

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



One Red Paperclip

Kyle MacDonald

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

One Fish Pen

One Doorknob

One Camping Stove

One Red Generator

One Instant Party

One Famous Snowmobile

One Trip to Yahk

One Cube Van

One Recording Contract

One Year in Phoenix

One Afternoon with Alice Cooper

One Kiss Snow Globe

One Movie Role

One House in Kipling

Saskatchewan's Biggest Housewarming Party, Ever

Epilogue: Grandpa Brings it

Acknowledgements

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about the book

My name is Kyle MacDonald. Until recently I was 'between jobs', sick of sponging off others, and on the verge of being dumped by my girlfriend. I had to do something to get myself out of that rut.

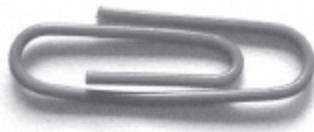
It was then I remembered a childhood game I used to play, Bigger and Better, a way of trading old stuff to get bigger and better new stuff. And then I saw it, a red paperclip holding the pages of my CV together, ready to go out into the world and help me find a job. I decided I'd start with that. And I promised to visit whoever would trade with me, wherever they were, swapping each time for something bigger and better until maybe - just maybe - I got a house!

about the author

My name is Kyle MacDonald. I'm from Belcarra, British Columbia, Canada. I like to do things. Doing things is the best. I've planted more than one hundred thousand trees, delivered more than one thousand pizzas, but eaten only one scorpion. I've also traded one red paperclip for a house only once.

ONE RED PAPERCLIP

The story of how one man
changed his life one swap at a time



KYLE MACDONALD


EBURY
PRESS

*For mom and dad and everyone
who made you who you are.*

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream - and not make dreams your master,
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings - nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute

With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)

Dom and I round the corner.

People are everywhere.

Hundreds.

The whole town.

Literally.

We walk to the front of the crowd and see Bert and Pat.

We shake their hands.

I wave shyly to the crowd and the ceremony begins.

We stand for the national anthem.

Mom and Dad are right behind us.

Speeches are made, formal introductions take place.

Pat, the mayor, raises a piece of paper in the air.

“Here in my right hand is the deed to the house behind us. It is my honour to hereby ask Kyle MacDonald to step forward with his trade item and sign this piece of paper to make the trade official.”

The crowd claps. I step forward, and a hush falls over the crowd.

I smile and hand over my trade item.

Pat hands me a pen.

I sign the deed.

We smile.

Pat says, “To make this official, it must be witnessed. Gord?”

Gord, the Mountie, steps forward and signs the deed.

Pat says, “Welcome to Kipling.”

We cut a red ribbon with a pair of scissors.

Dom and I hold hands and walk up the stairs.

I reach out and open the front door.

I face the crowd to speak.

My lip starts to tremble.

It is so real.

So perfect.
So silent.
Dom holds my hand.
We say thank you.
We wave to the crowd.
And walk through the door.
Into the future.

It was the best idea ever. Bigger and Better. It had *legs*. Bigger and Better was a game. A mash-up between a scavenger hunt and trick-or-treating. You'd start with a small object and go door to door to see if anybody would trade something bigger and better for it. When you made a trade you'd go to another door and see if you could trade your new object for something bigger and better. Eventually, with enough hard work, you could end up with something much bigger and better than you started with.

For example, you could start with a spoon. You'd take that spoon to the neighbour's house, and maybe they'd offer you a boot. You could then take the boot to the next neighbour and they'd say, "Hey! I could use a boot, I accidentally threw one of mine out the passenger window onto the shoulder of the freeway last week. I have an old microwave. Would you like to trade that boot for a microwave?"

At this point you'd nod yes, take the microwave and run as fast as possible to find your friends and show off your new microwave. You'd have a great story about how you got your microwave and from that moment on stare at every solitary boot on the side of a freeway and wonder if that was *the* boot. Then a few weeks later your mom would come into your room and say, "Hey, I can't find my antique spoon. Have you seen it anywhere?" At this point you'd shake your head no and she'd say, "And do you know anything about that smelly old microwave in the garage?"

