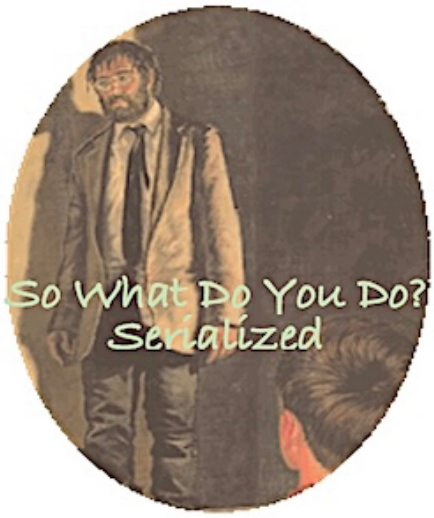

Chapter 24

Mr. Adams stepped into the gym. He looked taller than I remembered. He milled through the crowd, smiling and shaking hands like a politician or something. He seemed to remember every name. He seemed to remember details about everyone in the room.

"So how's the writing coming along, Scott?" he said to one man with a funny-looking goatee. "You always had a great skill with words. I read your column in the newspaper every week. Good writing. "

"Thanks, Mr. Adams," the man answered. "Great to see you again. I still have some stories I wrote for you in third grade."

"Brett, how are you?" Mr. Adams said, shaking a younger woman's hand. "I hear you're graduating from Stanford this year with honors. Congratulations. Keep up the good work."

"I'm majoring in zoology, Mr. Adams," she said. "I'll never forget all the creatures you had in our classroom."

Funny how each person—old or young—still called our teacher Mr. Adams. Not Joe or Joseph, but Mr. Adams. I guess that's the way it is with

teachers. I guess you always think of them as someone important, someone you should respect.

Mr. Adams walked up to William Johnson—a big-time football player at the high school. He was also one of the people in the park that night. I wondered if this guy ever found out whose home he had destroyed?

"I remember how you could toss a football around this playground, William," Mr. Adams said to him. "Hope you get the football scholarship to C A L you've always wanted."

"Thanks, Mr. Adams," William Johnson said. "I'll send you game tickets if I do."

Next, Mr. Adams shook Jack Keller's hand. "Well, Jack, you wanted to do something rewarding with your education," he said. "I hear you're helping the needy with legal problems. Good for you."

"I'd have gotten nowhere if it weren't for you, Mr. Adams," said Jack Keller, continuing to pump his hand.

That's how it went. Person after person. Mr. Adams chatted with everyone in this familiar way. How did he do it? How did he remember so much?

I spotted Ray and his girlfriend standing by the drinking fountain. I pushed my way over to them.

"Hey, Ray?" I said, "What's going on? I mean, how did Mr. Adams get fixed up so fast—the clothes, the haircut, the shave? And where did he learn so much about these people? I know, he read a lot over the years, but he was out of it most of the time."

Ray punched my shoulder. "Pride, kid," he said. "Joe has a good memory, all right, but he also has a ton of pride. He was studying up on these people all afternoon."

I nearly choked on the piece of Rice Krispies Treat in my mouth. "You helped him," I said. "You let him into the school office and let him go through the old records. Didn't you, Ray?"

"Something like that, kid," said Ray. "Back in the boxcar, he asked me to help him out. He said if he came tonight, he would have to come as a teacher, not as a bum. Oh, I made sure he was able to clean up and get some new threads, but he was the one who insisted on refreshing his memory about his students. No, he wasn't going to let these people down."

I watched Mr. Adams work the crowd. "He's going great," I said. "He's just like the Mr. Adams I used to know."

Ray punched my shoulder again. "You got it, kid," he said. "What you see is a great teacher doing what great teachers do best. He's making people feel special."

Jack Keller now stood on the stage, holding a microphone. "Your attention, please, ladies and gentlemen. It's time to make a special presentation. Mr. Adams, will you please come up?"

Everyone clapped and cheered as Mr. Adams stepped onto the stage. Standing next to Jack Keller, he bowed deeply with his hand on his stomach. Everyone laughed. That was the way he used to bow before sitting at the piano during school assemblies.

"Mr. Adams," said Jack Keller. "We wish to present you with a small token of our appreciation for what you have done toward our education and the influence you had on our lives."

Alan Vega now stepped up on stage and handed Mr. Adams a giant fake bank check and a set of keys that I knew must belonged to the new apartment.

The room filled again with ear-splitting cheers and applause.

Mr. Adams received the gifts with a bow of his head and placed them on a folding chair. He took the microphone from Jack Keller and cleared his throat.

"I can't thank you enough for this wonderful tribute," he said. "It's great to see everyone here tonight. But if I may, I'd like to give a special thanks to two very special students of mine—Colleen Martin and Chas Fuller. Colleen is serving the delicious treats in back and Chas is hanging out over there by the drinking fountain the way he often did in third grade during P.E."

Everyone laughed and turned toward me. I pulled at my collar and stared at my shoes.

"Few students were as kind and giving as Colleen," said Mr. Adams. "Even back in third grade she wrote stories about how she wanted a career dedicated to aiding people. Eight-year-old Colleen told me once that giving was far more enjoyable to her than receiving. Who could have imagined back then that the person to whom she would give the most would be an old geezer living in a park—me?"

The gymnasium again erupted in cheers and applause.

Now Mr. Adams turned toward me. "And who could ever forget Chas in third grade?" he said. "I remember him not only as a fine artist, but as a boy always aware of other people's feelings. Charlie had a hard time in third grade. Whenever he ran into trouble in his schoolwork or on the playground, he would shrug his shoulders and say, 'So what do you do, Mr. Adams?' But, mind you, he always found a way of working things out for himself."

I shook my head and stared at the floor. Sweat poured from my armpits.

"It was Colleen and Chas who found me living on the streets last fall and decided to do something about it," Mr. Adams went on. "I would be on this

stage now if it weren't for them. Colleen and Chas, I thank you both with all my heart."

I was burning hot as people clapped again and patted my back and said "Congratulations" and things like that.

"*Oic*," I muttered to myself.

Now the crowd went wild as Mr. Adams sat down behind the piano on the stage. He played a song everyone remembered from third grade. The gym filled with singing.

But the cat came back the very next day,

The cat came back, they thought he was a goner;

But the cat came back, it just couldn't stay

Away, away, away, away.