

**Prologue**

Although it had been a while since anything really exciting or even remotely interesting had happened to him, Roger thought that he lived a fairly normal life. It was not until today, his thirty-sixth birthday, that he realized, much to his chagrin, that his life was, at best, boring and, at worst, mundane. His job as a bookkeeper for his Uncle Ted's firm, Murdock Toiletries, was the most interesting part of his life, and that wasn't even enough to stimulate the mind of a gnat.

The day had started out as any other day. Roger's alarm went off at six fifteen, and the daily routine began. Twenty-five sit-ups, twenty-five push-ups, shit, shower and shave. His clothes were laid out on the chair from the night before. He got dressed, made the bed, and left the house, carefully locking and double bolting the door. A quick stop at the coffee shop for a glazed doughnut, a newspaper, and a black with one sugar completed the ritual. The next destination was the bus stop, arriving eight minutes before the bus. Opening the paper to the obituaries and blowing on the coffee, Roger was startled to find his name at the top of the second column, under an advertisement for discount grave plots. Desiring to correct this obvious error, Roger decided to call the *Daily Dispatch* from his office at work.

Much to his astonishment, when he arrived at his office, it was being remodeled, and the changes were being made under the

direction of a large, bustling man who obviously considered his own judgment to be infallible.

"Excuse me," Roger began timidly. No one seemed to notice his presence. "I'd hate to be a bother," he began a second time, still with no response. "Uh hum," he began in his gruffest, most businesslike manner, and this time the large, loud man turned, only to glare at this obvious intrusion into his domain. "What?" he snarled as he stared contemptuously at Roger.

"Well, it seems ... that is to say ... uh, what are you doing to my office? This is room 811, isn't it?" he finished lamely.

"This is my office, and the previous occupant is dead, and if it's any of your business, I'm in charge of bookkeeping and accounting, and I'd thank you to leave now, good day," he said in one breath as he jostled Roger into the hallway and slammed the door. On the same door that once read "Roger Whitley - Head Bookkeeper" was an auspicious gold plaque that read "Lance Righteous, Chief Accountant". "Phone for Appointment" was written in smaller letters underneath.

Indignation, along with a sense of despair, propelled Roger to his Uncle Ted's office. "Uncle Ted," he began as he entered, "what is..." but this trailed off as he noticed the look of bafflement on Ted's face.

"Roger ... you're still alive," were the first words out of Ted's mouth.

"Indeed I am," Roger said, "and I'd like to know what's going

on and where my new office is going to be."

"Well, Roger, it's like this," Ted began grimly. "Since my niece left you and your demise opened up your position, and Lance seems so well situated and competent, er, um, well, perhaps this is the perfect time to see if you can find a position more suited to your ... particular talents. I'll give you a decent letter of referral, if you like."

"Well, I never..." gasped Roger.

"Oh, good, that's settled then, isn't it," Ted said graciously. "And good luck to you. Drop us a line, and let me know how you are doing. All right then, good-bye."

Roger stood by with his mouth agape as "Uncle" Ted talked to him, and then, in a stupor, he stumbled out of Ted's office and into the rest of his life.

*Chapter One*

The aforementioned letter of reference never appeared, and Roger found that no one at his old place of employ could recognize him specifically, although Mrs. Simpson, the cleaning lady, did seem to recall someone who vaguely fit his description. This was not the sort of referral Roger could use in his search for work.

This left a huge gap in Roger's employment record, since he had gone straight to Murdock's following college. With such a handicap in his search, Roger decided to get help from the professionals and began looking in his paper for an employment agency. Alltemp was at the beginning of the employment listings, so Roger decided to begin at the beginning (which is a good place to start, especially if you're in a state of confusion!).

A short walk later found Roger in front of a large desk in a small office.

"Excuse me," he began.

"New hires fill out forms A, two and three, in the bins to your left," the bespectacled gentleman behind the desk said in a voice that suggested an automaton.

"Thanks," replied Roger as he gathered the appropriate paperwork. Forty minutes later, Roger returned to the desk and handed the forms to the man.

"Have a seat and listen for your name," was the standard, curt answer he received for his effort. Two hours later, Roger was startled out of a daydream by the sound of "Whitley ... Mr. Whitley ... going once, twice...."

"Here ... here I am ... Whitley!" Roger quickly blurted out.

"I'm sure I don't appreciate your inattentiveness, Mr. Whitley," the youngish woman snapped as she gave Roger the once-over.

"I'm not usually like that," began Roger.

"Save it, I think you're beyond help anyway!" was her reply.

"Are you aware that you are in a, shall we say, state of, well, do you know you're listed as deceased?" she asked awkwardly.

"I know there was some sort of foul up somewhere and I'm trying to get it straightened out, but I need to get a job, so I can eat and pay for some place to stay. Can you help me out with that?" Roger asked, hoping for the best.

"If you are whom you claim to be, you have a lot of paperwork to file before you can begin to search for employment, Mr. Whitley," she said. "You are wasting my time, and yours, when you need to be at the Bureau of Information straightening this out." And with that, she returned his forms and walked away.

Roger had no idea what to make of this turn of events but decided to go to the Bureau of Information to see if he could make a start of straightening out the facts. As he hailed a cab,

Roger realized his experience dealing with government agencies was limited to his Annual IRS audit, and the thought of dealing with the bureaucracy stirred the beginnings of a headache that wouldn't be relieved for quite a long time.

"Slide the ide, buddy!" was the jolt that brought Roger back to earth as he got into the cab. As he dug into his wallet, the taxi driver stared at him with a practiced look of impatience. The scrutiny, combined with all the morning's events, made the usual procurement of his ID an ordeal.

"Let's go! I'm trying to make a living here, mac," snapped the cabby.

"Here we go," said Roger, as he swiped his card in the debit ID slot.

The seconds seemed to slip by as slowly as a drive-through window at lunchtime, while the driver stared at the transaction screen mounted in his dashboard. Finally, he turned to Roger and said, "Listen, buddy, I personally don't care how you make your way in this world, but you'll never get away with trying to slide that ide in this lifetime. If you rolled the guy who that belonged to, I'll give ya a clue ... he isn't looking for it, but the cops'll be looking for you if ya try to swipe it again. Now get outta my cab, and if I were you, I'd use my own ID in the next cab ya hail!"

Standing on the sidewalk, Roger began to realize the implications of his dilemma. After walking around in a daze for

an indeterminate amount of time, he found a bench and began to run through the functions of his identification card and realized for the first time that he had no place to go and no one to turn to for any assistance. For a lack of a destination, Roger had returned to his own neighborhood and decided to return to his apartment to regroup and form a plan of attack to regain his life, which the government had ended so prematurely. Unfortunately, this option was also a dead issue. His ID was also the key to the front door, and that only flashed "Invalid Entry Attempt" whenever Roger swiped the card. He knew at that point that he was up the proverbial creek without a pot to piss in.

The doorman to his building was gracious enough to allow him to sit in the foyer, but Roger knew his grace period would be limited. Trying to think fast was out of the question, since he hadn't even had to think slowly for a few years. Roger figured that a bit to eat was the first order of business, since his stomach hadn't been informed of his demise and was beginning to grumble for attention.

The closest dining establishment was a place called "El Pollo Loco", and although Roger hadn't eaten there before, he also never had to walk somewhere to get his lunch, and so he found himself seated at the restaurant a few minutes after deciding to eat.

"A little early for lunch, buddy, but you can order off the

appetizer menu if you want, or are you here for cocktails?" the waitress asked.

Roger didn't know what to say and just grunted and stared at the menu. "Well, let me know when you decide, then," she said, while looking at him with a judging eye. "Are you O.K., hon?" she added.

"I am not O.K.," Roger began, "but I don't know where to begin. Do you really want to know?" he added hopefully.

"There are a thousand ugly stories in this city, but I guess I could listen to one more," she said with a half smile. "We're not exactly busy!" And she gestured to the empty room. "Don't make it too long, though. Ron, my manager, doesn't like it if we socialize much with the customers."

"Well, here's how my day's been going...", began Roger as he launched into a quick, condensed version of his experiences. "... And that's how I arrived here," he concluded with a sigh. Ann (for that was the waitress's name) shook her head and said, "Not the most bizarre tale, but I might be able to help you out if you're not too picky, and I guess you can't be. I could ask Ron if you could start as the dishwasher. Bob, the old one, hasn't shown up yet this week, and we could definitely use the help."

And so, Roger found himself talking with Ron and beginning a stint in the food service industry. Ron quickly explained that, although he'd be leaving his position as soon as the Department of Labor Resources approved his application for self-employment,

he needed to ensure strict adherence to the restaurateur policies.

"The first, and most important, thing is promptness," he began. "Well, perhaps thoroughness. I never can decide which is more important. Well, promptness and thoroughness are definitely numbers one and two, nevertheless, and cleanliness, too. That's one, two and three. Did I say promptness?"

"First thing!" volunteered Roger.

"Oh, and a good memory, too, that's important, too!" exclaimed Ron, looking genuinely pleased at Roger's attentiveness. As they walked into the kitchen area, Ron pointed out the major features. "There's the stoves, and that's the walk-in 'fridge, and here's your sinks and cleaning supplies," he finished hurriedly, as an incredibly fast man in a clean, white uniform rushed up and uttered a phrase that would often be repeated in Roger's presence. "Who's the new guy?"

"Dwayne, this is Roger, our new dishwasher. Roger, Dwayne, our cook," Ron said as he headed for his office.

"Welcome aboard. Hope you're here longer than most. We don't tend to keep help around here for very long. Some folks don't see much of a future here, but things are only as good as you make them." And with that, Dwayne headed back to the grill.

## *Chapter 2*

El Pollo Loco was not your ordinary eating establishment, and most of the people who worked there insisted the work was transitory, and so, as the dishwasher, Roger fit in better than he thought he would. The rest of the staff seemed friendly enough, although a bit leery of much conversation, but considering the migratory nature of most dishwashers, Roger figured that was to be expected.

As the end of his first shift approached, Roger was surprised to find himself accepting an invitation from Ann to go somewhere for a cup of coffee. The thought of a cup of coffee didn't exactly thrill him, but the thought of spending the evening alone in the closet-sized room that Ron said he could use (located across the hall from Dwayne's abode) made any offer sound like a good one. And besides, it had been a while since he'd had a "date" of any sort, and Ann, while not totally beautiful, was as pretty as most of the women Roger had ever been out with, and he already knew she was a good listener.

The coffee shop Ann took him to was one he would have avoided at all costs in his previous life, but Roger knew he'd have to adjust to a lot of new circumstances since his death. It was a dingy little dive with a row of booths on one side and a counter stretching nearly the length of the building. The barstools at the counter were mostly full of folks who looked like the misfits and dregs of society. Roger thought bleakly that, if it

weren't for Ann's presence, he would have easily fit into the motley assortment of characters at the counter.

At first, Roger assumed that the place was trying for a sort of 1950's ambiance, but after he and Ann had sat for a few minutes, he realized that it wasn't a conscious effort on the management's part. The furniture and accessories were just old enough to have been there since that period of history.

Ann listened sympathetically as Roger recounted the misfortunes of his recent past, this time in a little more detail. This reminded her of a similar incident that had happened to her cousin, Ernie, and she proceeded to give Roger the details in full. Ernie's story reminded Roger of nothing that had happened to him, and he couldn't seem to relate the two, so he just listened half-heartedly and enjoyed the feeling of being around a somewhat attractive woman who seemed to be mildly interested in his company. About midway through her story, Ann put her hand on Roger's knee to emphasize some point, and he was shocked to find that, after her point had been made, her hand did not return to her section of the table. He was so stunned by this that he remained speechless as the intruder slowly began inching its way up his thigh. As it reached the midway point, Roger began to feel stirrings that hadn't surfaced for years. He was only slightly surprised at the beginning of an erection. When her hand leapt to his crotch, he realized that there was more going on than was obvious to the casual observer.

"HEY ... Roger!" Ann said as she shook his shoulder. "Have you heard anything I've said recently?"

Roger flushed with embarrassment as he returned from his daydream and turned a darker shade of red as he realized that part of his fantasy was true, as his trousers had, in fact, become a tent, and he had no idea what Ann had been saying.

"Um, well ... Ernie got out of the army and was feeling out of place, and, um..." he stammered.

"That was five minutes ago, Rog, where have you been?" she exclaimed. "I was asking if you wanted to come over to my place to watch TV and have a beer or something."

"That sounds great, but I have to be at work early tomorrow," Roger said, and it even sounded lame to him as he said it.

"Come on, just for a little while. I promise I won't bite. Unless you're into that sort of thing." She grinned.

"All right," said Roger, and he realized that maybe he wasn't the only lonely person in town that night.

As he let himself in through the back door of the Pollo, Roger reflected back on the events of the evening and realized that it was the first time in a long time that he had had a pretty enjoyable evening, the best he had had for years, in fact, and he owed it all to his death. Sometimes it takes an event as major as your death to alter your life, he thought. He wondered if perhaps the mindset he'd been in all those years

could have been altered by an internal act to bring him some happiness without all the hassles of dying. He couldn't remember how his life had gotten into such a rut. My new life began like a nightmare come true, he thought, but then again, my old life hadn't been a dream, by any standards.

Without a valid ID card, Roger realized that he had a limited amount of options to pursue. His main objective was to regain the use of his identity, but the first order of business was to take care of his basic needs until he could re-establish himself in the real world. Ron, the restaurant manager, was sympathetic to his plight, but only to the point of paying Roger with credit at the Pollo, and being willing to get items Roger wanted, as long as they didn't cost much. Slave labor was supposed to be a thing of the past, but when you're over a barrel, you take any bone that's tossed your way, he thought a little bitterly. Breakfast, lunch and dinner became the main focus of Roger's life for the next few weeks. He found that the few hours in between were his own to spend, but at first he didn't realize how precious that time could be.

"How can I get anything done in a couple of hours!" he groused to the cook, Dwayne, as he scrubbed a particularly crusty chaffing dish.

"Quit your bellyaching and take advantage of what you got," replied Dwayne. "That's a big problem with most people ... they don't realize what they got until it's gone, and then it's too

late. You have an opportunity here, Roger, that most people never get, and you need to try to take advantage of it. Take the bull by the balls, and bring him to his knees."

"Yeah, that's easy to say, but not as easy to do," Roger retorted.

"Listen to me, and try to grasp the concept, Roger," Dwayne began. "Any problem you have can be solved by you, but you have to take it one step at a time. List your problems, list your goals, and then figure out how to get from A to B. You got some time on your hands, don't piss it away, man. Use the gaps in your schedule to do some serious brainstorming. Delegate the hours in between meals to specific tasks, and don't become distracted from those tasks in the allotted times.... Sorry, my mom wanted me to be a preacher, and sometimes I get up in my pulpit," he laughed. "But try to do what I said and see if it works for you. It does for me."

"Thanks, Dwayne, maybe I'll try that. I'm not making any progress just sitting here complaining, anyway," Roger said.

"That's the spirit," Dwayne replied. "Just try to focus on one task for a specific amount of time each day, and you'll be surprised how much you can get done."

With that thought in mind, Roger decided to wake up an hour earlier each day and dedicate that hour to writing down his problems (numerous) and his goals (which at this point seemed to be a short list.) The tricky part would be to figure out the

steps to solve part A and to begin attaining part B. Roger thought writing down the problems would be a time consuming process, until he went to actually write them down.

