



BACK TO THE CLC

A True Story



Chuck Trunks

Old Friends

From outside my truck in the Christian Life Center parking lot, I could see the children playing outside the adjacent day care but was denied hearing their mood-lifting shouts and peals of laughter—courtesy of two impossibly loud lawnmowers and a trio of equally noisy string trimmers. What is it with this country? Must everything that feeds the soul be obliterated by never-ending commerce, consumption, and efficiency? How much longer can we allow a revolving door of authoritarian regimes to prioritize greed over human need? When will we finally stop listening to a ruling class that publicly aligns itself with Christian-based values while privately kneeling before the god of profit? I grabbed my backpack from the passenger's seat and locked my truck, hastening my pace toward the CLC entrance to escape the deafening sound of gasoline-powered killer bees.

"Hi, Chuck," drawled a smiling Annabelle from behind the well-built reception desk. "How are you on this fine morning?"

"Good morning, Annabelle," I said as I walked into the lobby. "Do you remember the duck and cover drills we had to do way back in elementary school?"

I watched Annabelle lay her phone on top of the heavy desk while again noticing the giant diamond on her ring finger. In the eight months I'd known her, I never heard her talk about a husband. My relationship with the good-natured 70-something-year-old was casual and light, consisting mostly of me asking her random questions no one would expect, let alone a prim lady whose every utterance was geared toward predictable small talk.

"Huh? Yes, I do," she replied. "I hated those drills! I was one of the tallest girls in my class, so it was difficult for me to get completely underneath those little desks. Plus, I didn't want to get any of that nasty gum in my hair."

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot about the gum under the desks,” I said. “Every time I walk in here, I look at this reception desk and can’t help but think it’s been carved out of a single piece of mahogany. If the Cold War were ever to start up again, I’ll be ducking and covering under this beast.”

Annabelle’s phone chimed, and as she picked it up, she said, “Chuck, you say the cutest things.”

With Annabelle reengaged with her phone, I told her I’d talk to her later and began walking toward the elevator. When I heard the sound of running feet and bouncing balls, I peered into the gym’s basketball court through the open double doors on my right and smiled. *Great! Now I’ll be able to watch and listen to a bunch of three- and four-year-olds chase beach balls while I do my cardio from upstairs in the mezzanine.* Who needs earbuds and a playlist when you can be entertained by rambunctious preschoolers still unspoiled by things like Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok? I pressed the elevator button and waited—feeling no shame for not taking the nearby stairs up to the second floor. When anyone looked at me, I’d simply joke, “Um . . . I’m saving my strength for the workout.”

In order for me to watch the kids from the mezzanine, I’d need access to either one of two stationary bikes or the one and only elliptical trainer overlooking the basketball court below. Of course, as luck would have it, I was denied across the board. All three cardio machines were occupied, which meant I’d have to use one of the ellipticals in the upstairs loft in the alcove above the treadmills and weight machines. I saw my friend Stewart shuffling toward me on the track that circumvented the mezzanine and waited for him. Having known him for eight months, I knew the 86-year-old was close to wrapping up his workout when he was walking the track. Afterward, he’d go home and take a nap on his recliner.

“Hi, Stewart. How are you feeling today?” I asked as I began walking with him.

“Hi, Chuck,” he replied. “I feel a bit run down today, but I suppose it’s because I did more than my usual exercises.”

“Don’t tell me. You extended your kettlebell routine, right?”

“No, I did 20 minutes on the bike,” he deadpanned.

“You didn’t use *my* bike, did you? That’s only for professional riders like me,” I teased.

Stewart had a habit of walking with his head bent over—his gaze focused two feet in front of him as if he were contemplating the mysteries of life. I looked over at him and saw that he was smiling.

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t think of touching *your* bike, Chuck.”

From below, high-pitched squeals of pure delight forced a change in the trajectory of our conversation, causing Stewart and me to share our mutual appreciation for the innocence of children at play. I peeled away from the gentle older man when we reached the alcove, saying, “Good seeing you, Stewart. Enjoy the rest of your day.” Just before ascending the stairs to the loft, I saw my other inspirational friend, Jean, trudging along on one of the four treadmills with both hands grasping the side rails.

“Hi, Jean,” I said to the self-admitted bookworm. “Are you working with your trainer today?”