Bigger and Better was awesome.

I grew up in Port Moody, a suburb east of Vancouver, Canada. Friends at high school told tales of amazing Bigger and Better adventures. One group started with a penny and traded up to a couch in just one afternoon. Another group

started with a clothespeg and worked their way up to a fridge in an evening. Rumour had it that in the next suburb over, some kids started early in the morning with a toothpick and traded all the way up to a car before the day was over. A *car*. Of course nobody had proof that any of these things actually happened, but it didn't matter. Suburban legend or not, it was possible. *Anything* was possible. And we were all about making anything possible.

We were sixteen. We'd just passed our road tests. The driver's licences were just itching to be used. There was only one thing on our mind: cars. We wanted to be Marty McFly. We wanted to park our freshly waxed black 1985 Toyota pickup on an angle in the garage and turn the front wheels to enhance its sportiness. We wanted to take Jennifer up to the lake for the big party on the weekend. Yeah, where we were going, we wouldn't need roads. So much was possible. Our children could one day meet a middle-aged DeLorean-driving mad scientist who would invent the flux capacitor and accidentally get sent back in time to right all the wrong choices we'd made in our life so we could then realize our dream of being science fiction writers.

It was possible.

But we were sixteen. And never read science-fiction books. Or even remotely considered the idea of being *writers*.

We looked at each other and nodded. That night was the night. It was going to happen. We were going to do it. We were going to play Bigger and Better until we got cars. Tonight. All we needed was a toothpick. We couldn't find a toothpick, so we "found" the next best thing: a Christmas tree from the local Christmas tree lot.

We picked up the Christmas tree and carried it over to the first house that still had their lights on. We knocked on the door. We heard footsteps. We looked at one another. We were *so* getting cars. A shadow approached the door and

reached for the handle. Cars by the end of the night. The door opened. A man stepped into the door frame, looked at us with the Christmas tree in our hands, made a slight face, and said, "Yes?" We quickly explained how we were playing Bigger and Better, told him our plan to trade up to a car by the end of night, and waited in full expectation. All he had to do was trade us something. Anything. He looked at the Christmas tree, laughed slightly, and said, "Sorry, guys, I'd love to help you out, but I don't have a use for a second Christmas tree." He stretched his arm towards the front room and pointed at the most over-elaborately decorated Christmas tree of all time. It shone bright white. It was like heaven, in Christmas tree form. We looked back at our meagre little tree, hung our heads low, and watched the car in our minds go *poof*. He shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and said, "Maybe try next door? Good luck!"

We walked off and looked at the tree. It was too late at night to play Bigger and Better. We'd try next door tomorrow. Yeah, tomorrow had next door written all over it. Tomorrow had "car" written all over it.

But we never played Bigger and Better tomorrow.

We quit because Bigger and Better wasn't as easy as we expected it to be.

That was ten years ago. *Ten years* had passed since that night we'd played Bigger and Better. So many things had happened since then. I'd finished school, travelled, met new people, worked all over the world, and experienced so many things. I even shook Al Roker's hand. In all those years I never finished that game of Bigger and Better. But it was still the best idea ever.

I looked out into the distance and imagined the possibilities. A car from a toothpick. It was possible. But how would I trade a toothpick for a car nowadays? I made a confident face, and looked even further into the distance, as though it would help. It might have made for an amazing inspiration-seeking moment in a movie, except the distance

wasn't a setting sun smouldering over the remains of a freshly annihilated evil alien civilization or a windswept seashore with waves and unsurpassed vistas. The distance was a brick wall five feet from my head. A brick wall that held up one side of the small one-bedroom apartment in Montreal that my girlfriend Dominique and I rented.

