The next night was Halloween. We all decided it would be the last year we got dressed up. We spent the day making phone calls: “What’re you gonna wear?” “What’re you gonna wear?”

I couldn’t put my finger on it, but for me there still was something a little bit funny, or strange, or, I don’t know, about Calvin Lemaire and Peter Kim talking about what they were going to dress up as. I mean, I remember one Halloween when I found this coolie hat and a pair of those fake buckteeth up in the attic, and I thought maybe I would go around as a Chinese. (So happens my mother didn’t let me.) But what I mean is, until I got to know Peter pretty well, I always thought of Chinese (which is like Korean, which is what Peter Kim is) as something to be dressed up as.

Sort of the same thing with Calvin, him being black. Like, why did they ask me what they ought to be? They already were something.

Anyway, it was just at first that it seemed kind of funny.

Everybody met at my house. Calvin came as a bone. He
wore this white suit, like a chef or a hospital person wears. He didn’t look any more like a bone than me.

I asked him what kind of bone he was supposed to be.

“Femur,” he sniffs, like it was supposed to be obvious. “Thigh bone to you. Biggest bone of all.”

Then he puts this sort of round knobby thing on his head, stands real straight, and puts his hands in his pockets.

“See?” he says.

He still didn’t look like a bone.

The reason Calvin came as a bone is because he wants to become a doctor. He can tell you the names of every bone in your body. And just about everything else too.

Last year he was a ligament.

Peter Kim came as a football player. Really original, huh?

But the bad thing was, he had to bring his little brother along, Kippy Kim. Kippy’s only four. That was bad for all of us, because the kid would slow us down and would want to go places we didn’t and just be an all-around pain in the butt. None of us really liked him, because he was always insisting on going places with Peter, and his mother almost always made Peter take him along. We tried to dump him onto Cootyhead, who was going to take Timmy around, but Kippy screamed and said he would tell his mother if Peter dumped him.

But that was only half of it. The crazy, absolutely insane part was what he was dressed up as: Fu Manchu! He had the whole getup, including this evil-looking mask with the long droopy mustache. And the insanest thing of all was, sitting on top of the Fu Manchu mask was his Phillies baseball cap. Peter used to tell me he wore it all the time, even to bed sometimes, but until now I didn’t believe him.
I didn’t want to hurt Peter’s feelings, so I dragged Dugan into the kitchen to laugh about it. We kept saying imagine what was going to happen when he goes up to some house, and they can’t guess him, and so he takes off his Asian mask and what’s left? A little Asian face! They’d have to laugh at him, but for all I cared it would serve him right for making such an ass out of himself. But what really surprised me was his family letting him get away with it.

Then Peter came in. “What’s so funny?” he goes, as if he didn’t know.

So we told him. He looked all bewildered.

“C’mon, Peter,” I said. “Stop acting dumb.”

“Who’s acting? I still don’t get it.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay, look. I’ll explain it, okay?” I went through it real slow, how ludicrous it was to wear this Asian mask over an Asian face.

“So?” he goes, still acting dumb.

I was losing my patience. “So? So? Look, Peter, this is Halloween, y’know? Halloween? Ever hear of it? United States of America? The whole idea is, you wear a mask to look like something else, something different.”

“Fu Manchu is different.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t know what you mean.” Peter’s voice was squeaking now. “Fu Manchu is Chinese.”

“Well?”

“Well, Kippy is American. Isn’t that different enough?”

“Peter, look, that’s not the point.” And then all of a sudden I saw it was me who was missing the point. Peter probably did see how funny it was, but he figured it was more important to stick up for his kid brother. I could understand
that Korean families are very close. “Okay, okay, I see,” I told him, and I passed around a bag of pretzels to get us off the subject.

Dugan came as himself, except for this dopey mask that he must have picked out of a garbage can on the way over. It didn’t even have a rubber band on it; he just held it up to his face. Naturally he had his green-and-gold St. Stevie’s jacket on. And his tie. His tie is like Kippy’s cap: he wears it everywhere, not just to school. Wore it on the hayride. He’s had this same tie since fourth grade. Only time he takes it off is when school lets out for the summer. Funny thing, though: it never makes him look dressed up.

