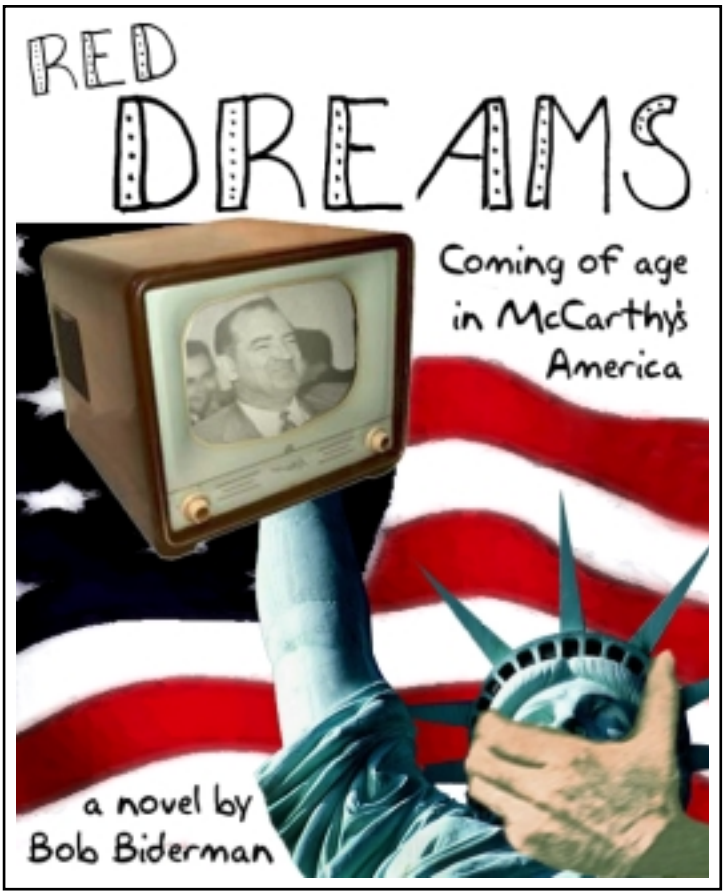
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Chapter 1
The Secret Room

A tiny mouse, no bigger than a thimble, peeked its red eyes around the corner of a box and then dashed across the wooden floor like a speck of dust caught up in an autumn breeze. It was, thoughtAlan, like a grand metaphor writ boldly by some invisible, prophetic hand - "Rats abandon sinking ship!" But, the world of mice and men was no longer quite as predictable as it once had been. In fact, he was the one who was leaving. The mouse was quite content to stay.

The bare bulb which dangled overhead cast a harsh light on the contents of the attic room. As a younger child, the stark shadows as well as the musty smell had kept him away; but now he regretted not having spent more time in this seedy chamber, for he had come to believe that the key to the mystery of his disrupted life lay hidden here, somewhere beneath the sagging rafters, among the cobwebs and the dark crawly things that emerged now and then from the rotting wood.

In the middle of the room, under the glaring bulb, stood an old metal table. Atop the table was a mimeograph machine. Alan ran his fingers over the parts, feeling the rough texture of the dried ink which had caked the surface over the years. He tried moving the handle, but it

was frozen in time like a petrified tree.

He closed his eyes and remembered a night, years ago, when he had first awakened to that strange, rhythmic sound - “thuba, thuba, thuba” - which kept repeating itself over and over again like the flapping of a bed sheet hung out on a windy day. He had followed the sound to its source, up the narrow ladder which led to the attic where a dusty shaft of light had broken through the trap door, open just enough to allow him to peek in. Standing there on the ladder, holding the rails as tight as he could and squinting his eyes because of the harsh glare, he had seen the thin image of his father bending intently over the mimeograph machine, furiously cranking the handle as sheets of paper spewed from one end, floated briefly in the sour air and then fluttered down into an inky pile. He had watched, transfixed, that night, not daring to move or speak. His father hadn’t noticed him. He had been too focused on his work, painfully grinding the crank as the midnight sweat dripped from his brow. But to Alan it was as if he had suddenly come upon a secret world he had never known existed - right in his very own home. And there was his father in that shadowy attic space, just above the other rooms he knew so well, surrounded by mysterious cardboard cartons and shelves upon shelves of books and pamphlets and journals all stacked in orderly rows like

some curious bookshop kept hidden in this rotting space for wood worms or for ghosts.

