



Serialized Chapter 25

So I guess the evening was a big success. Jack Keller drove Mr. Adams to his new apartment. Ray roared off on his motorcycle with his girlfriend, and Colleen thought she was the greatest social worker in the world.

My parents gave me a big hug before they left the gym.

"Who was the homeless man?" Tanya said. "I didn't see any homeless man here tonight."

I decided to hang out around the school and talk to friends. As I walked out of the gym, guess who I saw standing there. Otto!

There he was in the dark, right next to the swings, panhandling. No kidding. Panhandling right on the playground. I mean, he held a flashlight in one hand and his A's baseball cap in the other. He talked to the people leaving the gym in his usual polite manner.

"Spare change, madam?...Thank you kindly...Any change?...OK, maybe next time...Spare change?...Spare change?"

"Hey, Otto," I called to him. "How's business?"

"Excellent, young brother," he said. "Your friend Colleen invited me here tonight. Spare change, sir?...Thank you very much...I thought I would skip all those fancy speeches and turn this into a money-making opportunity...Any extra change, madam?...Have a good evening...And it's been very profitable, I must say, young brother. These people are in a very charitable mood this evening...Spare change?"

I punched a tetherball and watched it twirl around the pole. "I've been thinking about your way of life a lot lately, Otto," I said.

"What about it, young brother?"

"Well, you know I want to be an artist someday," I said. "And I was thinking in a few years when I can quit school, maybe I could join you on the road and sketch stuff as we travel. You know, the mountains, the beach, the cities, all those things you told me about."

Otto shook his baseball cap and the change jingled. "Sorry, young brother," he said. "But I can't come with you. I'm enrolling in college next term--the community college downtown. "

"What are you talking about, Otto?" I said. "You're going to school?"

"That's right, young brother. That's why I've been working so hard lately. I need the money for tuition."

A man passed and dropped some change into Otto's baseball cap.

"Thank you very much."

I thought about the evenings in the cardboard shack and the rolled-up workbook in Otto's pocket. "Back in the park, with Mr. Adams..." I began to say.

"That's right, young brother. The Professor was teaching me to read. He also helped me study for the GED."

"GED? What's that?" I asked.

"General Equivalency Diploma," Otto recited. "Yes, sir, I never finished high school, but now I'm working for a diploma."

"And you want to go to the community college after that?"

"I want to study landscaping," said Otto. "You know, work outdoors, designing parks and gardens. No inside work for this dude, no, sir."

I punched the tetherball again. "Man, Otto" was all I could think of to say.

"You know, young brother, you and your friend Colleen had a lot to do with my decision."

"What do you mean? What did we do?"

Otto stopped his panhandling for the first time. "You took action. And good actions lead to more good actions. They snowball, young brother. I could see how your actions were helping The Professor. It gave me hope. Good actions snowball, young brother. They snowball."

"Man, Otto," I repeated. "Man oh man!"

I saw Colleen leaving the gym by herself. I walked over to her and without a word we walked across the parking lot together. Halfway down the road we stopped and looked up. Her smile told me her thoughts were the same as mine.

"Those aren't just shining periods up there in the sky at night," I said in a tone Mr. Adams had used three years before. "Those are humongous balls of gas or planets or maybe a comet or a galaxy made up of billions of stars."