But that’s Dugan. He’s always, well . . . Dugan. He just fits in everywhere. He just shows up. Wherever you are (if there’s at least two of you), just turn around—there’s Dugan. I think his tombstone will say:

Here lies Dugan
He showed up

Richie was a bum. Every year he’s a bum. He always talks about these fantastic things he’s going to be. But he can never find costumes for them in a store. And his mother never feels like taking half a year to make them. So all Richie ever actually does is make all these drawings and talk about it all year, and in the end he goes back to being a bum. He wears this ratty old black mothholey suit his father gave him, and this old pair of pointy roach-killer shoes with the little holes in them. And this cigar he has to promise not to light up.

Me, I was Luke Skywalker, from Star Wars. I knew all along I wanted to be something from space. I thought about
being The Alien for a while, but that would be too hard. Then I had a brilliant idea: a black hole! But I couldn’t figure out how to do it. I’m not like Calvin—I want to look real. (Plus if I was a black hole I didn’t know what I would say to Calvin when he would ask me what I was.)

That brought me to Star Wars. I knew right away I didn’t want to be cute, like the robots. Or weird or funny. That left out Chewbacca and the freaks in the bar. So it kind of came down to either Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker. I didn’t know which one it would be until the night before, at the hayride, when Debbie Breen said she was going to go around as Princes Leia. I didn’t tell her, but I knew right then it was going to be Skywalker.

I was cool. Pants tucked into a pair of my mother’s boots. Blousy sleeves. Timmy’s toy sword (he steals my dinosaurs) that I painted green, the blade of. Lone Ranger mask. I was cool.

So out we go, Kippy and all. Of course, everybody else was only worried about getting their bags filled and where to get the best stuff. But my mind wasn’t on candy. My mind was on steering everybody over to Debbie Breen’s neighborhood, which was about ten blocks away. So I kind of got us started in that direction, and then when somebody wanted to hang a right or left I would jump in real quick and say, “Hey, look, right ahead, I got two peanut butter cups there last year!” Or, “Why you want the same old places? All we ever get’s apples and crackers every year.”

When I ran out of those reasons I pulled out the big gun: “Okay, you guys wanna go back, go ahead. I’m goin’ this way.” Which worked, because on Halloween almost anybody will give in to somebody who knows where you can get good stuff. Or says he knows.
Lucky for me, we kept getting just enough good stuff so there wasn’t a mutiny. The closer we got to Debbie’s neighborhood, the more Richie kept giving me this grin in back of his cigar.

Naturally nobody guessed us after a while, because we weren’t in any of our neighborhoods. Actually, Kippy came in kind of handy. Some of us, especially me and Calvin, were a little shy about going up to all these strange houses. But Kippy didn’t care. Uh-uh. He just tore from one house to the next. He learned houses with lights on meant people with treats, so he was always yelling, “Yight! Yight!” (He talks funny because he can’t say some letters.)

So we would let him knock on the doors and sort of soften the people up. The usual scene went something like this: Kippy bangs on door. Lady opens. Kippy says, “Fwick or fweet, mell my feet.” Lady says, “Oh look, Lester. I believe we have Fu Manchu here. Apparently he’s been signed up by the Phillies. Come on in, Mister Manchu.” Lady looks up and sees us. Half the smile goes away, but she says, “Come on, boys.” They try and try and try to guess Kippy Kim, who’s so dumb he thinks they ought to know him, so he keeps shaking his head and saying, “Nope. Geh again.” At long last (there’s other Halloweeners bunching up at the door by now), he takes the mask off, and the lady gets this funny look and says, “Well, well. And what is your name?” (Me and Dugan keep waiting for one of the ladies to go, “Well, glory be, Lester! Look here: a Chinababy!” But they never do.)