Over the past eight months, Jean always welcomed my intrusiveness no matter what she was doing in the little church gym. The 76-year-old woman seemed to suffer from the same affliction that tormented me—the world didn’t see her.

“Hi, Chuck. No, she’s on vacation for the next two weeks, but she gave me a lot of homework, and I don’t want to disappoint her.”

“Well, knock it off,” I teased. “You’re making the rest of us look bad.”

Jean laughed and suddenly lost her balance before recovering just as quickly.

“Whoa! Take it easy, Tiger!” I joked. “You’ll hurt yourself and blame it on me when your trainer asks what happened.”

“You’re right! I would,” replied Jean, clearly wanting to tease me back.

I stepped toward the foot of the stairs and told Jean I was headed up to the loft to use one of the ellipticals, prompting her to ask, “Why not use the treadmill next to me, instead?”

“As tempting as that sounds, I need the elliptical to give my legs and lower back a break from all the running I’ve done this week.”

I braced myself when I noticed an arched eyebrow and a slight upturn in the corner of her mouth—telltale signs that Jean was about to unleash a playful zinger.

“You’re finally getting old like the rest of us,” she quipped. “Welcome to the world of aches and pains!”

I chuckled and smiled at her before ascending the steep staircase. However, by the third step, both my laugh and smile had evaporated. Above me, I heard the last sound I wanted to hear—especially on a beautiful day where I got to see the children, Annabelle, Stewart, and Jean. The unmistakable sound came from

someone I most dreaded seeing at the gym, let alone being in a cramped room with. That sound belonged to—The Huff.

The Huff

Oddly enough, my first encounter with The Huff occurred four months earlier in the loft—a small rectangular room with three elliptical trainers and an industrial-grade oscillating fan suspended from the upper right corner. Two ellipticals were positioned side-by-side in the rear of the room, while the third was stationed in the front right corner. If the fan were turned on, the person using the elliptical beneath it would have to endure a steady stream of cold air blasting them in the face. There was simply no way to avoid it without having to unplug it. Obviously, it was best to use one of the ellipticals in the back of the room to avoid freezing to death. But because the rear ellipticals were so close together, you'd feel like the other person was invading your personal space. To me, it felt too intimate, and I wasn't comfortable with the arrangement. Thankfully, having to resort to an elliptical in the loft was rare.

Most times, I'd make do with whatever machines were available in the mezzanine or alcove so I could watch the old timers walk around the track or the pickleball games and kids on the basketball court below. It wasn't the most thrilling entertainment, but people-watching was always better than disconnecting from the present moment with smartphones and TVs. After a month at the CLC, on a day when hardly anyone else was there, I ventured up to the empty loft for the very first time. Besides the ellipticals and fan, the sparse room included a wall-mounted whiteboard with several Bible quotes scrawled across it, a dispenser of disinfectant wipes, and a sign threatening eternal damnation if machines weren't wiped down after use. A singular flush window in the wall opposite the stairs perfectly framed a metal stand supporting a wooden cross on its sill, giving the space the look and feel of a church prayer room. As I began to descend the stairs to the alcove, I thought about returning to the loft and using one of the markers to

write an old inscription on the whiteboard that I remembered from Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean attraction—"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

My first real need for one of the ellipticals in the loft came a few months later in the middle of the summer when soaring temperatures and high humidity drove everyone indoors. Suddenly, I was competing with an influx of grannies and grandpas for the use of the CLC's cardio equipment. Fortunately for me, many of them were unable to climb the steep staircase leading up to the loft. I entered the space from the top of the stairs, and seeing that I was alone, I quickly unplugged the annoying fan and chose one of the ellipticals at the back of the room. 20 minutes into my 30-minute session, a five-foot-two-inch brunette in her late 30s popped into the picture and promptly plugged in the fan. I watched while she opened her miniature backpack and pulled out her phone and a set of earbuds. Although she was wearing a faded blue crop top and black yoga pants, her pug nose, chiseled face, and muscular frame made her appear more masculine than feminine. From the way she didn't consider my thoughts about the fan to her air of self-importance and assertiveness, I instantly didn't like her.

