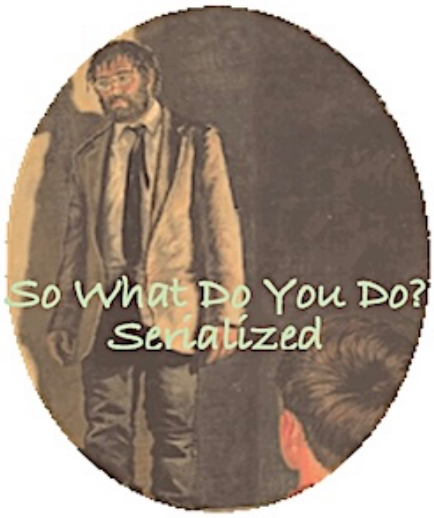

Chapter 9

The next morning in homeroom, I spotted Colleen sitting in the front of the room, so I sat in the back. She kept turning around to look at me, but I ignored her.

As the teacher took attendance, the boy in front of me dropped a note on my desk. I knew who it was from. It said:

I'm returning to the park after school. You in or out?

I flipped the paper over and wrote:

What can we do? It's a waste of time.

And that was the truth. I mean, I knew the man in the café was Mr. Adams, but I didn't want him to be like that. I wanted him to be like the Mr. Adams I used to know.

I tossed the note on the desk in front of me and pointed to Colleen.

She wrote back:

If you're in, meet me at the library at 4:00.

If you're not there, I'll help him by myself.

Typical Colleen. The way she works gives you little choice but to do things her way. My next note read:

OIC OK

After school, Colleen was again waiting for me on the library steps. She wore her old ski jacket and Squaw Valley cap. She held up a square Tupperware container and said, "Look what I made. Rice Krispies Treats. Remember how Mr. Adams used to joke about not having any kids of his own, so the only time he ever got his favorite snack was when one of his students had a birthday party at school?"

I copied Colleen's stupid smile. "Look what I made. Man, Colleen. Rice Krispies Treats? The man doesn't even have milk or bread, and you're bringing him junk food. I mean, this whole thing seems stupid. What can kids do? I mean, he never asked for our help, did he? Maybe he's happy the way he is."

Colleen handed me two Macy's shopping bags. "Here, carry these," she said.

I slumped under their weight. "OK, OK, OK."

As we entered the park, Colleen spouted some more about being a social worker. She talked about all the great things she wanted to do in her life to help needy people.

"If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem," she quoted from some book. Who was she trying to be, another Mother Teresa?

This time I felt less creepy walking along the cement path. Maybe I was getting used to all the homeless people sitting on the grass and everything.

Near the rhododendron area I saw a woman stooped from lugging two shopping bags like mine. "Hey, a bag lady," I said to Colleen. "And I'm a bag boy."

Colleen gave me her look.

I knew the joke was bad and I quickly said, "It's going to be cold tonight. I wonder where she'll sleep."

When we got to the cardboard shack, it was empty.

"Well, he's not here," I said. "Let's go."

But Colleen laid her Rice Krispies Treats on the grass and walked right in.

"Hey, make yourself at home, why don't you," I said. "What do you think you're doing?"

Colleen tossed some newspapers and a whiskey bottle out the door. "I'm cleaning up this place. I brought some things to make it more homey."

"Homey?" I said. "Man, Colleen, this is a crummy cardboard shack and you want to be *homey*?"

Colleen ignored me and kept working. So what else could I do? I got on my knees and started to help.

First, I straightened up the stacks of books, lots of them, fiction, history books, books on education, books in other languages even. Pretty amazing.

When I was finished Colleen pointed to a shopping bag and said, "Broom."

"Yes, O Tidy One," I said.

I pulled a whisk broom from the bag and swept out bottle tops, chicken bones, chess pieces, and other stuff.

Colleen spread a foam pad and sleeping bag on the ground.

I lay on the bed with my hands behind my head. "Just like camping," I said.

"Duct tape," said Colleen, pointing to a bag.

"Yes, Your Royal Neatness."

I found a roll of silver tape and taped up the cracks in the cardboard walls. Meanwhile, Colleen took out a knife and cut two windows in the side walls.

"That will let in a lot more light," she said. "Hand me the plastic food wrap. I want to tape it over the windows so the rain won't get in."

She had even brought some flowery cotton material to hang up as curtains.

"There's food and washing things in the bags too," she said.

By now, I was catching on. I went outside and brought in a plank of wood I had spotted. With two bricks to hold it up, it made a nice low shelf by Mr. Adams' bed.

Colleen and I lined the shelf with aluminum dishes, soap, candles, two towels, a flashlight, and spare batteries. You could tell that Colleen had raided her family's camping equipment.

Finally, she brought in the Rice Krispies Treats and placed them next to the tape player. She left a note that read:

From Two Friends--We want to help you, because you helped us.

After all that I sprayed the room with air freshener until it smelled like a pine tree.

I knelt next to Colleen to admire our work.

"Well, it's a start," she said.

"This place looks all right. Almost homey." I meant it too.

A voice from the doorway startled us both. "What's up, young sister, young brother?"

We spun around together.

In the doorway crouched a black man wearing an army jacket. Earphones covered his ears. The earphone wire dangled over his shoulder, not plugged into anything.

"You robbing The Professor?" he said.