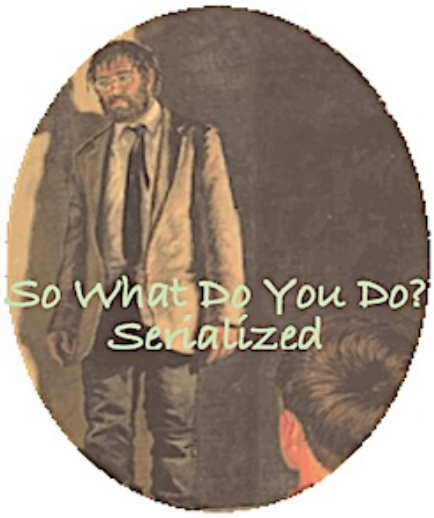

Chapter 6

My middle school was enormous. They had about a mile of hallways and a million classrooms. It was already November, but I doubted that any of my teachers—except maybe my art teacher—knew much about me.

I rarely saw friends from my elementary school. I hadn't made any new friends in this school either. You'd think it would be easy to find a friend out of all those people, but it doesn't work that way. The more people there are in a place, the harder it is to get to know them.

Colleen Martin was another story. I saw her a lot. We had the same homeroom and the same math class. I had known Colleen ever since first grade. I knew it was safe to tell her about Mr. Adams. In the first place, she wouldn't go blabbing the news around the school. And second, Colleen has this thing about caring for people. She's always been that way. I mean, she's always the first person to make friends with a new kid in the school. And you see her sitting in the cafeteria with the most unpopular kids.

"People are unpopular because they are different," she told me. "But it's the people who are different who will make a difference in the world someday."

It's hard to figure out how Colleen got that way—caring and unselfish and stuff like that. I mean, her parents are the worst snobs. Colleen's sister, Shannon, is even worse. She's a cheerleader at the high school. She's good-looking and everything, but you always hear her making fun of people who aren't as rich as she is.

In homeroom the next morning, I sat in the back. When Colleen came in, I waved her over. I told her about discovering Mr. Adams panhandling on Fourth Street. I told her about following him to the library and how I found him in the park.

"You really saw him?" she said. "And he was living in the park?"

I slouched in my seat. I could tell she was impressed. "Right there with the bums and the drug addicts. He lives in a cardboard shack."

"But that's so sad," said Colleen. "How could that happen? Mr. Adams was the best teacher in the school."

"He's different now, Colleen. He acts strange. I mean, he's nuts, crazy or something. He even has a beard."

Colleen wasn't listening. She was in a daydream, gazing toward the blackboard. "You know, Mr. Adams was the teacher who turned me on to reading and writing," she said. "He always wore that tweed coat and black tennis shoes. Remember, we once tied his shoelaces together when he was reading us a story. All the girls had a crush on him."

"Do you remember Neil Turner?" I said.

Colleen heard me that time. "How can you forget him?" she said, wrinkling her nose "He spit on me once. I tried to make friends with him when he first came, but he kept being so obnoxious. He went around pinching everyone. Once he went into the girl's bathroom and wrote swear words on the wall."

"He came in January during third grade, didn't he?" I asked. "His parents moved around a lot."

"They were creepy too," said Colleen. "They were the one who got Mr. Adams in trouble. They said he pushed their dear little Neil. But do you know what Neil was doing at the time? Trying to dunk Jenny's head in the fish tank! Remember that? I wanted to push him all the way into the ocean."

"I guess I was at the Resource Room at the time. So what happened?"

"Neil Turner complained to his parents and they went straight to reporter for the *Pleasant Hill Times*. Mr. Adams changed after that. Mom and I baked him some cookies to cheer him up, but he wouldn't take them. I've always wondered where he went when he quit."

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know. But it's so sad," Colleen said. "That whole City Park is sad. My mom says the homeless are not our problem. She calls panhandlers "panhasslers". My dad says they're the Four D's--dope pushers, drug addicts, drunkards, and dropouts. I'd never tell my parents what I plan to when I get to college."

"Date football players like your sister?" I said.

"Funny, Chucky. I'm going to study to become a social worker."

"Social worker? So what do they do?"

"You know, help people and stuff," said Colleen. "I want to help fix what's wrong with our cities. I'm going to get the government to build better shelters for the homeless, better rest homes for the elderly, better day care centers for mothers, and better schools for children."

"Our school is good enough," I said.

Colleen gave me one of those looks she always gives me, when I've said something stupid.

"Show me where Mr. Adams lives," she said suddenly. "Take me there. This afternoon."

I stared down at my desktop. "What's the point? What good would it do?"

"I just want to see him. I want to talk to him."

"Listen, Colleen," I said. "He's not the same Mr. Adams we knew. He's a different person. He's weird. And it's too dangerous to go down there."

"Then I'll go by myself."

And she would too. Colleen could be stubborn. She would go down to the park alone just to show me that she could.

"OK, OK, OK," I said to her. "I'll meet you in front of the library after school."