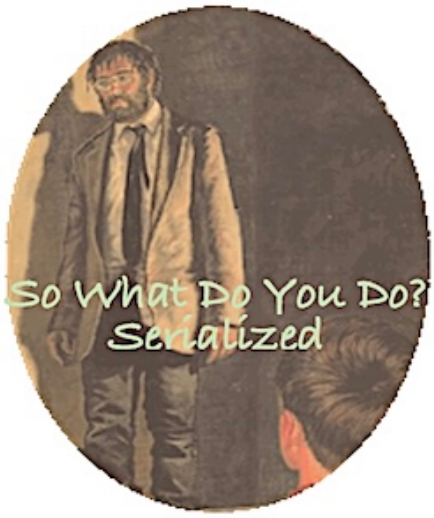

Prologue

You can be walking down a sidewalk in the middle of the day and be approached five or ten times by street people--panhandlers. Mostly guys about my dad's age. And they look perfectly able to get a job and everything. But they want me to give them money, and I'm just a twelve-year-old kid. So what do you do?

The weather is usually warm and sunny in California. I suppose that's what brings homeless people here. They hang around outside the pizza parlor and video store, so you have to walk by them if you want to rent a video or something. Some act crazy. Some smell bad. Some hold up cardboard signs that say things like:

I'll work for food
HIV and homeless

and

Four children and no job

or stupid things like

Change please for the payments on my BMW

and

I can't lie, I just want a beer

Some seem friendly and smile. Some stagger around talking to themselves. I would never give a cent to a drunk.

But some of the street people really get to me. Like this woman I keep seeing crouched in a doorway with a baby in her arms. Or this man with no legs who sits outside the used record store and is always smiling. When I pass, he shouts, "Have a good day, son." Why doesn't someone help him? Why can't someone give him clean clothes or something?

My dad says homeless people have taken over City Park. He says he pays good taxes for the government to take care of them. Build them shelters or cheap houses maybe. Dad says they litter the park and make it dangerous to walk there. My dad says he doesn't care where the police put the homeless people, just so it's not where we live on the hill.

"Giving change to beggars only encourages them, Charlie," my mom says. "They'll learn to live on handouts." Then she goes on and on, talking about the bears in Yellowstone who live on the food people give them and have never learned to hunt for themselves.

Sometimes, if I'm walking down Fourth Street, I might give a quarter to one of those street people. I mean, think about the millions of quarters I've already plugged into video games. Once, I gave a homeless woman a whole dollar. She had no teeth, but she smiled at me anyway. You could tell that money made her really happy.

Sometimes I feel sorry for the street people. Sometimes I just get confused. So what do you do?