I'd moved to Montreal with Dom the previous summer after she got a job as a flight attendant with an airline that had since gone bankrupt. She'd found a job at a hospital as a dietician soon after that. We'd been together for three years. While I looked into the distance and reminisced about juvenile adventures of yore, Dom was working. Dom had a job. I was "between jobs". I'd been "between jobs" for almost a year now, bridging the gap from time to time by working at trade shows promoting products for friends.

But those trade shows were few and far between.

I was just some guy. What was I thinking? I'd just stared at a brick wall for the better part of an hour. I'd nearly *wasted* an entire afternoon. I remembered the job at hand. My résumé. My cover letter. My future. That whole get-a-job thing.

Rent was due soon, and I couldn't sponge off Dom for another month. I'd sponged for a few months. It had to stop. It was my turn to provide. I looked at the résumé on my computer screen. Motivational words from my high school business education teacher rang out in my mind. She'd say, "You need to sell yourself to a potential employer. You need to showcase your skills." She'd then pull out an overhead projector slide and show us how to implement the five secrets of the perfect résumé. And boy did those five secrets work! We all had jobs at fast food joints in less than a week. Ten years ago, a bagful of free burgers pretty much guaranteed you were on easy street. Living at home makes everything so much simpler.

Dom was about to cut me off if I didn't get my act together. I had to figure something out. Fast. I asked myself

a simple question: “Did I *really* want to implement the five secrets of the perfect résumé or did I want to do something else?” Something else sounded pretty good right now. I didn’t want to sell myself to anyone. I just wanted to do *things*. I wanted to *explore*. I wanted to *play*. I wanted to *be*.

But things were different now. I wasn’t some punk kid who “borrowed” Christmas trees and lived with his parents. I was an unemployed twenty-five-year-old guy lucky enough to have a girlfriend who helped cover my portion of the rent while I was “between jobs”.

I was sick of sponging off others. I was sick of being “between jobs”. I was tired of quotation-mark-accompanied euphemisms for being unemployed. There was really only one thing I wanted to do. I wanted to *provide*. I wanted to put food on the table. I wanted to break the cycle we were in. We worked hard for our money, then shovelled it directly into the landlord’s pocket. Well, *Dom* worked hard for our money, but I definitely helped shovel it into the landlord’s pocket. Sure, paying rent’s not all bad. There’s something to be said for being able to covertly pack up all your stuff in the middle of the night, then fly away to another country on a moment’s notice. Don’t get me wrong, landlords are often pleasant, trustworthy folk. I just didn’t want anything to do with them. A place where you pay rent is just somewhere you haven’t moved out of yet. But with enough time, care, and effort, a place of your own can become a home.

I wanted to come home at the end of the day, hang my top hat on the hat stand by the doorway, look up at the roof above my head, and smile with satisfaction that I owned that roof. A roof of our own. We could do anything under that roof. If we wanted to knock down a wall, then that’s exactly what we could do. Nobody could say otherwise.

If I started small, thought big, and had fun, it could all happen.

It was possible.

For it to be possible, I had to start. I had to do more than the first time I'd tried to play Bigger and Better. The time I'd never even made a single trade. Bigger and Better had just stared back at me for the last decade. Laughing at me. Cackling, even. I thought about it again. It would take a few weeks to get a job, but I could walk outside and make Bigger and Better happen *now*. I made up my mind then and there. *Now* was the time. Not only would I play Bigger and Better, I would play it *well*. I would become the greatest Bigger and Better player the world had ever seen, *bar none*. Or I had just come up with the most elaborate way to put off getting a job. Ever. Either way, I had to give it a shot. I squinted and lowered my head slightly. The résumé and cover letter could wait. I had a score to settle with Bigger and Better.

If I was going to make it happen, I needed an object to start with. Something less Christmas treeish than a Christmas tree. And something not blatantly stolen.

I looked down at the desk. It was a mess. Things strewn everywhere. A pen. A roll of tape. Way too many cables. A stapler. Computer speakers. My résumé and cover letter. An unmailed letter. A postcard. A banana peel. A framed picture of an eagle in flight. Various cereal bowls in various stages of not being washed. I looked back at the draft copy of my résumé and cover letter. Two sheets of paper held together by a red paperclip.

