



**I**N THE SUMMER OF 1959. AT THE FEATHER RIVER INN near the town of Blairsden in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of northern California. A resort environment. And I, just out of college, have a job that combines being the night desk clerk in the lodge and helping out with the horse-wrangling at the stables. The owner/manager is Italian-Swiss, with European notions about conditions of employment. He and I do not get along. I think he's a fascist who wants peasant employees who know their place, and he thinks I'm a good example of how democracy can be carried too far. I'm twenty-two and pretty free with my opinions, and he's fifty-two and has a few opinions of his own.

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One week the employees had been served the same thing for lunch every single day. Two wieners, a mound of sauerkraut, and stale rolls. To compound insult with injury, the cost of meals was deducted from our check. I was outraged.

On Friday night of that awful week, I was at my desk job around 11:00 P.M., and the night auditor had just come on duty. I went into the kitchen to get a bite to eat and saw notes to the chef to the effect that wieners and sauerkraut are on the employee menu for two more days.

That tears it. I quit! For lack of any better audience, I unloaded on the night auditor, Sigmund Wollman. I declared that I have had it up to here; that I am going to get a plate of wieners and sauerkraut and go and wake up the owner and throw it on him. I am sick and tired of this crap and insulted and nobody is going to make me eat wieners and sauerkraut for a whole week and make me pay for it and who does he think he is anyhow and how can life be sustained on wieners and sauerkraut and this is un-American and I don't like wieners and sauerkraut enough to eat it one day for God's sake and the whole hotel stinks anyhow and the horses are all nags and the guests are all idiots and I'm packing my bags and heading for Montana where they never even heard of wieners and sauerkraut and wouldn't feed that stuff to pigs. Something like that. I'm still mad about it.

I raved on in this way for twenty minutes, and

needn't repeat it all here. You get the drift. My monologue was delivered at the top of my lungs, punctuated by blows on the front desk with a fly-swatter, the kicking of chairs, and much profanity. A call to arms, freedom, unions, uprisings, and the breaking of chains for the working masses.

As I pitched my fit, Sigmund Wollman, the night auditor, sat quietly on his stool, smoking a cigarette, watching me with sorrowful eyes. Put a bloodhound in a suit and tie and you have Sigmund Wollman. He's got good reason to look sorrowful. Survivor of Auschwitz. Three years. German Jew. Thin, coughed a lot. He liked being alone at the night job—gave him intellectual space, gave him peace and quiet, and, even more, he could go into the kitchen and have a snack whenever he wanted to—all the wieners and sauerkraut he wanted. To him, a feast. More than that, there's nobody around at night to tell him what to do. In Auschwitz he dreamed of such a time. The only person he sees at work is me, the nightly disturber of his dream. Our shifts overlap for an hour. And here I am again. A one-man war party at full cry.

"Fulchum, are you finished?"

"No. Why?"

"Lissen, Fulchum. Lissen me, lissen me. You know what's wrong with you? It's not wieners and kraut and it's not the boss and it's not the chef and it's not this job."

"So what's wrong with me?"

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"Fulchum, you think you know everything, but you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem.

"If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire—then you got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life *is* inconvenient. Life *is* lumpy.

"Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And will not annoy people like me so much. Good night."

In a gesture combining dismissal and blessing, he waved me off to bed.

Seldom in my life have I been hit between the eyes with truth so hard. Years later I heard a Japanese Zen Buddhist priest describe what the moment of enlightenment was like and I knew exactly what he meant. There in that late-night darkness of the Feather River Inn, Sigmund Wollman simultaneously kicked my butt and opened a window in my mind.

For thirty years now, in times of stress and strain, when something has me backed against the wall and I'm ready to do something really stupid with my anger, a sorrowful face appears in my mind and asks: "Fulchum. Problem or inconvenience?"

I think of this as the Wollman Test of Reality. Life is lumpy. And a lump in the oatmeal, a lump in the throat, and a lump in a breast are not the same lump. One should learn the difference. Good night, Sig.