Remembering that moment, which seemed so long ago, Alan walked past the mimeo machine and over to the attic window which looked out onto the garden behind the house. He rubbed the dirty glass with the sleeve of his shirt till he could peer through the encrusted grime. Beyond the narrow, grassy field was a steep ravine which led to a wooded valley - his enchanted forest. He had spent his childhood here, playing among the oaks and elms and wild flowers. He had watched the animals burrow in their nests, give birth to their young and eventually disappear to some unknown place, as the seasons changed from the fresh buds of spring to the cold winter snows.

Turning back around, he glanced again at the books and journals which had been taken from the shelves and thrown, haphazardly, into cartons. He walked over to a nearby box and pulled out one of the dusty books. He opened it and quickly paged through, stopping at a section he had read before. It was the story of a Philippine guerrilla who had fought against the Japanese occupation and had continued to fight for his country's independence long after the Japanese had gone. The passage that he read was this:

"The strike being waged by the railway workers

had reached its climax. The government was determined not to give in, but the workers were just as adamant to continue their struggle. The train which was about to leave the station would test their resolve. It was a desperate tactic, but Huk knew that this was their only hope of success. The alternatives had been thoroughly discussed; now it was time to put their bodies on the line. Five hundred men lined the track. At the far end, by the roundhouse, the train was building up steam. Slowly the gigantic wheels began to turn and then, as the shrill whistle blew, the mighty engine began moving toward them. Suddenly, at a given signal, a group of workers lay down on the rails. Just an hour before they had drawn straws to see who would be first. Huk had pulled the short one. Now his body was first in line. Lying on the cold steel, his head extending over the side of the rail, he could feel the vibrations from the oncoming train transmitted through the iron tracks. Huk closed his eyes and bit down hard on his lip till he could taste the blood. He was determined not to move, yet he knew that as the engine built up speed the momentum would not allow it to stop. Giving in now meant the strike would be over. So he thought not of himself, but of his people and the suffering they endured. If he died, the struggle would continue on without him. But if he gave in to cowardice, the battle would be lost and all their efforts would have

been for naught..."

Alan put the book back down. Someday he'd finish it and find out what happened to Huk, he thought, but for now he felt he'd rather not know. When he had first discovered it, during one of his forays into this musty chamber, he had only read as far as his breath would allow. Then he had retreated to fill his lungs with cleaner air. Reading this way, it had taken him the better part of an afternoon to get through the first chapter. But he had persisted until he had finally reached the passage he read again today. Then, as now, he had put the book back down.

It had caused him several sleepless nights thinking of that young man with his head extended over the rail waiting for a giant locomotive to lop it off. It was hard to imagine the kind of commitment which would have allowed such a response. Late at night, under his sheets, he pictured himself as Huk, lying on the railway tracks and waiting. And then, in his sleep, he would feel the trembling in the iron as the great train rolled closer. The muscles in his neck would tighten till he could hardly breathe. He had tried to end the dream, but somehow he could still feel the engine bearing down on him. He had tried to scream, but no sound came from his mouth. Before his father had gone away, Alan had asked him about this curious story. They were sitting at the

breakfast table. His father was reading the morning paper.

"Why would someone stick their head on a railway track to win a strike?" Alan had asked, casually.

His father put down the paper and gave him a strange look. "Strikes aren't won by sticking your head on railway tracks," he said. "They're won through careful organization and proper leadership."

"I once read about someone who did it," Alan went on, hoping to break through the invisible barrier between rhetoric and feeling that often made it difficult to talk with his father.

"Where was that?"

"In the Philippines...after the war."

"It's a tactic of desperation," his father replied. "When you're ready to lie down in front of trains it usually means that you've lost."

"What if the train stops?"

"Then you're lucky. Movements aren't built on luck."

"But what if your action inspires thousands of people to join in?"

