Danny had read in the warplane books. I think Michael wanted to encourage Danny to pursue any knowledge that he was interested in, so he let him talk at length about warplanes.

We finished up, and Michael paid the tab. Outside, we said goodbye under an orange autumn sky. Danny headed home. Michael and I walked back to his house.

When we got there his parents were on the porch with a healthy and (still) stupid looking Mr. Smith. There were also two men with white jumpsuits marked with red letters 'VET' on the back, walking back to a van in the driveway.

Michael's parents explained that they had come by to check up on Mr. Smith. They took Mr. Smith into their van for a few 'tests', then declared him to be healthy.

As we were to find out much later, the men in vet jumpsuits were, in reality, The Men. They had been instructed to affix a small radio device to Mr. Smith's collar. This device would allow Omni security to monitor any conversations that took place within earshot of Mr. Smith.

Michael leaned over to pet the dog with mock affection, and the words that came out of his mouth were the first to fly over the airwaves directly to Omni security's central office. Those words certainly must have convinced the listeners that they were on to something.

Michael: "Dad, what's East Germany ?"

Michael's father answered curtly.

Michael's Father: "It's a country."

With that, parents called Mr. Smith into the house, leaving Michael and me there alone.

Me: "It's not going too well with your parents, is it ?"

Michael: "No, it's not."

Down at Omni security, the entire exchange was raising a heavy mass of questions. Why would a kid ask that ? Why didn't the father give a full answer ? What were they hiding ?

The Secret of the Ladies' Club

There was something up in our town, but it had nothing to do with the pathetic spaniel worship of Michael's parents. Michael and I had got closest to the truth of anyone, but we were too uninformed about international politics to make the correct connection.

Mrs. Balbanov was a spy. The son we had seen drop her off that night was not her son, but another spy. He drove into town every Tuesday for the sole purpose of picking up the weekly batch of taped conversations. The gossip of the Ladies' club was being taped by hidden microphones, which were wired to a host of tape machines in her basement electronics room.

How The Men missed this one, you have to wonder. Sure, she was a good spy. Her act was perfect. But she had a Russian sounding name ! Sometimes, it seems, you can hide in plain sight.

There was, I believe, a major shakeup of the security hierarchy at Omni after everything came out. Omni suspected that she had inside help. Whether she did or not is the question that lies at the center of the international scandal that we are familiar with today.

You might think the information spoken by housewives at a tea club would be trite. You would be wrong if you thought that. For the husbands always spoke to their wives. And Omni wives discussed the affairs of Omni husbands. They didn't discuss specific details, but they discussed as much as they knew and this information could be useful to the other side.

Mrs. Balbanov herself stoked the fires of gossip by repeating other things she heard. For example, when two women spoke in hushed tones about some secret matter, Mrs. Balbanov would pick it up on the tapes the next day. The following Monday, Mrs. Balbanov would break the story as if she heard it from someone else. She skillfully manipulated the atmosphere at the Ladies' club to create a blast furnace of gossip.

This atmosphere also made the Ladies' Club very popular. As the club's popularity grew, Mrs. Balbanov's living room became slowly packed with more wives, more information beacons for the communists.

One of the minor pieces of information picked up in this manner concerned Michael. It seemed that one of our classmates had told her mother of the secret of Michael's non-allegiance to Omni. The mother related the story to a close ally, and imperceptibly, to a coffee table mounted microphone.

Mrs. Balbanov couldn't circulate this one so easily, since it indirectly concerned a new member - Michael's mother. She was careful about gossiping about club members directly. That could create bad blood, and possibly dam the gossipy floodwaters. She had to be selective in choosing when to release information.

She remembered the story though, mostly because of the oddness of it. A young citizen refusing to pledge allegiance - what was going on? There was no telling how this information could be useful in the future, or how Michael could be useful to her in the future.

Week The Fifth

Although the fifth week was notable more for happenings in other areas, there were a few spy related events.

Firstly, Monday was the day that Mrs. Balbanov recorded the parents' discussion of Michael's situation. Secondly, Michael and I loaded our big silver flashlights with big 'D' batteries and prowled around Mrs. Balbanov's one more time that night. There wasn't anything more to be seen, however, so we went home empty handed.

Michael was trying to dredge up more information on the Arkon radios. But there wasn't as much information on East German radios as West German radios. He checked a bunch of books out from the library, and kept up the research.

He also had a theory that Mrs. Balbanov was monitoring satellites in space somehow. But maybe he just made that up to keep me interested.

Danny Lunch was also checking books out from the library at a quick pace. The subject was always the same: warplanes. He even carried books around at recess to show Michael, who always encouraged more reading. Michael began taking time to help Danny with homework at this time. I thought that was nice, but also a little strange. Danny accepted the help gladly.

It was now October, and with the early sunsets the routine of school life had long since settled in. I was pleased to discover that those classes I had been terrified about in September turned out to be just more drudgery. It was all about memorizing. That's all school ever was. It was all memorization, then forgetting everything.

Shop class was still scary, but less so if I stayed clear of the band saw when Tommy White was using it.

Tommy Gets Mad

On Tuesday of the fifth week, Michael and Danny and I were circling the yard at recess when we saw Tommy approaching. He had reached a truce with Mike Rank, of late, and hadn't been in trouble for awhile. But now, we were in his sights.

Tommy: "Hey, it's the wise guy and his stupid friends."

It looked like he was going straight for Michael this time. Danny didn't look like he was afraid, so I tried to mimic Danny. Michael was indifferent, and even a little mocking. The henchmen loomed behind Tommy.

Michael: "Hi there Tommy."

Tommy: "Huh. 'Hi there.' You know you sound like a fairy."

Michael: "Uh huh."

Tommy: "You don't care if you sound like a fairy, fairy ?"

Michael: "Well, I don't care what you think, that's for sure."

Tommy: "Well, do you care if I plow you one in the head, fairy ?"

Michael thought about this for a second. Then, with a look of disgust and pity, he smirked.

Michael: "If you were really tough, you'd pick fights with kids that could beat you."

With this, one of the henchmen gave a chuckle. It was Glen Brown, the bigger, quieter henchman of the two. Michael turned towards him quickly enough to see the smirk on his face.

Michael: "What are you laughing at ?"

Glen: "What he said."

Michael: "Oh, yeah ?"

Glen: "Yeah. Cause he's right."

They stared at each other.

We all know what the penalty for disloyalty is in any military organization. Firing squad.

Tommy dove for Glen, but Glen ducked down and eluded him. When he came up, Glen had his fists ready. Tommy put his up, then came at Glen like a madman. Glen had long arms, which provided enough protection to keep Tommy just out of range. He pushed Tommy head out of the way, almost knocking him off balance. Tommy wasn't going to give up, though. When he came back at Glen, more slowly this time, the now ex-henchman drove his fist right into Tommy's nose.

Tommy was done - he had lost. Glen shrugged and walked off. But Tommy stood looking pale and manic, with blood starting to trickle out of his nose. He pointed at Michael, Danny and me.

Tommy: "You're gonna get yours. All of you."

He looked directly at me, and I got a shiver. Then he staggered off, with the last henchman following, but looking worried. The power shakeout wasn't finished. Mike Rank had shaken morale within Tommy's camp, Glen Brown had defected and now Tommy had something to prove. He would surely strike soon. Would Danny protect me ?

That night, it looked like I had finally arrived at the story I had been waiting for in Tome Seven of The Thirteen Tomes of Life and Death.

The Human Wolf

It was quite a coincidence that I should come across the story of the Human Wolf that very night. The Human Wolf was born out of violence, the turtle explained to the child, but would only attack other animals, such as the Human Goat. There was no case in history where a wolf attacked a real human, according to the turtle.

Sitting on my bed, with the Tome open in my lap I wondered. What did that mean for me? I was an animal, it was true. I was the Human Chicken. I was afraid of my own shadow. I read on.

The Human Wolf was born out of violence, and thrived in violence. He could be defeated in violence, but that wouldn't make him human. In fact, he would become even more wolf-like. The turtle described a series of events that could help The Human Wolf appreciate beauty, peace and so forth, thus making him human.

That was it? This story had followed the formula of the others, but this story had a very real subject to me. And the solution appeared to be completely impractical. What was I going to do - take Tommy White to an art museum?

Did that mean that the rest of the stories were impractical as well? I hoped not. I reread the story again.

There was something in there that could help, after all. The Human Wolf could be defeated in violence, it said. Maybe that was it. He COULD be defeated. We had seen that today, when his ex-henchman Glen had trounced him in a fight. Maybe Danny could beat him. Danny was my friend after all.

I resolved to set up a backup plan that would protect me if - or more correctly when - Tommy pounced on me again. Danny was my best hope for protection.

Danny The Protector

On Wednesday morning, as I walked to school in a hard autumn chill, I had a plan. When I got to the school yard, I found Danny standing by himself with his hands in his pockets.

I walked up to him, and after some small talk, I pitched my idea: We would stand up for each other if threatened by Tommy White. That was it. It was pretty clear that there wasn't anything in it for him, but I hoped that our new friendship, and Danny's sense of duty would carry the deal. Danny looked at the ground.

Danny: "You gotta fight your own battles Jay"

Me: "I will. I just want you to step in if he's pounding me."

Danny: "I dunno."

Me: "Come on, Danny. I'll fight him if I have to, but you know I can't beat him. He'll kill me."

I was desperate, and he saw that. But he looked nervous too. Tommy was going to strike soon, possibly today. Danny may have actually been scared of Tommy after all. He sure

didn't seem to willing to stick his neck out. But he finally agreed to help out if Tommy was pounding on me. I shook his hand.

So, the treaty was in place when Tommy struck at morning recess. Danny and Michael and I were watching the recess football game. Bobby Beeman was quarterbacking, and had run his team all the way down the schoolyard to the end zone, a distance of about fifty yards. It was first and goal as he took the snap, faded back and - whump - I felt myself getting pushed down from behind.

Bobby was running in for the touchdown as I turned to see Tommy and his lone henchman grinning. I had been blindsided.

Tommy: "Watch it you little creep."

He turned to the henchman to have a little laugh, and I looked around. Michael was looking away disinterestedly, but Danny - good old Danny - was right beside me. I had a chance. The Tome had told me what to do. I rushed Tommy.

He didn't turn away from the henchman until I was almost on top of him, so I took him by surprise. I ran into his chest with my forearms, knocking him down to the ground. He was flustered, but got up very quickly to see me standing pale beside Danny. I saw bloodlust in his eyes.

Tommy: "You're gonna die."

He grabbed me, and put me in a headlock. I struggled, and tried to stomp on his feet but it didn't work. The Thirteen Tomes had never given any advice on how to get out of a headlock.

Tommy punched me on the top of the head several times before Danny jumped him. Then the last henchman jumped him, and it was a big pile-up. The kids circled around us and started yelling 'fight fight', and soon the schoolyard teacher was pulling us apart. The whole thing lasted about one minute.

Michael would not be alone in the detention room tonight.

In The Detention Room

Mrs. French seemed especially ticked off at us, and snapped at Danny, me, Tommy, and the henchman at every opportunity. She didn't snap at Michael, though. After all, he was a prisoner of conscience, not a thug like us.

Actually, I kind of liked feeling like a thug. It certainly had more dignity than being a victim all the time. Tommy was no longer glaring at me, and that was good. In fact, Tommy looked kind of tired.

Sitting in the detention room, I stared lovingly at Mrs. French as she wrote in her book. How was she faring, now that her husband had been hospitalized ?

Margaret French had a proper middle class upbringing. She studied hard, and participated in her church and community. She graduated from college and was married, and had followed all the prescriptions for a happy life.

But happiness seemed to be moving farther away into the past, and the future seem to hold only loneliness. She was sitting in her house alone every night, looking at pictures in her photo album, walking through the house, playing piano, crying. Her husband would probably never be the man he once was. There seemed to be so many obstacles to her happiness now, she could barely hang on.

There was only one person that she really looked forward to being with, who helped her get through these days. It was her afternoon sessions with Michael that gave her life some colour. He was sensitive, and he listened to her like her husband used to years ago. He had, at his young age, the insight, the understanding of an adult. She found herself talking to Michael all through his detention period.

She would sit on her desk with her legs crossed, discussing this or that with the little man, and - more and more often - she would laugh. She had started to allude to the problems she had with her husband, and was surprised to find that he had some sage advice. Margaret actually felt better after talking to Michael. Their relationship was deepening and as much as she enjoyed it, it unsettled her.

That's why she was so snappy with us that day. We were causing her to miss her daily private time with him. If I had known this was happening, of course, I would have been jealous. I would have hated him.

I Am Under Suspicion

Michael's parents had not yet arrived at a satisfactory hypothesis about the poisoning of Mr. Smith. It seemed inconceivable that Michael would try to poison him, yet the official story didn't ring true to them. Somewhere in their scrambled consciousness, they determined that I must have something to do with the whole matter. I suppose that was easier to accept than the idea that their own son was a monster.

Michael delivered the news to me on the way to school on Thursday morning, as we passed Mrs. French's house.

Michael: "Oh, my parents told me that you're not allowed in the house anymore."

Me: "Why?"

Michael: "I think they suspect you poisoned Mr. Smith."

Me: "What? YOU did it."

Michael: "Be quiet, someone could be listening."

Michael looked around to make sure no one had heard.

Me: "I knew it. *I'm* going to get in trouble for this!"

Michael: "No you aren't. They don't have any proof."

Me: "I'm going to go to jail."

Michael: "Relax. They'll forget about it soon."

Me: "Not if they think I did it."

Michael: "It doesn't matter. We'll be meeting at the library from now on, to assess what our plans should be. You know what I mean don't you?"

I knew, but I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was angry now.

Michael: "We're going to use this. We're going to make another attempt."

Michael leaned over and gave me an evil whisper.

Michael: "We're going to make another attempt on Mr. Smith."

I stopped walking. If Michael had ever told a joke in his life, I would have thought he was joking. Did he actually think I would help him again ?

Michael: "If I can make it look like you did it, then I can get back in with Mr. Smith and my parents again. And this time, we'll make no mistakes."

Me: "I'm not helping you with this any more. Forget it."

Michael: "It'll be like last time. You won't have to do a thing."

Me: "I did have to do something last time. I had to lie. And now they think I did it."

Michael: "This time, it'll be just me. And we won't make any mistakes. "

I was adamant: I would have nothing more to do with Michael's twisted dog murders. I was underestimating Michael's ability to persuade me.

An Announcement

That day, Mrs. French brightly announced that our English class would be mounting a play at the Autumn Pageant. The class would read several plays over the next few weeks, then pick one to mount for the Autumn assembly. Our parents would also be invited to witness the humiliation.

I felt a pall of misery come across my face. I could only hope that we would pick a play with many small non-speaking animal parts for me. Some of the other kids actually seemed excited about this prospect. I looked over at Michael, who seemed to be glowing.

Michael: "Mrs. French ?"

Mrs. French: "Yes, Michael ?"

Michael: "Can I bring a play for the class to look at ?"

Mrs. French: "What play is that ?"

Michael: "I can't remember the title, but I know that the author Hermann Pustul wrote several plays during his remarkable career."

Michael's pretentious manner made Tommy White scoff out loud.

Mrs. French: "Well, Michael, if you can get a copy of the play and bring it in, I'll take a look at it."

After school that day, I waited for Michael under the usual grim cloud cover of autumn. But Michael didn't exit the school his usual way – he almost burst through the doors. Before I could say a word, he immediately began describing one of Pustul's plays. He insisted that I accompany him to the library to check out a copy. I could hardly keep up with him he was walking so fast.

Inside the library, Michael deftly thumbed through the index cards as he had so many times before, then bolted off for the shelves. By the time I caught up with him, he was standing with a dusty navy blue hardcover. The cover had gold loopy writing that read 'The Funeral Trial' by Hermann Pustul.

The Funeral Trial by Hermann Pustul

Michael wanted to read it right there, right away. So I went off to read some old newspaper comic strips on the microfilm until he was ready. He sat himself at a long dark pine table and started to read the play.

The piece was one of only two plays written by Pustul. Completed it in the middle of his depressing and depressed career, it told the story of a young man who has committed suicide. The town in which he was raised and lived has decided that his funeral is to be conducted as a trial, hence the title. The purpose of the trial is to allow the town to 'assess the worth of the life this man has lived'.