Of course, the woman I'd never seen in the gym before chose the machine closest to me without so much as a hello or good morning. I glanced at the display panel on my elliptical—seven minutes and thirty-nine seconds to go. *You can do it, champ.* Less than a minute later, without warning, *it* began—the kind of dramatic huffing and puffing you'd expect from asthmatic chain smokers after having sprinted a quarter-mile in hot, muggy weather. "Six minutes and forty-five seconds to go." *I'm not sure you can do it, champ.* While her arms and legs churned three times faster than mine, I took inventory of my undeserved pain and suffering. She had a vibe that rubbed me the wrong way from the get-go and a breathing technique that made her look and sound insane. The unpleasantness of her gasping and expelling was all-consuming and nearly deafening from eighteen inches away. Plus, the fan was blowing on me—and I hate that. I'd rather be exercising next to a cougher with tuberculosis while someone else sprayed high-

velocity ice water at me from a firehose than be side-by-side with this annoying boss lady. “Five minutes and thirteen seconds to go.” *Abort mission, champ!*

Despite the lack of space, I stepped off my elliptical, moving to the right like a contortionist just to avoid being in the direct line of fire from her mouth. I thought about pulling the fan’s plug on my way out but instead opted to break the eleventh of the CLC’s 10 Commandments, “Thou Shalt Wipe Down Machines After Use.” I’ll rot in eternal damnation for the indiscretion, but it seemed like a fair tradeoff to put a flight of stairs between me and The Huff fifteen seconds sooner. Unfortunately, I’d see her more often than not around the gym. When she wasn’t annoying everyone by loudly attempting to filter every cubic foot of air in the entire gym through her respiratory system, she’d selfishly inconvenience anyone who wanted to use the free weights by hogging the dumbbells and kettlebells for her weighted balance exercises. She’d lay a yoga mat in the middle of high-traffic lanes and surround it with multiple sets of hand weights. If an octogenarian were interested in using dumbbells or kettlebells weighing between 10 and 25 pounds, they were out of luck for at least an hour. *The nerve!*

It became standard practice to first locate The Blonde Belittler from Chapter One and The Huff before deciding what equipment I’d use for a workout, doing my best to avoid their general unpleasantness and any chance of a confrontation where I’d automatically lose no matter the circumstance simply for having a Y chromosome.

The Incredible Huff

From midway up the stairs, I looked back at Jean, thinking she *had* to be hearing the same huffing, puffing, gasping, and choking noises that were assaulting my eardrums. Instead of catching her staring back at me with an expression that said, “I have some duct tape in my purse,” she had already gone back to watching HGTV while maintaining a death grip on the side rails of the slow-moving

treadmill. I had done well to steer clear of The Huff over the last several months, but I'd be as crazy as her if I believed I could avoid her forever. Our paths were bound to cross again. While contemplating my next move on the staircase, I thought about all the measures I'd taken—from preemptively using the free weights before she got to them to situating myself on cardio equipment as far away from her as possible. I had to admit—the near-constant vigilance had worn me down.

There wasn't a doubt that The Huff posed a set of challenges against the Zen of my workouts, which is why I had opted to exercise wherever she wasn't. My philosophy was simple—take the path of least resistance and live to see another day. But that way of thinking wasn't always the case for me—especially in the late 90s and early 2000s when I was coaching adult newbies to run in their first marathons. Back then, I preached about the virtues of overcoming adversity, serving up worn-out platitudes like “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger” and “You can do anything you set your mind to.” To win their respect, I recounted some of the payoffs I experienced for having trained through stress, sickness, injuries, and inclement weather. I told them about the time I completed a half-Ironman in under six hours while suffering from the flu. I shared stories about running an entire marathon in mud, swimming in a long-distance ocean race in 64-degree water because nobody told me I'd need a wetsuit to protect myself from hypothermia, and cycling against a 25-mile-per-hour headwind for the last 30 miles of a 62-mile bike race in 95-degree heat. What have I become to allow a mere annoyance to steal my Zen?

I scrambled the rest of the way up the stairs and quickly saw that only The Huff and I were in the loft. She, of course, was huffing and puffing on the same elliptical I saw her on the last time. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she was wearing a pair of earbuds, a long-sleeve purple t-shirt, and gray stretch pants. I had two ellipticals to choose between, but there was no way I'd

opt for one next to her. I walked toward the right corner of the room, and just before I reached the machine, I bent down and unplugged the fan.

I hadn't even stood up yet when I heard Her Majesty say, "Excuse me! Would you please plug that back in?"

