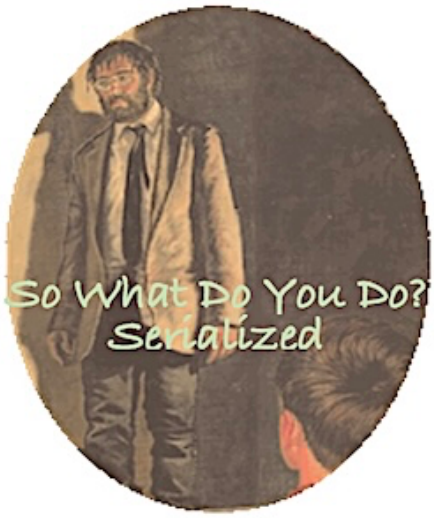

Chapter 3

I took off. I ran down the library steps and up Fourth Street. My ears still rang from Mr. Adams' screaming. I turned onto the street that led to my neighborhood. It was uphill all the way.

Funny, but the place where I ended up was my old grade school, Pleasant Hill Elementary School. What a name—Pleasant Hill. I guess they call it that since it's halfway up a hill and more pleasant than the rest of the city. I hadn't been back there since the last day of fifth grade, when I charged out of the classroom and smashed Colleen Martin with a water balloon.

Not much had changed. They had put up new tetherball poles on the playground and painted larger numbers on the classroom doors, but the place looked pretty much the same as I remembered it.

Ray, the custodian, was still there. I spotted him sweeping the covered corridor that connected the three wings of classrooms. Ray was all right. I mean, he was ornery sometimes, but he helped kids too, fetching balls that went on the roof and passing out Band-Aids, stuff like that. You could always

count on Ray for good advice when you were mad at a friend, and he'd always listen when you had a problem with your teacher.

Ray drove a huge black motorcycle to school. As a joke the maintenance men painted a skinny parking spot, two white lines one foot apart, in the parking lot for Ray's bike. I spotted the motorcycle parked there now. Sometimes, if we helped Ray after school, he'd give us a ride around the parking lot when Mrs. Franklin, the principal, wasn't looking. Once, Ray even rolled up his sleeves to let us see his tattoos.

I ran across the playground and called out to him.

Ray looked up from his wide broom. "What are you up to, kid?" he said. "School was over at three o'clock. I'm not letting you back in your classroom to get any coats or books or anything."

"It's me, Ray," I said. "Charlie Fuller. I went to this school last year. Remember? I'm in sixth grade now at the middle school. I just came back to check things out."

"Well, make sure you keep everything on the school grounds spic-and-span, kid," Ray said. "As clean as you see it now."

Ray had this thing about keeping the school super clean. In fact, everything about Ray was clean--clean T-shirt, clean jeans, clean motorcycle boots even.

"Sure, Ray. Spic-and-span," I said. "Hey, do you remember Mr. Adams? He was my third-grade teacher."

Ray started to sweep again. "Sure do. What about him?"

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"He took off somewhere to write books," Ray answered. "I hope he's lying on some beach right now, a rich author."

I don't know why I didn't tell Ray about seeing Mr. Adams on Fourth Street, but I didn't. I knew Mr. Adams and Ray had been friends. Mr. Adams was the only man teacher in the school back then. That's probably why he sat with Ray in the small janitor's room at lunchtime every day. They would talk in there and drink coffee and listen to rock-and-roll CDs on Ray's boombox.

I heard a telephone beep. Ray reached around and pulled a cellular phone from his back pocket. Probably one of his girlfriends, I figured. He always had plenty of them hanging around after school.

"See ya, Ray," I called, walking off.

"Keep everything clean, kid," he shouted after me.

I wasn't curious about seeing my fourth or fifth grade classrooms. Instead, I ran along the corridor to Room 7, where I had spent my third grade.

Someone had scrawled graffiti under the big 7 on the door:

This School Sucks

Mrs. Franklin is bald

Outside the window, I stepped up on the long planter box. Mr. Adams once made us spend a whole Friday afternoon planting daffodil bulbs in that planter.

I jiggled the latch on the window. This was a trick every kid at school knew about. If you yanked the latch from side to side, the window opened. This came in handy during lunch if you forgot your ice cream money or after school if you forgot your homework.

The latch trick still worked. I glanced back to see if Ray was still on the phone, then opened the window and dropped into the classroom.

My old desk was still there. The CF I had carved with scissors still showed on the desktop. I sat in the chair. Weird. My knees lifted the desk clear off the tile floor.

Looking around, I saw that the teacher had messed up the rest of the classroom. Where was the fish tank and the piano? Where were the toys on the teacher's desk, and the giant globe and the solar system mobile Mr. Adams had? Poor third graders.

As I told Mr. Adams in the library, the first years of elementary school were a waste of time for me. I mean, even before I got to the school, I flunked. I couldn't even pass the test to get into kindergarten. Pretty funny, right? Mom and Dad don't think I remember, but I do. I couldn't jump correctly or hold a pencil properly, so they flunked me.

I had to go to something called DK—Developmental Kindergarten. Then came regular kindergarten, then first grade, then I flunked again. Retained, repeated a grade, held back, no matter what they called it, I had to have Mrs. Smartt all over again. Same desk, same boring books, same dumb art projects, same stupid science projects on whales and dinosaurs. Man, I don't want to see another whale or dinosaur for the rest of my life.

But now here I was, sitting in the classroom where I had the best year of school--best year of my life even. For one thing, Mr. Adams joked around a lot. For another, not knowing my plus and minus facts was no big deal to him. But he made sure I knew them by the end of the year. Man, did I sweat flash cards that year. He taped flash cards to my desk and even sneaked flash cards into my lunchbox.

Mr. Adams kept on me about math like some football coach. I remember we'd sit at the reading table and move blocks around as if I were a kindergartner or something. He tried to describe what addition and subtraction were all about. He became more excited about arithmetic than my dad was at a Cal football game.

Then, as I said, one day I went, "Oh, I see!" and he said, "Oic!" and the whole math thing made a lot more sense from then on.

I stood and walked up to the blackboard. I sat down behind the teacher's desk and took a few spins in the swivel chair.

Funny, but back in the library, Mr. Adams didn't even remember me. I guess with twenty-five students each year times how many years he'd taught, how could he remember some dummy like me? Teachers only remember the smart students or the ones who get in trouble a lot. I bet he would remember Colleen Martin. She was smart and always got in trouble. I wondered what Colleen would think when I told her tomorrow at school about Mr. Adams. I wondered if she could believe he was now a crazy homeless person living out of trash cans.