The protagonist is charged, in death, of wasting his life with banal pursuits, and generally not conforming to the rigid expectations of the town. It was a typical Pustul theme delivered with a heavily sarcastic and ironic damnation of the society in which he was raised. And, as with everything he wrote, it was plainly autobiographical.

The play consists of various ignorant people accusing him of this and that. He defends himself against all charges, then eloquently shows how all of the accusers are hypocrites. The jury convicts him anyway, and the already dead man is sentenced to hang.

In the final, incredibly bleak scene, the protagonist lectures on and on about honesty, and the value of the intellect. He indicts the entire town, then resigns himself to his fate. Finally the executioner pulls the switch, hanging him.

The piece was pure gloom. Not a happy word, not a frivolous feeling, not a smile or light note was to be seen anywhere in those pages. Michael loved it.

Friday's Job Offer

It follows that Michael would love the play. After all, it was yet another reiteration of Pustul's theme, that Michael had long since taken to heart. That is: the mind is humankind's only salvation. Without it, we are doomed to the fate of the beasts. Mind over matter, mind over emotion.

On Friday I met Michael at Bobby's tree house before school, since I was no longer welcome at his home. As we walked, he went on and on about 'The Funeral Trial'. Although I rather liked the ghoulish parts of the play - the hangings, mostly - I really couldn't understand his enthusiasm for it. It sounded mostly dull to me.

We got to the schoolyard where Danny joined us. Michael proceeded to pitch the play to Danny, Jamie Palladium, Susan Feeny and any other students within earshot. The general reaction that I was a general curiosity that grew as it was fed with Michael's enthusiasm.

In detention that day, Michael spoke to Mrs. French about the play, and she listened politely, but guardedly. By the end of the detention, though, she had agreed to get a copy of the book, and to read it that night. Then, she told Michael that she had an idea.

Why didn't Michael come over Saturday to cut her lawn? It hadn't been cut since long before her husband had gone into the hospital. It would be a great favour to her. Then, they could discuss the play in depth after Michael was finished.

When Michael told me about this much later, he said that he felt uneasy about this arrangement. While it wasn't exactly inappropriate, it was a little unusual. Why would she think Michael was suited to yard work anyway ?

And there was something else, in the way she had asked him. There was something in her invitation that betrayed the fact that she really wanted to spend time with Michael.

So, a little afraid and a little intrigued, he agreed to come over to her house at one o'clock Saturday, for an afternoon of manual labour and enlightened discussion.

My Saturday With Danny

I phoned Michael on Saturday, disguising my voice so that his mother wouldn't know it was me. When Michael eventually came to the phone, he spoke in a sleepy voice saying that he had 'some things to do' and would meet up with me later at the library. So I called Danny, and we ended up down at the bowling alley, just the two of us.

Danny and I had a blast. He hit the magic number in the baseball game and we bowled another free game. Afterwards, we went down to the park to climb the craggy old trees near the water. The great thing about Danny was that he really liked doing kid things.

We met Michael at four p.m. on the library steps. We went in, and soon Danny was sitting at a table, looking at picture books of tanks. Michael motioned me to follow him, and behind the bookshelves he began speaking in his plotting whisper.

Michael: "We're going to drown him."

Me: "Who ?"

Michael: "Mr. Smith."

Me: "No way. I'm not helping you this time."

Michael: "It's okay. You don't have to do anything."

Me: "No. I don't even want to hear about it."

Michael: "I'm going to do everything. All you have to do is keep watch."

I put my hands over my ears, but Michael rolled his eyes at me. When I finally took my hands down he spoke in a parental tone to me.

Michael: "Jay, that is childish behavior."

Me: "Michael, I don't want to help in any way."

Michael: "All you have to do is keep watch."

I held strong, so he gave up trying to convince me. I did, however, agree to give his plan a listen once it was complete. With that he let me go off to the microfilm room. And he went off to a corner of the library on his own, his little whirling around the latest plan to put Mr. Smith in the grave for good.

Michael's First Day on the Job

I should explain that the important facts of the meetings between Michael and Mrs. French were related to me long after the fact by Michael himself. Although I never found him to lie about these matters, I do feel that some of what he said was strictly his interpretation of the events that happened.

That day, before he had met Danny and me at the library, Michael had gone over to Mrs. French's, and she set him up with a push mower. As he worked, he said, he had the feeling that she was watching him work the whole time, waiting for him to finish. The minute he was through working, she was right there with a lemonade for him to drink. They put the mower back in the garage and went in the house.

She sat down with him on the couch and they started discussing 'The Funeral Trial'.

He related his opinions on the theme of the play, some of which were absorbed from various essays on the play he had read at the library. But he had also formulated his own ideas, independent of these. She noted that his theories were based more on the parallels to Pustul's life, than on anything that could be found in the text. Michael responded that Pustul was always trying to tell stories that had happened in his own life.

Mrs. French said she would consider that for awhile. The decision about the play didn't have to be made for awhile. She must have known that such a play, involving dark themes, suicides, and hangings couldn't possibly be staged at the school without causing a scandal. She may indeed have been humouring Michael's suggestion in order to spend time with him, knowing that the play wouldn't happen.

She got more lemonades, and talked of this and that, with Michael becoming a little uneasy as to why he was there. He had finished cutting that lawn, they had discussed the play - when was it going to be time for him to leave ?

She, being a sensitive woman, could feel Michael's discomfort and tried to put him at ease. She told Michael that she felt a little lonely, and she found his company comforting. He seemed almost adult, she said.

With that flattery well in place, Mrs. French asked Michael if he could come over every Saturday to help with chores, and spend the afternoon 'just talking'. He would be paid cash for the chores, and the conversation would be educational after all.

Michael agreed, and they spent the next hour or so chatting with a delightful buoyancy. They covered many topics, quizzing each other here and there, laughing, and connecting - really connecting to each other like good friends. And sometimes, he said, it felt even deeper than that.

When it was time for Michael to leave to meet us, she thanked him and showed him to the door. And then, before he went out, she surprised him by giving him a very warm hug.

Sunday at the Library

After church on Sunday, I went to the library to meet up with Michael. He was sitting at a table beside a small tower of books when I got there, talking to someone I had never seen before. There was an older man with a friendly, bookish look sitting with him. I waited for the man to leave before I sat down.

Me: "Who was that ?"

Michael: "I don't know. He just came up and started recommending books to me."

I looked down at the books piled up beside of Michael. On the top of the pile was 'The Conscientious Objector'. Michael explained that the title referred to someone who did what he felt was right, no matter what the laws of the land said.

Michael: "I'm a conscientious objector myself you see, because I refuse to pledge allegiance to Omni corporation."

He was clearly pleased with himself.

Me: "They have a word for that ?"

Michael: "Sure. In some places they put you in jail, or even kill you for saying what you believe."

Me: "Wow."

Michael: "This book was written by a man who was put in jail for writing a play that his government didn't agree with."

Me: "Are you going to check it out?"

Michael: "It's not a library book. He just gave it to me."

It seemed a little strange that this man would recommend a book that was so appropriate to Michael's current situation. And then to hand it to him as a gift, rather than just give him a library copy ? Of course the town library wouldn't even have had a book written by an imprisoned Marxist, but that wouldn't have occurred to us.

Nor could we have suspected that the Eastern Bloc was making an effort to recruit Michael to the worldwide people's struggle against the forces of capitalism. For the man wasn't even from our town. He was an agent, dispatched by Mrs. Balbanov.

After having heard the story of Michael's refusal to pledge allegiance to Omni, Mrs. Balbanov was setting Michael on a course to become the communist sympathizer he was apparently so well suited to be.

But, none of that would have occurred to us, no. We just sat there, I think both feeling that it was all a little strange.

Week The Sixth

I had no hint that Michael had a new Saturday job giving company to Mrs. French. If I had, the week might have started with me attacking Michael. Instead, it started with a mundane Monday at school, and a recess-time conference to discuss spying on the Ladies' Club again that night.

This time, Michael suggested that we bring Danny along in a limited capacity. I think he was just trying to evaluate Danny's skills as an operative. He was, at the time, planning the second attempt on Mr. Smith's life, and would need extra help with his plan, even if I eventually agreed to help out.

After dinner, my mother left for the Ladies' Club meeting. I read comics for awhile, then put on my coat and yelled to my father from the front door.

Me: "I'm going over to Michael's to do homework."

There was no response, so I left and walked out into the damp night air. Michael's parents were both out. Michael's mother had gone to the Ladies' Club meeting on her

own, as she had been giving my mother the cold shoulder lately. This was possibly due to the suspicion that I, her son, had poisoned Mr. Smith. Michael's father had taken Mr. Smith for a walk somewhere, so I could go over to their house without worrying about his parents' accusatory stare.

Michael greeted me, and we shared a drink of apple juice until Danny showed up. The three of us then headed towards the Ladies' Club meeting, flashlights in hand.

It was fun to prowl around Mrs. Balbanov's house and Danny gave the whole experience that kid-like excitement. Michael provide that to me – he always acted if he was on professional business. We had got there kind of late, so it wasn't too long before the ladies started filing out of the house.

Michael, Danny and I skulked in the backyard bushes as they moved out to their cars and drove off. Eventually everything was quiet again.

Me: "Now what?"

Michael: "Follow me."

He stepped out, motioned for us to follow him, then he walked around the side of house. He was in plain sight ! What was he doing ? Danny and I followed with uncertain steps.

Michael went to the front door and knocked on it ! Danny and I had no choice - we ran up to the bottom of the front steps and stood there. I whispered at him.

Me: "Michael, what are you doing ?"

He didn't have time to answer. I hid my flashlight behind my back as Mrs. Balbanov opened the door.

Welcome To Mrs. Balbanov's World

Michael's motivation for this rash act was twofold.

First, the mystery of the Arkon radio was still eating at him. Our prowling hadn't uncovered anything useful. So he decided that direct intelligence gathering was in order. This was the reason he gave us later when I asked him why he had knocked on the door.

The second motivation didn't occur to me until much later. It was the plot against Mr. Smith. Mrs. Balbanov was now close friends with Michael's mother, and her name had come up once as someone who could possibly look after Mr. Smith if the parents went somewhere for a weekend. Michael had decided that a closer relationship with her would be advantageous in this regard.

So under this tangled network of Michael's schemes, we found ourselves smiling insincerely at Mrs. Balbanov's front door.

Mrs. Balbanov: "Well, hello there !"

Michael: "Hello."

Mrs. Balbanov: "I think I know you, but who is this ?"

Danny and I emerged into the porch light and introduced ourselves, and Mrs. Balbanov kindly invited us in and sat us down. As she went to the kitchen to fetch cookies, I examined this strange new place.

Her house was so bright that it hurt my eyes. And colourful, too. There were knick knacks and upholstery everywhere. Mrs. Balbanov came back with a large weight of cookies on a plate. Michael took care of the small talk as Danny and I sat uneasily on the hard sofa and crunched on the snacks.

Michael: "I saw your bookshelves from the street. I like books."

Mrs. Balbanov: "Oh, do you ? I have many, many, books. Would you like to read some ?"

And so it went, with Mrs. Balbanov acting the perfect hostess, and Michael trying to engage her in conversation about literature. Unfortunately for him, she had fairly standard tastes in books. Maybe she didn't have enough command of the English language to appreciate anything but standard narratives. She had many classics, such as Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Jane Eyre, as well as a ton of romance books.

Michael kept coming at her, trying to start up some kind of point-counterpoint discussion about literature, but she wouldn't be drawn in. She paid her attention to filling the cookie plate in front of Danny and me. And there was no hint as to why this woman would own military radio equipment.

By the time our little visit ended, Michael had given up the literary discussion and had even eaten a few cookies for himself. We thanked her, and left with our goodies: tarts for Danny and me, 'A Tale of Two Cities' for Michael.

Danny and Me

Michael and our lonely homeroom teacher were now talking through the whole detention period, and even staying late sometimes. I had tired of waiting around for him after school, and was spending my time doing kid stuff with Danny instead.

My relationship with Danny, rooted as it was in my desire for protection from Tommy White, was blooming in its own way. Danny wasn't as interesting intellectually as Michael, but neither was he as pretentious. He was still a kid, like me, so we just had fun. I lent him my comic books, and we talked about them. We walked home from school together. I even got to go inside his house on Thursday after school, although I never made it more than a few inches past the front door.

The sixth week flowed forward with the usual school happenings and few other events of note.

Tommy White stayed away from us, and in English class we read through some plays that might be suitable for our Autumn production. One of them was a shortened version of Dickens' Oliver Twist. Michael hated it, of course, and was still lobbying hard for Mrs. French to choose the Pustul play.

And through the power of Michael's persuasion, Mrs. French was slowly becoming convinced that it might be possible to do just that.

Saturday's Shocker

Michael once again pushed me off when I suggested we meet Saturday. He had some unspecified 'chores' to complete, (his secret job at Mrs. French's) but would meet me later at the library.

The cold way he dismissed me annoyed me a bit. It had become harder and harder for us to meet, since his parents indictment of me. He was doing nothing to make it easier, even though all of this was his fault.

I decided to again spend the day with Danny, and curtly declined Michael's offer for another Saturday afternoon at the library. Anyway, it would likely be more arguments for my assistance with murdering Mr. Smith.

So when Saturday morning came Danny and I made our arrangements by phone. I raked the leaves at my house, collected my wages, then headed out towards Bobby's where Danny and I were to meet.

As I walked past Michael's house, I saw his parents were out front with Mr. Smith. They fairly much glared at me as I approached, and I did my best to look innocent.

As I passed, Mr. Smith, too, gave me a strange look. Then, in a characteristic bolt of energy, Mr. Smith took off towards me. But he was barking and snarling even ! Michael's parents were able to pull him back, but they didn't scold him. No. In their minds, I'm sure, Mr. Smith had just demonstrated his divine intelligence, and identified the boy who attempted to kill him.

I just kept walking as they stared after me.

But then I reached Bobby's tree house. My jaw dropped. There was Michael raking the leaves in front of Mrs. French's house. Michael was working for Mrs. French !

It was the ultimate betrayal. He had secretly taken this job to try to get closer to her. - there was no doubt in my mind. I felt a knot in my heart, and I clenched my teeth as I passed him. He looked up in surprise as I approached, but I just kept walking. We said nothing to each other as I passed.

My heart was pounding as I walked. My breath was short. I decided that I was going to tell his parents the truth about what had happened to Mr. Smith. The scenario ran over and over in my mind. I imagined the look of shock and disbelief on his parents' faces as I pointed the finger. I imagined Michael reduced to tears as accusing policemen huddled around him. I imagined the disgust on our classmates' faces as I told them one by one.

But it still would not be enough to make up for how I felt at the moment I saw him on Mrs. French's lawn. I would never speak to him again, I decided. I was furious.

Down at the bowling alley, I took all my anger out on that baseball game. Danny whooped as I pounded that big metal button as hard as I could, registering home runs, triples, and singles. Bells rang, and the score clicked up and up and up. When it was done, I had beaten Danny's score for the game - the only time that it ever happened.

Michael's Second Day on the Job

Of course there wasn't much work to be done at Mrs. French's house that day that I saw him. After less than an hour of raking, Michael was back inside, sitting on the couch beside her, keeping her company. Had I not avoided the house on the way home, I could have passed by the large front window and seen them laughing together.

From what Michael told me later, they discussed the play again that day, and Mrs. French revealed that she had looked at 'The Funeral Trial' again, and thought that there were some possibilities there. She would have to rewrite it to tone down the violence and bleakness, of course, and that led to some protests from Michael, and discussions about censorship and so forth. But Michael could feel that he was convincing her.

And so they talked on and on, so comfortably, and way past the time Michael was supposed to leave.

Michael had such an instinct for this type of discussion, she said. He had such strong opinions on these things, and he defended them so well, she said. He was mature, she said. He wasn't like a little boy at all, she said. He was more mature than many adults, she said. And as the two of them sat on the couch together, a beautiful stillness passed between them and they sat silently admiring each other.

And then she kissed him. She kissed Michael on the lips ! It was, as he related the story later, 'just a light kiss - just a friendly kiss'. But a kiss !

At that point in my life, what I would have done for a kiss from Mrs. French ! That vision of absolute purity and poise kissing me ? It might have killed me ! But for Michael, how did he react ?