One red paperclip.

I unclipped the red paperclip from the papers and held it up to my eye.

It was perfect.

This was it.

All I had to do was go outside and trade with somebody. Surely *somebody* would have something bigger and better than one red paperclip. This was it. I was going to do it. Bigger and Better was going to get *served*.

I put the red paperclip on the desk and took a picture of it. I walked to the door and pulled the handle. The door swung open. I lifted my right foot into the air. As my right foot came forward to the threshold of the door frame, the phone rang. My foot hung in the air, just short of the outside hallway. The phone rang again. I spun around, almost in slow motion. I slowly slunk away from the door and lifted the phone from the receiver.

“Hello?” I said.

“Hey.”

It was Dom.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Not much,” I said.

“Did you finish your résumé?” she asked.

“Not yet. I’m just taking a break.”

“Right. *A break.* How long have you been working on that thing?”

I felt guilty. Dom was so good to me. She’d covered my rent for months. She could’ve kicked me out into the street. Heck, *I* would’ve kicked me out into the street. I owed her. We chatted a while and made plans for dinner.

I walked back to the computer and shoved the red paperclip in my wallet. What was I thinking anyhow? Bigger and Better? Settling scores? With a kids’ game? I shook my head and turned on my computer. Maybe I’d play Bigger and Better another day. After I had a job, enough money to cover the rent, and a day off. Then I could play Bigger and Better.

The computer monitor came to life and I got back to my résumé. Over the next three days I hammered out a respectable enough one and halfheartedly emailed it in response to a few job postings on some websites. I also emailed the picture of the red paperclip to myself, as a reminder of something fun I could do once I had a job, and a day off.

Tomorrow came and went many times. The more I thought of my potential new job, the less I thought about my score with Bigger and Better. In my wallet, the red paperclip became buried among my cards, receipts and old coins. I eventually got some calls from people who wanted to interview me for various jobs. Nothing spectacular, but decent enough jobs. I was just thankful that somebody had responded. I went to several interviews but never put my heart into it. I was just “going through the motions” as Mom would have said. Was it because I was a lazy schmo or was it because the jobs didn’t feel right? I couldn’t decide. I didn’t want to settle for something I wasn’t happy with. I wanted to put my heart into something. I didn’t want to *survive*, I wanted to *thrive*. I was running on empty but didn’t want to make the move that would fill the tank.

A few weeks later Dom and I flew across the country to Vancouver, on the west coast of Canada, to visit my family. Well, actually, the plane flew across the country, we just sat in our seats. After we’d been in Vancouver a week, Mom and Dom had a “girls’ night out”, so Dad and I went over to my cousin Ty’s place. During a lull in the conversation, I decided to clean out my wallet. I dumped the contents of my wallet on the coffee table.

And out spilled the red paperclip.

I thought again about the idea to trade up from the red paperclip. But this time was different. This time I opened my mouth: “Hey, what do you guys think of this idea?”

I filled them in on Bigger and Better. They thought about it.

“I like it,” Dad said.

“I like it too,” said Ty.

“Why did you choose a red paperclip?” Dad said.

“It was the first thing I saw,” I said.

“When are you going to trade it?” Ty said.

“Well, I need to set some things up before I can start.”

“Like what?” Dad said.

“I’ll need to get some money first, so I have time to make trades. I should probably set up a website and take a better picture of the paperclip, you know?” I said and looked at my dad.

“Why?” he said.

He had a point. Why did I have to set things up? I just wanted to trade my red paperclip with somebody.

I looked at the paperclip. It was a big “if”. Watching as I stared at the paperclip, Dad smirked. He then uttered his favourite secondhand inspirational slogan: “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” he said.