"Socialism is a science, Alan. If there is a revolution someday, it won't be because people stick their necks on train tracks."

His father's response hadn't really satisfied him. There was something about Huk's passion which hadn't

been answered by his father's words. Alan found it hard to understand how the young man in the book would have controlled his fear of death to such an extent, for he felt certain that he must have been afraid. Surely, he thought, Huk had considered the consequence of the great, eternal void, that vast nothingness which took over when life, itself, had stopped.

"Are you afraid of death?" he had asked his father.

"Sometimes," his father had replied. "But I know that part of me will live on through you."

One night Alan had tried an experiment to see how much pain he could endure without flinching. He had taken some matches from the kitchen and had lit them one by one, holding each in the tips of his fingers till the fire came dangerously close to burning him. He fumbled the first match, dropping it too soon and had to stamp out the flame with his shoe. The second had come closer to burning him and, as he felt the searing heat, he had begun to wonder what had possessed him to try this morbid game anyway. Then he had discovered that by holding the match up, instead of down, he could make it burn almost to the end while the flame pointed away from his hand. And with a tiny flick he could extinguish the light before it reached his flesh. It had seemed a fair compromise as he hadn't relished the thought of injuring himself. He had wondered whether that was what his

father meant by “scientific socialism.”

He had shown this trick to his friend, Bartholomew, one day after school. But Bartholomew hadn’t been impressed.

“Here, let me try,” Bartholomew had said. Then, lighting a match, he had held it till the flame had reached his fingers, turning the tips of his thumb and forefinger a bright red. He would have let it continue to burn if Alan, sickened by the horror of broiling flesh, hadn’t blown it out.

“Are you crazy?” Alan had shouted at his friend.

“I don’t know,” Bartholomew had answered after thinking the question over. “Maybe I am.”

Sitting in the attic, resting on one of the cartons packed with books, Alan remembered that fateful day his father had taken him on a walk. It wasn’t a common occurrence for them to go off together like that. When his father had worked at the factory, he had been too tired after a hard day of tedious labor to go on walks. And then, after he had been laid off, he was too busy with his continuous organizing duties - always rushing to meetings or passing out leaflets at the housing projects or unemployment lines. So Alan had known that something important was up when his father had asked him to go along on a stroll.

“Where?” Alan had asked.

"Oh, just around the block," his father had said. "I have something I want to talk to you about."

They had strolled down a quiet, tree-lined avenue not far from their house and stopped to sit on a bench.

"I have to go away for a while," his father said, taking off his wire spectacles and rubbing his eyes.

"Why?" asked Alan. His father's words had seemed to come out of the blue.

"Because of the Smith Act. It's illegal to be in the Communist Party now. If I stay, they'll send me to prison."

It took a moment for Alan to get past the lump in his throat. Then he asked. "How long will you be away?"

"I don't know..."

"More than a month?"

"Perhaps."

"More than a year?"

"It may be more than a year."

Suddenly, he had felt the tears start to fill his eyes and he fought to control them. "But where will you go?"

"I can't say."

"Does that mean there won't be a revolution after all?"

His father had smiled in spite of himself. "No. Not necessarily." Then he had stopped talking for a moment and when he began again his voice was softer. "Does it

frighten you?"

"No."

His father had patted his hand. "You're a brave boy," he said gently.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are," his father repeated.

After his father had left, it was as if an emptiness had taken over the house. There was a space where his father's presence should have been that remained unfilled. Sometimes it seemed to follow him from room to room, echoing when he spoke, as if to remind him that his father wasn't there.

A short while later, he and his mother began to take their meals with his grandparents who lived in the flat below. It had helped having a full table.

One evening after dinner, as they sat in the living room listening to Jack Benny on the radio, they were interrupted by a loud knocking at the door. His mother had answered it to find an enormous hulk of a man dressed in a suit and tie and holding a large manila envelope in his hand. At first he had seemed quite friendly, like an encyclopedia salesman.

"Are you Mrs. Bronstein?" the man asked with a trace of a smile. It was a strange smile, however, and Alan thought he could see something nasty beyond the raised corners of the man's narrow lips.