Again, it wasn't until much, much later - until after everything ELSE happened - that he revealed the events of that day to me. When he told me about the kiss, he said that he had felt awkward. Even Michael, the emotionless Michael, knew what a kiss meant. But what did this kiss mean for them ? What was to happen next ?

And there was another period of silence after the kiss. Awkward silence. Mrs. French became nervous and got up to do something in the kitchen. They passed the remainder of their time together pretending that nothing had happened. Those were the facts according to Michael.

But, how did he *feel* ? Awkward, yes. But awkward, how ? Michael claimed that he felt nothing romantic towards her. Was this possible ? He claimed that just he felt sorry that she had lost her husband. He said that he only had an intellectual interest in Mrs. French.

Was it true ? I didn't know when he told me. I still don't know. I never will.

Sunday's Desperate Attempt

After church on Sunday, my parents and I drove by Mrs. French's house on our way home. In the back seat of our car, dressed in my Sunday clothes, I looked to see Michael was working there again ! She had asked him to come by again, ostensibly to rake the nine or ten leaves that had fallen since the day before.

I felt wrath. My mouth tightened. I sat stiffly there, until our car finally pulled up the driveway, then ran up to my room in a huff to read my comics. But I couldn't read them. This situation would not stand. I had to do something.

By late afternoon, I had hatched a plan. I went downstairs, put my coat on and left without telling my parents where I was going. I walked straight to Mrs. French's house and rang the bell. She arrived after the second ring.

Me: "Hello Mrs. French."

Mrs. French: "Well, hello Jay."

Me: "I noticed that Michael has been doing some yard work for you lately."

Mrs. French: "Uh, yes, he has."

Me: "Well, I'm here to offer my services in that area. I have much more experience in that area than Michael does. And I will charge you less than Michael does."

Mrs. French: "Well, that's very kind of you Jay."

Me: "If you give me a chance, I'm sure you'll be much happier with my work than with Michael's."

She, being a kind woman, tried to let me down easy.

Mrs. French: "I'm sorry, Jay, but I already promised the job to Michael."

Me: "I really am a much better worker than he is, Mrs. French. Believe me."

Mrs. French: "Jay, I appreciate it, but..."

Me: "Mrs. French, I'll work for you for free for awhile just to show you."

Mrs. French: "That's very kind of you, but..."

Me: "Or, I can help Michael for free. We're friends, you know. I can just come around and help him for nothing !"

I pushed and pushed, but she could only offer polite refusal. At the point where she was starting to get stern with me, I accepted my defeat and left. I walked home, truly alone, with unrequited love pouring out of me.

She didn't care about me at all. She thought Michael was special, but not me. I felt a heavy weight in my chest.

Week The Seventh - Strained Relations

As week the seventh started, autumn was doing its work. The air was damp with an unfriendly chill. I walked straight to school that morning with only animosity for Michael accompanying me. For the first time that year, I didn't go by his house to pick him up or arrange to meet him at Bobby's. In fact, I didn't speak to Michael again ever.

I had decided against exposing his murder plot, though, because it really would be my word against his. But I wouldn't return his stupid Tome. My feelings towards Michael showed plainly that day, and I'm sure he was aware of what was happening, but he was completely indifferent. At recess, I opted to play schoolyard games instead of walking around with him.

This was somewhat dangerous because Danny now had to choose between hanging around with Michael, and playing games with me. I could be unprotected for long periods of time. A problem - because Tommy White was alone now too.

As things played out, Tommy did try to intimidate me a few times that week, but only in small ways. Sometimes he called me a name, but that was it. I think my sullen rage towards Michael showed in me. It gave me a new demeanor. The recklessness of the

spurned lover. Maybe Tommy mistook this for confidence - I don't know. Either way, Tommy and I kept the peace.

My experience with Michael also caused a new cynical attitude to blossom within me. Every time he answered in class, every time Mrs. French called on him to answer, I felt disgusted. They were so smug and cozy with each other. A slow fuse glowed in the pit of my stomach.

Mrs. French announced to our English class that we would be presenting a shortened (and toned down) version of 'The Funeral Trial' at the Autumn assembly. Michael's choice, of course. Only the precious Michael could have enough pull with her to change our entire curriculum. I sneered to myself.

Week the seventh continued, and Michael made it clear from his actions that he did not miss my company at all. I was the one with the problem, obviously. If I didn't talk to him, it was because I was immature.

So our friendship was on the rocks. My mother noticed my new bitterness, and the absence of Michael in my life right away, and commented on it later in the week.

Mother: "You haven't been seeing Michael much lately. "

Me: "I don't like him anymore."

Mother: "Oh, but why, Jay ?"

Me: "He's just a big liar, that's why."

And when she gave me that loving look of concern, I felt sad. But as many Michaels as there were in the world, I knew I would be okay as long as I had my one mom.

The Dream

That night I had a strange dream. My parents were with me at a bus station. We stood beside a long bus, and I held a suitcase. It seemed that I was to be leaving on a long trip.

My parents explained to me that it wasn't me that they were sending away. They were sending away my imagination. When the bus appeared, I got on and found an open seat. I put my suitcase in the overhead rack, then sat down.

I waved to my parents as the bus pulled away. That's it, I thought, my imagination is gone for good now. I'm on my own.

A Man Called Horst

So the play was to be 'The Funeral Trial'. On Tuesday of week seven, Mrs. French passed out the scripts - adapted, typed, and mimeographed by herself. She also had chosen parts for all of us and written the names of all cast members on the board.

Michael was playing Harld, the lead character - the dead man. I wouldn't have wanted the part, but I was jealous anyway. Still, he was the obvious choice - outspoken, outcast. Michael *was* Harld.

I was playing Horst, his lone friend in life and death. Another obvious casting choice. Danny played Stefan, the blacksmith. He had very few lines, and thus was satisfied with his part. Tommy was playing Gunther the angry townsman, a thug.

The irrepressible Jamie Palladium was initially disappointed that he didn't get the lead - until he read his part. Jamie was to play the prosecuting attorney for the town, a choice role. There were lots of lines, and, better, lots and lots of flowery words. Jamie seemed more and more pleased as he sat there flipping through the pages.

Rehearsals were set to start the next week. Mrs. French gave us the first five pages to memorize as class came to an end.

At home that night I read my lines with growing alarm. There was a lot of hostile wordplay between Horst (me) and Gunther (Tommy). I didn't like the idea of provoking Tommy, even in character. I didn't want to risk anything spilling over into real life. I started to wonder whether Michael might even turn Danny against me, leaving me unprotected.

I sat on my bed and learned my five pages. When I was done, I put the pages on my night table on top of Tome Nine. Michael's book. I wondered what he was thinking about right now. Murdering Mr. Smith? Spying on Mrs. Balbanov? Probably Mrs. French.

I looked over at Michael's book on the table. He'll never have it back, I thought.

The Play Begins

On Thursday of week seven we were to begin rehearsals in English class and after school. Mrs. French started the class by giving us a speech about what we were doing.

Mrs. French: "Well, as you know, we're going to start rehearsal today for 'The Funeral Trial'. I thought I'd begin by speaking about what we're going to do with this play.

This play is not a children's play. I have done some research and I can't find a single time that this play was performed by people your age. It has been performed in many languages, in many countries. It has been performed in Moscow, New York and London, England. It was performed in twenty different cities last year. But it has never been performed by children as far as I know.

So this will indeed be a historic production.

Before we begin, I think that we should talk about what this play is really about. It will help you come up with your characters. If we all pay attention, I think that it will be very interesting and we will all learn a lot.

Now, we've been talking about 'themes' in English class. Now, we know that the main 'theme' is what a story, or a play is all about. The theme of this play can be seen already in the first five pages, which I'm sure you've all read.

So. Before we begin, we should discuss the theme."

Susan Feeny raised her hand. Mrs. French acknowledged her with a nod.

Susan: "Is the theme that we should be nice to people?"

Mrs. French: "Is that what you think the theme is?"

Susan thought a moment.

Susan: "Well, yeah. Nobody in the town likes Harld."

Here were children discussing the work of Hermann Pustul. Our classroom was in this moment, a youthful imitation of a club of Parisian café intellectuals.

Michael's hand went up.

Michael: "It's an actually an examination of a society with an inconsistent moral code."

Mrs. French replied to no one in particular.

Mrs. French: "Can we make it simpler than that ?"

My hand went up.

Me: "I think it's about how people always hate people that aren't like they are."

Susan seemed to agree. And there were nods around the room and more discussion and Mrs. French moderated and quizzed and eventually went to the blackboard. And there was some more discussion about wording until she finally wrote our theme down.

Mrs. French: "So the class agrees that the theme is 'people don't like other people who are different from them'."

Ha ! Michael's theme had been rejected, while the one I came up with was being written on the board by Mrs. French. It was almost word for word mine ! A coup for me ! Michael looked unconvinced and perturbed.

Mrs. French: "The other thing I wanted to speak to you about what it means to put on a play, or write a story or to play music. All of these things are part of what we call 'the arts'."

Music, literature, plays, films, and television programmes are all part of the arts. Even the cartoons you watch could be considered to be part of the arts.

In many schools, and in our school in particular, the arts are not considered to be important. In many schools, science is stressed more strongly than the arts.

Now, I consider this to be a bad thing. Science teaches us about the world around us, and teaches us ways to understand it. But the arts teach us about ourselves. And we need to know more about ourselves if we want to make the world a better place, don't we ?

For example, there are a great many countries in the world where people are sent to jail if they try to pray to God on Sundays. Do you think that would be a good thing to have happen here ? How many of you went to church last Sunday ?"

A good number of hands went up.

Mrs. French: "Well, in some countries you could all be sent to jail for that. In this play, Harld lives a life of freedom, like us. But the people of his town don't like that. They try to make him do things that he doesn't want to do."

And as Mrs. French continued to press the importance of what we were doing, it started to mean something to us. That anti-communist air in the town, that cold war air that we had been breathing into our lungs since infancy had definitely had its effect. We sat like little stone statues, taking in the seriousness of the project before us.

Mrs. French: "It's not very often that children get a chance to actually teach something to adults. But you will all have that chance.

Your parents will be seeing this play, along with other adults. Teachers, homemakers, and your fathers' business associates may see this play. You will be using this play to tell these people a story, a story with a lesson, a story with a theme. You will be teaching *them*."

Mrs. French then went on to explain how the townspeople in the play weren't 'bad' people for not liking Harld - Michael's character - they just didn't know better. They were 'ignorant'. When we portrayed them, we would have to understand this in order to make them seem real.

We were about to take an old, obscure, morbid little Pustul play and have it performed realistically by children in the Omni school auditorium. The town would never know what hit them.

The First Reading

So we began. At our desks, we held our scripts and read through the first five pages out loud. Then Mrs. French had us put the scripts away, and we tried it again. She had to prompt a few people, but not me, Michael, Susan, or Jamie Palladium. By the end of class, only Danny and Tommy and a few others needed prompting. We broke for recess, to return for more rehearsal after school.

After recess, we went in and buzzed through the rest of our classes. Then it was rehearsal time. The real thing. This would be the first rehearsal in the school auditorium. I remember the feeling I had walking out on the stage for the first time.

It was before Mrs. French arrived. There were kids buzzing around, chasing each other down the aisles and laughing. And I just stood there in awe, thinking about how big the auditorium looked from the stage.

Omni had built quite a nice auditorium for the school. Very big, with nice plush seats. It was so nice that they sometimes used it for company meetings. It was big enough for Omni to hold a shareholders meeting if they wanted to, and more than big enough to seat the entire school.

I was still standing on the huge stage, when Mrs. French arrived and started to set things in order. She sat down in the front row, and we all settled down to business. First, she ran through some administrative details. Stuff like where stage left was and things like that. Then she called the actors on stage to begin.

The entire play is set in the courtroom where the funeral trial takes place. When the curtain comes up, the courtroom is starting to fill up with townspeople. They confer and gossip, thereby introducing the plot. Two of those townspeople were Gunther and Horst,

played by Tommy and myself respectively. Gunther brushes by Horst and growls a line about Horst's 'foul friend'.

Mrs. French: "Let's begin."

And it all started. As it ran on, my eyes widened. I thought it was brilliant. It wasn't of course, but I didn't know better. We little actors were either overacting, or behaving like walking trees. But we were acting. We were making those five pages happen in front of my very eyes, and I watched from the wings, amazed and breathless.

I waited for my cue, then walked out. Tommy walked out from the other side of the stage towards me, then delivered his line with the power of a sleepy rabbit. Mrs. French stopped the rehearsal.

Mrs. French: "Hold it a second, please. Tommy, you know that Gunther really hates Horst, don't you?"

Tommy: "So?"

Mrs. French: "Well, Tommy, it didn't sound like you hated Horst."

Tommy: "Well, I'm going to beat him up later anyway."

I couldn't figure out if he meant Gunther was going to beat up Horst later, or Tommy was going to beat up Jay later.

Mrs. French: "Well, the people watching won't be able to figure that out. You have to make them understand that Gunther hates Horst right from the beginning. Can you act like you hate him?"

Tommy turned to me with a soft leer, and my stomach started to misbehave. I didn't like this character development stuff at all.

We walked back to the wings on our respective sides of the stage. When we came out this time, he barked his line at me with that old Tommy 'pepper' I had learned to fear. I flinched.

Mrs. French: "Much better."

And so it continued, and we ran the scenes with more and more real emotions gurgling to the surface with each attempt. Tommy clearly was starting to relish the opportunity to terrorize me on stage.

And strangely, I didn't mind.

This rehearsal was giving Tommy an opportunity to harass me in a way that I could handle. Any humiliation I felt was dampened by the fact that we were acting. It was all for the play. I was supposed to be intimidated. And there didn't seem to be the chance of actual physical violence as long as Mrs. French was there.

And so it went on until the end of rehearsal. We ran the scene until it seemed (to us) to be perfect. At four-thirty we wrapped it up, Michael went off with Mrs. French to serve his daily detention for not pledging allegiance, and I walked home alone.

My sneakers kicked at the crunchy leaves, and I considered the events of that day. I would soon have to speak to Michael - on stage anyway. We hadn't made it as far as

Michael's entrance on page five, not today. But that would come soon, and then Michael and I would be in the strange situation of having a friendship in the play, but not in real life.

This was the beginning of the period wherein Michael, Tommy and I only spoke to each other through Harld, Horst and Gunther. We were using our roles in the play as surrogate relationships with each other.

I say surrogate relationships, because we were not communicating as friends, or even enemies in our real lives at this point. This is the period that I refer to as our Cold War.

Our Cold War

Before the first day of school, I had predicted a tumultuous year. Now, a power shakeup had occurred. An entirely different network of human interactions had evolved from the events of our first day.

Michael began spending more time alone, with occasional contact with Danny or the irrepressible Jamie Palladium. I spent my time with Danny Lunch, or playing ball games. Tommy White was now without either of his henchmen now. As a result, he was less aggressive in general, spending a lot of his schoolyard time alone.

Michael's mother wasn't speaking to my mother because she thought I had poisoned Mr. Smith. My mother had no idea what she had done wrong, so she stopped trying to speak to Michael's mother. They were both happy to speak to Mrs. Balbanov. And she was happy to speak to anybody, as long as they spoke loudly into her flower pot.

Mrs. Balbanov and Mrs. French were both spending time cultivating their relationships with Michael. Mrs. Balbanov was grooming Michael to be a Communist double agent. And Mrs. French was grooming him to partially replace her husband as a companion.

Danny was aware that something was amiss between Michael and me, but he didn't ask about it. He and I spent Saturdays together, while Michael sat at Mrs. French's.

This unhappy and uneasy set of alliances and embargoes stayed stable for several weeks. And all us who were caught in it came to get used to the order of things.

But it was lonely for me. During those first few weeks of school, I had followed Michael into a series of new adventures. I felt like I was living - really having fun - for the first time in a long time. Now it seemed that the current stasis would remain from a long time.

And I was wrong. For people, like nations, don't stay the same for long. Something always shakes loose. There's an imbalance. Someone wants more, or is unhappy with the state of things as they are. It's usually the party who has the most to gain that strikes first. In this case, it was Tommy White.

Michael the Actor

During the eighth week, the time came when Michael and I would have to speak to each other on stage.

