Serialized
Chapter 1

I saw a tall man standing in the doorway of the bookstore. He looked dirty and sad. I grabbed two quarters out of my backpack and dropped them into the Styrofoam cup by his feet.

The man said nothing. He just stood there, staring at the sidewalk through wire-rimmed glasses with one lens cracked.

I took a good look at the man's face. His black beard was full of crumbs and spit. Strands of oily hair drooped over his glasses. His clothes smelled like a garbage truck, but he wore a tie and tweed coat as if he were on the way to the office or something. Weird. I mean, my dad doesn't even wear a tie and he has a big architect's job in the city.

Something about this guy looked familiar. I don't know, something about his clothes or how he stood there made me wonder if I knew him from someplace before.

My mom would have killed me if she knew what I did next. Like an idiot, I leaned against a mailbox and watched the man panhandle. The air was cool and I zipped up my gold 49ers jacket to my neck. I studied the man for about ten minutes. He never moved. He never called out the typical panhandler lines. He just stood there looking crazy.

“Get a job,” one guy yelled at him.

“Move out of the way,” shouted someone else.

But other people smiled at him and gave him change.

After maybe ten minutes the man picked up his Styrofoam cup and dumped the coins into his pants pocket. He jammed his hands into the pockets of his tweed coat and took off across Fourth Street--right in the middle of traffic. Cars had to stop. A bus nearly smashed into him. I waited for the light to change before I followed.

The man barged down the sidewalk as if he were a football halfback or something. When he came to a trash can he stopped. He rummaged through the papers, bottles, and stuff. Most street people I've seen doing this were looking for aluminum cans. But he pulled out a half-eaten egg sandwich and crammed it into his mouth. Disgusting.

I followed for another block. He rifled through every trash can he passed. Once he pulled out a newspaper and stuffed it under his coat. Once he stopped by a wall to pee.

I got nervous when the man walked into an alley behind the pizza parlor. From the sidewalk I watched him stand on a tomato crate and dig through a dumpster with his hands. He tore open a plastic garbage bag and came up holding a burnt piece of pizza. He gnawed on it ignoring the germs. After that he gulped down some milk left in a carton. If this guy ever discovered the trash cans outside our school cafeteria, he could have a feast every day.

I continued trailing him. In front of the library he stuck a finger in the pay phone coin return. He picked a pen off the sidewalk before climbing the library steps.

Lots of street people hang around in the library. Why not? It's free and warm and has soft chairs to sit in all day. I come to the library and see them washing their hair and clothes in the bathroom, even though there's this sign on the door that tells where you can get free showers and stuff. I think the library has a policy not to kick out homeless people unless they are loud or drunk or something.

The man in the tweed coat walked straight to the fiction section. He pulled a fat book--Don Quixote--off a shelf and sat down at a table. Like an idiot, I stood by the magazine rack and watched.

That's when I knew for sure. That's when I was positive who this man was. I could tell by the way he sat there. By the way his head bent over the book. I remembered how he had bent over me while I read to him.

His beard was new. His hair had gray and was much longer. But I knew him. He was Mr. Adams--my third-grade teacher.