A great number of alcoholics' children develop severe drinking problems as adults. Most of them don't get into trouble as kids. Most of them unobtrusively fit in, working hard at hiding their pain. I would like to introduce one of them, "Michael," a composite typical of the unnoticed victims of our nation's hidden tragedy.

Michael was doing very well in school. In fact, he was the brightest kid in class, the teacher's favorite, one of the best-behaved. He never created any disciplinary problems and always hung out with the good crowd. The best little boy in the world. "Why can't we all be like Michael and sit quietly?" Sister Gertrude would say in her most melodious voice. Conform, be docile, do well, be quiet. Hold it in. Don't tell a soul.

And now he was waiting at the school corner for his mother to pick him up. This was always the hardest moment. What will she look like, how will she sound? Michael could tell right away if she had been drinking. The scuffed voice, the pale, unmade-up face. He really didn't know what it was all about. He just knew that when Dad came home he would fight with her. Argue, yell, scream, run. Michael could hear them through the closed doors and over the humming of the air conditioner. He wondered if the neighbors could hear, too. Hold it in. Don't tell anyone.

He was still waiting at the corner. She was 15 minutes late. It was so good to go to school and get out of the house. But when 3 o'clock came he would feel the tension begin to gather inside him. He never knew what to expect. When she was not drinking, she would be smiling, even pretty. When drunk, she'd be cold, withdrawn, tired, unloving, not caring. Michael would cook dinner and straighten up the house. He would search for the alcohol, like egg-hunting on Easter morning, under the stuffed chair in the bedroom, in the laundry bag concealed among the towels, behind her hats in the closet. When he found it, he'd pour it down the sink drain. Maybe then no one would know that she'd been drinking. Maybe no one would fight. Don't tell a soul.

She still hadn't come to pick him up yet. She'd never been 30 minutes late. Sometimes she'd sleep late in the morning after Dad had already left for work, and Michael would make breakfast for his little sister and himself. Then a friend's mother would take them to school. The biggest problem was during vacation time, especially around the holidays. He wanted to play with his friends. But he was afraid to bring them home. He was afraid to go out and play, too, because then she would drink. Michael didn't want to be blamed for that. So he stayed in and did his homework and read. He didn't tell his friends. Hold it in.

And still he was waiting alone on the corner. Forty-five minutes late. Michael decided to walk the 10 blocks home. He felt that he was old enough now. After all, he took care of his little sister a lot. He took care of his mother a lot. He was responsible. He always did what people told him to do. Everyone could count on him for help. Everyone did.

And he never complained. Never fought, never argued, never yelled. The best little boy in the world. Hold it in.

When he got nearer to home, Michael's heart felt as if it were going to explode. Her car was there, the house was locked tight. He rang the bell. He rang and rang as he felt his stomach turn inside out. He climbed through a window. No one seemed to be home. He looked around the house, in all the right hiding places. Finally, in the closet in his own bedroom, he saw his mom in her slip, with a belt around her neck, and attached to the wooden rod. She was just sitting there, sobbing. She had been drinking. But maybe no one would find out. Michael wouldn't tell anyone, ever. Hold it in.

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