“Who are you?” his mother said, curtly. Alan saw her body stiffen and suddenly the mood of light humor ended like a sheet of ice crashing through a soft, summer afternoon.

“I’m asking whether you’re Mrs. Bronstein.” The smile had gone from the beefy face. The man’s thick fingers tightened around the large, manila envelope. “What do you want?” his mother asked. Alan sensed her fear. The man at the door appeared to him as evil as the most slimy character in the horror comic books he had kept hidden underneath his bed before his parents had confiscated them.

“I have a summons for Mr. Jacob Bronstein. Will you accept it for him?”

It was then that his grandfather had gone to the door. The short, elderly man was half the size of the uninvited visitor whose enormous body filled the entryway.

“We accept nothing from you!” his grandfather had said in a hoarse, gravely voice, the top of his bald head glowing like a ripe tomato.

Alan saw the hostility in the man’s face and it frightened him. For a moment he thought this terrible person would lift both his mother and grandfather by their collars and throw them across the room.

But all the man did was sneer. “This is a summons

from a Congressional committee. You have to accept it, Mister!"

His grandfather had tried to slam the door but the man's leg was in the way. Together, his mother and grandfather pushed while Alan ran over and began to kick at the enormous foot stuck between the door and the frame.

The man tried to slide the envelope through the open crack, but his mother pushed it back out again. Alan heard it fall to the ground. And then he heard the man shout, "You touched it, lady! It's yours!"

The door had slammed shut and his mother turned the bolt. Outside they heard a car start up and drive away. But for a while it seemed as if the man's malevolent presence remained, hovering in the air like a bad smell.

In the background his grandmother was sobbing. Alan went over to the couch and sat down next to her. He put his arm around her shoulder to comfort the gray-haired woman whose large bosom heaved as she tried to catch her breath.

"Listen to me, boychick," she said, taking his face between her wrinkled hands and looking at him through tearful eyes. "Your father is a good man." And then pointing toward the door and shaking her finger, she had added, "They are the ones who should be put away!"

“Your daddy should have stayed!” his grandfather had shouted. His face hadn’t yet returned to its normal color. “He should never have left his wife and son!”

His grandmother had glared at her husband. “Are you tsedrate in the kope? He should have stayed to go to prison? And what good would that have done? You tell me!”

“Who said he would have gone to prison? Not everyone goes to prison...”

“No, some are put in the electrical chair!”

“He hasn’t been accused of passing secrets, meshugena woman!”

“Who knows what they accuse him of? They accuse anyone of anything these days!”

Then his mother had broken down and cried. She had cried silently, but he had seen. His grandmother had looked severely at her husband and had said in a loud whisper, “See what you’ve done? Meshugena yourself!” His grandfather had left the room in anger and his grandmother had gone over to her daughter and had begun to stroke her hair, singing softly to her as if she were still a child and needed to be comforted. “Sha, shenelah, sha...”

He recalled the immediate days that had followed as a lull between storms. It was as if there had been an unspoken agreement to ignore the events that had

transpired and to try and approach normality again. Alan thought those days were very strange; everyone had been on their best behavior, becoming exceedingly polite about trivialities. But in the background lurked the demon. It lay outside, in front of the downstairs door, splattered with mud and spotted by rain.

Once he had tried to pick it up. His mother had seen him and had screeched at the top of her lungs, "Alan, leave that alone! You're not to touch it, do your hear? No one's to touch that document!" So it lay on the stoop as a symbol of their torment. He had thought at the very least they should have covered it with the welcome mat.

A short while later, however, the tempest started up again. They were sitting in front of the television, watching the evening news, when suddenly the commentator had leaned forward, folded his hands in a priestly gesture and said: "The House Un-American Activities Committee arrives in Cincinnati this week continuing their probe into Communist infiltration of local organizations. So far, ten witnesses have been subpoenaed to testify. The ten are - Jacob Bronstein, who lives at ..."
"My God!" his grandmother cried, drowning out the voice of the television commentator. "They're telling the whole world the address! It's a pogrom!"