"Now let's see," he muttered to himself, "No ID, that's a biggie, and no place to live - well, I guess that's not exactly true. I do have this place, and this is good enough for now, and I'd like to get my life going in a better direction." And with that flash of insight that inadvertently slipped out, almost unbidden, Roger sat back and gaped at what he had written. Two problems ... only two problems! When had he had only two problems in his entire life? This death thing was starting to become an advantage, and Roger suddenly realized it wasn't so much a death as a rebirth.

The big question remained - where did he want to go with his life? The lack of goals in his old life had limited him to a dead end job in a company he had no interest in. Getting a decent paying job is a good idea and having food on the table and a place to live is necessary, but those aren't the goals to live a fulfilled life. Thinking about it made him realize that most of the people he knew were in the same boat. He needed to think of someone outside that boat and the only person that he could think of was Dwayne, and that was only due to the fact that Dwayne seemed to have some sort of purpose in his life.

Roger thought this was odd, since a cook's job seemed to him to be as pointless as any other, and he couldn't figure out why

Dwayne would have an edge on his life that seemed to set him apart. The only thing he could think to do was to take Dwayne's advice, and take the bull by the balls. And he was sure Dwayne didn't realize that he'd be the bull when Roger went for those above-mentioned genitals.

"Dwayne, when you have a couple of minutes, I'd like a chance to talk to you," Roger said when he found Dwayne at work in the kitchen a little later that morning.

"Sure, Rog, I always sit down for a few minutes to collect my thoughts after I get done with the breakfast prep, so just be there when I'm ready. If you like, you could help me out by filling that stack of bowls with two eggs each. That way we'll have a couple extra minutes when we do get to sit down," Dwayne shot back.

"No problem," Roger replied. As he got to work filling the large stack of bowls, Roger watched Dwayne as he went about his morning routine. It was like going to a ballet, Roger thought, as the concise movements made Dwayne look like a dancer, weaving his way around the kitchen. A routine doesn't have to be mundane, he thought to himself, but I wonder how anyone could do the same things, year after year, and not develop an aversion to their work. Roger thought some more and decided that that was the first question he would bring up when they got a chance to sit and talk. Watching Dwayne at work was interesting, but Roger just couldn't figure out why.

"All right, what's up, Roger," asked Dwayne as he settled into a chair in the back of the kitchen.

"Well, I don't really know how to start, so I guess I'll just say that I can't figure you out. I know I've only been here a little while, but you seem to know something the others in here don't, and I'd like to know what that something is. Ann wants to be a secretary, Ron wants to start his own business, I don't know what I want to do, but you, you seem to be content in a job that, to me, looks like a dead end. No offense, but I just can't figure it out, because out of everyone who works here, you seem to have a firmer grasp on reality than anyone else around here," Roger said. "How can you stay in the same routine and not be bored to tears?"

"Wow, when you say you want to talk, you don't dance around the issues, do you?" Dwayne laughed. "Well, at least you asked a good question, albeit a complex one. I don't have time right now to get into a complete answer for you, but I'll stab at the heart of your query, anyway. I don't think of my job as a dead end, and therefore I'm not bored at all. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty excited about what I do, because I look at the big picture and realize I'm providing a service to people and making a good living while I do it. If you really want to get into the details, I can talk to you between eight and nine o'clock tonight."

"Sure, Dwayne, that sounds good, but what's the story with

that - fitting me into your tight schedule?" Roger laughed, thinking Dwayne was a little off by allotting him this time, like a celebrity granting an interview.

"Actually yes, between eight and nine is when I have my time allotted for meetings of a social nature and it just happens tonight my schedule was empty, so you'll fit in there. Hopefully, talking with you will give me some insight on how I can improve my routine or my outlook and, at the least, I'll get more work out of you - provided you want to learn a thing or two," Dwayne replied, a bit more seriously than Roger had anticipated. "I have to get going now. My next day starts at six, and I don't like to get off my schedule. Nice talking with you. I'm looking forward to tonight."

Kind of blown away, Roger watched Dwayne rush back to work. Well, maybe rushed wasn't the best adjective, Roger thought, but moving with a purpose and with a stride that made Roger wonder what Dwayne was going to have to say when they got a chance to sit and really talk. What the heck did he mean 'my next day starts at six'?? --what a cryptic comment. He thought he'd probe around and see what the other employees had to say about Dwayne. First things first, though, and without further ado, Roger dove into a growing stack of dishes. Luckily, dishes don't require much brainpower, and Roger could talk to the waitresses as they scurried in and out of the kitchen.

Unfortunately for Roger, he was the only one who had time to

talk, and the waitresses, although prone to attacks of gossip, weren't able to stop in the middle of breakfast rush to have a philosophical discussion on either Rogers' plight or Dwayne's' unusual work habits. When the rush was finally over, Roger made his way over to the break area where Ann and Sue, the two waitresses, had just sat down.

"Hey, ladies, how's it going?"

"Hi, Roger. Sue, this is Roger, Roger, Sue," Ann said, giving Roger a kind of half smile.

"Nice to meet you, Sue," Roger began. "Mind if I join you two for a coff a cupee"?

"Pull up a chair, and make yourself at home," countered Sue.

"Of course, since this kind of is your home, I guess that's a little like telling my grandma to get comfortable in her rocker," added Ann with a grin that made Roger feel welcome and a little like being at home.

"Did you have a good crowd for breakfast?" he asked, more to fill in a gap in conversation than because he cared.

"Usual assortment for a Thursday. Regular cronies at the counter and a hodgepodge filling out the rest of the arena," Sue said, "but a pretty decent morning for tips, at least for me. How'd you do, Ann?"

"Well, apart from the johnson at the end of the counter trying to pinch my ass every time I went past, it was pretty calm. Not bad for tips, except for the two whiners in booth

four. I'll be glad when Beth gets back from vacation. She's the only one those two don't bug with all the nickel and dime crap."

"Yeah, I don't know how she does it, but those two ladies smile and carry on with her and always leave a good tip, but anyone else gets the crabby bitch sisters and one thin dime for their time and effort, no matter what you do," Sue returned. "I tried all the tricks – how are your kids, don't you look pretty this morning, and is that a new dress, haircut– nothing works, not even listening to them. And that usually brings them in if nothing else works, but that's more of a last ditch desperation move." She laughed, and asked, "How's the boss treating you, Rog?"

"Ron hasn't even been back to the kitchen this morning," Roger said, with a little relief in his voice.

"I wasn't talking about Ron, I meant Dwayne," Sue countered, looking at Roger a little strangely.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Didn't you know that Dwayne is the owner of the Pollo, Roger?" Ann put in. "I thought I told you that last night. Of course, I know you weren't there for all of my conversation," she added with a malicious grin. "What were you thinking about anyway?" she added innocently, as Roger turned eight shades of red. She and Sue turned to each other and burst out laughing.

"Don't get offended, Roger, I didn't mean to piss you off," Ann said, suddenly looking contrite. "I didn't mean to embarrass

you, either. I'm sorry, it's just that you looked so funny when I said let's go back to my place last night that I couldn't help but realize you were off in a fantasy when your mind wandered off."

"Dwayne owns the Pollo?" Roger asked with a hint of disbelief in his voice, choosing to ignore the other issue rather than pursuing it. "Maybe that's why he acts the way he does. I thought he was a little too dedicated to his job, but if he's the owner, it makes more sense. Why is he back in the kitchen if he is the owner?"

"He tried coming up front and doing Ron's job, but never was satisfied with the job the cooks did, so he decided to stay there and just do the job himself."

"It seems to work pretty well," Sue chimed in. "I know Ron likes it. Dwayne never butts in and just lets Ron handle every detail of the restaurant. It's like we're the middle men for two different companies - Dwayne's meal manufacturing and Ron's food service." She laughed. "Or maybe we're another company - Delivery, Inc."

"Didn't you notice how you were treated, well, kind of oddly, when Ron brought you on board?" asked Ann.

"Well, no one really told me what to do, they just pointed at the sink and told me to dive in," Roger said.

"Dwayne hasn't given you the intro yet, then. Wait until that and then get back to us. That'll be in his communications day.

Look for him to talk to you between nine and ten."

"What do you mean 'communications day'?" Roger asked, once more feeling like he was missing something.

"Dwayne will tell you about his 'day' schedule," Ann said.

"Quick-days, he calls 'em," Sue added.

"Yeah, he always does the same sort of stuff, at the same times every day. I think he has Ron doing it, too. He says he can get more stuff done that way - keeps him on track without wasting time with that 'what now' thing hanging over his head. I use it too, but not as strictly as Dwayne. I need more self-discipline. That's something I have to work on." Ann looked at Roger to see if he was following her and not back in fantasyland. She smiled when she realized he was gazing at her intently, with a look of fascination on his face.

"I never even heard of anything like that before," Roger said with a look of amazement on his face. "I know I always have been completely disorganized, but never could figure out how to arrange my day to 'get it together'."

"Wait until you talk to Dwayne, he's the 'King of Organization', and he'll make you the crown prince if you sit down and listen to him," Sue giggled. "Seriously, though, he does have a good system and seems to get more done in one day than I do in a week. I'm just learning to appreciate how a little structure can really help to get things done without having to get anal about your whole life."

"Hey, I didn't mean to bring work into your break time," Roger said, feeling guilty for interrupting their routine.

"That's cool. We usually talk about the same old, every day. It's good to have a change of pace. Maybe that's a good sign. Welcome aboard, Roger. Woops, hate to cut this short, but we do have to get back to work and, speak of the devil, here comes Dwayne. He's probably ready to talk to you now." Sue cut off her comments as she and Ann got up and scurried back to work.

"Roger, how are you doing? Listen, there are a few things I'd like to go over, in relation to your job," Dwayne started out. "In case you haven't noticed, we do things a little differently here than most places."

"Yeah, I kind of wondered how, exactly, the pieces fit together," Roger commented. "Everyone seems to operate independently around here. It's like an integrated chaos, if you know what I mean."

"Interesting choice of words. That's about how I want it to work. Everyone has their own areas of concern and operates independently of each other, yet still in harmony, at least that's the plan. Here's how you will fit in"

Roger cut in before Dwayne had a chance to complete the sentence. "What do you mean, 'here's how I'll fit in'? I'm just the dishwasher!"

"In most places, you'd be right, but here 'just the dishwasher' doesn't apply. As far as I'm concerned you are an

interdependent company providing services to my company. I know that sounds like a glorified job title, but it's not. I'll give you a structure to start out with, and you decide from there what works best for you. I don't usually do this with the dish washers, because they come and go pretty quickly, but with your situation, you'll probably be here a while. The way we'll work it is like this; You buy the raw materials to work with - water, soap, sponges, the works - and figure out what hours you need to work to fulfill my needs, and I pay you according to the work you do. I don't pay by the hour, I pay by the job, piece rate, so the more efficient you are, the more you'll make, and the more free time you'll have to pursue other money-making ventures or try to get your identity back or whatever you choose. That's up to you." Dwayne grinned, "I know that's a lot to swallow in one gulp, but it's not as complex as it sounds. If you have any questions, feel free to ask. I won't charge a consulting fee for advice until you're here for two weeks. That'll give you time to get comfortable with the concept." And with that, Dwayne went into the kitchen and took Roger through the basics of running his own business.

At the end of the day, Roger felt pretty good about the situation he just happened to fall into. The idea of operating the dishwashing area as a separate business appeared kind of stupid to him at first, but as he got into it, he liked the feeling of control he had over his own life. A sort of freedom

he had never felt before had taken hold of him, and it seemed like the job, the 'dead end job', had a whole new feel to it. He already had a few ideas on how to cut costs, and knowing the money he saved would be his to keep made each penny saved count that much more. The 'other issue' in his life, getting his official life back on the books, was still a high priority, but at least now he didn't have to worry about how he was going to live until he did straighten that mess out.

## *Chapter 3*

It was fast approaching eight o'clock, and Roger was looking forward to his meeting with Dwayne. He knew the cook was much more complex now than what he had originally given him credit for. Roger also knew he could learn quite a bit from Dwayne if he kept his ears open and tried to catch on to this new way of looking at things. He headed back to Dwayne's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," was the firm response from within.

Roger entered and greeted a busy-looking Dwayne. "Hey, Dwayne, ready for our chat?"

"Sure, Rog, just a minute while I finish this up."

Roger sat down in the chair in front of Dwayne's desk and watched as Dwayne completed the day's bookkeeping entries. He tried not to let his impatience show, but figured that it did anyway and was relieved when Dwayne finally shut the ledger.

"I'm glad you could make time to see me," he said, as Dwayne put the paperwork into the filing cabinet. "I've been looking forward to it all day."

"Well, what have you got on your mind?"

"Why didn't you tell me you owned the Pollo?" he began tentatively, "and what's the deal with your 'quick-day' thing, to start with. I have a million questions, but I guess we'll start with those two."

"As far as why I didn't say anything about owning the

restaurant, what difference would that make to you who owned it? And anyhow, it didn't take long for you to find out anyway, did it? And as to the schedule I keep, well that's a pretty good question there. The concept of quick-days isn't my own, but I adopt any good idea that I stumble across. I found that without a set schedule, I tended to wander through my days, and everything blended together. When I set up my quick-days, I got on top of things, because I know I only have a limited time to accomplish what is contained in that time frame, and if I don't get it done, well, then I have to wait until the next day that contains that activity." He smiled and continued, "That sounds more complex than it really is. I just tried to figure out how many hours I needed to do each task I have and then slotted a time frame to do each. Like breakfast prep is from 4:30 to 5:30, and cooking breakfast is from 5:30 'til 9:30. Cooking time is flextime, though. You have to be realistic in order to make it work for you."

"If you need to talk to someone outside of your normal routine, then what happens?" Roger was trying to 'get it', but thought of the many unplanned things that happened in his days (especially recently).

"I have 'catch all days' twice a day, for meetings and miscellaneous details. You're a miscellaneous detail," he laughed. "Just kidding, most people don't even try to grasp how this could change their lives. Just coming by to talk to me

tells me a lot about you. You can benefit a lot by using this system, Roger, in all areas of your life. You could have your morning break be your planning day and your afternoon break as your action day. You'd probably make more headway on your 'Quest for Life' if you have a plan of action rather than just running around to various government agencies carrying on about a clerical error."

"That gives me a lot to think about," Roger said. "What gave you the idea for the way you have things organized around here?"

"That's a pet project of mine. I'm trying out a theory I read about. The more that people control their own future, the harder they'll work to make it a promising one, and the harder my people work, the more it enhanced my own future. Simple logic, really, but it's surprising no one puts it to work. No one I know of, anyway."

"I think it's pretty cool, and I know it's inspired me to look at my job in a whole new light," Roger said.

"That's a step in the right direction, so it is working to an extent. Now, if you apply it to your life, you'll find some real changes are in store for you. You don't have to follow my advice, Roger, it's only a suggestion, but it is working for me."

"I'll give it a shot. At this point, I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. I know the way I was running my life before all this happened wasn't doing much for me, so I guess I'll go for it with this plan."

## *Chapter 4*

The day started out like any other since Roger had modified his schedule. His first 'day' was an organizer and was only a half-hour long. On this particular day, Roger had all of his regular items to do, so there wasn't a whole lot to organize. His industrial supplier was due to make an appearance, so that added a little flavor to an otherwise bland morning. The guy was suggesting a new line of cleaners, and Roger was trying to get a free week's worth to try. He figured to save a couple of bucks that way, even if it didn't work as well as the salesman's boast. (And how often does anything live up to a sales pitch?) None of the ideas for speeding up the dishwashing process worked so far, but Roger wouldn't give up trying new angles anytime he thought one up.