I stood and turned to face her. She had stopped churning and was holding an earbud in her fingertips, looking at me and waiting for my response. Remembering the cardinal rule of limiting dialog with overbearing females, I simply pointed to the fan and said, "It's in my face."

"Then use this one," she hissed with a look that said, "Are you stupid, or what?"

I knew I was poking the hornet's nest when I said it. "I don't know what you're trying to achieve with all the heavy breathing, but it's super distracting," I replied while stepping onto the elliptical of my choice.

"I'm working on my VO2 max, thank you very much."

I was shocked by her admission but chose to ignore her. *VO2 max? That's crazy!* In all my years surrounded by gifted endurance athletes, I knew of only one to have had their VO2 max measured—and he set three American middle-distance track records! What records was *this* delusional woman chasing? *Give me a break!* As I started gyrating on the machine, my mind began compiling a list of all my potential responses should she take it upon herself to plug the fan back in. Instead, she remained on her elliptical and huffed and puffed even louder, making sure to let me know how displeased she was with me. After 15 minutes, my prayers were answered. Her machine slowed and then finally stopped. But rather than immediately stepping off and leaving like most normal people would, she stayed on top of it and continued her heavy breathing for another minute or so.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I watched her wipe down her machine and vanish down the stairs.

Jean was nowhere in sight when I came down from the loft. Another older lady was using the same treadmill, making me think it was the most popular of the four since the other three were still vacant. Up ahead, in the middle of the free weight area, The Huff was holding a warrior yoga pose with lightweight kettlebells in each hand. If I didn't see Linda, the unofficial mayor of the CLC, getting up from a rowing machine on the other side of the mezzanine, I might have given my nemesis a sarcastic golf clap while saying, "Yes, we all see you. Yes, we all think you're amazing." I waved to my friend of several years and indicated I'd come over to her. I walked halfway around the track and approached her while she was cleaning the machine's footplate.

"Don't forget to lube the chain," I teased.

She laughed and tossed the used disinfectant sheet into the wastebasket between the rowing machine and a stationary bike. "I don't want to get in trouble," said the always-smiling octogenarian, who looked more like she was in her early 60s.

"That's not the first time I've caught you cleaning where you put your feet," I continued. "That's totally unnecessary, okay?"

"Okay," she sighed, frowning and acting like she was indeed in hot water.

Now it was my turn to laugh. "You'll never guess who was upstairs in the loft with me," I said.

"The Huff," she replied.

"Nope."

“But I saw her come down from there.”

“You’re right, but that wasn’t The Huff,” I explained. “That was The *Incredible* Huff!”

Special Delivery

There were many reasons why Linda was my best friend at the gym. Besides her easygoing nature and perpetual smile, the five-foot-four-inch, blue-eyed blonde was kind, down to earth, and shared my same wicked sense of humor. Plus, she was just as dedicated to health and fitness as I was. As we gained each other’s trust, I began to share the secret nicknames I’d given to gym members who most irritated me. There was, of course, The Huff and the Blonde Belittler, but there was also the Ballerina Lady, Joe Cool, Melted Barbie, Ichabod Crane, Sniffler One, and Sniffler Two.

“Did you see Stewart and Jean?” I asked while we walked along the track toward the exit.

“I did. They both stopped by to say hello while I was rowing.”

“Of course they did,” I teased. “If the CLC were a high school, you’d be the most popular girl in the senior class. With all the visitors you get, I’m surprised you’re able to fit in a workout.”

Linda began to untie her warm-up jacket from around her waist. “That’s not true,” she laughed. “So, tell me, did something happen up in the loft?”

I replayed the whole scene for my inquisitive friend—even going as far as acting out some of it just for the comedic effect. Upon reaching the exit, I stepped past Linda and pushed the door open. While I waited for her to pass through the

doorway, I looked out over the basketball court below and noticed that the scampering preschoolers had been replaced by much slower kids with gray hair, knee braces, and pickleball rackets.

“What’s VO2 max?” she asked as we entered the second-floor hallway.

I told Linda to hold on for a minute while I washed my hands in the men’s bathroom. “Even if a tarantula were crawling on my face in the gym, I wouldn’t bat it away until I’ve washed my hands. You never know what microbes are lurking on all that equipment,” I explained.

“Yes, I wash my hands as soon as I leave the gym, too,” she said, smirking while angling toward the woman’s bathroom. “I just don’t feel the need to be as dramatic as you about everything.”