I suddenly had an inexplicable craving for cheese. I thought to myself, *what would I do if I weren’t afraid? Also, should I tell Pops that he’s a total cheeseball?*

I said, “If I weren’t afraid, I’d trade this red paperclip for something.”

He smiled and said, “So why don’t you?”

I knew I could walk out into the street and ask the first person who came along if they wanted to trade something for my red paperclip, but that just didn’t feel right.

“I don’t want to pester people, get up in their grill, you know?” It didn’t feel right to go around hassling people. There had to be another way.

I said, “You know what would be cool? If people contacted me if *they* wanted to make a trade.” I thought about the man with the angelic Christmas tree that we’d bothered with our raggedy old stolen tree. “Instead of bothering people I wish that people who want to trade could get in touch with me.”

Ty put his arms up in the air to suggest he’d just realized something extraordinary that was right in front of us all along, and said, “Craigslist! Have you tried putting it on Craigslist? *Everyone* uses Craigslist.”

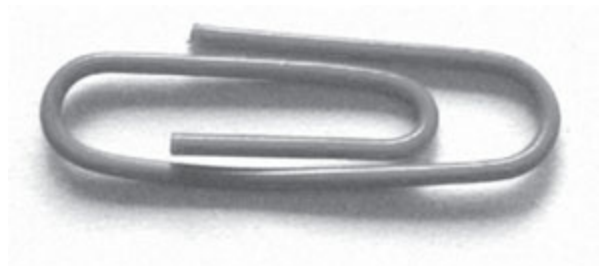
“Can you trade stuff on Craigslist?” I asked.

Ty shook his head in semi-mock disbelief. *Can you trade stuff on Craigslist?*

As we walked over to the computer I looked up at the calendar on the wall.

It was July 12.

Ty brought up the Craigslist site for Vancouver. I found a section marked “barter”. Under “Posting Title”, I entered: one red paperclip.



I uploaded a picture of the red paperclip I’d sent myself in an email. Under the “Posting Description”, I entered the following:

This might not surprise you, but this is a picture of a paperclip. It is red. This red paperclip is currently sitting on my desk next to my computer. I want to trade this paperclip with you for something bigger or better, maybe a pen, a spoon, or perhaps a boot. If you promise to make the trade I will come and visit you, wherever you are, to trade. So, if you have something bigger or better than a red paperclip, email me at biggerorbetter@gmail.com! Hope to trade with you soon!

Kyle

PS I’m going to make a continuous chain of “up trades” until I get a house. Or an island. Or a house on an island. You get the idea.

I clicked “Publish”, and made my intentions public. Sure, my “if you post it, they will come” tactic was pretty optimistic and lazy, but it was better than nothing. I was

just trying to trade a silly little red paperclip for something bigger and better. We waited a few minutes, then refreshed my email. Nothing. We waited a few more. Nothing. I started to get antsy. I found the Craigslist sites for a few cities near or not so near Vancouver and Montreal and added a listing for the red paperclip to those. We waited a few more minutes and I clicked on "Refresh". A number of offers were already in my email inbox!

*******I've got a black spork to trade. I love red paperclips.**

*******I have a broken #2 pencil to trade for the paper clip!**

*******I have a blue felt tip pen, but I am worried that this would not be an even trade due to the slight bend in the side. LOL. Any how if you are serious I would gladly trade my blue pen. I am in Woodbridge, you would have to come out! Thank you!**

Bethany

*******Kyle,**

I imagine you are wanting to see how far you can take this so I will trade with you a stepometer that I think came from a McDonalds meal deal (I don't eat McDonalds anymore). It is orange and dark gray and has a clock with alarm. I believe it is bigger and better than a paperclip. If you are interested in trading email me back and I will give you directions!

Jacky

Since I'd posted ads in a number of different Craigslist cities I had no idea where each offer had come from. (Posting ads in multiple cities on Craigslist is a big no-no, I later found out. Apparently it's called "spamming" or

something like that. I emailed everyone back and asked where each person was located. I added Mom and Dad's phone number and urged people to call if they were in Vancouver. It was sort of important, as I wanted to make the trade in person. And soon. If I was going to do this, *now* was the time. Now is always a great time to do things. I just had to start. If I never started, it would never happen.

