

The Good Life

(from an actual conversation)

By Paul Voakes

(Professor Emeritus “Patrick” enters the coffee house. “Theresa”, seated at a small table, is staring in his direction with a vague, distracted look. Then she recognizes him and springs up, greeting him with a firm handshake and a mature, confident smile. They settle into chairs at the table.)

PATRICK

So I’m a little surprised you’re back here in Denver, unemployed. Last time we talked, you had a new Ph.D., finally employed back East at that federal agency, doing legal work for, what, one-twenty grand a year? So what happened?

THERESA

Renewable six-month contract. They didn’t want me back.

PATRICK

Why not?

THERESA

They said I wasn’t getting enough work done.

PATRICK

C’mon, you’re smart. With that salary, and all your student debt, couldn’t you have put your head down for a couple of years and just done the work?”

THERESA

No! It was so boring! So glad I’m not there anymore.

PATRICK

So you've come back to Colorado with . . . a new job?

THERESA

No, that's why I want to talk to you! I need tips. Leads.

PATRICK

OK, so first the obvious: Why not apply for jobs at Front Range law firms?

THERESA

Did that, few years ago. Got fired.

PATRICK

Why?

THERESA

My bosses were lawyers. Most lawyers are not very bright. I kept correcting them when they were wrong, so they didn't like my attitude. Plus they said I wasn't doing the assigned work. But the work they gave me was so boring.

PATRICK

So . . . the Ph.D. You exploring academic jobs?

THERESA

Yes! "Professor" is my dream job!

PATRICK

Why is that?

THERESA

Ph.D.! Cushy job with tenure, can't get fired.

PATRICK

You realize, right, that you'll have to work really hard – publish a lot of original research – to get tenure in the first place.

THERESA

No, no, no. I hate doing research. It's so boring. I want to get tenure as a Teaching Professor, not a Researcher. I'm a great teacher. I've already been applying for teaching-professor jobs in Journalism. But over four years, dozens of interviews, I've never gotten a second interview. Yet I have this incomparable pedigree: Master's in Journalism, law degree, passed the bar exam in two states, academic master's in law, PhD in Mass Communication, and I'm halfway through the online MBA program at Harvard!

PATRICK

What? Why?

THERESA

For the pedigree! How can a university turn down someone with so many impressive degrees?

PATRICK

But what would you actually do with an MBA?

THERESA

(Looking pained at having to state the obvious) Get a tenured faculty job teaching at a business school.

PATRICK

Y'know, most *teaching* professors are on contracts – not eligible for tenure. And in journalism and business schools, they usually have impressive professional experience. You haven't ever worked as a journalist or a business manager, have you?

THERESA

No, but I'm an excellent writer – you've seen my blog! -- and I understand how business works. And I can always teach business law, and media law, and of course ethics.

PATRICK

Mm-hmm. Maybe you could launch your own law firm: Do only the kind of work you won't consider boring, and you'll never get fired.

THERESA

That sounds like a lot of work. I'd rather be a fulltime professor and just practice law as a side hustle.

PATRICK

But why did you get those law degrees and work so hard to pass the bar?

THERESA

The pedigree, like I said. But also, law school taught me how to game the system. I was almost dismissed from my Ph.D. program, but I knew my rights, I knew the loopholes, and I'm good at legal paperwork. I sued them, so they *had* to let me finish my degree.

PATRICK

OK. Theresa. Let's just back up a bit. What is it you want to achieve in your life?

THERESA

Oh, my goals are crystal clear: Job security, maximum income, minimum effort.

(Patrick scrutinizes Theresa's face, looking for a "just kidding" smile or some verbal qualifier. Instead, Theresa gives him a calm self-assured smile. Freeze in tableau.)