When we reconvened in front of the elevator and waited for it to come up from the first floor, I explained that VO2 max is a measure of how much oxygen your body uses during intense exercise. The higher your VO2 max, the higher your cardiovascular efficiency.

“Sounds complicated.”

“It is,” I said. “First of all, you need to have it measured in a lab with special equipment to get an accurate result. Secondly, if you’re not training for the Summer Olympics, you don’t need it at all. The Huff is just another pretentious validation-seeker.”

Linda stepped onto the elevator first and pressed the first-floor button with a curled knuckle while I silently approved of her germ-avoiding technique. “Boy, she sure gets under your skin. Are you sure you aren’t in love with her?” she joked.

“Definitely not my type,” I laughed, stepping onto the elevator. “This is a little church gym with mostly 70- and 80-year-olds, right? So, why does she work out like she’s at an intense CrossFit facility? That would be like me doing speedwork on the CLC track and startling the hell out of all the slow-moving stumblers, hobblers, and shufflers. They’d have every right to think of me as an annoying showoff.”

“Oh my god. You really *do* love her!”

Linda and I stepped out of the elevator together at the exact moment a little chain gang of two- and three-year-olds were passing by on their way to one of the day care romper rooms. It wasn’t really a chain gang, but it sure looked like one. A couple of day care aides held the ends of a 12-foot rope. 10 short leashes were tethered to it, like ribs along a backbone. 10 tiny humans—five on each side—followed the wobbler in front of them while gripping the loops at the end of the leashes. Without thinking, I immediately began singing “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” in an over-the-top baritone voice and asked, “What are you in for, guy?” to a bewildered little boy wearing a pair of bib overalls with the words “USC Gamecocks” across the front. Once again, my all-star comedy routine left me with the sound of crickets and blank stares. I looked at one of the aides and said, “At some point, they’re eventually going to find me hilarious.”

Just as I was dying at the mic on amateur night, Linda took the stage to save me from further humiliation and addressed the stunned chain gang. “Did you have fun playing in the big gym? Are you going to get a snack now? My, my, my, y’all look so sweet,” she said in her signature singsong lilt. 10 little faces not only smiled back at her, but they also beamed as if their favorite nana just showed up with shortbread cookies and juice boxes.

We walked toward the reception desk where Annabelle was talking to her boss, Emmitt—the manager of the CLC, who not once attempted to introduce himself to

me. The gangly 50-something-year-old stood in front of her desk with his arms folded across his chest. Annabelle said, “You two have a wonderful rest of your day,” as we exited the building. Emmet flashed an uncomfortable smile and resumed the conversation with his receptionist. Linda and I said our goodbyes, saying we’d see each other at the gym the next morning. She walked toward her silver sports car while I headed in the other direction across the parking lot.

I liked parking in spots closer to the street so I could walk past the play yard behind the day care center. The kids weren’t always outside, but when they were, they were fun to watch—even for a few seconds. But on this particular morning, something extraordinary took place. Just as I opened my truck’s driver-side door, I noticed a little girl standing on a cartoonishly small scooter looking directly at me from behind a row of wrought iron pickets. The blonde three-year-old was wearing a white dress with a red sash tied around her waist. With all the activity, her matching red hair ribbon had slipped and was hanging off to the side. However, her true fashion statement was on her feet—a tiny pair of light blue Crocs. One mini croc was planted on the scooter; the other was pushing the whole ensemble toward me. I tossed my backpack over the console and onto the passenger seat without taking my eyes off of her, curious to learn what was on this little angel’s mind.

When she reached the gate and could come no closer, she looked at the ground in front of her and stopped pushing. Like a gymnast finding her footing after landing a balance beam dismount, the little girl collected her feet beside the scooter while holding it up by the handlebar with her left hand. Then, after reestablishing eye contact, she smiled and began waving at me with her free hand. I waved back at her—even going as far as positioning my feet like hers. A young lady, who I didn’t see standing off to the side, looked at who her charge was waving at and said cheerfully, “Emma loves to say hi to everybody.” I was about to reply by saying, “Well, she made me feel like it was a special delivery,” but a lawn mower roared to life across the street, putting a kibosh on the sweet moment. Despite the

disruption, Emma had brightened my mood with one thoughtful gesture, making me forget all about The Huff.

The End (of Chapter 7)