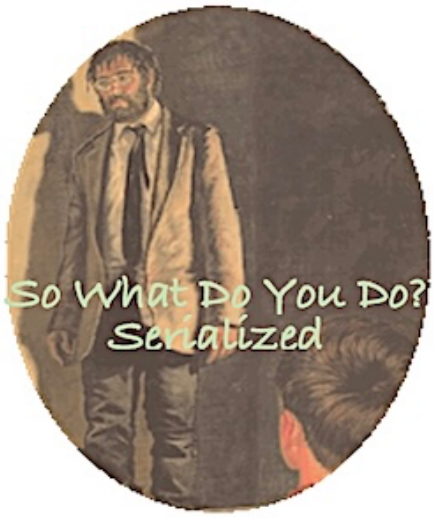

Chapter 22

In a eucalyptus grove not far from the track stood something like a shack village. People had built shelters out of anything you could imagine--plywood, plastic tarps, sheets of corrugated metal, used bricks, railroad ties, even culvert pipes, and old tires. I wondered where they got water for washing. I wondered where they went to the bathroom.

I raised my feet as Ray drove the motorcycle through a muddy puddle. We rolled across a parking lot and stopped by a sign that said: No Trespassing.

What a joke! Piles of beer bottles, tin cans, baby diapers, and other trash littered the ground around the sign.

Cars, vans, and buses were parked in a field of weeds. I spotted three kids playing tag around a station wagon. A whole family was probably living there.

"Man, Ray," I said. "This place looks like India or Africa or something."

Ray pulled off his helmet. "No, kid, it's the good old U.S. of A."

He climbed off his motorcycle and walked over to an oil barrel with flames shooting out of it. Four men stood around the fire warming their hands.

"Morning, gentlemen," Ray said. "We're looking for a friend of ours...black hair with some gray, bearded, about fifty, and about so tall." He held his hand above his head.

I jumped off the motorcycle. "His name's Mr. Adams," I called out. "He always wears a tweed coat."

One man wearing a hooded sweatshirt flicked a cigarette butt into the fire. "A fellow like that showed up last night," he said. "Asked about trains going north. Saw him head for the boxcars over there."

"Thanks," said Ray. "All the best to you."

I followed him over to a row of empty boxcars. Like an idiot, I forgot to take off my helmet. I must have looked like a space alien or something as I leaped over a culvert and climbed over a wire fence.

"You check the boxcars to the right," Ray said. "I'll take the ones this way."

I ran up the track shouting into every open boxcar. "Mr. Adams? Hey, Mr. Adams? You there?"

I was nervous. Beats me why. Maybe because the railroad yard seemed creepy. Maybe I was worried about how I would find Mr. Adams. Would he be drunk? Would he act crazy as he had months before in the library?

A few minutes later, Ray called out, "Over here, kid." He waved me over to a green boxcar.

I ran up to it and looked inside. Mr. Adams lay curled up in the far corner. A silver thermal blanket covered him.

Ray grabbed my shoulders. "Stay here," he said, and climbed into the car. He knelt by Mr. Adams and shook him gently. "Hey, Joe. Hey, old man. Your buddy Ray is here. The kid is with me. He has something to tell you, Joe.

Some big plan to help you...He's a good kid. Everything's going to work out fine."

Mr. Adams rolled over. Bits of straw clung to his tweed coat and beard. He looked at me and winced. I guess I looked stupid standing there on the ground with my motorcycle helmet still on.

Ray nodded to me, and I climbed onto the boxcar next to the two men. Lines of sunlight beamed on us through the sides of the car. The place smelled like cow manure.

"Tell him the plan, kid," said Ray.

"Everyone's coming, Mr. Adams," I said. "Jack Keller--remember him?--he called all of your old students. They donated money and stuff. There's an apartment for you and furniture and everything. It's tonight in the gym at eight o'clock."

"Come on, old man," said Ray. "We need to take you back to school and get you fixed up."

Mr. Adams combed his hair back with his fingers. He coughed into his fist and shook his head.

"No, I can't," he said. His voice was a whisper. "I just can't, Ray. You understand, don't you? I can't face all those people. They have families and good lives. They used to look up to me. Now I'm a loser. I just can't face them like this--not like this."

"What did you say, old man?" Ray said. "Loser?" He rapped my helmet with his knuckles. "Just look what you've done for this kid here. People in this city still admire you, Joe. Lots of them."

"Then let them remember me the way I used to be," Mr. Adams said. "It was hard being back at that nice school. When I went for a walk in the neighborhood I knew I didn't belong there anymore. Not after what I've become.

I'm a bum—a drunk. You can see that. Can't you? I don't deserve anything better than this boxcar."

At that moment, the boxcar shook as if there were an earthquake.

“I think we're going to start moving soon,” I said.

"I'll meet you back at the bike, kid," Ray said to me. "I want to have a private word with your teacher."

I climbed out of the boxcar and walked to Ray's motorcycle. My helmet visor fogged up as I watched the two men talk. Finally, Ray slapped Mr. Adams on the back and leaped to the ground. A moment later, the green boxcar started to move.

Ray ran to the bike. "Let's get out of here, kid," he said. He revved up the motor and drove out of the railroad yard.

I looked back one last time. "You've let us down, Mr. Adams," I said. "You've let all of us down."