A new plan Roger was trying was to import dishes from the deli that was next door to the Pollo. No other dishwasher had ever gone looking for more work, but that didn't deter Roger at all. Dwayne looked kind of funny at Roger when he approached him about it, but said, "It's your business, do what you want," and left it at that. The manager of the deli thought it odd, but his dishwasher was broken, and he figured why not, since it cost less to pay Roger than to fix the machine, so Roger found himself with an outside contract and a little more income.

His next order of business was deciding where to attack in his battle for identification recovery. The Bureau of Information was the place the woman at the employment agency had

told him to go to, so Roger figured he might as well start there. That decision gave Roger some relief. Although he hadn't figured out a plan of action, at least he knew where he was going when the afternoon lull gave him some time. Thinking about time made Roger realize it was time to get to the breakfast dishes before they began to get out of control.

The pile of dishes, pots and pans hadn't grown to monstrous proportions yet, but Roger was glad he hadn't stayed any longer in his organizer day than he had originally scheduled. He was pleased he had stuck to the plan and not fallen into the trap of ignoring his quick-day schedule. Getting off track on the first day would be an easy road to follow, but he knew once the habits of a set schedule set in, the problem of falling off track would be less likely to rear its ugly head. The never-ending pile of dishes and silverware finally began to shrink, and Roger realized the breakfast rush was over. Figuring out the exact plan of attack was next, and Roger wasn't sure how to begin. *I've got to try to find out the origin of the mistake and find out how to undo what's been done,* he thought to himself, *probably calling the newspaper and finding the reporting authority and then going straight to that person and discovering their source.* With the basis of a plan in hand, Roger felt his grip on reality tighten and hoped he wouldn't get sweaty palms in this crucial situation.

The Daily Dispatch was only about a fifteen-minute walk from

the Pollo, and as soon as the lunch rush was over, that's where Roger headed. The gray walled Dispatch building looked like a dinosaur that had gone belly up, and after he walked into the reception area, Roger felt the description was even more accurate. The room had an overwhelming feeling of disarray and had a smell that reminded Roger of leftovers that sat too long in the fridge - not ready for the trash but not appetizing either, unless you were desperate. The receptionist, however, was downright rancid.

"What business do you have in here?" she snarled. "This isn't a charity ward, you know."

"I'm looking for the person in charge of the obituaries," Roger explained, "and I'd appreciate it if you could point me in the right direction, with a name to ask after," he finished politely.

"No one is in charge. It's just a chore that's passed around to the peons," she snapped, as if she was above the peons. "Go to the second floor, in the city room, and just ask around. Next," she called, although no one else was there. It was a form of dismissal to reduce everyone to a number and it seemed quite rude to Roger. He wanted to get away, so he quickly went up to the second floor to escape the receptionist as much as to find someone else to talk to. The government's regulation of one newspaper per city certainly insured that the employees pretty much did what they wanted, but reducing competition

didn't make for increased efficiency, as the government folks claimed.

'Service Duplication' was the current government phrase used as the argument against competition. The simple concept of equal treatment in oral expression, which began as 'Political Correctness' was soon out of control and meant freedom of speech was regulated by a self-appointed panel of idiots who made sure that no one with an unconventional point of view was allowed to express their ideas. Roger still didn't understand why editorials were still included in the paper, since only the official point of view was represented anyway.

The first person Roger saw was a middle-aged, balding man, who was poring over a sheet of paper filled with all kinds of calculations. The man was licking a pencil and intermittently scribbling furiously. "Latest information hot off the wire?" Roger asked, trying to gain an ally.

"Actually, I'm trying to figure out what I can afford for lunch this week," came the ponderous reply. "What can I do for you, Mr. ...?"

"Uhm ... Whitley," Roger said, "and if you would be so kind as to direct me to someone who is involved with writing up the obituaries, I'd appreciate it."

"Well, Mr. Umwhitley, the junior staff members usually take care of that sort of thing, but I'd be willing to help you

if ...," and with that, a palm stuck out, and a forlorn look at the figures on the sheet let Roger know he wasn't expecting a business card.

"I'd like to help you out, honest I would, but the truth of the matter is, I'm in worse shape than you are," Roger admitted rather sheepishly. "You see, I'm the one who was ..."

"Save it for someone who cares, bud. Try one of the copyboys for a shoulder to cry on," and with that he gestured over his shoulder and went back to his calculations.

The indicated location so graciously provided by the previous gentleman was occupied by a lone young man absorbed in a CRT screen. As Roger made his approach, he noticed that the man was involved in saving the known galaxy from an invasion of 'Reptiloid Invaders', an occupation that was actively employing millions of people across the country. Knowing the game could go on for hours, Roger nevertheless settled in a chair behind the desk, next to the young man, and prepared to wait him out. The whole video game concept seemed a colossal waste of time to Roger, but he figured at least it keeps kids off the street and out of trouble. He was quite surprised when the man hit the pause and turned to him and said, "How are you doing? Is there something I can help you with?"

"If you wouldn't mind, I'm trying to find some information on an obituary the paper ran last week," Roger explained. "I don't mean to bother you, but the older gentleman suggested that

perhaps you could help me," as he gestured to the middle-aged gent still chewing on his pencil.

"Gentleman ... hmph ... first time I ever heard old Greeley called that ... you must be pretty generous with that phrase. He's right, though, if you need some information, I can give you a hand. Was the deceased a friend or family member?"

"Actually, neither. It was me. I was listed erroneously, and I'm trying to straighten out the error," Roger explained, as he handed him a copy of the column he was listed in.

"Well," said the young man, as he read the obit, "not the first time that's happened, I'm sure, but the first time I've dealt with it. Let me see what I can bring up on the screen." And with that, he began to cycle through all sorts of information on the computer. "Ah, yes, here we go, found your file, Mr. Whitley."

"Roger, please."

"OK, Rog, my name's Gus."

"Nice to meet you, Gus. Can you tell me the reporting authority, so I can try to straighten this all out?" Roger asked, hoping that Gus could bring it up while he was holding his file.

"Sure, Roger, hum ... it says here 'natural causes/apathy', that's a normal bye-line, if you'll excuse the pun, and it came right from County General Hospital. That's where you checked out from, Rog."

"Well, I guess that's my next stop. Thanks for the help, Gus. If I ever get this straightened out, I'll remember you and your help," Roger said gratefully.

"No problemo Rog, sometimes it's nice to get a break from the routine. They don't let me touch the real news. It's all just typing exercises for me - obituaries, advertisements, public service messages, etc., etc. Good to get something different once in a while," Gus said, looking pleased to help someone.

"If I ever get a line on a story, you'll be the first to hear about it, Gus. I appreciate your help. Thanks again."

Time was moving along, and Roger knew he'd have to get back to the Pollo, so he headed back to work. When he got there, Dwayne was just dumping a load of pots and pans into the sink. "Perfect timing Roger, any luck in your quest?"

"Getting closer, Dwayne, every step is one step closer, anyway."

"Yeah, a lot of people don't look at it that way, but without the first step, the best laid plans don't get off the ground. If Henry Ford wouldn't have gone with the production line, when would we have moved into the mass production age? The innovators in this country all had to start somewhere," Dwayne stated, like it was something he alone had figured out.

"You have a flair for stating the obvious," Roger said, "but I guess a lot of people gloss over the obvious and don't apply common sense to staid and stagnant concepts. That must be how

the country got in the shape it's in – too many people gliding along, content with too little. Apathy is a contagious disease."

"Don't let the apathy hit you in the ass as you're doing the dishes, Rog," Dwayne joked. "You've got your mission, but the Pollo is my mission and provides the economic fuel for all our other business."

"All right, all right, I'm on it, Dwayne," Roger said, "takin' care of business, ever day, takin' care of business, every way ..."

"That's the spirit, Rog, taking care of your own business, that'll inspire ya to new heights."

With that, Dwayne got back to cooking, and Roger got busy on the dishes. It wasn't long before the waitresses started coming in to collect place settings to set up the tables for the dinner crowd. Sue came in first and began an interrupted conversation with Roger. "How are you doing, big guy?" she asked.

"Not too bad," he replied, as she sailed out the door. At that point, Ann waltzed into the kitchen.

"Oh, no, not another new guy," she began, "Sorry about that, didn't mean to get off on the wrong foot. How are you doing, friend?"

"Ann, what are you talking about? It's me, Roger. I know I probably didn't make all that good an impression, but you don't have to give me the complete cold shoulder!"

"Roger, how do you do? You must be mistaking me for my twin

sister, Ann. We switch on and off here. My name is Fran, please to make your acquaintance!" as she stuck out her hand and gave Roger's a vigorous shake. "Maybe we could get together later for a cup of coffee, or something stronger, if you're in the mood. Always glad to meet a friend of my sister's. I have to warn you, though, we're pretty competitive about everything," with that she gave him a wink and headed out the door with a tray full of silverware.

"What's the deal with Fran?" Roger asked Sue, as she made a return trip to the kitchen.

"Oh, god, not again. Is she back?" was the reply he got. "Did she seem normal, bitchy, or what? Did she grab silverware, china or a large butcher knife? Tell me, Rog, it's important!" she demanded, in a pleading sort of way.

"She seemed pretty normal to me. Then again, I don't know her at all, so how do I know what's normal? She grabbed a tray of silver and headed for the dining area, 'sall I know," he returned.

"Oh, no, Rog, you know her all right, that's Ann. She hasn't had a 'spell' for a while, but at least she's Fran this time and not Stan. Stan's *really* hard to take. Quite obnoxious and always grabbin' my ass. I don't know what to do about that," she said sadly, "I like him, but I know he can't deliver the goods, no matter what his intentions." She smiled sadly, "Yeah, all the good ones are either married, gay or schizo."

"Oh, and no one thought to tell me anything about this, as I'm taking Ann out for a cup of coffee or running over to her place, or whatever?"

"Well, we were really hoping the others were gone for good this time. They haven't been around for a while, and you gotta hope for the best, right?" Sue pleaded. "I was hoping you two would hit it off ... she could really use a decent man in her life. A stabilizing factor was something the doctor said could help to alleviate the split personality thing."

"Oh, yeah, and just let me find out in my own good time, right?..."

"Children, children ..." Dwayne broke in, as he entered the room. "What seems to be the major malfunction?"

"Nothing too major, I guess," Roger practically spit at the room. "The girl I've been kind of seeing has more than one personality, and no one thought this was a little out of the ordinary? Or maybe something I ought to know about? 'Maybe a word of precaution, Rog, she's a little bit of a crowd sometimes', or something!"

"Oh, is Ann entertaining company again?" Dwayne asked Sue. "She's pretty much harmless, Roger, no need to get alarmed."

"*Pretty much* harmless? What is that like ... not too poisonous, slightly lethal? What?" Roger, somewhat overwhelmed, decided to sit down and try to digest this latest tidbit of information. "Just what I need, my life's not confused enough

already."

"Easy, Roger, she's not dangerous to anyone, just unpredictable, that's all," Dwayne quickly pointed out.

"Yeah, Roger, she's all right, just confused, and confusing to all of us," Sue added. "Nothing to worry about, kind of adds a little bit of spice to the situation around here," she smiled, "not that you need any extra spice, Rog, but go with the flow. Fran could add a whole new layer to your world. She really has an interesting view on life. Wait until you both have some time, and try a discussion on religion, then stand back and open your mind."

"Why did you ask about a knife, if there's nothing to worry about then?" Roger felt this was a legitimate question. No one seemed to be concerned about this latest twist, and Roger was completely blown away by their nonchalance. Schizophrenics may have been a part of all their lives, but he had never had to deal with any. Granted, his ex had wild mood swings during her dot, but nothing to this extent.

"Oh, I didn't mean to alarm you with that. It's just that a couple of times she didn't like the look of curtains and things and felt commanded to change them, as quickly as she could. She used a knife to trim all the tablecloths, and the new ones came out of her next check," Sue explained. "I told her I'd try to dissuade her if the redecorating bug ever hit her again."

"Don't sweat it, Rog, just go with the flow. Ann usually

isn't gone for very long. Sometimes it's only for a couple minutes. Other times ... well, it's never been for more than a couple days ... and is mostly just a quick visit, especially with Stan. He only lasts until she has to pee," Dwayne grinned, and added, "Live and learn, and don't let unusual situations stop you from getting information you might not find in a more conventional learning environment. Some of the best information is gotten completely out of context."

"Well, I guess she didn't bother me until Sue let me in on the 'secret', so I'll see how it goes."

"That's the spirit, Roger, let the present take care of itself, try to understand the past, and prepare for the future," Sue laughed, and blushed. "There I go sounding like you, Dwayne."

"I'll take that as a compliment; if that means deep thoughts reflect my influence on you."

Ann/Fran walked in and said, "Hey, next time there's a committee meeting, let me know, so I can take a break, too."

"How are you doing, honey?" asked Sue. "Are you feeling yourself?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. Felt a little dizzy out there in the dining room, but I'm better now. Are we still on for tonight, Roger?" She turned and looked at him. "Are you OK? Looks like you saw a ghost or something."

"Honey, can I talk to you for a minute out on the floor?" Sue

asked Ann.

"Sure, I'll be back for your answer, Rog, you never did reply."

"Oh...yeah... right...talk to you in a minute...Anne," Roger answered.

As the girls left, Dwayne decided to say, "If you want my opinion, I'd say give it a chance. She's one in a million."

"More like two or three in a million," Roger grimaced, "but I guess everyone has their quirks. She has a few ID's, I don't even have one." He smiled ruefully and hoped his luck wasn't going to stay this strange. This all seemed like an awful lot to accept, even for someone in Roger's shoes, but as he told himself, he wasn't looking for a wife, just someone to spend some time with. If Ann wanted more than that, well, she'd definitely have to get this situation in hand before anything more would go on. The new few hours went by pretty quickly, without any time to really think about the whole situation, and certainly no time to gab with anyone about it.

Roger was finally putting the last of the dishes away when Dave, from the deli, came in. "When were you planning on getting to my dishes, Roger"? He asked, "I don't plan to run over here every time I need a serving tray, you know!"

"Sorry, Dave, it won't happen again."

"You're right about that. Next time I won't be looking for you, I'll be getting that new wash set-up over at my place."

"I'll get on it right away, and you won't have this problem again, on my word," Roger said emphatically.

"Yeah, the word of the wandering dishwasher, that should be worth a lot. Oh well, ya gotta take chances to get ahead in this world, so I guess this is your chance."

"You won't be sorry, Dave, I will not let you down," Roger promised, as he began wheeling a cart over to the deli to get the dishes. The extra work provided Roger with a bit of a dilemma. He couldn't accept payment in the conventional sense, because he had no account to be credited, so he was given an informal line of credit at the deli. Roger knew that the elimination of hard cash caused an inconvenience to some folks, but he had never experienced it in his previous life. Now, he found he was building lines of credit at various places and had to trade goods and services in a barter sort of arrangement any time he needed anything, unless he could talk Dwayne into buying something for him. The only problem with that was that Dwayne charged him a handling fee of five percent, and that ate into

his meager 'savings'. You don't get something for nothing, Dwayne had said, and if you give something for nothing, you're a fool. That goes for giving a friend a ride in your car or buying lunch for a co-worker. If you expect anything back from those gestures of friendship, you need to make it clear from the get. Paying someone back for prior actions was one thing, but something for nothing is charity, and although nothing is wrong with charity, the giver should recognize it as such, and the receiver, if he has any pride, should resent it. Dwayne's 'words of wisdom' sometimes were harsh, but in the real world, life is harsh sometimes, and Roger realized this fact more and more as time went on. These little tidbits of information were interesting, but Roger still didn't know exactly how to use the assets he was now in possession of.