I stuffed the miscellany back in my wallet, and Dad and I headed back home. By the time we got there, several more offers were in my inbox:

*******Hi ... We have a fish pen that actually moves like a fish ... back and forth ... rather amusing ... and pretty sweet ... you down? Let us know.**

Corinna

*******I happen to have an empty bottle of Wite-Out ... What do you think? Going fast, don't linger.**

Chris

*******Dear sir/madam,**

I just saw the advert of your (ADS), which you have for sale and I decided to mail you and find out if it is still for sale. I would like to know the present condition and your last offer price with a photo. Thanks as I await to hear from you soon.

Sincerely Cusin Malone

*******My lovely powder blue paper clip for your red one!! I absolutely adore red, it is my favourite colour, and the red paper clip is calling my name, would you trade for that? I could throw in a wonderful new pencil top eraser as well, just so long as I get the fabulous red paper clip!!**

Ciao, June

*******I will trade you for a sky blue crayola coloured pencil ... it has been used.**

Raine

*******I'll trade you your paper clip for a pair of women's boots. I'm a guy and I don't wear women's boots, but I do use paper and therefore I could use a paper clip.**

*******I have a pen, pencil, crayon, envelope or a small box of bandages. Want to trade??**

*******If you are a female and would like to meet for a coffee i will trade you a coffee date for the paper clip and if things work out who knows. Cheers.**

Cezaro

A bunch of family came over to my parents' house the following night. Ricky, the husband of my cousin Carmen, came up to me and said, "Hey, kid, I got you a present." He handed me a box of Wheaties, without a doubt my favourite breakfast cereal with pictures of real life sports heroes on it.

"A box of Wheaties, Ricky? You shouldn't have!" I said.

"Just open the damn box. You know it ain't Wheaties. I figured since you got me a shirt for Christmas, I'd return the favour," he said.

My brother, Scott, and I gave Ricky a Democrat shirt for Christmas, and Ty, a Republican one. They both put them on immediately. Nothing like Christmastime T-shirt politics to get a party started. Nothing. I tore open the Wheaties box and found a short-sleeve button-up work shirt. It was baby blue with pink pinstripes. I turned it over. Above the left breast pocket was a patch with the name "Ricky" in a stylish "patch" font. Another patch was above the right breast pocket. It read "Cintas - 'The Uniform People'".

“Gee Ricky, your old work shirt.” I looked up at Ricky and said, matter-of-factly, “You shouldn’t have.”

He smiled, patted me on the back and said, “Don’t mention it, kid!”

I slid the shirt over my T-shirt to show I wasn’t going to be “had” and said, “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

When everyone left just before midnight, I checked my email. The offers were continuing to roll in: pencils, crayons, keys, coffee dates, business enquiries from people who addressed me as “sir/madam”, and the like. One trader was in Vancouver:

From: Corinna

Hey ... We are in Vancouver ... near Commercial. Now, I hope you understand that this pen is very special. It is wood, and actually moves like a fish!! ... It is very multicoloured, green, blue and red. You let us know when you want to make the trade, and it will be done! Normally we would not trade a simple paperclip for such a wonderful pen ... but it needs to swim other waters ... and I suppose paperclips, can be quite useful. We are, Corinna and Rhawnie. Talk soon ... Later ...

Post-script ... and who are you ... other than “kyle”, and where are you??

The phone rang. It was late. I didn’t want Mom and Dad to wake up. I ran to the phone. I pushed “talk” before the second ring.

“Hello?” I said.

“Um, hey ... is this Kyle?” There was muffled laughter in the background.

“Yep, that’s me.”

“My name’s Rhawnie.” There was a smile in her voice. “My friend Corinna and I, um, we saw your red paperclip on Craigslist and we want to trade with you.”