Rehearsal was just about to start, and I stood on the stage of the auditorium, fidgeting with my shirt, watching Michael out of the corner of my eye. Mrs. French made some notes in her clipboard, then sat in the front row and looked up at Michael and me.

Mrs. French: "Okay, let's run it."

Michael and my acting hadn't been shown yet. For the most part, we had only done scenes where Harld stood in the prisoner's box, waiting for the trial to begin, enduring town scorn.

Now we were set to rehearse the first scene where Harld really speaks, when Horst goes to the prisoner's box. We did it and Michael gave a laboured performance, to say the least. He groaned, he preached, and he pontificated. Kind of like the Michael I knew, only louder and with more gestures,

It seemed fine to me, but I didn't see that Michael wasn't relating to me at all. Our director saw that.

Mrs. French: "Okay. Let's stop a second. Michael - you're not talking to Jay. I want you to say your lines to Jay as if *you* were really talking to him."

Michael: "But that's not right. Harld wouldn't talk the way I would."

Mrs. French: "That's the way it has to be done, Michael. Otherwise, we won't see that Harld and Horst are friends."

Michael: "But it's not right."

He just couldn't see it being done that way. But Mrs. French insisted. So we tried it again, and he got a little better but not much. Mrs. French stopped us again, repeated her directions, and asked us to start from the top. But Michael kept doing the lines more or less the same way.

I could see Michael was getting frustrated. His intellect couldn't help him, and his emotions were not up to the task. Eventually, Mrs. French had to give up, and we moved on to another scene. Michael looked deflated.

I could have gloated, but I didn't. I had never seen Michael look that way before - beaten - and I did feel bad for him.

Tommy the Actor

Tommy was perfectly cast in his role. Once he recognized the mean character of Gunther, he grabbed at it like he would my lunch bag. Yet, curiously, he was also taking the play very seriously.

In one scene, Gunther talks to Frank, the prosecuting attorney played by Jamie Palladium. Now Jamie had to refer to himself in this dialogue, but he kept pronouncing it 'Frank' like 'tank', instead of 'Frahnk' like 'honk'. Mrs. French had reminded Jamie at least three times of this error, but he kept screwing it up. They were rehearsing the scene for the fourth time when Jamie mispronounced it again, and Tommy blew up.

Jamie: "After all, Gunther, it is I, Frank..."

Tommy: "You goof, you're saying it wrong again !"

Jaime: "I..."

Tommy: "How many times does she have to tell you before you get it through your thick skull ?"

Mrs. French: "Now, Tommy..."

Mrs. French diffused the situation, but I noticed there was a light in her eyes. Why ? Because Tommy finally cared about something. Somehow, he had taken to this project of ours. He was actually trying hard.

The next time through, Jamie nailed it. He never got the line wrong again.

Tommy Strikes

Our cold war lasted from week seven to week ten. And on Tuesday of week ten it all ended. It was Tommy that ended it that morning, when I walked into his sights and he decided to pull the trigger on me.

At recess Danny was off walking with Michael, and I was playing touch football. I caught an easy pass from Bobby along the left side of the field, then turned right behind a crowd of players and headed for an opening.

As I crossed passed the clump of players, I looked up to see Tommy coming straight for me. I turned the other way to avoid him, but he stuck out his leg and tripped me. I went flying, and the ball bounced towards someone else on the opposing team, who picked it up and ran.

With all attention on the game, nobody noticed me lying on the ground behind the play. Tommy came straight over, crouched down and pounded me in the stomach. I was completely vulnerable. There was nothing I could do to defend myself short of kicking. And even I wouldn't stoop to kicking somebody.

Danny and Michael noticed it before anyone on the football field did, and rushed over. Tommy landed a few more shots by the time Danny pulled him away from me. But Danny didn't try to fight Tommy, he just held him. I got up, not bloody, but dazed and beaten nonetheless. I held my stomach. I must have looked pathetic.

I must have, because Michael started to get angry at Tommy !

Michael: "What's wrong with you ? Why can't you leave him alone ? Why do you have to beat people up all the time ?"

Tommy: "I can do whatever I want !"

Michael: "I asked you why. Why do you want to do that ?"

Tommy: "Cause I do !"

Michael: "Do you even know that nobody likes you ?"

Tommy looked stunned at this.

Michael: "You don't have any friends. Everyone either hates you or is afraid of you."

Tommy: "Shut up ! I don't care."

Michael: "Nobody likes you, Tommy !"

Tommy: "Shut up !"

Michael: "Why do you do it, Tommy ? Why do you have to beat people up ?"

Tommy: "Shut up !"

Tommy tried to take a run at Michael, but Danny was doing a great job of holding him back. By now, the game had stopped and people were coming over, running over, to watch. How could they pass it up ? A showdown between Michael and Tommy !

Tommy's eyes were throwing rage as he fought Danny to get free. But Danny held him well. Then, Michael did something unexpected. He got close to Tommy and cupped his hand over Tommy's ear.

Then Michael whispered something to him.

At first Tommy tried to cock his head away, as if Michael was going to spit in his ear. But Michael was able to get him to listen for a few seconds. And then, in an instant he softened completely and stopped struggling. His eyes moved back and forth as Michael kept whispering in his ear, and Tommy... Tommy was listening.

Peace Talks

Michael later reminded me of the story of the Human Wolf. The turtle had told the child that the Human Wolf was born out of violence. Michael was using the story in a way that I hadn't considered. He was telling the story to Tommy.

Well, not *the* story. Not the story of the Human Wolf as it was written in the Thirteen Tomes of Life and Death. Michael was telling Tommy's own story back to Tommy.

Michael had surmised what Tommy was feeling. He had long since figured out what made Tommy angry, and what made him afraid. Michael could do that – get inside someone's mind and think like they did. And so Michael stood there and whispered all of these secrets in Tommy's ear. When Tommy heard someone else describing his own fears and anxieties, he was transfixed.

Tommy relaxed completely, and Danny to let him go. Then the two of them walked off together, leaving us behind, stunned.

Eventually, the football game started up again and we continued play as Michael and Tommy walked and talked at the other side of the schoolyard.

It was almost comical to see them walking together. Michael walked with the air of a professor, and Tommy did his usual bully walk. And they kept on, through the rest of that recess, the afternoon recess, and the next two days' recesses and lunch hours.

I knew what Michael was doing. He was using the Tomes. No one else knew what was happening but me. Because I had read the Tomes.

The Truce With Tommy

Tommy and Michael's school yard consultations continued for a few days, and ended as quickly as they had begun. One recess they were walking around together talking, and at the next Tommy was playing games again and Michael was walking around by himself. That was it.

Although he wasn't trying to harass me, Tommy was otherwise as unfriendly with me and Michael as ever. At times he would give me a look, at recess or at rehearsal, that told

me that he still hated my guts. At other times, he seemed to be half sulking like he was mulling over something very troubling, very dark.

The Truce With Michael

Michael had cast some kind of spell on Tommy. He had saved me, maybe forever, from Tommy's terror. My life would drift back towards the comfortably mundane. For excitement, I had the play. I had one friend - Danny. I had my comic books. I had my mom.

But Michael and I were still estranged. I wanted to thank him for what he had done with Tommy. I missed him. I started to feel like I wanted Michael back as my friend.

But there was still the matter of Mrs. French. I had to find out what the business was with this Saturday job. I had to know how he felt about her.

I decided that I would to speak to him again.

So on week ten, at Friday morning recess, I stayed away from the football game. Instead, I walked around by myself for a few minutes wondering what I would say, then looked around for Michael. He was talking to the irrepressible Jamie Palladium, near the schoolyard fence. I walked over towards them.

Jamie was in the middle of a monologue when I walked up. His topic was the infiltration of flying saucers into the Catholic church.

Jamie: "So then the air force found this village in Mexico or someplace where they all pray to these flying saucers because they think the Virgin Mary is flying in them. They have this big church with a big statue of Mary on the altar, on a huge flying saucer. Everybody in this town has been kidnapped by a flying saucer at least once."

Michael: "Uh-huh."

Jamie: "But the thing is, they think that the priest in this church may be setting the whole thing up, right ? Because, get this, they can find no records of this guy anywhere ! They think the priest is a space man ! The air force thinks that space people sent him down to get everything ready !"

Michael: "Hmmm."

Michael had noticed me by this point.

Michael: "Say, Jamie, could you give Jay and me a minute?"

Jamie: "Oh. Sure."

And Jamie walked off to watch the football game, leaving me and Michael standing there with our hands in our pockets.

Michael: "Sounded pretty fantastic, didn't it ?"

Me: "Uh-huh."

I kicked at a stone.

Me: "So what have you been talking with Tommy about ?"

Michael: "That's personal, Jay."

Me: "Is he going to beat people up anymore ?"

Michael: "I don't know."

He sat down on the ground and put his arms around his knees.

Michael: "I doubt it. He's just thinking things over right now."

Me: "Did you tell him about the Thirteen Tomes ?"

Michael: "We just talked about... what he's like, and... things like that. He had a lot of questions."

Me: "Questions about what ?"

Michael: "You know, some of the things I've read. Some psychology, things like that."

Michael looked up at the cool blue sky, and so did I. I didn't know what to say. After awhile, the question just popped out of my mouth.

Me: "Why'd you do it ? Why'd you help me this time and not last time ?"

Michael looked at me coldly, then got up and started to walk away slowly. He was expecting me to follow, as usual. I decided that I would.

Michael: "I did it, Jay, because he was beating the hell out of you. I don't like to give direct advice to people, you know. But you were getting beat up. Things had gone too far, so I helped out. That's it."

Michael shrugged this off like it was something he would have done for anyone, not just me. As he continued, he spoke in more of a dismissive tone.

Michael: "I was hoping that you could figure out the solution from the Thirteen Tomes yourself. You didn't, of course. You tried to fight him. If you had read the story properly, you would have known it wouldn't work."

Me: "The story said the Wolf could be defeated in violence."

Michael: "Jay. He's twice your size. "

Me: "I don't know. What was I supposed to do ?"

To my surprise, Michael became very agitated.

Michael: "Well, how about telling him the truth, Jay ? What's wrong with that ? Did you think about telling him how he hurt you ? How he makes you feel ? Do you think he doesn't know it's wrong ? Do you think Tommy's happy that everyone hates him ? He's not ! "

He took a breath.

Michael: "He's just like us, Jay. Except that he's got some bad problems."

And I realized that Michael cared. I wouldn't have believed it, but Michael really cared about people. He cared enough about me getting beat up to talk to Tommy, and he cared enough about Tommy to talk to him, too.

And I noticed the worry on his face at this moment. It was the stress of carrying the problems of everyone close to him: me, Mrs. French, Tommy, Danny, and his parents too. I felt shame for silently impugning Michael's intentions all through our cold war, and even before. It was time to wash my hands clean. I wanted Michael and myself to be friends again. I had to do it. I had to swallow my pride and apologize.

Me: "I'm sorry."

Michael: "Sorry about what?"

Me: "I'm sorry I haven't been talking to you. When I saw you cutting Mrs. French's lawn, I was..."

I had said her name now. I had to finish the thought. The only thing left to do was to throw out how I felt about Mrs. French, and hope that we could talk it through. I stared at my shoes as I fumbled forward.

Me: "See, I... really like Mrs. French."

Michael: "You're in love with her, right? It's okay. I know."

I squinted at him. How did he know? I naively believed no one suspected my feelings. Michael smiled quietly, reassuringly.

Michael: "It's okay."

Me: "You know? How?"

Michael: "By the way you speak about her, by the way you're protective of her. By everything. I knew that's why you weren't speaking to me. I just didn't think it would take this long for you to outgrow it."

Me: "But, I haven't. I still love her."

And now the old Michael was back, rolling his eyes at me again.

Michael: "Oh, come on Jay. You can't possibly think a grown woman could fall in love with someone our age, do you?"

Me: "I don't know."

Michael: "Well, I know. It's not possible."

Perhaps he was trying to convince himself as much as he was trying to convince me.

Michael: "You want to keep hoping for the impossible? Why? Face reality. Live in the real world. Just stop it. Turn it off. It's easy."

Michael was a touch emphatic now. And he was telling me to stop a feeling, as if it were just an idea I could chase away.

To him, it was all the same: will and action, conscience and desire. To him, it was all just one smooth continuum. Life was just a matter of thinking about the best course of action and following that course. Emotions could be willed.

You just had to do it. You had to keep moving forward. Keep swimming. Like the goldfish.

Pals Again

I knew in my heart that my love for Mrs. French could never die, but I promised Michael I would try to get over it. For his part, Michael assured me that he had no romantic interest in her at all.

He explained the situation with the yard job, leaving out the more upsetting details - the kiss and so forth. He told me that Mrs. French just needed a shoulder to cry on. She hadn't developed any close friendships in town, and she needed someone to talk to in this

difficult time. He hadn't told me about the matter, he said, because it was a very sensitive and private thing.

It rang true to me. Mrs. French had lost her husband - she was alone now. Of course she would be lonely. Of course she would need someone to talk to. I wanted it to be me, but it just hadn't worked out that way. My burning jealousy softened. Michael wasn't in love with Mrs. French at all, he was just helping her.

I believed him. Finally.

I shook Michael's hand and thanked him. And we both smiled. We were back.

Danny came over, and now HE was smiling.

Danny: "So, you guys pals again ?"

And the three of us walked around in high spirits. Michael talked non-stop and I listened to every word he said. It was like being in the sun again.

Unfinished Business

At afternoon recess, Michael and I began our walk around the schoolyard. The kids were all yelling and playing, so we drifted to the far fence where it was quieter. We had a lot of catching up to do.

He told me that he was finding acting to be quite a challenge, and had read quite a few books on the topic. Michael disagreed with the direction that the play was taking. He thought that by making it more realistic, Mrs. French was draining the play of all of its meaning. She was making it into a play about how kids get along, he said.

I tried playing devil's advocate, and took Mrs. French's side but he countered all of my points into the ground. Then he changed topics. I wasn't expecting Mr. Smith to come up again.

Michael said had been reading some spy books. He said that the spy books would help us with our future plans. I heard a little thunder sound in my head. Did he mean the plot to kill Mr. Smith ? I had hoped that the plot had died off, somehow. It hadn't. Danny wandered within earshot.

Me: "You're still going to do that ?"

Michael: "I have to, Jay."

Danny piped in.

Danny: "Have to what ?"

Me: "Never mind."

Michael: "No, Jay. I think it's time we tell Danny what we're planning to do."

Me: "We're not planning to do anything."

Danny: "What is it ?"

Michael gave Danny that look of focused seriousness and conviction, full force.

Michael: "Danny, Jay and I are planning to put my dog to sleep."

Danny: "You mean kill it ?"

Michael: "Yes. Are you in ?"

Danny: "Ok."

Danny, the loyal soldier. He was agreeing to kill Mr. Smith without even knowing why Michael wanted to do it.

Me: "Wait, I'm not a part of this. I'm not doing it."

Danny: "What do I do ?"

Michael: "I haven't completed the plans yet."

Me: "Stop it. Stop talking about it."

Michael: "Jay, I'd like you to help me. If you don't want to, that's fine. Danny and I will do it alone. "

Michael wasn't trying to play us off against each other here, he just wanted the deed done. My friends were waiting for an answer.

Me: "I'll help for now, but I don't want to have anything to do with... you know, actually doing it."

Michael: "Fair enough."

We shook hands, and a black car rolled by the schoolyard on the other side of the fence where we stood. Unbeknownst to us, there were several of The Men inside that car, snapping pictures of Danny, Michael and me for their files.

Many years later, I saw the pictures. Thumbing through a file that the government had released to me, I found a snapshot of the three of us shaking hands, grim looks on our faces.

The Second Plot

The three of us agreed to meet at the library on Saturday after Michael finished up at Mrs. French's house. Danny and I spent our time and our allowances at the comic store and bowling alley, while Mrs. French and Michael took ginger ale and conferred on the couch.

We waited for Michael inside the huge front doors of the library. It started to rain, so when he showed up he was carrying a big, wet, black umbrella. It gave a proper tone of drama to the day's events.

Michael: "Let's go for a walk, gentlemen."

So we all crowded under his umbrella and walked past the stores towards Central Park. Michael talked over the "whoosh" of the rain as we went.

Michael: "I have been trying to find the best way to do this, and I think I have it. The best method to do this is drowning. There will be no body, no motive, and, of course, it's the most humane method."