Barter has been around since the dawn of time. Almost surely the first trade involved food of some sort, and Roger was going right back to those times. The two commodities he had to deal with were meals at the Pollo and any sort of party trays or sandwiches that Dave made at the deli. That wasn't too bad, as most of the people that he'd come in contact with had to break for food at least once in a while.

While he finished the last of Dave's dishes, Roger again thought about the problem with Ann. He had really had a good time when they had gone out the last time and knew in his current situation that women wouldn't exactly be throwing

themselves at him. He thought about schizophrenia and the people who had it. He had read a theory somewhere that the prophets of the earliest ages of man were all schizophrenics, and the voices in their heads were assumed to be gods, thus people listened to them, and religions had their beginnings in this manner. The thought of anyone in this day and age talking to a bush that was on fire would have people calling for those nice young men in their clean white suits, but in years gone by this was a 'sign from God'. If the earliest leaders were schizos, then perhaps dating Ann wouldn't be a bad thing. Maybe she was in touch with gods, too. The thought made Roger laugh, but an idea was forming in his head that he ought to take a look at religion and do a 'litmus test' to see how different religions stood up. Maybe everyone needs to be in touch with their own god or gods instead of having organized religion as a middle man. Thinking back to Ann and her episodes he realized that everyone has their quirks, and who am I to judge anyone's peculiarities. With a flourish, he finished the dishes and went out to see if Ann was ready to go.

## *Chapter 5*

Roger knew that Anne was wrestling with her demons. That phrase came to his mind even though he had never been a participant in any organized religions. His parents had met at a protest march and had instant attraction. They never thought their religious differences would have an impact on their relationship, and it really hadn't until Roger came along. Then it was a debate on how to raise him and the solution turned out to be ignoring the issue.

It was odd that the phrase wrestling with demons came to him; an agnostic in such modern times. He thought about wrestling with demons; *could this also have something to do with schizophrenia? We all wrestle with demons of one sort or another. Do we all have traits that reflect back on an earlier time in human consciousness? Do we all have split personalities to a degree? Everyone has a 'dark side'. Is that another person screaming to get out? 'We all have a face that we hide away forever, and we take it out and show ourselves when everyone has gone', said an old Billy Joel tune. What is that all about?*

Feeling uncomfortable with demons, Roger decided he'd rather have Anne wrestling with her conscience. That just made him start to wonder what the real difference was between demons and a conscience. He didn't want to spend too long trying to do the comparison, but he felt demons are a way religion tries to scare people away from things they might enjoy, and conscience is a

way we talk ourselves out of things we would enjoy maybe too much and feel guilty pleasure about. Why is it that conscience is spelled like 'con' and 'science'? Do we try to talk ourselves out of science by con, to avoid things (the demons) we'd rather not face? Roger couldn't decide.

Sue had come out to gently break the news to Anne that she was not alone in her thoughts, and she wasn't quite sure how to do it, so she just broke it open in the most direct manner. "Anne, I don't know how to break it to you, so I guess I'll just say that you need to go back and talk to your shrink, 'cause your dark side has been peeking through again."

"Oh no, *that's* why Roger was looking at me funny in there. I thought I did something wrong that I wasn't aware of, and I guess that is the case. I just didn't know it was that extreme," Anne lamented.

"It hasn't happened for a while, Anne, have you been taking the medication the doctor prescribed?"

"I thought I was all right," Anne said, "and didn't see the need for it anymore. I guess I was wrong, huh?"

"There's nothing wrong with you, hon, you just need to stay on the pills he prescribed. Some folks take blood pressure medication, or insulin, you have to take your medication, too. Every day, just like the doctor told you. You're not the doctor, Anne, you need to follow her instructions, and then you'll be OK."

"I guess that was a little stupid. Thanks for filling me in on my extra-curricular activities, Sue. Now if I can just get Roger to understand, I'll be back in business again."

"I think he'll be all right. Be honest, most relationships go bad due to a lack of honesty and communication. I'll see you tomorrow. Good luck with Rog!"

"Thanks, I'll see ya."

"There you are. Are you ready to go?" asked Roger, "Coffee Ole or someplace for something stronger?"

"Roger, are you sure you still want to go out with me? I mean, I could understand if you were, well, not," Ann started. "I forgot to take my medicine. I will be all right, now."

"Anne, I have my faults, too, so if you're done here, let's get going."

"Thanks, Rog. I'm really glad you're gonna give me another chance. How about we go over to Finnegan's for a nice cold one?"

"Sounds good to me, let's go."

The smile on Anne's face made Roger glad that he was willing to try again and not give up. The fact that he was a non-entity, and she was willing to give him a chance, was enough of an excuse to give her a second try, anyway. The walk to Finnegan's was a relatively short one, but it gave Roger a chance to reach out and hold her hand. Anne gave him another flash of the pearly whites, and that was all he needed to make his day.

Finnegan's turned out to be much more enjoyable than Roger thought. He and Anne had a few drinks, which made Roger feel a bit bad, because he couldn't pay for them, but also made him feel a bit good, because he hadn't let loose for years. He hadn't lost his sense of awareness though and noticed that the bartender seemed to be trying to hold the place together by himself and could barely keep up with the light crowd that was there. He sensed opportunity and knew he'd be back to talk to the man. He also sensed another opportunity and was thrilled when Anne invited him back for a nightcap.

As he woke up the next morning, Roger thought to himself, I really needed that! Anne was a delightful woman, and the evening had gotten better and better as it progressed. Of course, with the start of the night being as it was, it could hardly go downhill. Anne, being Anne, was an attentive listener and made Roger feel as if she cared about all that he said. The day at the restaurant and the time spent in his quest was soon forgotten, and talk turned to dreams and aspirations, and hers were similar to Roger's. A business of her own, a nice place to live, and possibly a family down the road all sounded familiar and attainable in this world, a world where the two of them were just talking. When they brought the real world into the picture, that's when it became more difficult. The bureaucrats didn't make it easy on any new businesses, and it seemed as if the various agencies competed to see who could win the prize of

driving a fledgling entrepreneur into the red and out of the game. The thought of all that drove the conversation back to small talk and that led them to Ann's apartment and eventually to bed. Quite an enjoyable night, he thought, as the sun began to beat the night sky into that nether time between darkness and dawn.

"Time, ohmygosh, time, Anne, I have to go! I gotta get to work. I don't mean to run out of here, but I didn't realize the time," Roger blundered through an explanation.

"That's all right, Roger, really it's my fault. I should have known to set the alarm, but usually I'm up before it rings, anyway. You must have worn me out," she said, none too coyly.

"Oh, geez," blushing and stammering, Roger made his way out of the bedroom and headed toward the door. "I'll see you later," he called, as he exited.

"You can bet on that," Anne said to an empty room, or perhaps to her less-than-empty head. She also had enjoyed herself and hoped that this relationship worked out better than the last few she had had.

## *Chapter 5*

When he got to the kitchen, things weren't as bad as they could have been. The dishes weren't stacked up much, and within a half hour Roger had them pretty much under control. Dwayne strolled in shortly after that and asked how the night went. "Actually, it went better than I had expected," Roger replied. "She is a pretty decent person and has a wide range of experiences. We had a lot of things to talk about, some of which were interesting."

"Must have been some conversation if it kept you until after sex this morning. Oh, slip of the tongue...I meant six, this morning," Dwayne said with a knowing grin.

"We had a pretty good night," said Roger, "and I'll just leave it at that. Kiss and tell isn't my style, but if it was, I don't have time to tell the story now, I've got work to do."

"That's the spirit, Rog, I can tell a good man when I see one, and I thought you would fit in around here. Keep it up! But I'm sure Anne told you the same thing," laughing, Dwayne went back to the grill.

Roger couldn't help but grin as he went back to work. What can you expect, he thought, a place as small as this, there are no secrets. Might just as well get used to a little good-natured ribbing. Sure enough, as people hurried through the kitchen, Roger heard the usual trail of comments. "Looking a little tired, Rog, get enough last night? ... sleep, that is?"

was Sue's question. "You look beat, Roger. Did you pull a double?" wondered Ron. Roger just smiled and continued to wash. Responding to any line of questioning would only provide more ammunition for the out-of-work stand-up comics who were filling in time between gigs as Pollo employees.

Once the breakfast crowd was done, Roger got down to figuring out his next time of attack in the ID search. The county hospital was the origin of the obituary, so Roger looked up the number and gave them a call. "County General switchboard, how may I direct your call?"

"May I speak to someone in the morgue, please?"

"One moment...." After about ten rings, Roger was ready to hang up the phone and try again, when "morgue...you call, we haul, this is Saul."

"Saul, thank you, my name is Roger Whitley, and I'm trying to find some information on a death that was called in to the Daily Dispatch on May fifth."

"Name?"

"Roger Whitley."

"No, not your name, the corpse's."

"Roger Whitley. I know it sounds confusing, but I was reported dead, and I'm trying to clear it up."

"All right, hold on...tum de dum de dum de dum...mmmmmmmm...la dee laadee...ah, here we go, Dr. Snyder's case, no next of kin, died of exposure and apathy. Come down

with the proper forms, and we'll have this straightened out in no time. Couple months at most."

"A couple months! Are you kidding me?" Roger exploded.

"I don't need this abuse. I just work here. I don't make up the rules."

Roger recovered enough to apologize. "I'm sorry. I just have had such a time the past few days and I didn't realize it would take that long. Sorry, really. Anyway, what forms do I need?"

"Hey, I just work here; I'm not an information service. You need to talk to the hospital oversight committee. Good luck, you'll need it!" Click.

After lunch was over and his work completed, Roger decided to go down to the hospital to talk with Dr. Snyder. The walk to the hospital only took twenty minutes, so he had plenty of time to wander around. Finding the doctor didn't take too long, but Roger wasn't the least bit surprised to find that he had no recollection of the case. "Do you mean to tell me, you signed a death certificate, and you don't even remember it?"

"Well, you have to know, it's not at all uncommon to sign two or three of those in a day, and you're talking about a couple of weeks ago, now," Dr. Snyder said, "and not an unusual case – the usual causes. You know it's surprising that the records were even that up to date. Someone in the office is really on their toes."

"How does a case like that get fouled up – hypothetically

speaking, of course?"

"Couple possibilities. Somebody carrying someone else's ID, mix up in the records department. Say a similar name in for a different procedure gets swapped for a death case, or even a bad swipe, like the scanner was dirty and misreads a bar code. Any of those things could, and have, happened. You'd need to talk to someone in the administration area and get the proper paperwork filled out. I'm not very familiar with it, to tell you the truth. That's pretty much all I could tell you." With a shrug of his shoulders, the doctor walked away.

Roger went to the administrative offices to try again, armed with this new information. He talked to the secretary and was soon sitting in the waiting room. This isn't going exactly as planned, he thought, but at least I'm beginning to get to the bottom of what's happened to me. The time was dragging on, and he figured he might as well look at the magazines that were scattered around the table. *Hmm, Newspeek, Oh, great, two months old, what's the main story, congress vows 'this time we'll really balance the budget', yeah, right. What else, Entertainment: Weakly 'Stallone says Rocky 23 is last installment', another fat chance. Ah good, Restauranteur, another old issue, but at least something believable might be in here.* Roger settled in to read a story on the battle of nutrition in the fast food market. The old myth of fat being detrimental to people's health was being raised by the

government council on fitness. All the agencies are trying to increase their influence just to prove they're not a waste of the taxpayers' money. The major problem, Roger thought, was that the more responsibility the government tried to handle, the less responsibility people took for their own actions. It's a catch 22 - government is responsible, so individuals don't need to be, so government has to be responsible for the individuals. The only problem is that individual rights are squashed, and group rights are considered to be all important. Individual responsibility is lost, and then everyone feels they are 'owed' by society, when they are actually *owned* by society. If individual rights are held as the most important, then everyone will be treated fairly. Group rights are unnecessary, if individual rights are paramount.

As soon as Roger got into the article, of course, his name was called out, and he had to put down the magazine. "Right this way, Mr....um..."

"Whitley," Roger said.

"Right, Mr. Whitley, if you'd follow me, Mr. Taft will see you now."

"Thank you."

"Mr. Taft, Mr. Whitley to see you."

"Mr. Whitley, what can I do for you?" Mr. Taft asked.

"Mr. Taft, there's been a terrible mistake, and I need to clear it up as soon as possible. The hospital listed me as

deceased, and I've lost everything I own, because my ID is invalid. The attending physician, Dr. Snyder, told me that I should talk to someone in administration services and I'd need some forms to authenticate my story and confirm my status, so I came to see you."

"Mr. Whitley, if you've been inconvenienced in any way by our services, we'd be happy to help you in any way we can. Miss Hoover, down in records verification, will straighten out the problem," Mr. Taft promised Roger, with a look of sincerity on his face.

"Thank you, Mr. Taft; it's good to speak with someone who seems to care about my problem."

"No problem at all, Mr. Whitley. We all make mistakes once in a while, and helping out the patients is part of my job. Go down to room 142, and ask for Miss Hoover, and we'll have this straightened out in no time."

"Well, thanks again," Roger said, as he got up and started down to see Miss Hoover. *Finally making some progress*, he thought as he went down the hallway. When he reached room 142, Roger knocked on the door and went in. The room was still as a cemetery at midnight, and Roger called out in a soft voice, "Hello, is there anybody in here?" There was no answer. A little bit louder, he said, "Excuse me, can someone help me here?" Still no reply. He called out, "Hello...HELLO!"

From out of the shadows a small voice called back, "No need

to shout, I heard you the first time. Hold on for a minute, sonny!"

After a little bit, Roger saw an old man creep out from between the tall rows of the memory storage facility. He must have been in his early seventies, at least, and Roger wondered why anyone past the mandatory retirement age of fifty-six was still working. "Well, what's all the shouting about, young fella? Last time anyone shouted in here, we had a fire alarm going off, and I wasn't going out. Where am I supposed to go, anyway? This place burns up; I got nothing left anyway, might as well just go up in smoke with all the other useless junk in the building. Wasn't always this way, why thirty years ago, I remember this place used to be jumping, a regular hospital, helping people get better, not a paper pushing mess like it is now. We used to have more doctors and nurses than pencil pushers, believe me I..."

Feeling that the old timer might ramble on for hours going nowhere, Roger finally had to interrupt, "Excuse me, I'm looking for Miss Hoover. I hate to interrupt your story, but I'm kind of in a hurry," looking apologetic, Roger continued, "Mr. Taft sent me down to see her. Do you know where I might find her?"

"That's the trouble with young folks nowadays, always in a hurry. Don't you know you can learn a lot from people just by taking the time to listen to them? Get a lot more cooperation, too, if you catch my meaning." The man stared at Roger for a

minute, and then said, "Miss Hoover," and when he said the name there were icicles hanging off the contempt in his voice, "shows up late in the afternoon, if at all, and also does an appearance on Mondays, usually for about four hours in the morning."

"Maybe you could help me then, Mr. ummm...."

"Tracey, but you can call me Dick, everyone does, that's an old joke, but some folks feel the same way about me. I'm the 'information detective'. What do you need, Mr. ...?"

"Roger Whitley. I was listed as deceased, by Dr. Snyder, and now I can't do a thing with my ID, and I need to get back some form of identification. I was hoping to find the information and the forms to fill out to process my Information claim."

