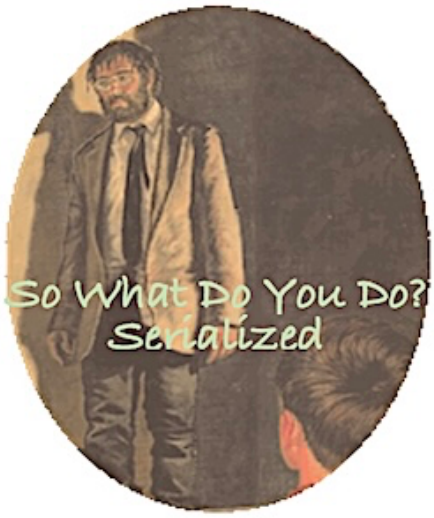

Chapter 11

After school the next day, Colleen and I returned to the park. We worked out this system. Colleen told her parents that she was doing her homework over at my house, and I told my parents I was doing my homework over at hers. Parents never argue if you use homework as an excuse. Still, I always make sure I am home before six-thirty, so they wouldn't suspect a thing.

As we walked up the cement path, I reached behind me and slapped the backpack I had on. "I brought some sandwiches and potato chips for Mr. Adams," I told Colleen. "No more dumpster food for him."

Colleen was carrying another Macy's bag. "I found some clothes in a box my parents were taking to the Salvation Army," she said. "And I brought some vitamin pills. I think Mr. Adams needs vitamins."

In the bag I spotted a white polo shirt, khaki pants, and a pair of old Nikes. "Man, Colleen," I said. "Mr. Adams will look like he's headed to the country club to play tennis."

"He'll look clean and respectable."

When we reached the cardboard shack, we heard violin music inside.

I knocked on a cardboard wall as if it were a door. "Hello? Mr. Adams?" I called out. "It's us again, Charlie Fuller and Colleen Martin."

No answer.

Colleen crouched by the hut entrance. "We brought some clothes and sandwiches and things, Mr. Adams. I'll bring them in."

She pulled the sheet door aside. As she crawled forward, whack! a book hit her shoulder.

She let out a yelp of surprise. "Mr. Adams! I only..."

"Get. Get!" *Thump!* A book hit the cardboard wall by her head.

Colleen backed up quickly and stood beside me. Tears filled her eyes.

I took off my backpack and dropped it on the ground. "No problem, Mr. Adams," I called out. "We'll just leave the stuff out here, and you can get it whenever you want."

We heard footsteps behind us and turned around. It was Otto, still wearing his army jacket and headphones that weren't plugged into anything.

"Give the Professor time," he said.

Colleen wiped her nose on a sleeve. "He won't let me in."

"He threw books at her," I said.

"Give The Professor time to know he's among friends again. He'll come around," said Otto. He jingled some change in his pocket.

"Have you been panhandling all day?" I asked.

"*Oooweee*! Did I have a good day at the office, young brother! Now excuse me, but your old teacher and I have business to attend to." Before he disappeared into the shack, I caught a glimpse again of a rolled-up book in his back pocket.

For the rest of the week, we visited the shack, but didn't try to go in. Every day, I brought sandwiches and juice and left them in the entranceway. They were always gone the next day, so I figured Mr. Adams was having at least one good meal.

We stayed about an hour each time we went. I usually sketched things I discovered in the park—a store mannequin, a shopping cart, an old bicycle. I also drew many of the homeless people. Colleen did her homework. She found a battered wicker chair and brought it over to the shack. She curled up in the chair just outside the door as if she were in her living room or something.

Around five-thirty, Otto would arrive, his pockets jingling with change. We chatted a while about school and life on the streets, before he went in to see Mr. Adams. That was our signal to go home.

On Saturday, we came to the park early. Colleen brought some daffodil bulbs. She wanted to spend the day planting them around the clearing.

The grass was still wet with dew. Many homeless people lay on the lawn with nothing covering them but newspapers. Dogs sniffed around the heaps of trash. Two old school buses, converted to homes, were parked in the parking lot.

Across the lawn, I spotted Otto. He lay on a bench with an army blanket wrapped around him, his head propped up on an elbow.

"Hey, Otto," I called out. "Is this where you sleep?"

Otto sat up and waved us over. "Welcome to my private, personal bench, young brother. And if I find anyone else lying on it at night, I turn monstrous. I sleep here because I can't stand sleeping in those homeless shelters. Those places smell like one big dirty sock. They have you sleeping in a huge dormitory with some crazy dude shouting all night or some drunk snoring his head off."

"That sounds awful," said Colleen. "But where do you take showers, Mr. Anderson?"

"And where do you find toilets and sinks to wash in?" I asked.

"You find places, young sister, young brother. It's all a part of the smarts and know-how you need to succeed on the streets. They have showers in the basement of the church for the homeless to use. Sometimes I might wash up in the Exxon station restroom. The cleanest toilets are in the bookstore."

"Maybe we could take Mr. Adams over to the church," said Colleen.

"Oh, I've tried that, young sister. But he won't come. I've never seen him at the shelter or down at the mission where they dish out free meals. You won't even see him down there for the big Thanksgiving feast on Thursday, turkey and all the trimmings. No, sir."

Otto had given me an idea. On Thanksgiving morning, I called Colleen and told her to meet me in the park at noon. That would give us plenty of time with Mr. Adams before our families ate. Around half-past eleven I rode my bike over to Food Mart. I bought a frozen *Hungry Man* TV dinner--turkey, mashed potatoes, peas and everything. I raced home and cooked it in our microwave. It was tricky holding the plastic dinner tray with one hand as I bombed down to the park on my bike. Steam was still rising from the lid when I arrived.

Colleen was already there, sitting in her wicker chair. She held a turkey decoration—an apple with a paper head and paper feathers sticking out one end. "Remember making these in third grade?" she said. "I think Mr. Adams will like this."

From the music, you could tell Mr. Adams was inside. I knocked on the cardboard wall. "Mr. Adams, it's me again. It's Thanksgiving. I have a hot dinner for you. There's turkey and chocolate pudding and stuff."

I lifted the sheet that covered the door and slid the plastic tray underneath. I saw Mr. Adams sitting on the sleeping bag, reading.

"OK if I come in?" I said.

No answer. No motion whatsoever.

Expecting to get clobbered with *David Copperfield* or something at any second, I crawled into the shack.

I picked up the dinner and held it out. "Eat before it gets cold, Mr. Adams," I said. "Happy Thanksgiving."

Mr. Adams lowered his book. He looked at me with his wide, bloodshot eyes. My throat grew so tight I couldn't say anything else.

Colleen knelt close behind me. She placed her apple turkey on the bookshelf. "For you, Mr. Adams," she said. "I remember when you dressed up in that Pilgrim outfit and read the *Mayflower Compact* to us. I'll never forget that."

A look came into Mr. Adams' eyes. Horror? Pain, maybe?. But with a shaky hand, he reached out and took my turkey dinner. Before I could pull the fork or a knife out of my pocket, he was shoveling turkey into his mouth with his fingers. Gravy splattered on his beard.

I sat down beside Colleen on a pile of newspapers. She nodded at me, and I smiled at her. Nothing needed to be said.

They say homeless people get loneliest on holidays. But Mr. Adams wasn't alone that Thanksgiving.