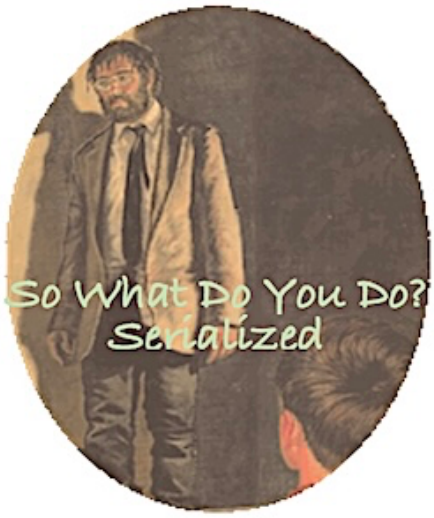

Chapter 8

You could tell that the workers in the café had dealt with Mr. Adams before. The second he walked in the door, the fat cook with a long ponytail charged out from behind his grill.

Waving his spatula in front of him, he shouted, "Come on! Get out of here! You smell up this place! Get out, or I'll call the police."

Cool Colleen came through the door and grabbed Mr. Adams by the elbow. "He's with us," she said, leading him to a booth in the back.

It was pretty embarrassing. I followed, shrugging my shoulders. Mr. Adams' foul odor lingered in the air behind him. Maybe bringing him here wasn't such a smart idea after all.

The waitress approached our booth with a pot of coffee in her hand. I knew from the look she gave me that she recognized me from the night before. She now wore a white shirt that showed her stomach. Her belly button had a gold rod through it.

She poured Mr. Adams a cup of coffee and pulled a pad of paper from the back pocket of her jeans.

"Is he the teacher you were looking for last night?" she asked me.

I shrugged again.

"This is Mr. Adams," said Colleen.

The waitress smiled. "Well, what'll it be?"

"Hamburgers and fries for us all," I said. I couldn't help thinking of all the dumpster food Mr. Adams had been living on.

Mr. Adams didn't say a thing while we waited for the food. I didn't know what to expect. Was he going to start shouting or something? Was he going to start waving his arms like a lunatic? He stared down at the tablecloth as if he were counting the red roosters on the tablecloth. How could he see through those cracked eyeglasses?

"That's a pretty neat cardboard house you're staying in, Mr. Adams," I said. "My sister and I make forts like that in our basement whenever my parents get a new TV or something."

"I loved the music you were playing," said Colleen. "I've been listening to opera for a long time."

Mr. Adams still said nothing. You could see his hand shaking as he lifted his coffee cup. He made slurping sounds when he drank.

Finally our order came. The waitress plopped the dishes on the table. "Enjoy," she said.

"Looks good," I said. "I'm starved."

"Bon appétit," said Colleen with her usual smile.

Mr. Adams picked up his hamburger right away and shoveled it into his mouth. Grease dribbled into his beard. He slurped more coffee, then stuffed his face with French fries.

Rude, Mr. Adams, I wanted to say, like my mother. The other customers were watching us. I slumped way down in my seat, wanting to be invisible.

"We can order all you want, Mr. Adams," said Colleen. "I bet you haven't had a good meal in a long time."

My napkin fell on the floor. When I bent to pick it up, I smelled something that made me gag. He had peed in his pants.

That did it. I just wanted to get out of there, fast. I kicked Colleen under the table and motioned toward the door with my head. But she ignored me.

Instead she said, "Remember all the stories you had us write in third grade, Mr. Adams? I still have every one I wrote. Now I'm writing a lot of stories on my own. I even had one published in the school newspaper."

Mr. Adams just went on eating.

"I'm reading lots of grown-up books now, Mr. Adams," Colleen blabbered on. "I just read *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain and *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. They were great. You always read great books to us in class."

Man oh man! I was thinking. Who cares, Colleen? I gave her another kick, wishing she would shut up.

"I'm reading *Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James right now," Colleen said. "I thought it would be hard, but it's not. What other books would you recommend, Mr. Adams?"

Our teacher mumbled something and a chewed-up French fry fell onto his plate.

I tossed my napkin onto the table and stood up. "Well, I guess we should be getting home before it gets too dark," I said.

I left the twenty dollars on the table and led the way outside.

Mr. Adams never thanked me or anything. But as we stood on the sidewalk, he looked down at me with his wild eyes.

"Listen," he said. "Leave me alone, Chas. Forget about me. I'm no good." Then he turned and disappeared into the park.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," I told Colleen as we started for home. "How embarrassing. What a waste. Mr. Adams is a lost cause."

Colleen remained silent until we were walking up the hill. "I'm going to help him," she said suddenly.

I twirled my finger in the air at the side of my head. "You're crazy, Colleen. I mean, you're both crazy. Mr. Adams doesn't even remember my name."

Colleen stopped and turned toward me. "Don't you remember what he said when he left?"

"Yeah, he told me to leave him alone."

"Correct. And then he called you Chas."

She was right. He did call me Chas. No one had called me that nickname since third grade. Weird. Mr. Adams did remember me.