Ignoring his grandmother's outburst, Alan clapped

his hands and shouted, “They don’t even know he’s escaped! He’s probably miles away by now!”

But then he remembered coming home from school the next day to find the downstairs kitchen floor covered with fragments of glass and his mother sweeping up the razor-sharp particles into neat little piles.

“Some brave patriot threw a rock,” his mother told him when he had asked her what had happened. She hid her anxiety under a veneer of calm as she worked the bristles of her broom into the corners in search of stray bits and pieces of the shattered window.

His grandmother was on her knees, scrubbing the areas which had been swept and muttering aloud in Yiddish about the terrible times to come.

Meanwhile, his grandfather had come back from his workroom with a piece of plywood which he had cut to fit the opening. His eyes blazed with anger as he nailed the wood to the frame of the broken window.

“How many years have I been in this country?” he shouted to no one in particular. “Forty? Forty-five?” He didn’t wait for a response, but went on shouting. “How many houses have I built in this city?”

“More than fifty!” answered his wife, still down on her hands and knees.

“My wife says ‘more than fifty!’ And my wife is

always right!" he hollered as he drove in another nail. "And this," he yelled, punctuating the remark with another blow of his hammer, "is my reward!"

Later, he remembered, his mother had taken him outside because she didn't like talking about important things indoors anymore.

She had looked pale and the muscles in her face seemed tense, but her voice was firm. "I want to tell you a secret," she said. "I've decided to move to California. I have some friends there and I think it would be better for everyone if we left. But I haven't told Grandma and Grandpa yet."

"Does Grandpa want us to go, too?" he had asked her.

"Of course not!" she replied. "Grandpa would never do that! He knows what it means to be forced to leave your home, Alan. It happened to him once..."

"When?"

"When he was a young man in Russia."

"But what about Dad?" he had asked.

"Your father will be able to find us when the time comes." Then she had taken him in her arms, a rare thing for her to do. "How have they been treating you at school?" she had asked him.

He hadn't been able to answer her at first. Then he said, simply, "OK." He hadn't wanted to make her feel

worse by telling her the truth.

She had looked him in the eyes and he had sensed her own insecurities. “Are you being honest with me, Alan?” she asked.

How could he have told her that all his friends except Bartholomew had stopped speaking to him? It had been embarrassing enough as it was. Somehow, he felt it was his fault. He had been a bit too defensive, he supposed, when they had asked him if he owned a radio transmitter and sent messages to Moscow in the dead of night. But what could he have responded to that, anyway? Did they think the Russians were sending him the answers to the Algebra exam?

“Have they hurt you?” she asked. He had known what she wanted him to answer. So he shook his head.

In fact they had hurt him. Not with their fists, but by suddenly excluding him from their games. They had ignored his presence, pretending he wasn’t there when he had approached them, till he, himself, had been convinced he was invisible.

Still, they didn’t hurt him the way they hurt Bartholomew and Bartholomew’s dad wasn’t even a Red. In fact, Bartholomew didn’t even have a dad. He was just thin and puny and had yellow plaque caked on his teeth.

“Why do you let them torture you like that?” he once

asked his friend after he had found him lying on the ground in the wake of three bullies who had gotten immense satisfaction by kicking him in the ribs.

"I don't mind," said Bartholomew, getting up and brushing himself off. "It doesn't really hurt a lot."

Alan understood that it didn't do much for his reputation to have someone like Bartholomew as a friend. But he couldn't help it. He saw Bartholomew as the kind of person his father was fighting for, even if Bartholomew didn't know it or would have even cared. Still, Alan somehow felt that by being friends with Bartholomew he was helping to protect the underdog. Because no one could have been more under than poor Bartholomew.

Perhaps there was a bit of Bartholomew in him which had made him undesirable. But his father had warned him that things might not be easy.

"They'll tell you I'm a traitor," his father had said before he left.

"I don't care what they say," he responded.

"They won't have anyone to tell them any different."

"I'll tell them!" he said, firmly.

His father had smiled in an understanding way. "They won't believe you, Alan. And why should they? It's very difficult to convince people that their newspapers and television programs actually tell lies. People only learn that when it touches their own personal lives."