Meanwhile, almost as funny as that, The Bone is standing there at attention the whole time. And Dugan is getting tireder and tireder of holding his mask up; his hand slips until all it’s covering is about one eyeball. If I wasn’t so anxious to get to Debbie Breen’s neighborhood, I would
have thought the whole thing was hilarious. But I could have killed Kippy Kim for making the people guess so long.

When we got five blocks from her house I started looking for Princess Leia. The fifth block went. The fourth block. The place was crawling with Darth Vaders and Artoo Detooos. Even a Chewbacca. But no Princess Leia.

The third block. The closer we got the scarerer I got. I was afraid we’d miss her — and afraid we wouldn’t miss her. I wondered how it would be. Would she go around with all of us? Or would just us two go off together? I could picture the guys hooting at us. Dugan’s whistle. We wouldn’t care. We’d just laugh and go from house to house . . . “Oh look, Lester — Princess Leia and Luke Skywalker!” . . . candy flowing into our open bags . . . trading favorites . . . the best part between houses, because we’re holding our bags on the outside because on the inside we’re holding hands. . . .

Then I saw her, the Princess, coming down from a lighted porch and ready to turn up the sidewalk toward us.

I grabbed Kippy and half shoved him across the street. “Hey, c’mon, you guys,” I called. “Over here. This looks like a great one.” They grumbled but they came.

When we walked up to the house on the other side of the street I was shaking like a leaf. There was an empty space where my stomach used to be. I didn’t dare look back. I was only glad I hadn’t told her who I was going to be. And I was glad I hadn’t told the guys who she was going to be. So I was the only one who knew Debbie Breen was out Halloweening with another Luke Skywalker.
TROUBLE

I got sent home from school today. With a note. From the vice-principal. (You always know it’s princi-pal instead of princi-ple because the principal is your pal. Right? Right.) It says I have to bring a parent along for a meeting with him tomorrow morning.

Until then I’m not allowed to go inside that school. Not even if I wanted to. They would stop me. What it means is, I’m suspended.

I was never suspended from school a day in my life. I was never even late, unless I had a note. Suspended. Me. I can’t get over it.

I’m a criminal.

I guess it all started with the first warning. (Three warnings and you’re suspended.) No. I guess you’d have to say it started with Ralphie Smith. Ralphie is famous, sort of. There are only four families in the United States that spell Smith Smith, with a t on the end. You say it the same way. The t, the second t, is silent. Every time Ralphie goes to a new grade we always kind of sit there and grin because we know exactly what the teacher is going to say. First she’s
going to think there was a mistake and ask him to say his name. Then, when she hears it, her face will screw up and she’ll squint back into the roll book, look back at Ralphie and go, “With a t?”

Maybe it was the t on the end of his name that made Ralphie Smith the way he is. He’s always laughing. Like the t stands for tickle. I mean always. Even at nothing. Even at sad stuff. Once at a varsity football game he was laughing because we were losing, and this ninth-grader kept telling Ralphie to knock it off. But the more he said it, the more Ralphie laughed. So the kid pushes Ralphie off the top of the stands. When I got down to the ground, there he was, laughing.

Now the thing about Ralphie Smith: he doesn’t like to laugh alone. He’s always trying to catch your eye or pull on your sleeve or hit you with a spitball to get your attention. It is very, very hard not to laugh along with somebody like that. Like trying not to sneeze with pepper all over the place. And if you finally do break down and start laughing along with him, it’s even harder not to do it the next time. In other words, it gets easier and easier to laugh.

And the final thing I’m saying, like where there’s smoke there’s fire: where there’s all that laughing, there’s trouble.

Well, I’ve been holding out against Ralphie Smith ever since fourth grade. Not that I never-ever laughed, but I never really caved in. Maybe once a month he would finally get to me, and this giggle would pop out of my mouth. But I always tried to hide it. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. Because actually, I thought he was an idiot nurd jackass and I couldn’t stand him.

