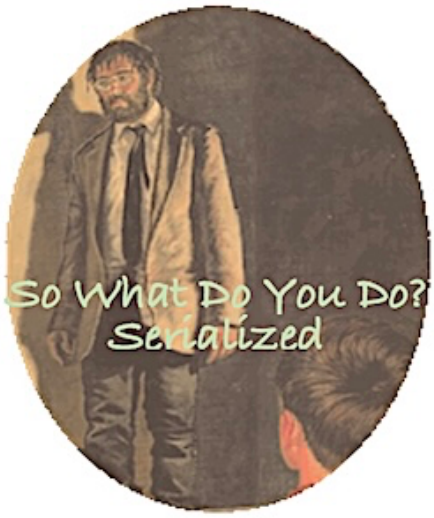

Chapter 12

In December, the rain started, and the temperature dropped. I brought a nylon tarp to cover the cardboard shack. Colleen brought two old comforters to keep us warm.

We sat inside now, even though Mr. Adams rarely said a word. He would lie in his sleeping bag, listening to opera music and reading by candlelight. We could never tell if he was drunk or not. At least we found no more whiskey bottles in the shack or around back.

"Maybe he's stopped drinking," I said to Colleen. "Maybe he learned that drinking is not good for you."

Colleen gave me one of her looks and said, "At least it's good that he doesn't drink while we're around."

One Saturday, Otto and I sat in the doorway playing poker with a dirty deck of cards.

"Let's play for Girl Scout cookies," I suggested. Two weeks ago, I had brought three boxes of them for Mr. Adams—peanut butter, his favorite kind. They still remained on his shelf, so I thought we could put them to good use.

"Deal, young brother," said Otto.

While we played, Otto talked more about his life on the road. He told us about riding the railroads all around the United States. He had been to almost every state. He knew all the big cities and national parks.

"Man, Otto," I said. "I bet you learn more about the United States in a day than I do in a year in social studies class."

As Otto shuffled the cards for the next hand, I took a candy bar out of my pocket. On the wrapper were some jokes. I read three of them and burst out laughing. One of them was really funny.

I handed the wrapper to Otto. "Read these," I said. "Especially the third one."

I heard Mr. Adams stir behind me.

Otto held the candy bar wrapper close to his face. His eyes squinted, and his lips moved slowly. "Very good, young brother. Never knew candy bars had jokes on them."

I could tell Otto hadn't read the wrapper—couldn't read the wrapper. I stared at the rolled-up booklet he carried in his back pocket. Now I saw what it was--a reading workbook, the same workbook we used in third grade.

I looked at Otto, but his eyes wouldn't meet mine. I knew that he knew that I knew--Otto couldn't read. That was the reason he met Mr. Adams each evening. My teacher was teaching him how.

"Don't worry, Otto," I said in a low voice. "I won't tell anyone. Your secret is safe with me."

"Deal, young brother," said Otto.

Two days before Christmas, Colleen and I brought some decorations for the shack. We taped silver garlands around the top of the cardboard walls and

hung snowflakes from the nylon ceiling. We had cut the snowflakes at home—proper six-pointed ones--the way Mr. Adams had taught us in third grade.

Next I cut the top off a small fir sampling grew near the shack. We decorated it with bottle caps, chess pieces, wine corks and strips of foil, and it made a pretty neat-looking Christmas tree.

Otto arrived carrying a bundle of green plants with white berries. "It's mistletoe," he explained. "I've been selling this stuff to people outside the mall all week. Fifty cents they pay for a small sprig with a red ribbon tied around it, although it grows in huge bundles in every oak tree in the area. Yes, sir. Easy change." He hung the mistletoe in the doorway of the shack.

We spent Christmas evening with Mr. Adams. I brought a plate of hot food from my family's dinner. Colleen brought a dozen red candles. She lit each one and stuck them in the ground.

"There," she said. "Now it looks real Christmasy in here."

Mr. Adams sat on the sleeping bag, staring into a candle. The candlelight made his eyes twinkle and his black beard shine. I wondered if he knew we were there. I wondered if he knew it was even Christmas.

Colleen pointed to my 49ers jacket. "What's that sticking out of your pocket?"

I pulled out my old plastic recorder. "I don't know why, but I brought this along. It's the one I learned to play in third grade. You taught me to play this, Mr. Adams. Remember?"

"Well, come on, Chucky. Play something," said Colleen. "Play Christmas carols. I'll sing."

I wrapped a comforter around my shoulders. I stuck the recorder between my lips and blew. With the cold you could see my breath shoot out of the holes as I played *Frosty the Snowman*.

Colleen sang along. Her voice sounded sweet and beautiful. But my recorder squeaked a lot. I played all the carols I could remember from grade school—*Rudolf, Silent Night, Oh, Christmas Tree*, and that *Let It Snow, Let It Snow* song.

Mr. Adams kept staring at the candle. Then, suddenly, while I was squeaking my way through *Jingle Bells*, he looked at me and winced. "For crying out loud, Chas. Cover the holes."

Stunned, I pulled the recorder out of my mouth. Those were the first words Mr. Adams had spoken in weeks.

"Cover the holes completely with the pads of your fingers," he said. "Then you won't squeak so much."

"OK, Mr. Adams. I'll do that."

I played *Jingle Bells* again, pressing as hard as I could on the holes. While I tooted away and Colleen sang the dashing- through-the-snow part, Mr. Adams started to sing along. Just like that. Just like old times. His deep bass voice echoed off the cardboard walls.

Otto came at his usual time. Colleen passed around cups of hot cider that she had brought in a thermos.

"Toast to Mr. Adams," I said, raising my Styrofoam cup.

"Toast to Otto," said Colleen, raising hers.

"Toast to us all," said Otto.

It was peaceful sitting there in the candlelight, with the snowflakes glistening overhead and everyone smiling and drinking cider. The tips of my fingers were cold, but my body was warm. I felt good. I was among friends. I'll never forget that Christmas.