But thinking about it now, here in the attic, he supposed that even his father hadn't counted on the hysteria which had come in the wake of the investigating committee. For his father never knew about the letters Alan had found in the trash can - letters his mother had ripped up in her fury and had thrown away. The letters were from people who said they had lost a son in Korea or who simply hated the color red. They were foul, despicable letters which had threatened retribution if his family didn't get out of town. After Alan had read them it had seemed to him that the world had truly gone mad. So, in defense, he had retreated to his special place, his enchanted forest behind the house, where moral judgments were suspended and he had nothing to fear but life itself.

The forest, though, had been a place to fantasize. The daily threats, the banishment at school, the pain which had progressively etched itself into his mother's face as if acid from an invisible vial had been painted around her eyes and mouth each night, was real.

Sometimes they had tried to keep their spirits up by playing songs on the old Victrola downstairs. His mother would bring down a few scratched records, old favorites sung by Paul Robeson or Woody Guthrie, and they would sit around the table and let the music remind them of better days as they tried to recapture the spirit

that would allow them to go on in spite of everything.

But most nights, he and his mother had sat alone in their small living room. She had tried to keep busy, darning socks or knitting sweaters that seemed to grow arms twice the size of the torso as if its intended wearer had been a freak in a circus sideshow. Every so often she had stopped and stared at the ceiling, transporting her mind through time and space to a place that only she knew.

Once, when he had tried to talk with her about his father, questioning simple things, like where he might have been at that very moment, a look of panic had appeared in his mother's eyes. She had quickly grabbed a pencil and scrap of paper and had written, "Quiet! They can hear every word we say!" When he had read the message, she lit the scrap of paper with a match and let it burn in an ash tray till the writing had faded away and all that had been left was some crinkled black char.

Afterward, she had led him by the hand to a window on the south side of the house and pointed to some wires which led from the outside wall to a telephone poll. "The phone company was here last week," she whispered. "They said they were repairing the line, but nothing was wrong with the telephone. Grandpa says they climbed onto the roof. Why would the telephone com-

pany climb onto our roof, Alan?" And she gave him a look which said, "Be careful!"

He believed her fears because even his father had once told him that the police were listening in.

"How can they?" he asked.

"Through little devices. They call them 'bugs.' They can plant them anywhere..."

"What do they look like?"

"They can look like anything."

"Can they even put them in the car?"

"Yes, I suppose they could bug the car. It's best to assume that they can hear you there, too."

"Even outside?"

"No. They can't hear you outside. They can't bug the air."

Sometimes he explored the house to see if he could find the bugs. He looked everywhere - under the furniture, in the closet, under his bed, in the toilet bowl, behind the pictures.

One time his mother caught him searching under the carpet. "What are you looking for?" she asked him.

"Bugs," he replied.

"There are no bugs under there!" she said in an outraged voice. "I vacuumed only yesterday!"

At night, in his bed, he had tried not to sleep lest he speak aloud in a dream and say something about his

father into the transmitters. But he had also wondered about those who were listening in. He tried to imagine who they were and what they thought of him. He even considered trying to talk with them, through the hidden bugs, and to convince them that they were off the track, that his father, his mother, his grandma and grandpa were all good, honest people who only wanted a revolution so the masses could be free to live in peace and brotherhood. When they finally understood this, he thought, they would probably switch sides and join up with his Dad. That's why he had sometimes read the books he discovered in the attic aloud, in a slow, sonorous voice. After all, if they listened long enough they were bound to find out the truth, sooner or later.

Then he had found himself wondering whether there weren't others, like his father, who had a secret identity. There was no way of really knowing, he supposed, because they certainly wouldn't say. He had asked himself whether one of his teachers couldn't have possibly been a Communist. After all, she was kind and often seemed concerned about him. Maybe his dad had asked her to keep an eye on him and that's why she looked at him sympathetically every so often. Of course, she couldn't tell him so, because she couldn't divulge the truth lest she herself be put in danger. And the more he had thought about it, the more he wondered whether

there wasn't a secret society made up of ordinary people, who were actually Communists in disguise. He had thought about the people who had given him a friendly nod on the street or had just said a pleasant, "Hello." There hadn't been many, but there were a few. Maybe they had been trying to tell him something. Perhaps that was it.