Then the week after Halloween, after all those years, I caved in.
It happened in science class. The lights were out and the shades were down because we were having a movie. It was about gravity. It started off showing Isaac Newton being plunked on the head by an apple. That got Ralphie started. Then the movie, which was like a cartoon, started showing all these other things falling all over the place: raindrops, leaves, meteors, baseballs, chicken eggs, kids on sliding boards, broken balloons. Every time something came down, Ralphie would laugh a little harder. And the next thing I knew I was laughing too. Cracking up. Roaring.

We started dropping stuff onto the floor to go along with the movie. Then we started making our own drop sounds, all kinds of splats, ploops, buhbumbuhs, frrrgles. And pretty soon they weren't even dropping noises. Just noises. Just about every kind of fart noise you can think of. Ralphie let out a really good mouth-fart, and then followed it up with a great belch. (He can bring up a belch whenever he wants; along with the final t, he's famous for that too.) Well, my answer was one of those cracklers you do by putting your hand in your armpit and mashing down hard and fast with your arm. I ripped a super one that almost blew Ralphie off his seat. I was getting ready for the next one when all of a sudden the lights go on. The teacher is glaring straight at me. And there I am: my shirt unbuttoned, my hand sticking into my armpit, and my elbow up over my head.

A couple minutes later I was in the vice-principal's office. Warning Number 1.

I didn't stand a chance after that. After all those years Ralphie Smith finally had me, and no way he was going to let me go. I was putty in his mouth.

We would pass in the halls and just crack up at the sight of each other. In fact, it got so I didn't even have to see him.
Once I was just walking along innocently with Richie when all of a sudden, from down the hallway and around the corner, I hear this moosecall. I didn’t even think. I just moosecalled back.

“Man, you’re gone crazy,” Richie said.

Maybe I was. Thinking back on it, it’s like a dream. Mostly what I remember is a lot of laughing and moose-calling and funny noises and just plain crazy, crazy stuff. The trouble was I kept waking up in the vice-principal’s office.

The last thing they got me for was the talent show assembly. Every year they let the kids that want to get up on the stage and perform, like sing and stuff. So me and Ralphie manage to sit together during the show, and we’re having a great old time snickering at the acts and booing at the end when everybody else is clapping.

Except when Debbie Breen came on. She got together with some of the other cheerleaders and good-looking girls and did this song-and-dance thing that they wore pajamas for. Debbie wore these real short baby-doll jobs. Pink. She just kept smiling the whole time she danced and sang, flicking her head, so beautiful. I tried to laugh along with Ralphie, but I just couldn’t. I couldn’t boo or clap at the end.

Then onto the stage comes this tall skinny girl, all by herself—and she’s playing a trombone! Talk about laughing. Half the audience beat me and Ralphie to the punch. You could hardly hear the trombone.

All of a sudden I knew what I had to do. I signaled to the teacher at the end of the row that I had to go to the lavatory. Okay, she said. I got up. Out to the aisle. Up to the back of the auditorium. I stop just outside one of the doorways. Look
up and down the hallway. Nobody there. The lavatory's right across the way. I peek back into the auditorium. The only one facing me is that fool tromboner on the stage. The rest is just backs of heads. Row after row of backs of heads. The whole school...

I do it. I cup my hands right toward the trombone and give a moosecall so loud I can't believe it came from me. It all happened so fast, not a head moved by the time I ran. (My feet were already pointed toward the lavatory.) But as the lavatory door was swinging shut behind me, I could hear them roaring in the auditorium.

I didn't really have to go, but I figured a stall was the best place to be. I went in one—one with a good latch—and closed it and sat down. I was shaking. My heart was pounding. I was sweating all over.

I heard the lavatory door creak open. Steps. Shoes outside my stall. Adult's. I gave some good grunts, but the shoes didn't move. A knock on the stall door, inches from my nose. “Somebody in here,” I said.

“Open, please,” the voice said.

I reached forward and slid the latch over. The door swung open. It was the vice-principal.