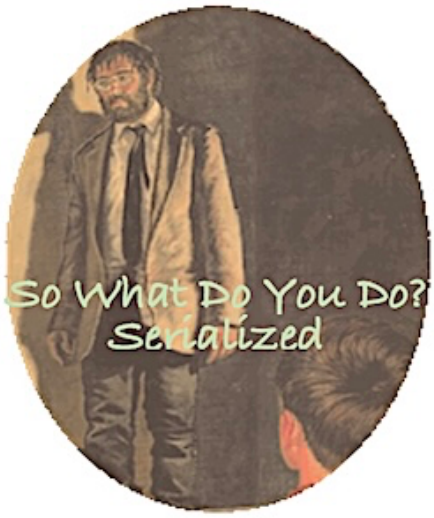

Chapter 4

"Colleen called," Mom said when I got home for supper. "She sounded upset, Charlie. Weren't you going over there to study for a math test before dinner?" Mom was standing by the stove, an apron tied around the business suit she'd worn to work that day. My mom sells houses and stuff, and she's very good at it. My dad, as I said, was an architect. They both work late, and this was the first year I was able to take care of myself after school. My little sister, Tanya, goes over to this lady Suzanne's house from three-thirty to six-thirty, so I have three hours alone each evening. I only wish we could have had more normal meals like this one.

I stuck my finger in a pot of spaghetti sauce and licked it. "Remember Mr. Adams?" I said. "I just ran into him."

"Mr. Adams? Your grade-school teacher?"

"Yeah, but he didn't look normal. I mean, he was dirty and had long hair, and he was panhandling. I think he's living on the streets, Mom. I gave him money."

"Mr. Adams?" my mom repeated. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure."

I ran into my bedroom. That's my favorite place in the world. I spend hours in there sketching people, houses, and things I find on the way to school. My dad built an easel that stands by the window. My drawings cover the walls.

I flung my backpack onto my bed and emptied my pockets. The sketches I'd tried to show Mr. Adams fluttered onto the bed.

My dad and little sister, Tanya, were already sitting at the table when I entered the dining room. Dad had his napkin tucked in above his bow tie. He always wears a bow tie and never takes it off for dinner. He dished me a plate of spaghetti while I told him about Mr. Adams.

"Didn't Joe Adams tell us he was going to live in England?" he asked. "He wanted to write books for children. Panhandling, huh?"

"It couldn't have been Mr. Adams, Charlie," said my mom. "He's not that type of person. And besides, you had no business giving money to panhandlers. Now eat."

I twirled my fork in the pasta. "It was him, Mom. But he didn't seem to remember me."

"They say we're all just one step from the streets," said my dad. "You can get down on your luck and have no family or friends to turn to for help. Let's say you get injured and don't have health insurance, or lose your job and can't make your mortgage payments. So there you are--homeless and having to beg for a living. It happens."

"Mr. Adams left Pleasant Hill the year after I had him, didn't he, Dad?" I asked.

"Big loss for the school when he left," Dad said. "He was an excellent teacher. Too bad your sister won't be able to have him."

"A man teacher? Yech!" said my sister, who was in second grade and didn't know any better. She followed this remark with a loud slurp of noodles.

"Rude, Tanya," said my mom. "I still say the man you were talking to as someone else, Charles. And you were lucky he didn't rob you or worse. Mr. Adams was the last person in the world who would ask for handouts. Why, that man was the most giving person I ever met. Do you remember the apple pie he baked when he came here for dinner?"

I shoved a forkful of spaghetti into my mouth. I remembered Mr. Adams sitting at this table all right. He lived alone. Something happened to his wife. But he was happy and funny and he wore the same tweed coat he had on in the library.

"Maybe it was the story in the newspaper," said Dad. "Maybe that's why Joe Adams quit. Once something like that gets in the papers, the people of this community never forget it. I can just hear those parents at the country club gossiping. I don't know, maybe he did push that rotten kid in your class, Charlie. Maybe he didn't."

"Neil Turner?" I asked with my mouth full of spaghetti. "Man, he was always asking for trouble."

"Rude, Charles," my mother said.

"Neil Turner? Yech!" said Tanya.

I swallowed hard. "What happened with Neil Turner? I don't remember anything in the paper."

"Oh, I don't know," said Dad. "The kid probably made the whole thing up. Who knows? The school board never said Joe Adams did anything wrong, but at the end of the year, he offered his resignation all the same."

"Had Mr. Adams been teaching at our school for a long time?" I asked.

"I believe he'd been at the school twenty years or so," said Dad. "I know a lot of people in this town who had him for a teacher."

I couldn't eat anymore. My stomach was a knot. "So what do you do?" I asked into my spaghetti.

The mom heard me. "Your homework," she said. "Right after dinner. Colleen is expecting you over there. And head straight home afterward. It gets dark early now."

After I cleared the table and loaded the dishwasher, I left the house with my backpack full of books. But I didn't go to Colleen's. I had to find Mr. Adams again.