"Piece of pie, Roger. All you need is GF 2375 and MFP package 72. I can get those for you in a flash, and then all you need to do is fill them out and take them to the Bureau of Information, have a verification of death notice inserted, come back here, have Dr. Snyder fill out section fourteen, Mr. Taft takes care of block seven, then back to Information for a verification of findings report, then back here for confirmation, then to the Bureau of Documents for a re-issue of identification form 1276, and then you're set for an interview with the review board." After that speech it took Dick a few minutes to catch his breath. The wheezing made Roger wonder if Dick was going to recover at all. Getting old wasn't anything Roger was looking forward to, but the alternative was worse.

"Can you write that down and give me the paperwork, please?" Roger was overwhelmed, but knew he had to start the process, and Dick was the first person who had given him any hard facts on the information he needed to get.

"Sure, no problem, Roger." And with that, he handed him a manila envelope stuffed with papers and a single sheet on the side. "The envelope is the MFP package, and the sheet is GF 2375. Stop in anytime if you need any other information. I'm always here."

"Thanks, Dick, you've been a big help!" Roger said gratefully, as he headed home to begin the paperwork.

## *Chapter 6*

When he got back to the Pollo, there wasn't any time to begin the hospital paperwork. First thing Roger knew he needed to do was take care of Dave's dishes from the deli. The dinner crowd was just beginning to appear at the Pollo, and he knew that once those dishes started, he wouldn't have time to get on Dave's work until late. The pile of dishes from the deli wasn't too bad, and Dave was pleased that Roger had shown up without any further prompting. "Keep up the good work, Roger. You know I didn't think this had a chance when you first proposed taking on my work, too, but now that you're on it, it seems like you got the situation under control."

"When you're in a business for the first time, it takes a bit to get organized, as I'm sure you know. I just hope that I don't make too many mistakes, and that I learn from the ones I do make!" Roger thought that Dave would think it was funny, saying he was in a business, but Dave had enough respect for a fellow small business operator not to even think about it. It was at that point that Roger began to think about the dishwashing as *his* business, instead of an interim job.

"I think you're going to do just fine, Rog. Keep plugging away, that's all the advice I have for you. Don't let mistakes deter you. We all make mistakes. The smart folks try to learn from them and not to repeat the same blunders."

"Thanks again for your business, Dave. I won't forget that

you gave me a shot when I make it to the top of this game," Roger grinned, and started working on the growing pile of dishes that the busboys were beginning to stack at his station.

As the day continued into evening, Roger realized even with his new work habit – utilizing Dwayne's' mini-day concept – he was looking at a long-term project. The words from the hospital kept coming back to him, 'we'll have this straightened out in no time, couple months at the most', and he knew that, when dealing with a bureaucracy, time estimates tended to be optimistic. He had thought it would only take a day or two when he started, but now he realized it might be as much as a year. The thought of a year, under these conditions, would have terrified him a few weeks before, but the only problem he could see now was how to trade his food service credits for items he needed. Need is a relative term, though. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that most of the things he craved he didn't really *need*.

When Roger figured there would be plenty of clean dishes, pots and pans for the rest of the evening, he asked Dwayne if it would be OK to finish cleaning after he ran a quick errand. Dwayne had a quizzical look on his face, but said, "Whatever, just make sure you take care of it pretty soon, we don't want to advertise for la cucarachas at the Pollo."

Roger quickly ran over to Finnegan's to try to talk to the bartender. He'd noticed on his first visit there with Anne that

the reason service was so slow was that the owner, Charlie, was basically doing it all. He served drinks and some snacks, cleaned tables, cooked and just about anything else that needed to be done. Roger was happy to see that it was a one-man show, because he saw opportunity in that.

"Hey there, Charlie, how are ya doing?" Roger started cautiously.

"Pretty good, Rog, how's Dwayne treating you?"

"Can't complain. He's showed me the ropes and then some. One thing he did tell me is that there's no such thing as a free lunch, and no one is handing out favors, and that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"I can't talk right now, Roger, I got stuff to do."

"Well, that's exactly what I want to talk to you about. I'd like to help out some around here, and before you say anything, I'm not looking for money or any big favors."

"OK, what's on your mind, but make it quick."

"I still don't have my ID, so I'd like to trade my services for occasional food and drinks. We can work out details to suit us both, and it'll give you some much needed assistance."

"Well, that sounds OK to me. I don't have any tax forms or government b.s. to deal with, and I get your help. When are you thinking about?"

"I can come over after the Pollo closes... around ten, and help you through the rush until close a few nights a week. You tell

me what nights, and then we can play it by ear, as far as my credit."

"I think I could use you on Friday and Saturday this week. Let's try that out and go from there."

"That sounds great! I'll see you Friday." Roger got up and made his way to the door. "Thanks a lot"

"Alright, see ya later." Charlie really wasn't sure what he had gotten himself into, but he figured he really couldn't lose, and when it came to his baby, his business, some help sounded pretty good.

Roger left Finnegan's feeling pretty good about himself. The deal with Charlie took care of another need that he had, taking Anne out somewhere and paying the way. It really got him thinking about needs and wants and trying to figure out where his thoughts on the subject had changed. They certainly were different from thoughts in his old life.

Most people are lured into thinking they need 'things' by commercials influencing them directly through billboards and TV, or indirectly. The advertising works on friends and neighbors and, seeing their use of things, we decide we want the same items. Most of the things aren't needs at all, but implanted 'wants.' Roger remembered times growing up where he was mad because his friends had things and he had to do without. Somehow he'd made it through life without the Charnastic128 game system, and the 76 millimeter wrist TV. His childhood fun came from last

year's models and yet he survived mostly intact. He thought the trick, if it is a trick, is to define your own fun and not let society decide what fun is for us.

Roger thought that aside from food and shelter, what he really needed was just relaxing and getting out once in a while. One advantage of working a repetitive job was that you could think about everything in the world that you wanted to, without devoting more than a tiny portion of your brain to the work at hand. Before trying to integrate his life, Roger had found that shifts seemed to drag, and days dragged into weeks, into months, into years. That was the trap he had been in at the old job. With the new job, he found a freedom to think and plan as he worked. This could have been applied at the other job, or at any job, but he had never been exposed to this kind of thinking before, and it altered his entire outlook. His shifts now seemed to fly by, and his off time did, too. The major difference was that now he often had his brain engaged rather than on automatic, and that in his off time, because of the mini-day schedule, things were getting accomplished rather than getting put off for another day. So much of his time before had been wasted with a routine that included items that had no benefit whatsoever, such as habitual TV watching, and allowing himself to be distracted by items that had nothing to do with his goals. That was the main benefit of the schedule he now was learning to use, allotting time for specific tasks and not

deviating from those tasks during that time.

That night, after he finished the dinner clean-up, he went back to his room and began the onerous task of filling out the paperwork he had received at the hospital. The 2375 was a basic form, a request for action on any accompanying paperwork. The more he thought about it, though, the angrier he became. A piece of paper to request effort on the other pieces of paperwork? What else would you do with paperwork? The people who would get the forms would probably just file them and not take any action, if the 2375 didn't accompany the MFP package.

The age of information was turning into a time where people did exactly as they were told, no more and no less. This problem seemed to infect everyone Roger had dealt with lately, outside of the people at the Pollo. This started with the basic premise of 'big brother taking care of me'. The government had such a heavy hand dealing in people's lives that a majority of the people didn't even do any thinking for themselves anymore. This spilled right over into their jobs and, instead of thinking about the purpose of the task at hand, people did only what they were directly told to do. A package of information wasn't something to act on, unless there was an additional, outside piece of paper that basically shouted 'Hey, look at this and do what you're supposed to do!' What a sad state to live in. He realized the anger was pointless, and moved on to the rest of the paperwork

The rest proved easy to fill out. The package came with a thirty-two page booklet explaining each section. Roger really couldn't understand why a section asking for one's name and address had a half page explanation in the booklet. The explanation included such items as 'last name is to be filled in space labeled: name, last, block one, section one'. Why is so much money spent on public high schools, when all government forms are only assuming a sixth grade reading level? The thing that infuriated Roger the most was that all publications were ten times longer than they had to be, due to the fact they were printed in ten languages, largely because of a decision that came down from the Supreme Court declaring that anything less would be discrimination towards those who didn't speak, read, or understand English. The forefathers of this country sat down and decided that in order to avoid the chaos of a multi-lingual existence, they would pick a language to unite us all and bring a universal understanding to our nation. This notion was lost sometime in the late nineteen-seventies or early eighties. (If anyone has found this notion, please return it to the federal government, thank you!) The thing Roger found most infuriating was that English wasn't even the first language listed on most of the paperwork. Finding it was sometimes the biggest challenge.

After completing the MFP package, Roger was ready to call it a day. All of the effort put forth seemed such a colossal waste

of time and energy. The thought of what he was going through made him wonder how many other people went through this sort of thing, and how much of the government's time went into straightening out things that had resulted from someone's ineptitude or slipshod attitude. The Bureau of Information was dedicated (perhaps dedicated is too strong a word) to putting things right that had gone awry. The office was one of the larger ones in the public sector, which gave Roger the idea that his wasn't the first item that had departed from reality. The establishment of such a monument to government ineptitude was an amazing statement of the confidence of the different sectors of government to handle their own mistakes. Knowing such a bureau existed could only contribute to the lack of responsibility. Hey, if I do too good a job over here, someone could lose a job over there, and I don't want that on my conscience.

This carried over into the private sector, as Dr. Snyder attested to. Since the bureau was there to correct mistakes that were made, individuals could just relax and work in any fashion, just to get the job out the door. In the case of the hospital, the 'job' was processing people, but this didn't mean you had to be responsible for the treatment, or the outcome, only the numbers that went through your station.

When did responsibility become a four-letter word? Very few people will accept responsibility for their own actions, let alone seek out greater responsibilities. Individual rights are

the results of assuming responsibility for your own actions. Without personal responsibility, individuals are basically demanding their rights be limited. How often do you hear people complaining about the government, yet when you ask, they don't vote or express their views to anyone who could do anything to correct the situation they're unhappy about? What difference would it make, they ask. If the apathy wasn't so widespread, it could make one hell of a difference. United We Stand shouldn't be an organization; it should be the premise that underlines the sentiments of the country.

Roger's head was beginning to throb, and he was sure that it was from doing more thinking than he had ever done before in his adult life. He thought more on the job as a dishwasher than he had ever done as an accountant. This had nothing to do with the actual job, but rather with the jolt to his system which was making him think about 'The Big Picture'. He also felt that he needed to try to get this message out, to try to wake people up to the deterioration of life. The Gospel According to Roger, Chapter One, Verse One: And Roger spoke, and said, 'Thou shalt not accept a government that is as pathetic as ours has become, and thou shalt get off your dead asses and become involved in improving the system, or perhaps scrapping the system, and starting over again.' Amen.

*Chapter 6*

As time passed and Roger became more integrated into his new life, he began to notice things, just little things about people, that he had never really paid attention to before. He was trying to find the key to happiness, as most of people are, and to accomplish this, he figured that instead of a positive outlook on life, he'd try a negative one. Dwayne had suggested this approach and it didn't sound particularly attractive to Roger until he really thought about it. He knew that millions of dollars were spent every year 'feel good, positive thinking, self help sort of seminars, books and tapes. Pretty much everyone Roger knew, including himself had taken one of these classes or purchased a book with little or nothing to show for it long term. Sure maybe a temporary improvement in outlook or self-image for a few weeks, but nothing permanent. Some of the better courses he had taken had engaged his brain, or applied one concept which generated an ongoing improvement in one area of his life, and that was great. Most of the courses he's heard about really only improved things for the author or the team putting on the seminar, with little or no long term improvement for anyone else. Where are people going to turn, though, when they know things could be better for them? Any port in a storm.

Negative thinking, in Roger's mind, wasn't what most people think of as negative thinking. His idea was to find the negative things and eliminate them and what's left behind is a decent working model or maybe nothing at all, and in the latter case,

then he knew the idea probably wasn't worth pursuing. If you've got something left, then build on it until there is a well-thought-out plan of action. He figured to check out all the people he could and see what made them happy, and what made them unhappy. With this information, he could try to build a model to base his life on. This was his plan, and he thought that it would give him his best shot at happiness. *What is the point of life if you're not happy?* he thought, "*Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*" - solid words to live by.

With the best place to start out being the place that you are, Roger began at the Pollo. A restaurant isn't the best place to look for negatives, because most people are in a better mood when they are getting something to eat. Getting a good meal might be one of the great pleasures in life, especially if you don't have to cook it, serve it, or clean up afterwards. People can still show an ugly side though; as any waiter or busboy can attest to. When people are out to eat they tend to lay a blanket of blame, instead of directing the critique to the correct source. If the restaurant is too cold, don't blame the waitress, ask if the heat can be turned up. If your food isn't good, the fault lies with the cook. When you are at work, does the client blame you if it is raining outside, or if he didn't dress warmly enough? Corrective action can only be taken by the responsible party.

Roger figured he would start with his co-workers and would

question the first one who happened by. Anne tried to waltz past, (1,2,3-1,2,3) but he quickly called her over.

"Anne, could you come over here? I want to ask you something."

"Alright, but make it quick, I got customers here."

"What is it that makes you happy? I mean, really gives you pleasure."

"What are you driving at Rog? Do you want to know what to do to satisfy me?"

"Well. I do want to know that, too," he grinned, "but I really am asking about the big picture. You know, what do you enjoy doing and would spend time at if only you had more time?"

"What I'd *like* to do and what I *have* to do are two different things, and right now I have to take care of some customers."

Roger knew that if he wanted to find out about people that he had to talk to them when they had time and when they were in a mood to shoot the breeze. At work wasn't the place to do it. Even if they wanted to, there just wasn't enough time to take care of business and discuss the deeper meaning of life. The truth was work was work and unless you were one of the lucky ones, that was how it stood.

He could hear Dwayne's voice in his head. "But, what if you didn't settle for doing something that you didn't get pleasure out of? What if the one thing you wanted to do, you could make a living at? Would you be willing to cut back on the things that you really don't need? You don't need to keep up with the

Jones's. Or do you? It's a matter of how you want to live your life. Spend your day miserable or unfulfilled, so you can enjoy the money and your free time, or spend your day groovin' and enjoy the simple life, more of it, with the people you love. Is it so important to have a new car, or a quicker computer, or a wardrobe that is "in fashion?" In fashion is just the designers' way of selling you more clothes when last years suit is still in fine shape. You only wore it to the office party that one time and then out to dinner. Do you need new clothes the way someone might need a meal. No way....Then why is it that our society pushes the latest model at you? You don't want to be "stuck" in last year's car, do you? My gosh, what would the neighbors think? If they are like more than half the world, I got news for you, they *don't* think. They let someone else tell them what they think and then they parrot it back and think how clever they are."

The thoughts spinning through his head were causing a bit of vertigo. It had been years since he'd done any serious thinking and the effort was really unfamiliar.

## *Chapter 7*

After finishing up the dinner dishes, Roger asked Anne if she wanted to stop and somewhere for a drink.

"That'd be great, Roger. After the day I've had, I'd like to relax for a little bit."

"I reserved a table over at Finnegan's. Maybe we could have an appetizer and talk for a bit."

"Sounds good, let me finish up here. I'll be ready in a couple minutes."

Within a few minutes she was done, and they headed over to Finnegan's. They settled into a booth towards the back, and Roger ordered some nachos. After it arrived he dove right into, not the nachos, but the conversation.

"Anne, even though we've only known each other for a little while, I feel like I can talk to you."

"I hope this isn't one of those too serious, too quick, relationship-type conversations," she said with an uncertain look on her face.