He thought of all this while he was up in the attic packing the books and literature into cardboard boxes. He placed each carton, as it was packed, near the entrance hole. Every once in a while he could hear his mother's voice come from below:

"Alan? Send me down another one. Don't dawdle! Grandpa's waiting!"

Then he would tie a rope around one of the cartons and slowly lower it down, as his mother guided its path with her hands.

As he packed each box, he would quickly sift through the literature and those things he found of interest would be placed accordingly, either to the sides or the top, for easy access, later, when he had time to research. For here, in these mildewed tomes, he felt would be the answer to his father's disappearance. Certainly, on one level, he knew why his father had left. But the deeper reason was never clear to him. He had that instinctual understanding of childhood which gave

him faith that truth was on their side; yet he couldn't put it into words. These books, he felt, held the words he was looking for. They expressed the ideas that would allow him to comprehend the madness that enveloped him and could free him from his inarticulate prison. They would allow him to communicate with others and might even provide him with the ammunition to assault the fortress of ideas which he found so impossible to penetrate; the notions of his former friends which made them certain he was a traitor.

But he knew that his quest would not be easy. The language inside the covers of these books was foreign. True, it was English; but it was a kind of English he had never read. Complicated language for complicated thoughts, he imagined. Still, he was game; intellectual pursuits were the one challenge that still remained open to him.

Every once in a while, however, he would stumble on a photograph or drawing among the rivers of black text. Usually they were of strange, bearded men with intense eyes that stared out of the pages with mesmerizing power. The pictures frightened him. In a way, they were like stern schoolmasters whose demanding gaze made him feel he could never live up to their exacting requirements. But occasionally there was also a look of warmth, a certain smile, that sneaked

through; and though he may have imagined it, he felt somehow they were encouraging him to go on.

Finally, the last box had been lowered down. Now the attic room was empty, except for several piles of newspapers and magazines and the old mimeograph machine that stood lonely in the center of the floor.

Alan sat down by a pile of Sunday supplements that had been stacked against the wall and felt behind the bundle for a particular cutting he had made during one of his past visits, and hidden there so no one could find it but him. It was the picture of a sleek, raven-haired woman - a young starlet being launched by her studio. She still held that same strange power over him that she had from the very beginning, when he had first discovered her lying there, seductively, on her bed, dressed in diaphanous nightclothes. His hand moved slowly over the silken page and then he pressed his lips gently to the impression of her mouth. He waited for her to magically transport herself from the paper, as she had done before, and to offer herself to him, leading him back to her bed so that he could feel the warmth, once more, between his legs.

All at once his dream was disrupted by a strange, acrid smell which began to sting his nostrils. It was a different odor from the musty one which had always been there before. But this one was even more powerful and

its intensity brought tears to his eyes.

Standing up again, he noticed wisps of grayish matter filtering through the small crack in the attic window. He went over and looked out through the glass. Clouds of thick, black smoke were rising from the back garden obstructing his view of the lawn and the forest beyond. As he stared out the window, a gust of wind momentarily cleared the haze. And then he saw them. There, in the garden, were his mother and grandparents. They stood around a gigantic bonfire. And as the red flames leapt into the sky, his mother was piling on the last carton he had lowered down to her just minutes before.

Suddenly he realized that all the books he had packed so meticulously into boxes - boxes he had thought were being shipped to California - were fuelling that gigantic blaze. The books that he had so desperately wanted to read, to research, to explore, were all going up in flames. And with them, he felt, went any chance of truly understanding his father and his ideals and why he had been forced to go away.

Then he remembered. Huk's story, too, was in those cartons. In a fit of anger and desperation, he smashed the window with his fists. "Stop!" he yelled. "Don't burn them! Please!"

They didn't hear his cries. The blood which

dripped from his hands, cut by the shattered glass, fell invisibly to the garden below, hidden by the thick vapours which floated back into the attic room. The words he wished to know returned as gaseous molecules.