Danny: "What's that mean ?"

Michael: "It means that Mr. Smith will feel as little pain as possible."

We continued in the rain, the three executioners. I started to get some of the images from our last attempt in my mind, and I fell silent. Danny and Michael were quiet too. We

reached Central Park, and continued along the paths, over leaf covered hills, deep into the park.

When we reached the wooden bridge on the east side of the park, Michael stopped. He pointed over the railing, and we all looked down to the rushing water below.

Michael: "We'll do it here."

The deliberate violence of the river below us gave me a shudder. There would be no mistakes on this attempt. If we made it to this spot, the dog was definitely doomed. I looked way downriver, towards the end of the rapids. There was no way I could watch them do it. I wouldn't have the stomach to witness the final struggle.

Me: "How are you going to get Mr. Smith away from your parents?"

Michael: "They're going away for the evening a week from Wednesday. They're going to leave Mr. Smith with Mrs. Balbanov."

That was it. If he could convince Mrs. Balbanov to let him have Mr. Smith, it would be simple. Just a matter of taking Mr. Smith for a walk.

Mr. Smith was going to die this time for sure.

Mrs. Balbanov, Dog Minder

Michael's mother had not actually asked Mrs. Balbanov to take care of Mr. Smith yet. Mrs. Balbanov didn't know yet that Michael's parents were driving into the city that Wednesday night to take in the opera. She didn't know that Mr. Smith's collar had been bugged by The Men, either.

But when Michael's mother walked Mr. Smith over to her house that Sunday afternoon, Mrs. Balbanov happened to be in her basement radio room. And she heard something. First, barking. Next, she heard Michael's mother's voice coming over the radio loud and clear.

Michael's mother: "We're going to visit your friend now, Mr. Smith. Yes, we're visiting Mrs. Balbanov. We are. Does that make you happy? Yes it does..."

Mr. Smith: "Woof, woof."

By the time Mrs. Balbanov answered the door, she had surmised that either Michael's mother or Mr. Smith was wearing a concealed microphone. And so when Michael's mother asked if Mr. Smith could stay over that Wednesday evening, Mrs. Balbanov had to think fast. Michael's mother might be trying to set her up, but she couldn't be sure yet. So Mrs. Balbanov opted to play along for the time being.

Mrs. Balbanov: "Of course, dear. I will take care of Mr. Smith."

And the kindly lady bent down and rubbed the stupid spaniel's neck, examining his collar with a spy's keen eye. And she spotted the microphone embedded in Mr. Smith's collar.

Now, all of us in town were used to regular surveillance of all sorts by The Men. But a bug in a dog collar was something else entirely. The usual surveillance methods, of

which we were mostly aware, were cameras hidden in trees, or in moving cars and vans with dark windows.

A dog collar with a bug might be directed specifically at her, or could they be they trying to monitor Michael's family ? Or had she been found out ? Was Michael's mother laying a trap for her ?

Mrs. Balbanov: "That's a very nice collar he has there."

It *was* a nice collar. The Men in the vet suits had stupidly picked a dog collar that was noticeable. It had bright red and blue stripes painted on the leather, and little metal studs sticking out.

Mrs. Balbanov: "Oh, yes. The vets gave him when he was sick, because he was such a good dog. Weren't you good, Mr. Smith ? Yes, you were !"

Michael's mother fawned on at length over Mr. Smith, and Mrs. Balbanov felt more at ease. Michael's mother couldn't be a spy, she decided. No spy would put on an act like this and pull it off - it was too strange, too remarkable. And the story of the vets made sense to her.

So Omni was spying on Michael's family, then ? But why ? And then it occurred to her - it had to be Michael. Maybe it was his refusal to pledge allegiance to Omni. Or maybe he had read 'The Conscientious Objector' and was spouting propaganda to his school mates.

Michael's Mother: "There's just one other thing. Can you please make sure that Michael and his friends stay away from Mr. Smith. They make him upset."

And Mrs. Balbanov agreed to this last request with a smile. She promised Michael's mother that he and his friends would not be allowed anywhere near Mr. Smith that night.

Week the Eleventh

The famous production of 'The Funeral Trial' was coming up soon - next week - and week eleven saw the pace of preparations accelerate. We were now rehearsing in costume, which helped me and others too I think. It felt more real. Mrs. French was working full steam with all the actors to iron out the wrinkled parts of the play.

Jamie Palladium had watched some old courtroom movies on TV in order to prepare himself for the role of the attorney. He grew more wonderful with every rehearsal. He addressed the courtroom with a big voice, which boomed well for a little kid's voice, and he beamed such utter confidence. We were all impressed.

One thing in particular that I remember was the way he stood with one arm up, pointing at the sky, shouting and shaking his head. It was quite dramatic.

But Michael was still too preachy, cold and distant in his part. He read his lines like he was all alone on stage, like he was shouting bad poetry in an empty room. Mrs. French kept trying to get him to liven up - to relate to the other actors. Their exchanges typically went like this:

Mrs. French: "Michael, you have to *speak* to these people. You are trying to convince them that they are wrong."

Michael: "But they've already rejected me. I don't care what they think anymore. I'm simply stating my beliefs."

Mrs. French: "But, there's no drama there if you don't care, Michael."

And Michael would promise to try harder, but no changes came. Tommy, on the other hand, was excellent. He was fascinating. Since the truce his anger had been bubbling under the surface of his entire being, and that was now showing up on stage.

The problem with Tommy, though, was that his anger was too much. It threw the balance of the play off. As it was now, the play was about Jamie Palladium and Tommy White, with Michael a disinterested player in the trial that would decide the validity of his entire life.

We still had much work to do.

Artistic Differences

So, rehearsal was going as it was going. Michael's narrow emotional range had opened as far as could be expected. Jamie Palladium, Susan Feeny, and Tommy White were excellent and getting better. I was trying to keep up as best I could. And the play was inching towards respectability.

An incident happened late Friday afternoon after a long rehearsal. Harld (Michael) and Gunther (Tommy) were supposed to be having a heated argument. Tommy, of course, was electrically alive in every moment. Michael, though, stood up in the witness stand preaching back at him in his usual manner, like a disinterested professor. After having run the scene four times with no change from Michael, Tommy snapped.

Tommy: "You're not listening to anything Gunther is saying !"

Michael gave Tommy a loaded look.

Michael: "I beg your pardon ?"

Tommy: "You're not listening to Gunther ! She's told you this about fifteen zillion times and you won't listen."

Tommy was livid. But Michael wasn't going to take direction from Tommy. No way. He responded to Tommy's charge with his usual arrogance and aloofness.

Michael: "Just do your part."

Michael's dismissive tone set Tommy off. He started to lunge towards the witness box, but Jamie stopped him and the entire stage came alive with a brand new play.

Mrs. French: "Class ! Class !"

Tommy: "You're ruining the whole play with your crappy acting !"

Jamie: "Calm down, Tommy !"

Danny jumped in and Jamie and Danny and Tommy grappled until Mrs. French ran up he stage steps and pulled them all apart. Michael stood in the prisoner's box watching all this, looked pale and exposed.

The girls yelled at the fighters to stop. The boys yelled at them to fight. A theatrical powder keg was alight !

It took some time, but Mrs. French restored order, then cooled us off with a speech about artistic differences and the importance of what we were doing. She tried to sound calm, but she was clearly unnerved.

And when she dismissed us for the day, the tension was still there. We only had three rehearsals left.

Returning Tome Nine

After rehearsal that night, I waited for Michael outside the detention room. It was after five thirty when he finally got out. I was worried whether Tommy's stinging criticism would bring him down.

I was worrying for nothing, though. Mrs. French had already spent the last hour in detention bandaging his damaged ego. And anyway, Michael didn't seem like he wanted to talk about the play. So we walked out the schoolyard gates in the dark talking about anything but the play, and the plot to kill the dog.

We ended up talking about the Tomes. I remembered that I still had Tome nine in my bedroom at home. I wanted badly to return it to Michael, to close the rift that had been between us.

We decided to meet at Bobby's tree house at seven, after dinner. I got home just in time for meat loaf, and my mom's smile. At the table, I told her I was going to Michael's that night and I knew she was glad that Michael and I were friends again. I looked over at my dad. I don't think he had any clue yet as to who Michael was.

After dinner, I waited until my dad was back behind the paper and my mom was in front of the TV, then told them I was off to Michael's to do homework. I didn't have homework books in my hand, though. I had Tome nine.

Mrs. Balbanov Double Checks The Story

I climbed up to Bobby's and found Michael waiting there for me with Tome ten in his hand. I couldn't help smiling as we exchanged books. This sealed it. We were officially friends again.

We chatted for awhile until the wind came up, and the conversation lulled.

Me: "What do you want to do now ?"

Michael: "Let's go visit Mrs. Balbanov."

And then we were climbing down, dropping to the ground, and following the sidewalks to Mrs. Balbanov's house. Michael had been nurturing his relationship with Mrs. Balbanov this whole time, all during our cold war. He was visiting her regularly, she was lending him books, and he was reading them.

Their routine was for him to come by once or twice a week with the books he had completed. She lent him a few more, then they had tea. They discussed the books, and anything else that came up.

I was a little shy about dropping by unannounced, but Michael assured me that it was all right. A couple of minutes later we were knocking on Mrs. Balbanov's door. She let us in with some friendly words spoken in that charming accent, and immediately brought the cookies out.

As my eyes dawdled around the room, stopping on knickknacks here and there Michael made small talk. He spoke about the upcoming play and banal school matters., but Mrs. Balbanov kept turning the subject around to Mr. Smith. Since the topic of the dog was in play, Michael took the opportunity to plant an idea in her mind.

Michael: "Actually, Mrs. Balbanov. My parents are just, you know, a little funny about the dog."

Mrs. Balbanov: "Vat do you mean, Michael ?"

And without pause, Michael told the bald facts of the case to Mrs. Balbanov - how his parents were insane and all that, and she moved the flower pot a little closer to the edge of the table. Michael was speaking too softly, though. When the tapes were eventually released to the public, you could hardly hear him.

So we sat talking, and Mrs. Balbanov started to pet Mr. Smith's neck.

Mrs. Balbanov: "This is such a nice collar, vere did you get it ?"

And Michael explained how Mr. Smith was sick, so the vets came by to check on him, and gave him the new collar. And Mrs. Balbanov smiled warmly. The story checked out. It WAS Michael's family they were after, not her. She was safe.

The funny thing was that while Mrs. Balbanov was secretly trying to get information from Michael, he was trying to manipulate her too. All of his comments about his parents and Mr. Smith were calculated to relax Mrs. Balbanov's watchfulness of the dog. He was trying to fix it so he could get access to Mr. Smith next Wednesday night.

And so we (the two dog assassins) and Mrs. Balbanov (the nice spy lady) chatted pleasantly, drank tea, ate cookies all evening, all of us weaving an intricate cloak of deception together. And when we left, Michael was holding Mrs. Balbanov's copy of Cannery Row by John Steinbeck. We thanked her, and said goodnight.

It was cold now, and was had our hands in our pockets as we walked home.

Michael: "I think we're set. I think she's going to let me have the dog on Wednesday. Tomorrow's the last planning session. Four o'clock at the library. Danny will be there."

I made another effort to try to talk Michael out of the whole thing again. But my words just bounced off him. When it came time for us to part, I could tell by the way he talked that I had had no effect on him.

Michael: "Tomorrow at four o'clock. Don't worry, Jay. It'll be okay."

And he was gone. I walked home watching my breath in the cold air and holding on tight to Tome ten. I hoped Michael knew what he was doing this time.

The Human Mouse

I finished my chores (raking) by one o'clock on Saturday, so I had three hours to kill before meeting Michael and Danny. I put the rake back in the garage and went inside, up to my room and flopped on my bed with Tome ten.

I began to read the story of the Human Mouse. This story came the closest of all the stories so far to describing my own personality.

The Human Mouse lived in a great stone house on a hill. The mouse house had hundreds of rooms - from great wood paneled ballrooms to tiny closets. But the Human Mouse was terrified of cats, so he scurried through this mansion day in and day out, terrified that there was always a cat around the corner. He would enter a room for a few minutes, then hear the cat, and run away. The Human Mouse couldn't enjoy his home because of his fear of the cat.

But he never saw the cat, and as it turned out there was no cat. The turtle pointed out that the mouse couldn't enjoy his life because he obsessed on the idea that a cat was after him, when it really wasn't.

Part way into the story, I put down the book. I understood the mouse. I was the mouse. I was the mouse and Tommy was the cat. I read on.

The turtle pointed out to the child that if the mouse took the time to go through every room in the house one by one, top to bottom, and inspect every room, he would discover that there was no cat - it was all in his mind. The various noises that the mouse attributed to the imaginary cat were actually just the sounds of the wind blowing through the house. But the mouse would never do that, the turtle reasoned, because he *needed* the idea of the cat in his life to make sense of it all. The Human Mouse wouldn't know what to do with his life if he found out there was no cat.

I put the book down again. This sounded something like me, for sure. But did that mean that Tommy wasn't as much of a threat as I thought he was ? I tried to make sense of that idea.

But I couldn't make sense of it. Tommy wasn't imaginary - he was real. He was a real threat: he had attacked me more than once. And I sure didn't feel like I needed Tommy in my life.

Still, there seemed to be a lesson there for me. Michael had told me that I should talk to Tommy. Maybe there was something to that.

Michael's Private Rehearsal

While I was reading Tome ten in the solitude of my room, Michael was perched on Mrs. French's sofa enjoying another ginger ale, and enjoying her company. By now they had dropped the pretence that he was there to do yard work at all.

As they had done so many times before, they discussed the play. Michael told her that he felt her insistence on realism was turning the play into a piece about how children get along with each other. To him, the force of the play was in Harld's speeches, where he professes his convictions and explains them at length. These ideas would be lost when Mrs. French shifted the focus to Harld's relationships.

Michael felt that if Harld was forced to really talk to the townspeople, to really engage them, it would bring Harld down to a lower level. The majesty of Harld's philosophies would thus be sullied.

Mrs. French listened intently to what Michael had to say, then spoke at her turn. The play was about people, she said, not ideas. The play was about how people interact with each other when all involved have different principles. It could only be interesting that way.

If it was just about Pustul's ideas on individuality, society, religion and so forth, then the he would have written it as a book rather than a play. A play is an exposition of human behavior, she said.

Michael countered back that the ideas themselves were interesting enough to carry the play. He felt that it was more interesting to witness the courtroom's ignorant reaction to Harld's progressiveness and forward mindedness.

Mrs. French felt *The Funeral Trial* could only be done realistically, and Michael wanted less focus on relationships and more focus on his speeches. It was a stalemate.

There was a pause. Each of them had elucidated their position, and there was no way to reconcile them. And yet, there was a comfort with it. There was a always a comfort between them when they talked this way. Mrs. French took a few seconds to admire the depth of Michael's feelings on the topic.

Then she offered a suggestion.

Mrs. French: "Michael, let's try it my way once just to see how it works."

Michael: "I have tried it."

Mrs. French: "No, I mean right here. Right now. I'm going to give you some suggestions to follow. Let's just see how it works."

Michael agreed, and Mrs. French went to refresh the drinks and get her copy of the play. When she returned, she sat in the armchair across from Michael. Now she was the director again.

Mrs. French: "Okay. Let's do the speech with Gunther. I want you to try to get in touch with the anger Harld must feel toward him."

And Michael read it, but it wasn't right. When he described it me later, I understood. After all, except for the time he defended me against Tommy, Michael hardly ever expressed anger. It was difficult for him. So they worked on that for the better part of an hour, but it went nowhere. He couldn't get in touch with that part of himself.

But Mrs. French wouldn't give up. She needed to make a change happen in Michael. She needed to find another way in.

Mrs. French: "Let's try the speech with Horst then. Harld feels a great affection for Horst. I want to see that warmth between them."

And again, they went through it but it was flat. She stopped him, and had him read the speech again, as though he was talking to me - Jay. There was still no improvement. She tried his parents. And Michael got worse. There was one idea left.

Mrs. French: "Let's try this. I want you to say the speech to me. I want you to drop Horst's name, and just say the speech to me. Say it like you're really talking to me."

Michael felt uneasy.

