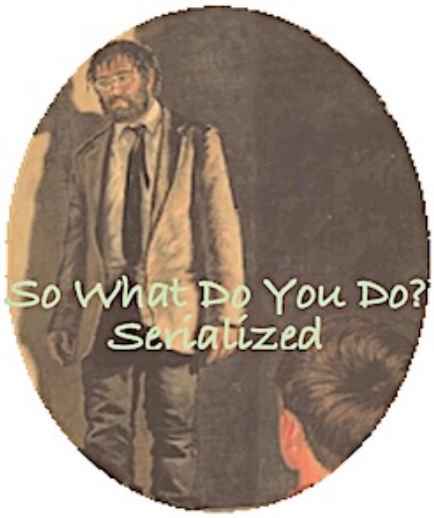


# Chapter 10

The man in the doorway held a thin book rolled up like a club. He slapped it against his thigh.

This is it, I thought. Hello, *Crime Blotter*. Next week, it would tell how Colleen and I were robbed and murdered in a cardboard shack in City Park, and our bodies weren't found until four days later.

The man must have read my mind. A smile crossed his face, and he crammed his book in a back pocket.

"*Oooweee!"* he said. "Calm down, young brother. I'm not the enemy."

"We were just cleaning up this house," said Colleen.

"We were making it homey," I said.

The man knelt in the doorway and peered into the cardboard shack. "Now I see that, young sister, young brother. And it looks mighty fine in here. I must say the Professor's place needed some cleaning up."

"The Professor?" I said. "You mean Mr. Adams? You know him?"

"I've known The Professor since he arrived here a few months back," said the man. "Used to be a teacher, I hear. That's why I call him The Professor. I stop by occasionally to... check that he's all right."

"He used to be our teacher," I said. "In third grade."

"*Oooweee!* Now, ain't you lucky, young brother. Call me Otto. Here's my card."

He handed me a business card like the one my father carries in his wallet. The words on the card surprised me:

Otto Anderson, Professional Panhandler
Address: Under the sky
Handouts are greatly appreciated.

I passed the card to Colleen. "Get this."

"I'm Colleen, that's Charlie," she said to Otto. "What's a professional panhandler?"

"My line of work, young sister," said Otto. "My job. My occupation. What I do for a living."

"Panhandling is your career?" I asked. "That's all you do?"

"That's right. You'll never find me working at some boring indoor job. No, sir. I couldn't stand having a boss ordering me around or a time schedule to keep. And to tell you the truth, I make more money on the streets than I did cooking in a fancy restaurant. Out here—*oooweee!*—people just hand you the money. And it's tax-free!"

"My dad complains about his boss and job all the time," I said.

Colleen gave me her look. "You make life on the streets sound easy, Mr. Anderson."

"Don't get me wrong, young sister," said Otto. "Most people think panhandling is easy and takes no brains. But let me tell you it's an art. To be

successful at it you need talent. He tapped his temple with a pointer finger. "Talent, smarts, and know-how."

I lay back on Colleen's sleeping bag. "I thought you just hold out a hand and say, 'Spare change? Spare change?'"

"No, sir," said Otto. "If you want a decent meal each night, an occasional room at the Y, and still have change to do your laundry now and then, it takes time and practice to learn the best lines and best places to stand."

"Yeah, I always see panhandlers in places where people are stuck waiting—like at bus stops or ATM's," I said.

Otto rubbed his thumb and finger together. "You got it, young brother. That's when people have fresh money jingling in their pockets. *Oooweee!* Outside the subway entrance is another excellent place to stand. You catch people coming and going. In the evening, nothing beats asking for change outside a movie theater where there's a long line waiting to get in. Outside a fancy restaurant is another good place to hang out. Men love showing off their generosity to their dates. *Oooweee!* I'm telling you, young brother, young sister, it takes talent to live on the streets--talent, smarts, and know-how." Again, he tapped his temple to show how smart he was.

"But panhandling sounds as boring as a regular job, Otto," I said. "I mean, doing the same thing day after day. A job is a job. Work is work."

"That's where you're wrong, young brother," said Otto. "You see, I can hit the road whenever I have the itch. In the summer, I make a fine income up north in Seattle. Each night, I sleep under a starry sky in the mountains. Come autumn, I hit the road again and drift south, stopping at Portland for fresh resources. Occasionally, I might cut over to the coast for some beautiful nights on the beach. By winter, I'm back here in sun-kissed California."

I looked up toward the black plastic ceiling, picturing his life in my mind. "Sounds grand, Otto," I said. "I mean, real grand."

Otto stood. "Let's get outside for some fresh air, young brother, young sister. It's the purple hour of the evening--the time when the park is most splendid."

Colleen and I followed him to the grass lawn. We walked up the cement path. Men with backpacks and women with suitcases were drifting into the park for the night. The way Otto described it, this seemed an enjoyable way to live—one long camping trip.

"But, Mr. Anderson," said Colleen, "don't you think it's dangerous to stay in this park overnight?"

"It can get rough at times," Otto answered. "That's one reason I come over and check on The Professor. He needs protection."

"From other street people?" I asked.

"No, sir. There are some bad dudes in the park, all right. But I worry more about the outsiders."

As Otto spoke, he pointed to a shiny black Jeep that was driving slowly by the park.

"Rich kids," he said. "They cruise by in their fancy cars with nothing better to do than hassle helpless people like The Professor. They toss eggs and beer cans at him. They shout the foulest insults. Once they came into the shack and stole some of his precious opera tapes."

"Oic," I mumbled.

I knew that black Jeep. So did Colleen, who remained silent next to me. The roof was off, and I saw the spiky hair of the driver--Colleen’s sister’s boyfriend.

I looked toward the setting sun at the far end of the park.

"We have to get home before dark, Otto," I said. "I have boring homework to do and boring chores. Then it's back to boring old school tomorrow."

Otto pointed up the cement path. He pulled the book from his pocket and smacked his palm with it. "Well, young brother, young sister, before you leave, you can say hello to the Professor. Here he comes now."

Mr. Adams was coming down the path toward us. He held a book in one hand and a paper sack in the other.

"Get. Get!" he snapped as he walked past.

Otto gave us a wink. "Evening, Professor. You had two fine visitors today."