"No, no, nothing like that." Roger worried he was getting started on the wrong foot, but also felt he needed to press on.

"I am confused with my life. Well, not this life, the restaurant and all, but actually with my other life, at the firm. I thought I was, well, not exactly happy, but I felt I was on the right path and doing what I was supposed to be doing, but now I don't think that at all. I think I was working myself to

death. No, not to death, but until death. Like I was filling in the time, and not enjoying life. Do you have any idea what I'm talking about, or is this all just gibberish?"

Anne sat quietly for a moment. She knew what Roger was talking about, but needed to collect her thoughts. "I know what you mean. I think you were in the same place as most people, but you got a wake up call. I think you needed that. My Mom always told me to look on everything as a blessing, no matter what it was. I used to think that was crazy when I was younger, but now, I can see better what she meant. I thought the worst night of my life was when my ex decided he was leaving. He probably decided it long before then, but I mean the night I found out. I thought my life was over. But it was just another beginning. That's what you had, too."

"I have come to look on it like that. With my ID card, even losing my job, I would have just found the same type job somewhere else. I wouldn't have found this, and you."

"I don't know that finding me is such a treat, but growing as a person is what we were meant to do, I think."

"You shouldn't put yourself down like that. You are a treat, actually more like a treasure...to me, anyway. I have learned so much from everyone at the Pollo, but I want to dig a little deeper. What are people's goals and dreams and how did they end up where they are. Did they settle for this job or drift into

it? Does it make them happy, or should they be looking to be happy? What about you Anne? How would you answer those?" His intent look flustered her.

"I, I don't know," she started out, faltering. "I really wasn't expecting all this tonight, but maybe it will help me to gain a little clarity myself to talk about it."

Now Roger hesitated. "I'm not trying to push you. If you'd rather not talk about it, we can talk about customers or the weather or 'us.' Whatever you choose."

"No, now that it's on the table, with the nachos," She smiled, "I *would* like to have this conversation. I like the freedom this job gives me. I am lucky to have a job at all really. When Dwayne hired me, I was still confused personally and the doctor hadn't found the right prescription to hold me firm in this persona. That was a huge hurdle for Dwayne to get over, but he saw potential, he said, so he took a chance, and it has really helped me to get grounded."

"Sometimes getting grounded, or even 'brought to Earth' jars you enough to restart your engine," Roger interjected excitedly.

"Yeah, after a few more visits to my shrink, I finally got on the right scrip and the rest of my life sort of fell into place. It's been months now since I've had an episode, apart from the other day when I stopped taking the pills, I mean. I don't really know what I want yet, but I have been doing a lot of thinking and reading. Listening to Dwayne has really helped me

out. He talks about stuff, nothing I can really quote or anything, just 'stuff' and it makes me think about life and how things work, and how I used to think. Maybe that's why I don't know what I want to do with my life yet. I am still sorting out what is real and what is make-believe. I still think I want to be a secretary of some sort, but I want to work for a cause, not just for a check."

"Now you've got me curious about what else is going on in Dwayne's head," Roger interjected. "I've talked to him about organizing and trying to get my life back together and business, but make-believe? That seems very far from my impression of him."

"I didn't mean he's in some fantasy world. Just that some of his beliefs are pretty far out there, but he says they are all based in scientific studies that were done and from personal experience, and I believe he believes it, anyway. He's not trying to sell me a wolf ticket or anything."

Seeing the look on Roger's face she started to laugh. "That's one of my old terms. When someone is trying to get you to believe some line they are like the boy who cried wolf. Selling you something you don't need or that's not true. Get it?"

Roger smiled and knew he was going to keep an eye out for that type of sales person. He'd seen them before, but he wasn't always sure if someone was putting him on until after his money was gone. "Thanks for sharing, and I hate to stop now, but I

have to be up early tomorrow, and it's already after midnight."

"Yeah, I have to get going, too. Breakfast shift again tomorrow, myself."

Roger walked her back to her place and then headed for the Pollo. He got into bed and was asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

## *Chapter 8*

When he woke up the next morning he was looking forward to some time with Dwayne. He had set up a meeting with Dwayne for eight that night, and the restaurant never seemed to slow down. The only breaks he had were filled with running back and forth between the Pollo and Dave's Deli. Before he knew it, it was almost eight and he was headed to Dwayne's office.

He knocked on the door, "Hey Dwayne, it's Roger."

"Come on in Roger, I'm just finishing up something. I'll be right with you. Sit down." Dwayne completed the row of figures in the ledger and then put it away. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"We've talked before about how I could fit in around here, and I have followed what you said pretty much to a T. It's really been amazing some of the things I've accomplished and also just the way I am looking at life. Different and astounding actually, and I was hoping maybe you could talk to me about how you got to the point you are at, what sort of things have been 'aha' moments for you, and stuff like that. I've been talking to everyone I know getting different points of view, and because I really respect where you are at, so, here I am."

Dwayne smiled, and gave Roger a knowing look. "I'm glad things are working out for you. It's like I told you before, sometimes people fit in and sometimes they don't, and it looks like you fit."

Roger leaned forward in his seat.

Dwayne cleared his throat and began. "My journey started with the notion that the world wasn't exactly as the people on top would have you think. I started looking for answers outside the normal channels of education. I found some old information on what is called creating your reality. The concept has been around for ages, literally, and somehow most people have never even heard of it. Anyhow, here's what I think. People are addicted to their behavior and even if they don't 'like' their situation, it is a situation they got themselves into, they are comfortable in that situation, and they really don't want to get out of it. They are addicted to the emotions they have, just as surely as a drug user is addicted to the drugs. To create a new reality, I needed to not only act differently, but also to *think* differently. I found I could think myself into believing something and that between thinking about it and acting on it, things changed."

Roger couldn't help but interject. "That's interesting, but it isn't easy to change the way you think. I find myself falling into old habits when I'm not thinking about what I'm doing."

"It is true that habits can take hold of your behavior. Something interesting I ran across was that the origin of the word habit means garment. Think a 'riding habit' like equestrians have. Habits are garments worn by our personality. A habit is an addiction to a certain behavior. And don't get me wrong, not all habits are bad. If you have a habit of exercising

and eating right, that's a good thing, as long as you don't get carried away or take it to extremes. The thing about habits is that it takes 21 days to break one. If you can manage to change for 21 days, you have overcome the psychological addiction to the behavior."

"OK, say I can overcome my old addictions, my bad habits and all that stuff, how can I get anywhere in life with all the things that come up all the time? Every day I have things blocking me. I don't just mean work, because I know about that. I'm talking about the stuff that just seems to crop up and kill all the hours and occupy my time." Roger had found himself working on tasks that were totally unrelated to anything he needed to get done and the self-sabotage drove him crazy. Why was he cleaning his room when he should be going over to Dave's to get another job done?

"Well, I think you are running across that in your quest for your ID. The trick to getting somewhere is having a destination in mind before you start the journey. If you meander through life without a specific goal, you are going to get what you are after - nothing. It's like a story I sometimes tell. A little kid goes to a gumball machine. He pays, turns the handle and out pops a gumball. That's the way it works. Next to that machine is a mystery prize machine. You know what I mean...on the front of the machine are all kinds of cool prizes you might get for your money, but it is a crap shoot. The child might get the stickers

they've always dreamed of, but they might get the plastic ring. They just don't know. Some people are happy getting the gumball. They slide their card and chew on it. Some people slide their card in the gumball machine and hope to get the stickers and just don't understand why they always get a gumball. I'm not saying it's bad to get a gumball. Some people want the gumball. But, some people get the gumball, chew the gumball and complain about getting gumballs, but they never leave the gumball machine. Some of those same folks get pissed off if they see you moving to a different machine. "What right do you have to move away from the gumball machine?" they ask. I say if you keep doing what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got. Maybe it's time to move to a new machine, you know? A new situation. If the old paradigm isn't working for you, why do you keep working at it?"

Roger's head was spinning. Creating reality, addictions, habits, gumballs. It was all piling up in his brain. Dwayne was giving him a quizzical look, and had stopped speaking. "I need to get a handle on all this stuff. You've given me more to think about in the last ten minutes than I think I got during my last year of college."

Dwayne gave a low chuckle and said, "Give it time to settle in and really think about it. Change doesn't happen overnight. You didn't get to where you were at in a few days or months, so don't think the change will happen instantly."

"Thanks again for taking the time to talk to me. I will give all of this serious thought. It makes sense on the surface; I just need to let it sink in." Roger eased out of his chair and walked back to his room. He felt like he needed time, but also that he wanted to talk to Ron before he slept on the new information. He wanted to let it all percolate and knew that a good night's sleep would help his brain assimilate the new stuff and maybe overwrite the old 'truths.'

After drinking a cup of coffee, he wandered up to the reception area to look for Ron. He knew this time of day the restaurant was pretty well empty, so it was a good time for Ron to shoot the breeze. As suspected, Ron was sitting at one of the booths near the podium looking at the paper.

"What's new in the world? Anything worth knowing about?"

"I heard a rumor that you were on the prowl today looking for answers to the questions that keep going through your mind." Ron smiled and nodded his head to indicate the seat across from him. "Fire away, I know I'd have to get to this sooner or later. It's not like I could avoid you...not that I want to. I think you know by now that Dwayne doesn't hire anyone who he thinks won't fit in, so we all have a bit of the 'minds that want to know' going on."

"Well, I know we've talked a couple times before, but what I'd like to know is what you think really makes an impact, you know maybe something else I can really use, not just theories or

'new-agey' kind of thinking."

"The thing that has made the most difference for me is defining where I want to be. I know it sounds strange, the creating reality thing, but if you think about it, it's been around forever. Everyone has created what they have now. Decisions and thinking impact what you are. When a young person chooses to go to work or college, they are visualizing what their life could be like for the different possibilities. People just need to hold themselves to the vision and make it happen."

"That's great, but where is the 'real' stuff? I want something to do *today*." Roger felt like he was making progress, but was sometimes frustrated by the wish-upon-a-star vagueness he sometimes got from Dwayne, and now from Ron.

"Ok, here's real. Set the goal, and then set a conclusion. What will be done by this Friday, or some definite time for completion. Then as you are going about your business, say to yourself, 'Is this action getting me closer to my goal?' If the answer is yes, keep doing it, and if the answer is no, ask yourself why you are doing it at all. For example, I want to own a five star restaurant and make people feel welcome. Every day I come in here, I am making money to save for my start-up, getting experience in the business and making contacts with people I will do business with in the future. My plan always has three action items. It is getting me closer to my goal every day. Talking to you doesn't directly get me toward my goal, but this

talking helps clarify things in my mind, so it is a step in the right direction, not moving away from the goal. Get it?"

Roger nodded and proclaimed, "That gives me something solid to work on! That is the sort of thing I was hoping to hear, concrete direction."

"The other stuff will be just as important to you as you get further along on your journey. I think actually it will be more important than the 'here and now' stuff, but you have to take the first step, which you have, and eventually you will soar. Now," Ron stated, as he got up, "I need to make sure everything is ready for tonight's crowd. Take care, Roger, I'm sure you'll get where you want to go." With that Ron headed to the waitress station to check the menus and supplies.

Roger went back to the kitchen to see if there were any dishes piling up and also to do some thinking about all that Dwayne and Ron had said. After a while he knew he wasn't making progress on his thoughts and figured he's let his subconscious take over for a while. Sometimes he found that the pieces of a puzzle fit better if he just stopped thinking.

He walked away from the sink once the dishes were done and gradually drifted toward the entrance. Business was pretty slow, even for a Saturday and he found himself leaning on the counter talking with Sue. "How long have you been a waitress, Sue?"

"About fifteen years, full time, couple before that, part-time. I was still in High School then...," She replied wistfully.

Roger picked up on the short sigh that followed. "What makes you stay?" he queried. "It doesn't seem like your heart is in it."

"Ha, why would you think that had anything to do with it? I'm a good waitress. It's what I know. Besides, we have fun here. Everyone treats you like family. That's what I like about it. Even most of the customers are OK," Sue replied.

"That's true. It's one of the things I've really come to love about this place. I never felt that way at my old job, even though I was there for a long time. It still felt like I was just putting in time, waiting until I could retire. I know I'd still be there going through the motions of a career, if I hadn't 'died.'"

"You know...you are asking all these questions, but I have to ask one myself. If you didn't like it there, and you have this burning inside you, why did you stay as long as you did? You were there, what, 12 years?"

Actually thirteen years, but who's counting," He replied with a weak laugh. "I never questioned it. I started there right after college and didn't have anything really to complain about. I liked looking at the numbers and the books. There was a thrill when everything worked out to the penny and I was the keeper." Roger remembered the joy he had with numbers at the beginning, but he also knew that had been extinguished pretty quickly. He hadn't felt that way in... well, he couldn't even remember when.

Over ten years at least. "But since I have been talking to Dwayne, I'm thinking it was a combination of being what he calls 'addicted' to my pattern of behavior and being 'comfortable' even though I wasn't happy."

"Well, that's about the same with me here," Sue countered. "I get by with what I make here and even manage to put a little aside so once in a while I can buy something nice. I'll admit to comfortable, but I don't know about the addicted part. That seems too extreme a word for me."

"But, don't you want more?" Roger asked. "Aren't there things you would rather do?"

"I used to think about going back to school to be a beautician, and open my own shop, but I'm too old for that now."

"That's crazy. You're younger than me, and whatever you do it should be to bring joy to your life and leave you fulfilled. Think about the passion you would have going to your own place instead of making money for someone else."

"Maybe I'll look into it. It can't hurt to check it out. I think maybe Monday I'll do it."

"Why wait until Monday? I know there is a school only about seven blocks from here. I got my hair cut there a couple times. A few of those girls thought it was great to get a free lunch to do a hair cut. They aren't really allowed to charge yet, and I don't have any real money yet, so it works out all around. I know some of them are there weekends, too. They'd be happy to

talk to you about it."

"I really would like that." A smile came to her face, just a hint of one really, but Roger could see the wheels spinning in her head.

"Oops, there's a customer, gotta go." Sue scurried off, but Roger knew that something might come of their conversation, and her happiness made him think even more about true callings, and following your heart.

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*Interlude*

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How many people work at jobs they just don't like, or even jobs they hate? They are working for a company, complaining about the company, yet trying to get a job for their son/daughter/friend because it's stable or a "good place to work." Roger couldn't figure out the contradiction. It had to be fear of the unknown or thoughts of dread as they pondered moving on. Maybe they didn't even consider it. That was something he hadn't thought about. Maybe acceptance of the current state, the status quo, was the norm. Did people just drift into jobs and then stay there thinking that was the best they could do, when they never really chose that job from the beginning? Do people look at the want ads for a specific thing, thinking " I really want to do THIS" or do they look and think, "Oh, I can do that" not realizing they don't really want to do that job; it is only a means to pay the bills.

If there is pressure to pay the bills (which is the case most of the time), then the first job that comes along with the hourly rate to cover the bills will probably be one that ends up as the career. Not exactly what the guidance counselor suggested. Roger kept thinking about his current situation and realized the predicament he was in was really a blessing in disguise. The time had afforded him the opportunity to really figure out what he wanted to do. Having an idea of what you want to do before you start looking for the situation can really

help you to be what you want to be, and do what you want to do.  
"Be all you can be," brilliant concept, but also be all you want  
to be and do what you want to do.