Mrs. French: "Look into my eyes. Don't look away. Start from the top."

And Michael started reading Harld's speech to Horst.

Michael: "When I look into this mad sea of ignorance, I want to rush to my own island. This island that I have built, I built myself with my own hands. I built the rocks that kept the waves of hatred clear from my own shores. I stood there on those shores alone, untouched by those waves.

But you, my friend, saw the storm and navigated through it. You brought your ship softly onto these shores, avoiding the deadly rocks. You saw that I had built them out of necessity, and not choler.

After you landed, and disembarked, I greeted you and welcomed you. Together we admired the island I had built. We saw the beauty in it. You and I understood what the ignorant maelstrom could never understand."

Mrs. French's direction was working - Michael was different. His voice was lower, his eyes were soft. It wasn't Harld preaching now, it was Michael talking to Mrs. French. And as he spoke, the speech took on a new meaning - deep and personal. And Mrs. French was moved.

Michael: "I want to thank you, my friend, for gracing my island with your kind presence. For without you, I would have been forced to walk on these hard rocks, on these shores with no one else to admire them."

And although these words marked the end of Harld's speech, Harld's eyes didn't move from Mrs. French's for several seconds. When they finally did, a tear spilled down over her cheek.

Harld's speech meant something to him now.

Final Planning Session

I got to the library just before four, and saw Danny there waiting for me. We sat down on the stone steps together and waited for Michael, who showed up twenty minutes late from Mrs. French's. There wasn't a hint of what he had experienced with Mrs. French earlier. There was only composure and business.

We went in, and found our usual table. We sat opposite Michael, and got down to it. He pulled out a hand drawn map, and a red pencil crayon, and went to work with a whispered urgency.

Michael: "Okay, Jay. Wednesday night at seven my parents are going to drop off Mr. Smith at Mrs. Balbanov's. Leave your house and seven sharp, and tell your parents you're going to the library with Danny. I'll meet you at Bobby's at seven fifteen. Then, we'll both walk to Mrs. Balbanov's.

When we get there, you'll wait in the bushes out back. It may take some time, but I'll eventually get out with Mr. Smith."

Me: "What if she doesn't let you have him?"

Michael: "I may have to take Mr. Smith and make a run for it. I don't think it will happen that way, but be ready in case it does. We might have to move fast."

Me: "Okay."

Michael: "Danny, tell your parents you're going to the library with Jay. If you leave at seven, you'll be waiting for us here in Central Park, where the paths cross at seven fifteen.

Wait there. When Jay and I get there, we'll all move quickly to the wooden bridge. You two will stand here and here to keep watch, and I'll take off his leash. "

Me: "Why take his leash off?"

Michael: "Because I'm going to tell everybody that I let Mr. Smith run free in the park, and he took off and jumped in the river."

Me: "Oh."

Michael: "So you two will keep watch here, and I will take Mr. Smith to the bridge and throw him in.

If we are seen, the story we tell everybody is I was taking Mr. Smith for a walk and ran into you two going to the library. We walked through Central Park together. I took off his leash there, and he jumped in the river here.

If we aren't seen, you two will go to the library after it's all over, and I'll go back to Mrs. Balbanov's. We won't tell anybody that we saw each other. That would look suspicious. I'll just tell Mrs. Balbanov that I was taking Mr. Smith through Central Park and he jumped in the river.

Are there any questions?"

The plan was well thought out maybe even foolproof, and I was relieved. I was also glad that I wouldn't have to watch it happen. No one would be in that part of the park so late at night. I looked at Danny. He seemed to have an adequate grasp of the plan. I felt bleak, but at least my stomach wasn't upset.

It had to be done. All Michael had to do was get Mr. Smith away from Mrs. Balbanov.

The Calm Before the Storm

Sunday was a crisp and bright day. Michael called me after I got home from church and suggested the he, Danny, and I hang around together. I agreed to meet him at Bobby's, and off I went.

Michael was trying to get our minds off of things, I think. But it wasn't necessary.

For some reason, the plot to kill Mr. Smith wasn't bothering me as much this time around. I couldn't figure out if it was because I had already been through it, or because my role had been reduced substantially, or just because I personally wouldn't see Mr. Smith suffering this time. Maybe I didn't think it was really going to happen.

In any case, Michael and I met at Bobby's and went on to meet Danny at the other end of Central Park, close to downtown. Danny had brought one of those toy balsa wood planes. So Michael watched with his hands in his pockets as Danny and I chased it around the park. When the sun started to sink, and the sky turned a warm orange, we said goodbye and headed home.

And in my room later, as I lay in bed reading Tome eleven with my Sunday dinner warming my stomach I wondered what the week ahead would be like. On Wednesday, Michael would be dropping Mr. Smith in the river. Thursday was the play. It already seemed like a pretty full week to me.

But week the twelfth was *the* week. The week that everything happened. It was the weeks that the gods decided to set right everything that was amiss in our little world.

Week The Twelfth

It was Monday of week twelve and everyone was worried about the play. We gathered after school in the auditorium and dressed for rehearsal without any commotion whatsoever. We had anxious hearts. The play was only three days away, and it wasn't ready yet. And everyone knew that Michael was the main problem.

Backstage, we put our peasant frocks on over our clothes. I looked over at Tommy, who was completely stolid. I was sure he would strangle Michael if the play didn't improve soon. And what we he do to me ?

Then I stopped. It was the Human Mouse. I was doing it again. I looked over at Tommy again. What was he thinking ? Could he be possible thinking of violence against me at every possible minute ? No. He couldn't be.

I took a my cue from Pustul and walked over to him.

Me: "Break a leg, Tommy."

Mrs. French had taught us that that was how actors said 'good luck' to each other. I forced a smile at a confused looking Tommy and walked away. I hoped he wouldn't take my advice literally.

When the rehearsal was ready to start, Mrs. French announced a change in plans. We were supposed to run the play from beginning to end today, but she said that we were going to start by rehearsing the scene between Horst and Harld instead. It was the speech that Michael had rehearsed with her on Saturday.

So Michael and I took our places and we began.

Mrs. French: "And Michael, I want you to do it just the way you did it for me last time."

And when Michael started to speak to me, it was immediately apparent that something was very different. Harld was so sad. He was so sad, it made me sad. It seemed to me that Michael was talking about our friendship, about how no one but he and I could be friends together on that island of his. And the weight, the immense weight that I had seen Michael bear, the weight of everyone else's problems - all of that came through in this short speech of Harld's.

When it was finished, we all saw the change in Michael. This was exactly what Mrs. French had wanted, and now I could see why. It was fascinating, captivating.

And our classmates applauded us ! Not Tommy, but everyone else. Then Mrs. French had us take our places and we started the play from the beginning.

It was a defining moment. The change in Michael had happened. There was hope.

Conference With Tommy

And by the end of the rehearsal, we knew it was going to work. The play was going to be ready. Tiny cracks of emotion had found their way into other parts of Michael's performance. There was now a humanity, a warmth even, in Harld.

And as Mrs. French dismissed us, the pent-up anxiety from before rehearsal - the silence and stillness - released itself in shouts, giggles, and young laughter. We left the auditorium with these sounds echoing. It felt like the last day of school before summer vacation.

I thought about saying something to Tommy, but when I looked around he was gone. Instead, I gave Michael a slap on the back, and a goodbye. He went off to detention with Mrs. French, and I headed home alone. The play was going to be wonderful, I could feel it.

And I continued to feel it as I walked home. Until I passed town park number three. Then the feeling left, and I stopped.

Tommy was sitting up in Bobby's tree house all alone. He saw me, and waved at me to join him. Now, dread flooded my consciousness. We hadn't done this routine in a long time, but I remembered what it was like.

I would sit there while Tommy berated me and toyed with me. He would insult me to my face, and I just sat there. That was the routine.

But maybe not. Maybe I could try to talk to Tommy, the way Michael had told me I should, the way Tome ten told me to. I went to the tree and climbed up. There was a sore lump in my throat.

I got to the top and sat down on the wide wooden platform across from Tommy. He looked off into the distance, tearing at a piece of bark, saying nothing. He didn't even acknowledge I was there, We just sat there. This went on for endless minutes, until I had to say something.

Me: "Tommy, I don't think we should fight anymore."

Tommy answered with no emotion at all, still looking off.

Tommy: "You don't huh ?"

Me: "No."

Tommy tossed the piece of bark he was playing with, and I watched it fall to the ground below. Then he spoke again, looking at me this time with all his anger.

Tommy: "You know what ? I hate your guts. You're a coward. You get everybody else to fight your battles for you. You're afraid of everything."

Me: "I know."

The anger was coming, now. I could feel it. But then, it turned. It turned into something else - anger still, but now directed inwards. Tommy was fighting to stay in control.

Tommy: "I hate you. I hate everything about you. The way you are. The way you look. I'm always gonna hate you."

And now he was looking away again. His voice lowered.

Tommy: "But I'm not going to beat you up anymore."

Then an afterthought.

Tommy: "It's too easy anyway."

I couldn't believe it. Was it true ? Was I safe ? Safe forever ?

Tommy was releasing me. I was free ! All the time I had spent looking back over my shoulder, avoiding him – it was in the past now. I wouldn't have to worry about that anymore.

But, strangely, I didn't feel happy about what he was saying. What *was* I feeling ? It felt like shame.

That was it. It was shame. Tommy was letting me go out of pity. He had been the bigger man, the one to outgrow this conflict. I felt like he was leaving me behind, somehow. And I felt truly ashamed.

We sat there for awhile longer, as I went over all of this in my mind. The years of torment were leaving us. Our feud was history. I wanted to say something, I wanted to apologize (to *apologize* to Tommy !) for being such a coward.

But all I could manage was a weak 'thank you'.

Me: "Thanks, Tommy."

Tommy: "Get out of here."

He was disgusted with me, I could tell. There was nothing I could do but thank him again, and climb down. And I walked home with my entire life in front of me, it seemed. I was free. It was done.

Unlikely Lovers

After that rehearsal on Monday, Michael and Mrs. French spent the happiest detention yet. They spoke breathlessly about the play for the whole hour. The play - their play - was going to be a success ! And the hour was over before they knew it. Too soon. And Mrs. French asked Michael to come over to her place to continue talking.

As Michael explained to me later, this meeting with Mrs. French was to be the most tumultuous they ever had. They drove up home her car, and there's always something sexy about driving in a woman's car. So the tone was set.

When they got inside Mrs. French talked Michael into staying for dinner. Michael made the call to his parents, stating that he was going to a classmate's house. They gave their indifferent consent, and the evening was set.

As they stood in the kitchen laughing and talking, Mrs. French lit some candles. She put some spaghetti on, as they talked, and Michael helped chop some onions. And the radio played soft music, as they talked in their old familiar way.

And then Michael kissed her. Michael kissed *her* !

When he told me about it later, it seemed to me that he *must* have felt something at that point. It must have been love, or something like it. But he said all he felt was a kind of sadness. Sadness, he said !

He said that a feeling of sadness came over him, and he put his hands on her waist, and moved to kiss her. And that was how it happened.

Michael may have felt sadness, but what could Mrs. French possibly have been feeling ?

It meant something to her. For her to take such a risk, to fall so far out of the bounds of acceptable behavior - it had to mean something to her. Could she have been in love with him ? Could she have actually been in love with Michael - barely a teenager ?

Something was wrong.

Michael said that after he kissed her, Mrs. French became uneasy. Then, with the spaghetti cooking and the soft music from the radio lingering in the room, Mrs. French sat down at the kitchen table and started to cry.

Tuesday's Secret

Tuesday was mostly a day of preparation. Preparation for the play in the auditorium, and in the school yard, more preparation for the assassination of Mr. Smith.

At recess, Michael, Danny and myself went off alone and went through the plan for Wednesday night over and over again. Danny had a little trouble at first, but by the end of recess he had it all down pat.

And our rehearsal after school was the best yet. Michael's growing passion continued to spread out through the entire play. And when that passion washed over the other players, it reverberated and came back again.

But Mrs. French didn't seem to notice today. Her enthusiasm wasn't there. She seemed like she was somewhere else. And when she gave notes after rehearsal, she didn't say a single thing to Michael.

In fact, she only spoke to him once at the end of rehearsal, to tell him that his detention was cancelled today. It was the first he didn't have to serve detention since the first day of school. Mrs. French said she had a 'personal matter' to attend to.

So Michael and I left the school in the cold still air and failing light. I walked with him to the library, then turned south towards home.

Two blocks south of the library is the town hospital. As I walked towards it, the building appeared as a great ghost to me, a white stone floodlit front. As I drew closer, I looked up and saw something that made me to stop. There were two wheelchairs coming out of the emergency entrance, with two people pushing them.

In the first wheelchair was Mr. French, looking much better - smiling and looking back at Mrs. French. And I had never seen her look so happy. She was opening the passenger door of their car, helping him get in, and smiling - smiling more than I had ever seen her smile before.

In the second wheelchair was Mr. Reddick. A nurse was pushing him along towards another waiting car.

I took all of this in for a second, then started walking again. As I got closer, Mrs. French walked around to the driver's side, got her keys out of her purse, and looked up. Our eyes met. And Mrs. French looked slightly alarmed.

She opened the car door, said a few words to Mr. French, and came over to meet me.

Mrs. French: "Hello, Jay."

Me: "Hello."

Mrs. French: "Jay, I'm just taking my husband home from the hospital here."

That was obvious, wasn't it? Why did she seem nervous?

Mrs. French: "I would appreciate it if you wouldn't tell Michael about this. I want to tell him myself. Do you think you could do that for me? Could you keep this secret for me? Just until after the play?"

Me: "Sure, Mrs. French."

And she thanked me and went back to the car. I could understand why she wanted to be the one to tell Michael. But why not until after the play? Mr. Reddick was out of the hospital now, too. Could it be that Mrs. French was leaving us?

And as I continued home, I thought about these things. And I thought, also, about how my crush for Mrs. French had softened in these weeks. At the beginning, she had seemed so angelic - so perfect. But now she seemed so real, so human. My old wedding fantasy had come true in September, but it was ending differently and I was glad.

I met Michael after dinner that night, and dropped in on Mrs. Balbanov again. But that night, of the three of us, I held the biggest secret.

The Final Attempt on Mr. Smith

After Wednesday night's rehearsal, it was clear the play was completely ready to go. Harld, Frank, and Gunther clashed violently throughout the play and it was riveting. Something very special was going to happen on that stage tomorrow after school.

But Michael, Danny and I had other things on our minds as we left rehearsal together. Tonight was the night - Mr. Smith's last night on earth. We walked home and went through Michael's scenarios one last time.

Michael got home before five and went down to his room to read, and feed the goldfish. At six, his parents signaled it was dinner time in the usual way - by rapping at the door at the top of the stairs three times. They all ate in their usual stone cold silence, with Mr. Smith eating his last meal beside them. After dinner, Michael went back downstairs to his room to read some more. Then at ten to seven, Michael's father called down that to say they were leaving, and would be home late. He was to go to bed by eleven, they said. And they packed the dog in the car to go to Mrs. Balbanov's.

There was no babysitter for Michael - only for Mr. Smith.

I had eaten only half my dinner, or so, that night. I was just a little anxious - mostly that something would go wrong. At seven, I told my parents I was off to the library with Danny, and set off for Bobby's tree house to meet Michael.

He was there, according to plan, and we left for Mrs. Balbanov's. As we approached, I scooted around the side of the house and went to the bushes and hid. I saw Michael knock, and go in. And I waited. And waited.

Once inside, Michael looked around for Mr. Smith, but couldn't find him. He took a seat, and tried to be casual.

Michael: "Where's Mr. Smith, Mrs. Balbanov?"

Mrs. Balbanov: "I think he vent down to the basement. I'll get him. You vait here."

Michael: "Can I come down, too?"

Mrs. Balbanov: "No, no. It's not a place for children. Just sit down, I get him."

The basement ! Mrs. Balbanov's secret room ! Would Michael get a chance to see it tonight ?

She stayed down there for a good while, a good few minutes. Michael picked up a magazine, and started to read. Then, he noticed she still wasn't back. What was she doing ?

What Mrs. Balbanov was doing was tuning her radio equipment so that she could pick up any transmission's from Mr. Smith's collar microphone. Eventually, Michael heard her voice from below.

Mrs. Balbanov: "Vere are you Mr. Smith ? Vere are you hiding ?."