“Cool! What do you guys have?”

“A pen shaped like a fish. Corinna sent you an email.”

“Right!” I said. “The fish pen!”

“It’s really cool,” said Rhawnie.

“I’ll bet,” I said. “Hey, I’m leaving town tomorrow around noon. Any chance we can meet up before then to make the trade?”

“Sure, but I leave for work early,” Rhawnie said.

“What time?”

“I get up around seven and am on my way to work by eight.”

“Wanna meet up just before eight?” I said.

“Can we meet somewhere near our place?” she said.

“Yeah, probably. Where do you guys live?”

“Near Commercial,” she said.

“Perfect, I’ll be driving right past there tomorrow morning anyhow,” I said “What works for you?”

“Do you know the 7-Eleven at the corner of First and Nanaimo?” she said.

“Yep” I said.

“How about quarter to eight in front of 7-Eleven?”

“Done. See you then,” I said.

“Yep, see you tomorrow.”

Click.

It was settled. Tomorrow was the day. I looked up at the clock. It was 12:03 a.m. Tomorrow was already here.

What's your paperclip?

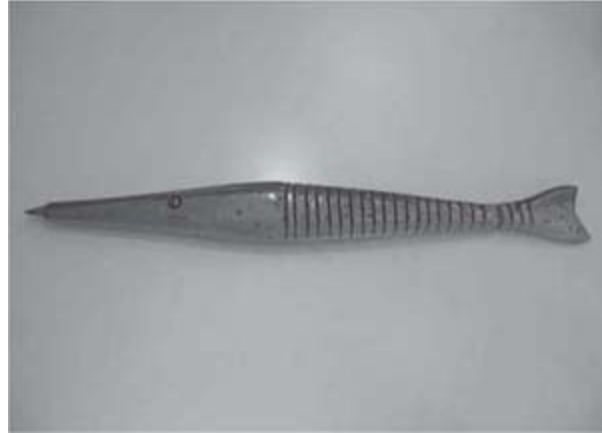
What will you "trade" to make it happen? What's your first move? It doesn't have to be big. Maybe it's just a phone call, or maybe you'll finally ask the question you've wondered about for so long. A red paperclip for a pen shaped like a fish isn't exactly a big commitment. But it's a start.

If you don't start, then how can you finish?

It's pretty simple. If you never start, it won't happen. Every great journey starts with a single step. Just get a foot through the door and make your move. Right foot or left foot, it's your choice.

Start small, think big, and have fun.

If it works small, it might work big, but if you have fun along the way it shouldn't matter either way.



one fish pen

I'D ONLY TALKED with Rhawnie and Corinna via email and phone, so I had no idea what they looked like. I figured I could find them easily enough. There's really no reason to go to 7-Eleven before noon unless you stop there in a cab at the tail end of a bender to satisfy your craving for microwaveable hamburgers. There are a lot of things that, depending on your level of alcohol intake, go from being the worst idea ever to the best idea ever, and sev burgers are right near the top of that list.

Mom and Dom came along for the ride. I pulled the van into the parking lot. A few cars, but nothing else. I immediately thought I'd been the victim of a Craigslist-instigated prank. *As if* two women were going to show up that early to trade a fish-shaped pen for a red paperclip with a guy they'd met on the Internet. *As if*. I bit my lip. When you've been "had", you don't want to let it get to you. You just roll with the punches and act like nothing's out of the ordinary.

We passed a parked car and turned into a parking spot. As we pulled in we saw two women sitting on the curb in front of the store. They didn't have microwaveable hamburgers in their hands. I felt relieved - not for their lack of sev burgers but because it meant I probably wasn't being stood up from a Craigslist posting.

Mom looked over at the two women and laughed, "That looks like them! Do you have your red paperclip?"

I rolled my eyes and said, "Yes, *Mom*."

I tapped Ricky's shirt pocket to double check. It was there. Not that I didn't already know that. I lifted the gear shift to P and opened the door. The two women stood up. I