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*End of Interlude*

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## *Chapter 9*

The guidance he received from Dick truly helped moved the process along. Knowing the right forms and getting the inside scoop made him feel like he finally had some control of his life. Even though he *really* didn't like getting up at 5 A.M., the time gained was invaluable to his progress. He figured the initial shot at the paperwork shouldn't take more than a couple hours. Of course that also meant a few days, since his schedule had filled out with the demands of his three customers. The upside was that his life was starting to seem a little bit normal, whatever that means.

The alarm jarred him awake, and he lay still for a few minutes getting his head together for the day. Those few minutes of peace just after waking up were like a gift from the universe. He filled his head with positive thoughts on what the day would bring, and the exercise really seemed to work. Dwayne had talked to him about that a few weeks back...

"I know this is going to seem, well, strange, but hear me out," Dwayne began. "I find the start of a day sets the pace for the entire day. And I don't mean the first encounter with another person, or even how getting dressed or "the routine" goes. I mean when I first get up in the morning, even before I roll out of bed, I like to run a sort of dress rehearsal for my

day."

"What the heck are you talking about? I don't even believe my mind is in gear until I hit the can, have a cup of coffee and gradually get my bearings," Roger responded.

"That's exactly what I am talking about. You don't have your 'head together' yet, so that is the perfect time to get it together in a focused life-affirming way. Starting out the day focusing on the wealth you have, and thinking about what you plan to get accomplished will bring more wealth to you and help you to get the things done that you are trying to get done without allowing yourself to get caught up in the things you don't want or need to do."

"But I..."

"Wait, let me finish. I know maybe you don't think you have 'wealth' but it really depends on what you consider wealth. Freedom and enough to eat is great wealth, so you just have to focus on what you have, not what you think you ought to have. And then to picture the perfect sequence and outcome of your day will also help that to materialize."

"I've done pretty well with the quick days and finding work, you know, working my own 'business', but this seems kinda 'out there,' if you know what I mean," Roger replied.

"I thought the same thing when I heard it, but trust me and give it a chance."

"Well, it can't hurt to try."

"You've got to do more than try Roger, *really believe* and it will work. Speaking of work, I have to get back to it."

"Yeah, me too. I will start tomorrow with the early morning visualization, and we'll see what comes of it." With that, Roger left the office and went back to the kitchen to catch up on the accumulating dishes.

The plan for the day and seeing it as successful before he even got out of bed put a hop, skip and a jump into his routine. When he got out to the sinks, he found himself whistling a tune. Anne walked in to say hi and started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Roger asked curiously.

"Do you realize what you are whistling?"

Roger thought about it, and started laughing himself. "Always look at the bright side of life" was a Monty Python tune that somehow was getting caught in his head on a regular basis, but he didn't realize it had surfaced until now. He didn't think it had ever surfaced back at Murdock's. No big surprise there. "Hey, I can be a good mood, if I want," he joked. It was a good start to the day.

The lack of large roasting pans and assorted pots always made the breakfast dishes seem to be the quickest cleanup of the day. Roger hadn't even thought about the dishwashing, it was just suddenly complete. He had similar experiences back in the days when he had a car and used to drive to work. He'd be pulling

into the lot and suddenly realizing that he didn't remember anything after starting the car. Auto pilot syndrome, he'd heard it called.

Of course that was before the realization that private vehicles were a drag on the economy. The government decree to ban all private transportation was the final blow to the faltering US automotive industry, but the labor force was a boon to other industries. The only private transportation anymore was for government officials and rock stars. Who knew how all of it worked, but the move to mass transit also moved the market from oil to hydrogen. Suddenly all the hubbub in the mid-east had calmed down and the uber-rich Arabic princes returned to the sands.

## *Chapter 10*

Once the dishes were done, Roger hurried to the Bureau of Information. His private transport system needed replacement soon and he thought of the tire-tread sandals of his youth as he rushed down the side walk. Although he saw many people scurrying about none of them would look him in the eyes. Their movements seemed furtive and evasive. The easygoing stroll was a thing of the past, and suspicion had replaced amiability. Roger wasn't looking to make friends, and was also in a hurry, but the lack of civility was appalling. At least the avoidance of eye contact also meant there was no jostling or impacts. That would have meant the possibility of having to explain oneself, and the privacy standards made that nearly taboo.

He arrived at the address Dick Tracey had given him and was surprised to see the main entrance was a more or less nondescript set of double doors. He walked up to the counter and pulled a number out of the dispenser. The display on the wall read "197." Glancing down at his ticket, he saw he was number 212. No one was waiting in the lounge area and, likewise, the space behind the counter was also vacant. He knew from experience that the likelihood of someone showing up unannounced was extremely unlikely, so he started knocking on the counter. There was no immediate response.

Gradually increasing the frequency and the volume, after

about ten minutes a door opened and the spectacled head of an older woman peered out.

"What's all the racket about?" She glared at Roger as if daring him to answer.

"I'm looking to get a 'verification of death notice' inserted into my GF 2375 form." He answered her with a firm voice. The advice from Dick Tracey seemed to be paying off.

"What number do you have?" she asked, looking at the wall display.

"I have number 212, but there doesn't seem to be anyone waiting here."

"Other people are in the back being served," she said with a look of disdain.

"Why haven't the numbers been advanced then?" Roger countered.

She advanced to the counter and popped the toggle until 211 was lit under the 'Now being served' legend. Each click of the toggle brought another twitch to her sardonic mouth. "Are you happy now?"

Disregarding the sarcasm, Roger kept his end of the transaction polite.

"Thank you very much. One more thing, could you please let me know how long it might be? I'm trying to get this done before I have to get to work."

"You'll probably be at least another hour. Even then you'll

get sent on your way because paperwork is missing." The second sentence seemed to come unbidden through her lips. Roger saw a brief look of puzzlement on her face as the unexpected bit of information popped out of her mouth.

"I also have my MFP package 72, if that's what you are talking about," He exclaimed.

Now the look of puzzlement took full bloom. It was as if she'd never heard anyone utter that sentence before. Roger pounced before she had a chance to disappear.

"Could you please get me my 'Verification of Death' notice? I'm sure it wouldn't take someone of your expertise long to get that done. Then I'd be out of your hair." He kept their eyes locked, and her above-it-all attitude seemed to disappear. On the plus side, the thought of being an expert also squared her shoulders and gave her the impetus to actually do her job. She popped through the doorway, and Roger returned to the bench.

He had hardly settled in when she reappeared. "Is there something else I needed to have?" Roger asked, not really expecting her to know.

"Here you go," she said. "Your file was right where it was supposed to be, and since you had all the paperwork filled out correctly, I didn't see any need to keep you waiting. If more people would just have their paperwork in order and complete, maybe there would be less frustration around here.

I don't actually remember the last time I gave one of those

out. Most people come in here demanding action and don't even know what they are asking for. It really is a mess. Bow down to the paperwork gods. Hail to the correction fluid gods!"

She then turned around and marched back into the maze of cubicles hidden behind the door. Roger hardly knew what to think, but he knew that he had another piece of the puzzle in his hand, and he wasn't going to question the lunacy of the establishment.

He got back to the Pollo with no time to spare. He had wanted to share his victory with Dwayne, but the mid-size pile of earthenware made him quickly scurry to work. As he was loading the washer, Roger reflected on the trip to the Bureau of Information. He had dealings with government agencies much more in the past weeks than ever before in his life, but this was the best he'd ever done. The key, he thought, was the clear target and really knowing what he needed to do to accomplish it. Most of the thanks for his expertise went to Dick Tracey for defining the path, but putting the knowledge to work was all his own doing.

The woman at the bureau was practically forced to help, just because he wouldn't allow her to run over him. They were used to powerless victims coming in meekly with no direction, and he didn't fit into that mold anymore. Merely thinking about that made him stand a little straighter and know that his strength

was going to make the rest of the journey successful despite any barriers he encountered.

When Dwayne came back to pick up some soup tureens, Roger practically ambushed him. "You won't believe what happened at the Bureau of Information. I..."

"You got what you went for?" Dwayne interrupted with.

"How did you know that?"

"Roger, when someone has a purpose and a plan, they are almost unstoppable. As a matter of fact, I'll make a prediction. My prediction is that you will persevere and succeed sooner than you thought. The only way that you will be blocked will be by yourself, if you allow that to happen. People nowadays aren't used to someone with determination. It's just too unusual and they don't know how to deal with it, except to acquiesce. Knowing the journey is more than half the battle."

Roger smiled and nodded. "I guess that sums it up. After lunch I'm going to succeed at the hospital, and tomorrow I'll get my ID back."

The finality in his voice made Dwayne laugh. "That's the best way to go into it. Knowing you will succeed precedes success. Talk to you later."

"Right, see ya." Roger's mind was exploding with thoughts and ideas. He wasn't limited in life, like he used to think. The possibilities were staggering.

Once the piles were gone and the lunch rush was over, Roger headed to the hospital. He found Dr. Snyder in his office and got him to fill in section fourteen of the 'verification of death' certificate. The funny part was that that section normally would be to certify that death had occurred, but it was also used, in rare instances, to recognize that life was still ongoing.

"Do you get many of these?" he asked, as the doctor seemed to be struggling with the phrasing.

"I sign these all the time, but I never had to do the 'still living and breathing part' before this. The paperwork is much easier when you are going from life to death, rather than vice versa. I wonder if I can claim this as a resuscitation and send a bill?" The last part was muttered under his breath, and although Roger wanted to say something, he figured it would be better to let sleeping dogs lie.

With a flourish, he signed and handed the file back to Roger. "Good luck with all this, I'd imagine it's been a nightmare."

"Actually, it's been an education, thanks for your help." Roger knew he'd be seeing Dr. Snyder again as a member of the review board, so he again kept a civil tongue, even though the good luck part seemed empty of feeling. Dr. Snyder looked at him with amazement, as he was used to hearing complaints on paperwork all the time. This was the first incident of polite

response he'd had on the red tape trail.

"Could you tell me how to find Mr. Taft? I need him to sign block seven to authenticate your signature." Roger hoped his earlier restraint had put him on the doctor's good side.

"Let's see, it's around three o'clock, so if he's not playing golf, he's probably down at the snack bar. The other possibility, and it's a remote one, would be in his office. That's in "D" wing, room D514."

"Thank you. I'll start at the snack bar. Thanks again for your time and the directions for Mr. Taft."

The ride in the elevator to the snack bar was uneventful, but Roger felt a slight case of nerves. Roger knew he had nothing to fear, especially, but Mr. Taft was the president of the hospital and the highest ranking official he'd had to deal with. Roger also knew that anyone in a position like that probably wouldn't be too thrilled to learn of a mistake, and would avoid any implication of fault, if at all possible. Signing the verification form might be seen as admission of guilt, or as a chance to help correct an unfortunate situation. Roger visualized a sympathetic meeting, and prayed it would be so.

The doors opened and the smell of heat-lamped grease hit him like a tsunami. As he walked toward the café, he spied the forlorn baskets of limp fries and dried out chicken fingers. He was glad he hadn't eaten much prior to arriving. Even so, he could feel his stomach protesting the lard-fried food. A quick

glance around the place revealed only three patrons. A young couple was seated at a booth, and an older man was sitting at the counter looking at a paper and absent-mindedly picking at a carton of the fries. Roger figured him to be Mr. Taft, since the heat would have driven most men to at least loosen their tie. But perhaps not a president.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for Mr. Taft, the hospital President, and I thought that you looked somewhat, well, presidential sitting there. Have I found the right man?" Roger had worked out that intro while riding in the elevator, and it seemed to have the effect he was looking for. The man squared his shoulders, cleared his throat, and said, "Yes, I am Mr. Taft...the President."

"My name is Roger Whitley, and I am in the process of correcting a clerical error, on the part of the Bureau of Information, and I just need to get your signature on this 'Death Notice' paperwork." He handed the sheet to Taft and as he was looking it over, Roger continued, "Dr. Snyder already filled out section fourteen, and I have cleared it all through the Bureau of Information, so if you could please sign it, I can be out of your hair."

It was then that Roger noticed that Mr. Taft was wearing a toupee. Roger gulped as Taft glared at him. "Just an expression," Roger managed to squeak out.

"Mr. Taft, I do apologize for interrupting your break, and

for any offense I might have caused, but I am under a lot of duress here, with the whole death thing hanging over my head, and I would really, really appreciate it if you could find it in your heart to help me out with this...sir."

Mr. Taft cleared his throat again, and with a slight look of pain, scribbled his mark on the form. "Mr. Whitley, I hope this is the end of this. We really can't be bailing out the government every time something like this comes up." He handed the form back to Roger, and went back to his newspaper.

Roger walked out of the café, pushed the down arrow, and waited for the elevator. Time seemed to be in a holding pattern, but eventually the doors slid open and he got in. He reached for the button to get him to the ground floor, but instead pushed the button for the first floor. He decided to stop in and pay a visit to Dick Tracey and thank him for the help and guidance he'd been given. He got off the elevator and headed for room 124. It seemed like ages since he'd been there, although it was only a few weeks. Things had changed so much in his life even he could hardly believe it.

"Knock, knock," he called out as he entered the room. "Dick, are you in here."

"Who's calling for me?" Dick walked up to the counter. "Do I know you?" he asked.

"Roger Whitley," Roger replied. "I was in here a few weeks ago asking about getting my ID back, and forms and stuff. You

helped me out with the paperwork and explaining the channels and all. I just wanted to thank you."

"Yeah, it's all coming back to me. You were one of the living dead, yes?"

"That's right, that was me. I'm almost done with the process now. I can't believe what a nightmare it's been. It seems like everyone is trying to avoid doing anything. I guess if you don't do anything, you can't get blamed for anything. What a way to run a country."

"It wasn't like this years ago Roger. When I first started at the hospital it was a place for action. People had a purpose and that was helping and healing patients. Now it has turned into a bureaucratic nightmare. You're not the first person to come here and try to get things straightened out, but I'll tell you something if you want to hear it."

Roger leaned in, "I'm all ears."

"The only ones who get anywhere are the ones that have a hard target they are working toward. 90% of the answer is knowing the right questions to ask, and where to ask them. Actually, just knowing *that* puts you ahead of the crowd. I'm glad if anything I said helped you out."

"Without you, I don't know how I would have gotten any of it done."

"Like I said, anyone who won't give up will get their mission done. I may have helped you with part of it, but you'd have

gotten it done without my help, as long as you kept at it." Dick nodded his head and looked at Roger knowingly.

"Well, thanks anyway. I don't know where I would have found out all you told me, so I'm glad to have met you." Roger turned and headed out the door. He looked back and saw Dick smiling, and he was glad he'd thought to make the side trip to see him.

## *Chapter 11*

Once again Roger headed back to the Pollo, getting back to work, and looking forward to the next day, which luckily was a Monday, the traditional day off for restaurateurs.

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Try to get a good meal or a haircut on a Monday. Odds are pretty good you will have to search around. Yes, you'll find the fast food and quick cuts places open, but most of your high-end eateries and beauty salons are closed. Do they have secret society meetings on those days? Is there a conspiracy or a clandestine hair/food connection the general public doesn't know about? There probably already is a secret government agency looking into just that issue, and they probably have an office in the building housing the Bureau of Information, but I didn't tell you that.

~

Roger was standing in front of the Bureau of Information at 8:55 AM waiting for the doors to open. Although most government buildings have lobbies that open prior to the official start of business, the B of I was not one of them. Most mornings they were lucky to get the doors open on time, let alone early. The labyrinth of cubicles were full of people prior to nine, but most of them were already busy checking their horoscopes and brewing tiny little pots of coffee, trying to start their days off without too much interference by actual work-related items.