He couldn't see that she was speaking directly into Mr. Smith's collar, and checking that the needles on her radio indicator swayed to the right when she spoke. She tested the dog collar a few more times. After she was satisfied that all was ready, she yelled out.

Mrs. Balbanov: "Dere you are ! You little scamp."

And Mrs. Balbanov emerged from the basement with Mr. Smith and headed for the kitchen for some snacks. Michael called out to her in the kitchen.

Michael: "Mrs. Balbanov, could I ask you for a favour ?"

Mrs. Balbanov: "Certainly, Michael."

Michael: "I was going to ask if I could take Mr. Smith for a walk."

Mrs. Balbanov hesitated a second.

Mrs. Balbanov: "Your mother didn't want you to be alone with him, Michael. I'm sorry."

That was it. He had miscalculated. Mrs. Balbanov wasn't going to agree. Michael's mind started to race. Mr. Smith was sitting right there in front of him. He could just grab him and run. But Michael decided, instead, to try again.

Michael: "But he hasn't had his walk tonight Mrs. Balbanov. And, you know, my parents are far too particular about him..."

Mrs. Balbanov: "Vell, you know. Why don't we walk him together ?"

A Change in Plans

This was a chance, at least, and Michael decided to take it. He agreed, and they put their coats on and put the leash on Mr. Smith, and they were gone.

I was getting cold there in the bushes, so I was glad when I heard the front door opening. But when I saw the two of them emerge together, my fast beating heart seemed like it was trying to bolt.

Michael hadn't planned for Mrs. Balbanov to be part of this.

So I followed Michael and the kindly spy at a safe distance as they strolled up the street. After about a block, they came to a corner store. I saw Mrs. Balbanov say a few words to Michael, then hand him Mr. Smith's leash before walking into the store.

I approached cautiously. Being seen by Mrs. Balbanov would be a disaster, so I was careful. When I was almost there, Michael saw me, and he waved a quick signal. Then he made his move. He walked off Mr. Smith on his own, first slowly, then more quickly.

Rather than walk in front of the store, I sprinted in the other direction and ran around the block. When I saw Michael, he was running too. And Mr. Smith was running.

We looked back. Mrs. Balbanov hadn't come out of the store yet. We had made it. Michael turned down Oak Street and we all ran towards Central Park in full gallop, gasping frigid air.

I talked breathlessly as I ran.

Me: "Michael, what happened ?"

Michael: "She wouldn't let me have him."

And we ran, and ran until Central Park came into view.

Michael: "Come on ! This is it !"

Zero Hour in Central Park

And we crossed the street into the dimly lit park, and didn't slow down until we were out of view from the street. This was it. The weeks of planning, the anxiety. It would all be over soon.

Michael: "We're right on time to meet Danny."

It was the perfect place for a murder, for tactical and ambient reasons. The darkness covered our identities. Creepy trees hung over the pathway and dim streetlights gave the park a glow of nervous revulsion.

We quietly slipped into the park, Mr. Smith trotting happily at Michael's side. I realized that this was probably the first time Michael had ever walked him.

Danny was waiting at the right place - where paths crossed. He joined us as we passed, and we continued to the river in silence. When we got there, we followed the dimly lit path along the river to where the rapids were.

My heart was still beating hard, but I didn't want to go back. This deed had to be done now. I couldn't go through it all again. We got to the footbridge, but Michael stopped short of it.

Me: "Why are we stopping ?"

Michael: "We're doing it here."

Me: "Here ? I thought you wanted to do it from the bridge. The water isn't rough enough here."

Michael: "It's rough enough."

The three of us looked at the rushing water. He was right - it was rough enough. Even if Mr. Smith could swim, he wouldn't be able to fight the rapids. I gulped and looked down at the condemned spaniel.

Michael: "We're doing it here. This is better, it's near the footpath. It'll be easier to explain it here, than from the bridge."

He was right.

Michael: "Okay."

And with that, Michael bent down and tried to undo Mr. Smith's collar. But somehow, Mr. Smith's animal instincts had imbued him with a temporary and revitalizing intelligence. Something very bad was afoot, and even a dumb, dumb dog could sense it. He tried to squirm away, but Michael grabbed him.

Michael: "Danny, take off his leash."

Danny didn't have a dog, and that was clear with the way he fumbled with Mr. Smith's collar. The dog few into a panic. The three of us wrestled with him and he put up quite a

fight, until Danny finally got a good hold of the collar. After a few seconds of fiddling, Danny stood up.

Danny: "I've got it !"

He held up the leash with the collar still attached. He had taken off Mr. Smith's whole collar ! Now Mr. Smith started fighting even harder, and there was just Michael and me to hold him without a collar to hang on to. We were in danger of him getting away completely !

Michael: "You took off his whole collar ! We just needed to take off the leash !"

Me: "We have to put the collar back on him !"

Michael: "No ! Hang on !"

And Michael put his arms under Mr. Smith and picked him right up and held him aloft.

Michael: "Okay, give me the leash. I need the leash."

I helped Danny unhook the leash from the collar and handed it to Michael's free hand. Danny stuffed the collar in his pocket. Now Michael had the leash to show people that Mr. Smith had got away. We would have to dispose of the collar now, but that was okay. Everything was okay. It was going to happen after all. We stepped down off the path to the edge of the river.

Mr. Smith seemed calmer now that Michael was holding him. Michael was able to walk down the incline to the river's edge without too much trouble. Danny and I followed. My heart was pounding quite hard, and there was an unreal feeling in the air. I had been composed and focused up until now, but as Michael reached the muddy river bank, my fear flooded over me.

Me: "Michael ! Don't !"

But Michael just stood there, looking blankly at me. He wasn't going to change his mind now. But I didn't want to see it happen, so I ran. I ran hard back up the path from where we had come.

I had only made it about twenty yards when I stopped. There was somebody coming towards me ! Was it Mrs. Balbanov ? No. Too fast.

There was some person - no - people coming straight for me ! Electricity shot through my body. I couldn't move.

And then a host of flashlights came on - bright flashlights shining in my face ! They were coming at me from straight ahead ! I stopped and turned.

And I have never been as terrified as when I heard that man's voice.

Man: "Hold it right there !"

And more flashlights came on and there were at least ten men surrounding me there in the park. I froze. Then I heard another commotion happening behind me, at the river bank. What was going on ?

The man who had spoken put his hand on my neck and marched me back to the river bank, from which I had fled. We walked down from the path, out of the bridge light and down to the dark river side where Michael stood - the leash dangling from his uplifted hands.

Danny and Mr. Smith were nowhere to be found, and there were men everywhere. Their flashlight beams fell onto the rushing river, the bushes, and the muddy path.

And now I knew who these men were. They were The Men.

Arrested !

A few minutes later, Michael and I were being nudged into separate vans at the other edge of the park. I had never seen so many Men before at one place. They spoke in low, restrained voices. I wasn't so much frightened by this as I was mystified. What could we have done that provoked this response ?

They drove us to the Omni security installation, adjacent to the main Omni complex at the east end of town. As we pulled through the security gates, I felt my anxiety rise. My parents couldn't even come in here to get me, if they knew where I was.

We disembarked and the Men took Michael and me to separate rooms for questioning. My room had two hard wooden chairs, juxtaposed at opposite ends of a square wooden table under fluorescent lighting. I sat in one of them, and waited for about five minutes until one of them came in. He sat in the other chair.

Man: "Do you want to tell me what you were doing in the park tonight ?"

I recited my story just as Michael had instructed me. I knew it was my best chance. Danny and I were on the way to the library when we met Michael, I said. Michael was taking Mr. Smith for a walk, I said. But I knew that there were pieces of the story that didn't quite make sense.

Like: Where was Danny now ? Why did we take off like that ? And the question I was wondering myself: What happened to Mr. Smith ?
I tried to stick to the truth as much as possible.

Man: "Why'd you run away ?"

Me: "We heard you coming, we didn't know who it was and we got scared and took off."

Man: "Why'd you take the dog's collar off ?"

Me: "We took it off so he could run free. Michael was going to just take off the leash, but we ended up taking off the whole collar. "

The interrogator sat back and looked at me.

Man: "We heard Michael say 'we're doing it here'. What did that mean ?"

I wondered how they could have heard these whispered words. I didn't realize, of course, that they had been in the van listening to everything from the collar microphone. I stuck to my story, but embellished it a bit.

Man: "What did he mean ? 'We're doing it here' ? "

Me: "I don't know. I think he wanted to pee in the river."

Man: "What's the big deal about that ? You never peed in a river before ?"

I had already shifted from our story, and I didn't want to be caught in a lie. So I didn't answer. We sat there in silence on that for a few minutes, then he left.

In the other room, Michael's interrogator asked him most of the same questions, and of course his answers matched closely with mine. But there was one question they asked Michael that they didn't ask me. It was the last question The Men asked him.

Man: "Michael, have you ever heard of project XYZ ?"

Michael told him that he hadn't, and that was it.

Not too many minutes later, Michael and I were both surprised to find ourselves in a van. We were going home. It was the Man who interviewed me that drove us home. As we pulled out of the Omni gates, I saw a clock in the booth that read nine thirty. It was still early enough to avoid suspicion from my mother.

The man spoke in a dry baritone voice from the front seat as the street lights flashed by.

Man: "I don't know. A couple of kids your age running around the park alone late at night. Looks kind of fishy to me."

And then he took on a sterner tone.

Man: "Now listen to me. You are not to discuss anything - *anything* - that happened tonight with anyone else. Not your parents, not your schoolmates, no one. Do you understand me ?"

We told him that we understood, and a few minutes later the van rolled to a slow stop a few blocks from my house. The man put the emergency brake on, then turned to give me a very menacing look.

Man: "Go on. Get out and walk home. And don't tell anyone about this. Remember - we've got our eye on you."

My feet touched the sidewalk outside the van, and I walked home on very shaky legs. When I got there, I went in and tried to look as normal as possible. I hung up my coat, and went into the kitchen and poured a glass of milk. I went to the living room and watched television with my parents for fifteen minutes, then excused myself for bed. They didn't suspect a thing.

In my room, I lay on my bed and felt as if I was deflating. I was exhausted, but my mind raced. There were so many questions unanswered. What did happen to Danny ? What about Mrs. Balbanov ? And, most importantly, what happened to Mr. Smith ?

So Many Questions, So Many Answers

First of all, Mr. Smith still alive.

When the Men had confronted me in the park, their shouts had given Michael and Danny several seconds of warning that something bad was happening. Danny seized the opportunity to take off like a shot, leaving Michael standing beside the river

alone, holding Mr. Smith.

How Mr. Smith got away from Michael is not as clear. I like to think that Michael felt sorry for him and let him go, but maybe Mr. Smith got away on his own.

Danny and Mr. Smith somehow ended up together outside of the park, so Danny walked the dog to Mrs. Balbanov's house and knocked on her door. He made up a story on the spot of how he was on his way to the library when he ran into Michael looking for the dog. A few blocks further, he told her, there was Mr. Smith running around by himself.

When Michael got home he phoned Mrs. Balbanov to try and explain what had happened but she immediately started scolding him for taking off with Mr. Smith. She was quite irate, he told me later, and particularly angry that we had lost his dog collar. She threatened to tell Michael's parents what happened.

Mrs. Balbanov had had quite a night of stress herself. She had wandered everywhere in town except Central Park looking for Danny and Mr. Smith. I'm sure some of her professional spy pride had been hurt, as well. It wouldn't look good, I'm sure, if she had to tell her people she had been given the slip by a couple of kids.

She finally gave up looking, and went home. There, she sat in her basement and listened with growing dread to the recording she had taken from Mr. Smith's collar microphone. When she heard the sounds of Michael, Danny and me plotting in the park she knew something wasn't right, but she didn't know what.

The Men had also listened, and they also knew that something wasn't right. They had tapes of our conversation, and it didn't sound to them like we were planning to pee in a river.

And now the microphone was missing. There hadn't been a sound heard from it in hours. On the east side of town, The Men wondered where it was, and on the south side of town Mrs. Balbanov wondered where it was. Who had taken the device? Why wasn't it picking up any sound?

The microphone wasn't picking up any sounds because it was in Danny's jeans pocket. Danny had stuffed it in there after I had unclipped the leash earlier.

And if Mrs. Balbanov had looked, she probably would have seen it sticking out of his pocket when he came by to deliver Mr. Smith later that night. The collar would probably have gone back onto Mr. Smith's neck.

Instead, it became a dangerous wandering eavesdropper, picking up mostly muffled noises and some random bits of conversation. Most of what it heard was inconsequential, but one piece of information was very important. It was a catalyst. It was the first atom to move in the chain reaction.

Michael's Parents Return

When Michael's parents arrived home at almost midnight, they came in with great happiness, and they came in with Mr. Smith. Mrs. Balbanov hadn't told them a thing about what happened. Mr. Smith had a new collar - a black wool collar knitted specially (and quickly) that night as a gift from Mrs. Balbanov.

But something was wrong. When they came in, Michael sat awake on the couch looking very stressed. He had been there since before ten, worrying about what was going to happen. His parents were surprised to see him in such a state, and they even looked a little worried for him, he said.

Michael's Mother: "What's wrong, Michael ?"

Michael could tell that she didn't know. She didn't know anything had happened with Mr. Smith. Mrs. Balbanov hadn't told them. Michael was safe. But he needed to answer.

Michael: "I missed Mr. Smith."

And then the tears of relief came. Michael was crying.

Wednesday's Secret

When I left for school on Wednesday, I went straight there. I was so afraid of The Men, that I didn't want to go anywhere near Michael for the time being. As I got to the school, I noticed that a black van had been following me for several blocks. It made me feel so self conscious that I started wondering if I was walking funny.

I ran into Michael just by chance near town park number three. His black van followed at about the same distance as my van followed me. We gave perfunctory greetings, and walked together without talking, our vans trailing behind.

I didn't feel safe to talk until we were well inside the schoolyard. Once there, we walked as far from the street as possible. Our vans parked together on the street outside the schoolyard.

Me: "What happened last night ?"

Michael: "We had some bad luck, Jay."

Me: "Is Mr. Smith dead ?"

Michael: "No. He got away right after you took off."

Me: "What about Danny ?"

Michael: "He ran after Mr. Smith just before The Men showed up. I guess he got away from them."

Me: "I told them we were going to the library when we ran into you, just like we said."

At that point a third black van pulled up and parked beside the other two. Danny's van. Danny walked into the schoolyard and joined us. Michael re-explained the events as we knew them to him.

Danny: "Oh yeah. I got his collar here."

Danny reached into his pocket and pulled out Mr. Smith's collar and gave it to Michael who played with it in his hands as we talked.

Danny: "So what'd they do to ya ?"

Michael: "They interrogated us."

Danny: "Oh. What's that mean ?"

Michael: "They asked us questions."

Danny: "Like what ?"

Michael: "They kept asking me if I had heard of some project."

For the last twelve hours or so, the collar had been in either in Danny's pocket, transmitting only muffled sounds or on the nightstand beside his bed. Now it was in the open air picking up everything we were saying, and transmitting to Omni headquarters, to the Men in the three vans parked fifty yards away, and to Mrs. Balbanov's basement radio room and by proxy to the many intelligence agencies from various governments that were friendly to either side . It was like the whole world was listening.

Michael: "Jay. Did they ask you a *project* ?"

Me: "No. I don't think so. What project ?"

Michael: "Something called project XYZ."

And the sound of Michael's voice bounced off the thin element in the microphone collar he held in his hand, a electric charge was converted and amplified and the radio signal was beamed all over town - to Omni, and to the vans, and to Mrs. Balbanov's waiting tape machine .

Later that morning, Mrs. Balbanov took her cup of tea down to the basement, rewound her tape machine and listened. When she heard our conversation, she knew she had something. She had an Omni project name - project XYZ. She had a piece of intelligence.

Arrested again !

With all of the intrigue swirling around, it was easy to forget that the play was tonight ! I sat through our classes nervous and quiet and noted whether the others looked nervous or not. Time sped and slowed, and when I was bored I listened to the teacher or looked at the decorations on the classroom walls.

Eventually, I turned to doodling Omni logos in my notebook. By the time afternoon recess was upon us, I was so tired that I felt I could sleep for hours. Michael, Danny and I walked around the schoolyard, running through our lines one last time.

