



Serialized Chapter 14

After the knife incident Mr. Adams changed. I mean, from then on he acted more normal. In the first place, he talked to Colleen and me more. He asked us questions about our families and school and everything. Funny, but as Mr. Adams got better, I felt better about myself.

One afternoon, Colleen and I arrived in the park and found Mr. Adams all cleaned up. He must have gone to the church basement. His hair was washed and trimmed. His beard was minus the crumbs, and he wore the khaki pants and white polo shirt Colleen had brought him weeks before. His tweed coat had even been dry-cleaned. He looked as if he had just stepped out of a third-grade classroom.

Colleen took Mr. Adams by the arm. "Let's go get hamburgers," she said.

"My treat," I said.

When we entered the café, the cook remained behind his grill. The blond waitress came to our booth. "What can I get you, sir?" She spoke to Mr. Adams

not us.

While we ate, Mr. Adams talked a lot about teaching.

"I greatly enjoyed being a teacher in an elementary school," he said, waving a French fry at Colleen and me. "You see, I felt teaching was the best way to make a difference in people's lives. I chose to teach young children because I felt it was easier to prevent problems than to fix them. And in what other job do you get to do wonderful things such as sing songs, read books, learn about other countries, make clay pots, or watch caterpillars change to butterflies?"

Colleen set down her Coke. "So what happened, Mr. Adams?" she asked. "Why did you stop teaching? How did you end up living on the streets?"

I slumped in my booth, embarrassed to look at my former teacher.

Mr. Adams took a long gulp of coffee. "Everything went wrong for me at once," he said. "You see, life can be like that sometimes. First I started having health problems. A spot of cancer, nothing serious, but the treatments made me weak and tired."

"Oh, no one knew," said Colleen.

"Don't you remember how cranky I was toward the end of the year," said Mr. Adams. "I felt bad about that."

I squirted some ketchup on my hamburger. "I don't remember you ever being crabby."

"Is that about the time the article appeared in the newspaper?" asked Colleen.

"About Neil Turner. Remember?" I said.

"He was awful, Mr. Adams," said Colleen. "He should have been kicked out of school. I remember the whole thing. If you hadn't pushed Neil out of the way he would have hurt Jenny."

Mr. Adams shrugged. "It was hard to look at any parent or fellow teacher in the face after that. Then about the same time that newspaper article came out, my wife found another man and left me. My teacher's salary didn't suit her. She wanted a bigger house and fancier vacations. 'You're just a teacher. Just a teacher,' she would tell me."

"They say bad things come in threes," said Colleen. "And you had three whoppers at once, Mr. Adams."

"So what do you do?" I said.

"I had no friends or family to turn to for help," said Mr. Adams. "You see, I felt ashamed. I felt I no longer deserved to be a teacher. It was all too much, so I left the school. Soon the doctor bills ate up my savings. Before I knew it I was living on the streets."

"You sure seemed different when I first found you," I said. "The only normal thing you did was read."

"Books were my way of escape, Chas. I could get lost in a good book and not have to think about my problems."

Colleen twirled a straw in her Coke. "Mr. Adams, you once told us that you wanted to write books for children. You taught us that if we wanted to write well we should read a lot of books. You also told us to write about what we know, about our own experiences. You made us write every day about things we did. Now that I'm writing on my own I think about that a lot."

Mr. Adams bit into his hamburger.

"Are you ever going to try writing again?" Colleen asked.

Mr. Adams swallowed hard. "I don't know. I don't know if I can."

I quickly changed the subject. "You remember me in third grade, don't you, Mr. Adams? I was the kid who did flash cards so slowly that you pretended to fall asleep and snore. Man, you were funny."

"I remember your wonderful sketches, Chas," he said. "I often admire the ones you have taped up in my cardboard cabin."

"I used to think I was a loser at everything I did in school. You taught me that I wasn't."

Mr. Adams wiped his mouth with a napkin. "What did I say?" he asked.

"You said I was a loser only if I thought I was a loser. You said everyone has a talent. I remember. You said a teacher should help a student discover what his talent is. Maybe mine is art."

Mr. Adams put down his napkin. He looked toward Colleen, who sat there smiling.

"I said all that?" he said.

Then Mr. Adams started to laugh. I hadn't the foggiest idea why he was laughing, but it wasn't a crazy-person laugh. It was a good solid Mr. Adams laugh.