Opening the doors to let in more work was the furthest thing from most minds. Paperwork filled the majority of in-boxes like butter fills the nooks and crannies of an English muffin, and, in general, the paper shufflers were willing to let the butter drip off their muffins and throw the plate in the trash. That fact notwithstanding, Roger was prepared to challenge the status quo and get his muffin buttered properly.

As soon as the doors were unlocked, promptly at 9:11 A.M., Roger grabbed a number from the dispenser and checked the display on the wall to make sure it was in sync with paper ticket in his hand. He stayed at the counter awaiting the arrival of the clerk, careful to abstain from ringing the buzzer. The buzzer has been known to cause a shift in the time-space continuum, especially in government buildings, and Roger was well aware of that fact.

After ten minutes had slowly plodded by, Roger saw his hand moving, as if it had a mind of its own, toward the buzzer. He yanked it back and was considering giving it a stern lecture when the door behind the counter opened and a young man walked out heading for the bank of elevators.

"Excuse me," Roger said trying to get his attention before the elevator doors opened up and swallowed him. "Is there anyone else back there available to help me?"

The young man stopped, startled to see anyone standing at the counter. His shoulders shifted in resignation, and he returned

to the work station. "Is there something you need, sir?" he asked with a slight hint of impatience.

"I have my GF 2375 and my MFP package 72," recited Roger by rote, "and I have got the signatures needed at the hospital, both by the doctor and the administrator, and I have to get my verification of findings report."

"Name?" asked the clerk, standing in front of the data entry tube.

"Whitley, Roger L. Whitley."

"Could you verify your address and give me your 'dent number?" countered the clerk.

"I don't have an address officially, and my identity number will come up as invalid. Could you please just look up the name and see if the report is here?" Roger pleaded, trying to keep his impatience under control. He knew the sure path to delay was to get the clerks pissed off.

"I need that information, just to verify your identity, so I don't hand your info to someone else. I'm sure you can understand that, can't you?" He looked bored and kept glancing at the elevators. Roger knew he needed to act fast if he was to get the report.

"OK, I was just trying to save you the aggravation of seeing my data come up as invalid, but here's what I have. My last official address was 311 Quarry Road Apartment 12, Hayward, California, 94541. My dent number is C91159257GCR. Now when you

look that up, know I will be listed as deceased. That's what I am trying to straighten out."

"Mr. Whitney, I didn't start here yesterday. I could figure that out for myself."

"It's actually Whitley, no 'N', and of course you could figure it out. I was trying to save you having to ask. The more you know, the better off you are, I always say." Roger knew the best way to get through the process was to be as patient and helpful as he could, and to give information without appearing to insult the other person's ability to discern it for themselves.

"Well, you are in here, and deceased, as you said you would be. I guess that confirms you are who you say you are. Who would try to impersonate a corpse? Hm he he he." The giggle was stuck on the end of the statement like a caboose trailing the end of a train, and Roger knew the lad would help him out. Giggling as a rule doesn't inspire confidence in ability, but it does indicate the giggler is usually in a good mood. Roger was willing to take it as a positive sign in any event.

"Do you think that you can get the report for me?" Roger queried.

"Well, usually it takes a while to get something like that printed up and issued, but seeing how you've got everything tied together in one neat package, and the forms are all in place...it shouldn't be any big deal. I'll print it out, and get it to you

as soon as it's done." And with a simple depression of the print key, Roger could hear the distinct whir of a printer starting the task.

"I'll be back in a few minutes. It'll take a while to print anyway, so you might as well sit down." With that he resumed his journey to the elevators. This time with no protest from Roger he disappeared as the doors slid shut in front of him.

Roger returned to the cast iron cast-away from a garden that had become a familiar, albeit uncomfortable, resting place. He was prepared to wait a while, but was in better spirits than the last time he occupied the ill conceived chair. He knew the designer had never sat in the chair, at least for an extended period of time, or that possibly the designer had also had a hand in the torture devices used by the Inquisition. Either way, it was an uncomfortable place to be, but it beat standing for potentially hours on end.

This time he'd had the foresight to bring a book with him. He sat down into the chair and pored over the book Dwayne had loaned him. Most of Dwayne's library seemed to be self-help and new-age type books, and this one seemed to combine them both. Roger was trying to wrap his brain around the concept of creating his own reality and meditating on a regular basis, and from what he had accomplished so far, it all seemed to work. The toughest part of all of it was figuring out actual goals and making plans to attain them. For the longest time Roger had

allowed his job to dictate his life, instead of using his life and mind to shape his future. He knew that most folks lived day to day or week to week and never even gave the big picture much thought. Moving past that was the biggest change he had made since his paper-death. Before he knew it, he heard his name being called again, incorrectly but still he was being called.

"Mr. Whitney..."

"Yes," Roger called out, "here I am."

"Mr. Whitney, here is your completed paperwork." It was the young man again, pushing the stack of papers back at Roger. He didn't give a second glance as Roger took the large manila envelope out of his hand. He turned and walked back to the door behind the counter.

"Excuse me," Roger called after him, "thank you for the effort. I really appreciate it. You have no idea how much trouble it has been to get this far, and it is only because of people like you that I am making progress getting my life back together."

The thank-you seemed to startle the clerk. "Well," he said, "I am just doing my job, but it sure is refreshing to hear someone actually say thanks. Take care now, and don't lose that stuff," gesturing to the envelope, "Getting copies re-issued is an even bigger task."

Roger nodded and headed for the door. It was just a little past noon, and he hoped to get to the Bureau of Documents and

get the 1276 form before they closed. The light at the end of the tunnel wasn't bright, but he felt like he could see a glimmer of hope.

The Bureau of Documents had one of the largest buildings in the government complex. It looked exactly like every other government building ever built, except more so. Walking through the revolving door sent a shiver up and down Roger's spine. The odd spinning sensation made him feel like he was starting over again, but he knew that wasn't the case. Everyone had told him that his journey through the red tape would be a revolving door and a series of redundant conversations, but this was the first actual revolving door he had encountered.

When he exited the blender, his ears were assaulted and peppered by the din of a thousand conversations about nothing. The privacy of the Bureau of Information was nowhere to be found in the cacophony of the documents building. People were packed into cubicles for as far as the eye could see, and they were surrounded by walls of gray filing cabinets. Unlike the Bureau of Information there was a buzz of activity and people standing/sitting/leaning all over the place, waiting to be served. The signs above the endless counter indicated the service provided at the front of the many lines of frustrated looking people.

In a government run on bureaucracy and red tape, there was bound to be a place like this. Roger figured he was just lucky

to have avoided all that during his other encounters, but then he figured out why. The signs indicated lines for rental agreements, zoning applications, permits of all sorts, unemployment services, and a myriad of other government functions. This was the hub of the red tape wheel. Roger paced up and down the lengthy foyer trying to find a sign for identification forms. Finally, just as he was about to give up, he saw a short line, half hidden, next to the "Rodent Control Permit" line, that read "ID."

Roger had expected the line to be as long as any of the others and with a longer title than ID, so he had inadvertently walked by the area a few times. As he got into line, it moved, so he only had two people in front of him. He overheard the woman at the front of the line asking for a "live birth" authentication form. Within a few minutes the girl behind the counter had produced the required form. Compared to the other lines, this one seemed to flow like magic. When the woman started to ask about filling the form out, the girl merely pointed to the "Clarifications and Questions" sign and called out, "Next!"

The "Clarifications and Questions" line could have had its own building. Some of the people must have either been regulars or anticipated the possibilities, and had actually brought folding chairs with them. Roger hoped he wouldn't need to wait that out, but he could also see why "his" line was short and

quick. Handing out forms with no other complications was a straightforward process.

When the man in front of him stepped up to the counter he asked the girl for a re-issue of his ID. "I really just don't think the picture is at all flattering. Look at it," he groaned, "It doesn't even look like me."

She didn't look at it. She barely glanced at him. "Sir, I really sympathize with your complaint." The lack of sympathy belied her statement. "I just give out the 1276. What you do with it is totally up to you." She held out the form while looking at her calendar.

"But I..." he sputtered.

"Take it, or leave it. It is up to you, sir. Next!" she yelled out.

He didn't want to leave the counter, but he took the form and trudged away muttering to himself. Roger stepped up and smiled and asked, "Can I get a 1276?"

She already had the paperwork in her outstretched hand. "Here, complete two copies, you'll need them."

Roger took the form and thanked her and quickly exited the building. Like most forms, it was fairly straightforward, and his accounting background gave him an advantage. Redundancy and mundane detail were second nature to his old occupation, so the duplicate copy didn't surprise him.

Roger sat down on a bench near the park and completed the

forms. He added them to his packet and took a deep breath. Finally, everything was in place. The deadline loomed for the monthly meeting of the review board and he didn't want to miss it and postpone the review for another thirty days. The afternoon was getting long, and he hurried over to Bureau of Information to turn in the forms and get an appointment with the review committee.

This time as he entered the building, he knew to grab a number and check the wall display. His number was only a few off, once again, but there were other people milling about also waiting, he assumed, to be served. Nevertheless, he stayed next to the ticket dispenser waiting to pounce on the first person he saw behind the counter. Finally after what seemed like an hour (but was probably only ten or fifteen minutes) a woman got up from one of the cubicles and headed toward him.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you, but I just have one question and then I'll wait in line. I just don't want to waste any of your time, in case I'm in the wrong place," he added as she seemed to look straight through him. He didn't want to appear too pushy.

"What?" was her flat reply.

"I've completed my GF 2375 and my MFP package 72. I've also got my 1276 form filled out, in duplicate, I know it must be duplicate." He heard desperation in his voice, stopped and took a deep breath.

"I need to get on the docket for the review board. Is this the right place to submit this package and get scheduled?"

"You are in the right place. Not too many people actually get here with their packet in order. Let me see what you got," she replied.

Roger handed over the pile of papers. She took the stack and laid them on the counter. "Hmm, now where is the checklist..." She looked in a few drawers and finally pulled out a single sheet of paper. She then pulled up a stool and started poring over the documents.

The muttering went on for a few minutes, and then she reached down and pulled a large manila envelope from the recesses of the filing cabinet. One by one the papers went into the envelope. One by one, the boxes on the check sheet were ticked off. Finally the checklist went into the envelope as well. She stuck out her tongue and licked the flap, sealing all of Roger's efforts into a plain brown wrap. She once more reached into the filing cabinet and pulled out a stamp and a pad of ink. With a resounding thud a black imprint went onto the center of the packet. "Re-ident -- Package 12/Complete"

"Take that over to the Reclamation building and submit it at the front desk, and that will take care of it." She turned to look at the numbers display on the wall.

"Wait, when do I get to sit before the review board?" Roger had thought the process was nearly over, but this seemed like

another set back.

She turned and looked at him. "There is no 'review board.' There hasn't been for years. We almost never have anyone get to this point, so they quit meeting. That whole process has been reduced to the checklist and the stamp. Just go to the Reclamation building and turn in your packet." She glanced at her watch. "They are open for another twenty minutes, so if you hurry you can probably catch them yet today."

Roger almost jumped when he heard that. He turned to run out the door, but then caught himself and went back to her. "Thank you. I was starting to think this was a never ending progression, but now my confidence is returning. Thank you again."

"Well, good luck with all that." She again looked behind her, and then called out, "One twenty two, anybody here have number one twenty two?"

Roger headed out the door. He clutched the large envelope with a death grip and hurried over to the Reclamation building, only a few blocks away. When he arrived he was a bit out of breath, but anxious to complete his quest.

The doors of the Reclamation building were ominous. The twin towers of gray metal seemed to stretch two stories tall. Not the sort of sterile modern grey look of burnished stainless steel, or even the gray of aged granite, which might have given the building some authority, but the gray of a cloudy day when you

think it might snow, but can't seem to make up its mind. It made the building feel like you heard a whisper in the back of your mind saying, "What's the point? You might as well just go home." That feeling didn't last a nanosecond in Roger's head. He knew what he needed to do. And he was here to do it.

The doors swung open soundlessly with very little effort. Roger quite nearly lost his balance, as he had expected great resistance. The weight just wasn't there. After it opened he thought it represented the entire process. Although he had to jump through a lot of hoops and it was time consuming, none of it had much resistance. He walked up to the counter and rang the bell that was sitting there. The sound echoed off the cavernous interior. A thunderous bang behind him made him jump, but he realized it was just the door swinging closed and latching.

A door behind the counter opened and a balding middle aged man shuffled to the counter. "Yes?"

"I need to turn in this Re-Ident package 12 and get an ID issued."

"Give it over, then," the man replied. "Wait here."

"Excuse me..." Roger said, but it was either too late, or the man hadn't heard him. Roger watched the man's back as it quickly disappeared through the doorway.

As the door closed in front of him, Roger realized all the effort and the paperwork was out of his hands once more. With all the incompetence he'd observed, he suddenly thought he

should have made copies before giving them up so easily. He fervently hoped the need would not arise.

He looked around the nearly empty foyer and found, to his surprise, an old picnic table. From the amount of carving done on it, he could tell it had been there for a while. Penknives had carved many sayings, limericks and anagrams on it that he wasn't sure if there was enough wood left to support his weight. Since there was no other choice but standing, he eased his weight onto the wobbly bench. It creaked and swayed a bit, but managed to hold him as he relaxed uneasily on it. Discomfort seemed to be the order of the day, but for lack of a better place to sit, Roger settled in for a wait.

The voice yelling his name made him realize he had actually fallen asleep while the wheels of the government machinery turned. His sore ass and kinked neck made him acutely aware that the process had probably taken hours.

"Whitley!" he heard again. He jumped up and rushed to the counter.

"Here I am," he said, nearly out of breath as the man almost disappeared into the door behind the counter.

"I hardly think you even want this, since you can't even stay awake a few hours," the man replied.

"Well, here you go," he said as he handed Roger his ID. He then once again disappeared through the doorway, back to the inner workings of the bureaucracy.

Not a "sorry for the inconvenience" or a "good luck" or even "take care." It didn't really surprise him. All the people he'd seen in their official capacity had seemed annoyed at having to work or downright hostile. Then he thought about those who really had helped; Gus, Dick and Saul. Short list. All of them were inside the system, but not really a part of the system. People genuinely trying to help other people and not thinking about it as chore or a bother, but rather doing their job as a service. The concept wasn't gone, but it had mostly gone underground.

That made Roger think of all the other people who had really made a difference in his new life. Obviously starting with Dwayne and his way of looking at things. A way so radical, yet so common-sensical that he had changed the entire restaurant into a new experience. Maybe not the entire restaurant staff, but most of the folks there. The ones who didn't buy into the whole thing at least had to perform as expected or they would soon be on their way.

Anne, who was willing to accept him, as is, right from the beginning. He never really expected anything to develop and yet she became more to him in the couple months he'd been at the Pollo than his wife did in all the years he'd known her. Or had he ever really known her at all? Certainly not in the talking, discussing, debating way he knew Anne.

All the people he now knew and considered friends, Ron, Sue,

Dave, even Charlie, all meant more to him than anyone he could remember from his old life. He couldn't think of anybody from the 'old days' who he would consider to be a true friend. He had never really had many friends and now he had a half dozen people he knew he could count on, and who looked to him in a similar fashion.

Roger just stared at the ID in his hand. It represented a different way of life and one he really didn't want. Madness it was, and he didn't really see a return to that world. He glanced over at the trash can in the corner and then back at his ID. He took a deep breath and put his ID into his pocket. The rest of the world might belong in that can, but it might recover. The walk back to the Pollo wasn't an especially quick one, but the arrival felt like he was finally home.