When we walked to the edge of the school yard, I noticed some men hanging around. And before we knew what was happening the Man who had driven us home last night was standing right in front of us.

Man: "Get in the van please."

I spun around to see one of the black vans rolling up outside the schoolyard gate. What else could we do ? The three of us climbed in the back seat, and the Man got in behind us and another Man pulled the door shut.

Michael started with a weak protest.

Michael: "Excuse me, sirs. We're supposed to be in a play tonight."

Man: "This won't take long if you cooperate. Last night, during our questioning session, we asked you about a project XYZ. Do you remember that ?"

Michael: "Yes."

Man: "Well, there is no project XYZ. It was a decoy. And a few hours ago, one of our radio receiving stations in Sweden decoded a message, a transmission. That message contained your name, and a reference to project XYZ."

Michael, Danny and I all looked at each other.

Michael: "I didn't tell anyone."

Me: "Neither did I."

Danny: "Neither did I."

The Man talked directly to Michael now.

Man: "We've had a look at your file and there are a few... peculiarities. Do you know what that means ?"

He looked at us with dead menace. Michael nodded.

Michael: "I know what that word means."

Man: "Now just tell us who your contact is, and we'll go easy on you."

I started to cry. I didn't understand what was happening, but I knew we were in big, big trouble.

Michael: "I don't know what you're talking about."

Man: "We told you not to discuss these details with anyone."

Michael: "No. You told us not to discuss them with anyone else. You didn't say we couldn't discuss them with each other."

Michael had a touch too much defiance to his voice. The Man questioning us, turned to the other Man – who seemed to be his superior.

Man: "Should I hit him now ?"

Other Man: "Not yet."

The first Man turned to Michael and went on the offensive.

Man: "Well, let's see here. You won't say an oath to Omni, you've been borrowing strange books from the library. Spy books, radio manuals, things like that. Nobody else had ever heard about project XYZ except you three, and now it's being beamed all over Europe ?"

Even I started to wonder. Could it be true ? Could Michael be a spy ? But the answer, of course, was in the collar microphone that lay coiled - in Michael's pocket now - at that very minute.

Michael: "I only told Jay and Danny ! And I was just checking those books out because I was looking up East German radios."

Man: "And why would a little kid be looking up East German radios, huh ?"

Michael: "Because a friend of mine has one."

Man: "Who ?"

Michael paused. And his face showed a new and strange awareness. The Man softened his voice now.

Man: "Why don't you just tell me. Who was it ?"

Michael looked scared, too, now.

Michael: "It was... Mrs. Balbanov."

And the Man glanced towards the front seat, where one of the men was looking back at him hard. They told the three of us to get out, and we did with haste. We stood outside the van for a few minutes, until the tinted driver's window rolled down and the Men inside spoke to us.

Man: "Are you telling me the truth, Michael ? This is very important."

Michael nodded.

Man: "Well, then. I want to thank you for your help. This has all just been a misunderstanding, then. "

The driver offered three lollipops through the window of the van, and we accepted them with nervous gratitude. We were thankful, not for the candy, but for the significance that were out of trouble with The Men.

Man: "You go play, then. And if you say a word of this to anybody, you'll both be arrested and sent to prison forever. Good boys."

The window rolled up and the van sped away, and so we went back inside the schoolyard fence. But the other two vans remained behind. And now there were two men standing by the schoolyard gates as well, watching us.

Opening Afternoon

The play was set to start at four thirty. By four o'clock we were all ready in our costumes, with youthful backstage jitters. By four thirty, I was bathed in nervous sweat.

Mrs. French looked radiant when she came backstage to wish us well.

Mrs. French: "Break a leg everyone."

And then she took her place in the wings, a copy of the script in her hand, and a pencil adorably tucked behind one ear.

Actually, Michael looked radiant, too, in his own pious way. I looked over at Tommy looked like he wanted to kill me and Michael. That made me feel better. Tommy was ready.

Mrs. French walked out on stage and the murmuring parents stopped murmuring and broke into a welcoming applause.

Mrs. French: "Good afternoon. I'd like to welcome all of you to Omni Middle School's production of The Funeral Trial by Hermann Pustul. I think you'll be surprised by the maturity and depth of the play that we chose to perform for you today. But the players and I think there's a message here for everyone.

We've worked hard. We've enjoyed ourselves. And now we're proud to present for you today... The Funeral Trial. Thank you."

And the parents and brothers and sisters all applauded again - politely, and with low expectations. And when the applause died down, the curtain came up on the courtroom. We were on.

Omni Middle School's Production of 'The Funeral Trial'.

It started. And right from the beginning, it was beautiful.

The courtroom slowly started to fill with townsfolk. I waited for my cue, then stepped out into the bright lights and started my walk across the stage. And there was Tommy, coming straight for me. He paused and delivered his opening line spot on.

Tommy: "And who is this ? Why it's Harld's foul friend !"

I just kept walking, and as he passed me by he gave me a shove just as hard he was supposed to - no more, no less. And the scene unfolded like a blooming graveside flower.

Jamie Palladium came out, and delivered his opening speech. The courtroom seemed to kneel to the power of his words, his rich voice. He had done a wonderful job.

The anticipation had been built. The scene was set. Now the audience wanted to meet Harld.

Michael, clad in chains, was led into the courtroom by Danny.

Right from the beginning, you could see Michael's nobility in Harld. The conviction, the sense of morality - it was all there. But that wasn't all.

Michael struck such a balance as Harld that I felt like I was watching a real person talking. He could be strong and defiant when talking to Gunther one minute, then soft and tender when talking to his mother (Susan Feeny) the next minute.

And although the arguments made in that courtroom over the next hour were quite complex and philosophical, everybody sounded like they knew exactly what they were talking about. No one mispronounced any of the philosopher's names. And no one forgot a single line.

And when the case wound down, and as Harld's sentence was read by the judge, it was just so sad. I felt like I was going to cry. I, Horst, had seen my friend Harld give such an eloquent, moving defense of his life. And now he was being pronounced guilty as charged. I, Horst, felt completely defeated.

The judge declared the sentence. Of course, Mrs. French had to take out the final hanging scene, as well as any reference to the suicide at the beginning due to the fact that it was a children's play. But it still worked.

Instead of ending with the hangman pulling the switch, a black hooded Donny Febbleston led Harld to a fake looking jail cell with the words 'jail' marked on it.

Then the curtain came down.

The Reaction

And when it was all over, and the curtain was down, we rushed around behind it to line up for the bow. Somehow I ended up beside Tommy, holding his hand ! Holding Tommy's hand ! I was so far outside of my own body, that I had barely even noticed the force of the applause booming on the other side of the curtain. And when it came up, the audience rose to their feet.

The applause kept coming. It didn't stop. And we bowed. We bowed five times.

Michael and Mrs. French

When the bowing ended, the curtain came down again and we all went crazy. Mrs. French congratulated all of us, and gave each of us a chocolate bar. And then, as the rest of us rejoiced, Mrs. French took Michael aside into an office room. Once inside, she closed the door and gave him a big hug.

Mrs. French: "Michael, you were wonderful."

Michael: "Thanks."

Mrs. French: "You did so well. You're so talented, so gifted."

Michael: "Mrs. French, you taught me to do it."

Did she hear affection in his voice ? They hadn't spoken since the night of the kiss. Was he feeling something now for her ?

And Mrs. French turned away and lit a cigarette. She inhaled it and looked up at the ceiling. Michael was perceptive enough to know that she had something important to say.

Michael: "I didn't know you smoked."

Mrs. French: "Michael, I think we need to talk about some things."

Michael: "Okay."

Mrs. French paced a little, and her eyes moved between Michael and the floor.

Mrs. French: "First of all, I want to thank you for helping me through these last few weeks."

She looked down to the floor again.

Mrs. French: "Michael, my husband has been released from the hospital."

And he paused before answering without a hint of regret in his voice.

Michael: "Well, that's great."

Mrs. French looked at him again. Michael genuinely seemed happy to hear this.

Mrs. French: "Yes it is, isn't it ? We're going on a trip together, paid for by the company."

And this next part was the hardest.

Mrs. French: "Tomorrow is my last day as your teacher. Mr. Reddick will be back on Monday."

And Michael paused again. He didn't understand why Mrs. French seemed so agitated by all of this.

Michael: "Well, you must be very happy. I'm glad for you."

Mrs. French: "I am happy Michael. But I will miss you so much."

He stood up and hugged her.

Michael: "I'll miss you, too, Mrs. French."

She hugged him back, and put her cheek against his soft hair. She held him tight for a few seconds.

Mrs. French: "I have something else to tell you, Michael. When I was watching you tonight, the whole meaning of the play changed for me. Isn't that strange?"

Michael: "How?"

She stood back and brushed his hair with her hand.

Mrs. French: "It's about you, Michael. Harld is you. I always thought that you and he were similar, emotionally, but tonight when I realized the way Harld is like you, it almost made me cry.

I started thinking about you, about how you're different. Different from the others. You're so grown up. But you're not an adult, Michael, you're not. You still have to grow. You have to grow emotionally. You cut yourself off from people, just as Harld did. That's what I realized. You put yourself above them."

She was fighting tears now.

Mrs. French: "These problems with your parents - you can solve them Michael. You have to talk to them about it. You can't solve them yourself."

She walked away again, and took another drag of the cigarette with trembling fingers.

Mrs. French: "I know you think you're all grown up, but you're not. All these ideals that you have, they're wonderful. But these are things people learn from experience, not just from books. And frankly, frankly..."

She looked right at him.

Mrs. French: "I think that these things, these principles, are just things you use to put yourself above others. To feel better than them. That's avoidance, Michael."

Michael: "I see."

But he didn't see. He was being his aloof self again, and this made her upset.

Mrs. French: "I'm telling you this because I love you, Michael. I care about you. Think about these things that you're doing - ask yourself if you're doing them for the right reasons, or if you're just doing them to punish people."

And her eyes went back to his in an earnest plea.

Mrs. French: "Promise me you'll think about it. About talking to your parents."

Michael: "I will. I promise."

And now she looked at him with those tears in her eyes.

Mrs. French: "I'll miss you Michael."

Michael: "I'll miss you, too."

And they hugged for the last time.

Dinner With Our Families

Michael left the office, and came into the dressing room looking pretty shaken, but I didn't notice. He came over to where Danny and I were talking about the play over and over. Danny and I shook his hand, and we all took off our peasant frocks. When we came out from backstage into the auditorium, I was surprised to see Michael's and my parents waiting together.

I walked up to my parents, and my mother gave me a quick hug. And I looked, and couldn't believe my eyes when I saw my dad smiling at me. This I hadn't seen since my last birthday.

My mother announced that the two families would be going out to diner together, and soon we were filing out to the separate family cars on our way to the town steak house.

Michael regained his composure from his meeting with Mrs. French somewhere along the way. I know this because I remember that he did most of the talking over dinner. He spoke at length about the meaning of the play, the nihilism of Hermann Pustul and so on. The parents all looked a little ill at ease, but interested in what he was saying none the less.

At the back of the restaurant, there was a room with a pool table. After dinner, my father suggested a quick game to Michael's father, who quickly agreed. Michael and I followed to watch, leaving our moms to talk things out over coffee.

At the table, Michael had done all the talking. But in the pool room, our fathers did the talking. And as they played, Michael and I listened with fascination. They were talking about man things.

Both our fathers had been in the army, it turned out. And as they played, and talked about that period in their lives it occurred to me for the first time that my dad was actually kind of interesting.

The Raid

Around the time Michael and I were in the pool room with our fathers, the raid happened. I was eventually able to piece together the events that led up to it.

When Mrs. Balbanov had heard us speak about project XYZ that morning, she knew this was the kind of intelligence she had waited months to pick up. After sending a radio transmission to her superiors, she decided to call an emergency meeting of the Ladies' club to "discuss the budget surplus".

Of course, she was really planning to work the room and dig up as much information on this project XYZ as she could. That afternoon, she baked some cookies and planted some extra microphones in the lamp, in preparation for that evening's event.

Because our mothers were with us at the steak house, they missed the meeting. Because they were with us, they weren't at Mrs. Balbanov's when a dozen vans full of The Men pulled up, and kicked in the door and hauled out most of the society ladies in town and arrested them for treason.

The women were marched out in the glare of floodlights, and driven down to Omni security for interrogation. And The Men buzzed all over Mrs. Balbanov's house, until they finally found basement radio room.

And so The Men finally had their spy.

Our Last Day with Mrs. French

When I left for school the next morning, I felt different. I felt a little more grown up, I remember that. A lot had happened recently. It didn't occur to me at the time that nothing remotely as important as the past twelve weeks would ever happen to me again.

I met Michael at his house, and we made it to school just on time. The schoolyard gang was still in the afterglow of our masterful performance of the night before. Tommy and the irrepressible Jamie Palladium were talking very loudly about it, with a gang of other kids watching.

Mrs. French announced to us in homeroom that Mr. Reddick would be returning Monday, to the sound of many groans. She liked that, I think. And then she told us to stand and pledge allegiance to Omni, and we did and sat down. But something was different in our morning routine. She didn't tell Michael that he had detention that night ! She was smiling at him instead. But why ?

Michael had said the oath ! Without any prior announcement, he had given in on the toughest battle he had fought all year. As we were let out for morning recess I caught up with Michael and cornered him.

Me: "Why'd you do say the oath ? I thought you said you'd never do it."

Michael seemed unsure himself.

Michael: "I don't know. I just thought about it, and decided that it didn't really matter if I lied or not. And I knew if I said it, it would make Mrs. French happy. It was... a present for her."

Me: "Are you going to say it on Monday ?"

Michael: "Sure. Why not ?"

I didn't get it. But Michael had learned the lesson of the mutually agreeable lie. That sometimes, people agree to lie to each other because it just makes life easier. He would never have learned that one in the Tomes.

Danny came over to inform us that there was a new pinball machine at the bowling alley, and we agreed to meet there Saturday at four.

That night after school, Michael and I sat in Bobby's and watched as Mrs. French fussed over her husband, and prepared for their trip.

There was only one conflict that remained now, that needed to be resolved for all of us to move on to new challenges. The only fight left was the one between Michael and Mr. Smith.

The Goldfish

When I think now about Michael's description of the encounter between them after the play, about Mrs. French's assessment of Michael's character, and how it started to change him, I can see how that was really the only one that he ever listened to.

And I'm reminded, again, of that goldfish.

Michael had told me that the goldfish would grow to any size, proportional to the body of water it lived in. That's kind of the way of we were. It seems to me now that all of us then only ever grew smart enough to outsmart their parents.

And Michael's parents were child psychologists.

Turn, Turn, Turn

I finished Tome thirteen that night. The last Tome. I had been so impressed when Michael had first showed me them, but now as I turned out the lights to go to sleep, all I could think was 'is that all there is to it ?'.

When I woke up Saturday, I enjoyed my usual routine of colour comics, colour cartoons, and brightly coloured cereal. I finished my chores at the usual time, then told my mom I was off to Michael's and was gone.

When I got there, I rang the bell and his mom answered.

Michael's Mom: "Oh, hello Jay. Michael went to the park with Mr. Smith"

I managed a fake smile, then thanked her and started my frantic walk to Central Park. Wednesday's plot hadn't been uncovered - and all I could think was that Michael was going to take one last shot at it. He was going to go it alone this time.

I didn't want it to happen. I wanted him to let it go. I wanted peace. And I walked, my worrying started to immerse me, so I broke into a run.

When I got to Central Park, I stood on the hill and saw them there. Michael and Mr. Smith.

I still have two mementos from the events of those twelve weeks. One is a Christmas card from Mrs. French, sent from a warm place on the other side of the world. She signed it simply - "Merry Christmas Jay".

The other memento is an old photo of Michael and me sitting with Mr. Smith in town park number three, taken by Michael's mother that next summer, just before they moved back to Ohio.

But the memento I hold in my heart, that I remember more than anything else, is the picture in my mind of Michael and Mr. Smith playing together in Central Park that day.

Michael was throwing a rubber ball for Mr. Smith and the dog, looking as stupid as ever, just kept bringing it back to him. I watched for a minute, until Michael saw me. Then he looked embarrassed.

He came up the hill to where I was standing and shrugged.

Michael: "You know, I never really got to know him. He's a good dog."