



MANFRED

A True Story



Chuck Trunks

Please Take Your Seats

“Maybe the second time around will be the charm,” I sighed to an empty passenger seat, idling five cars deep at a red light on Garrity Boulevard in East Nampa. It always amazes me how the same heavy traffic I slogged through on the Hollywood Freeway in Los Angeles for two decades could plague a largely forgettable agro-industrial town in the southwest corner of the Gem State. But it wasn’t just the seemingly never-ending congestion that made my spirit want to leave my body and soar among the clouds. The urban blight was just as soul-crushing. Through a dusty windshield, I saw what everyone else pretended not to see: call-to-action signage in every direction, crumbling sidewalks, weathered telephone poles, ubiquitous power lines, and gray, utilitarian buildings that made aesthetics sound like a dirty word. It was the second time in a month I had driven across town to Northwest Nazarene University, a beautiful and spacious private institution that appeared out of place amongst the sprawl of track homes, commercial farms, and rodeos.

Weeks earlier, after a solid year of daily writing, I decided that I needed to do something—anything—to jumpstart a social life that had flatlined since moving back to Idaho in 2022. As a self-inducted member of The Finer Things Club, a silly reference to an unforgettable episode of *The Office*, I thought I’d attend an event featuring the university’s choir and orchestra since country bars and Kenny Chesney concerts don’t interest me. Now that I had a reason to shave, brush my hair, and tuck in my shirt, I figured I’d have a chance to meet people who’ve read a book or two since graduating high school. The 1,500-seat Swayne Auditorium is nothing you’d expect to find in a blue-collar town punctuated with smoke shops, thrift stores, and fast-food joints. The venue sits inside the university’s Brandt Center, a building whose size and architecture make it look like a city hall that focuses solely on the arts. During my first visit, I was awestruck by the height and sheer magnitude of the heavily carpeted and draped music hall. If there was a

bomb that discharged maroon fabric and plushness when detonated, then the Swayne Auditorium had to be at ground zero.

From my seat in the mathematical center of the mezzanine section, I determined that there were three types of groups in attendance—none of which I belonged to. Old folks from the surrounding communities made up the smallest group. The stage performers' families were the next group and exceeded the number of in-house geriatric patients by only a few dozen. The largest group by far consisted of friends and schoolmates of the singers and musicians, whose overzealous support ruined the experience for me. To recall the only other time I had to stomach the same kind of maniacal handclapping and over-the-top shouting, I'd need to go back 15 years to an Arthur Murray dance studio in LA's San Fernando Valley. If you've ever attended one of their practice parties as an invited guest, you'll know what I'm talking about. I was there in support of a female friend who had joined the social club as a way to meet people after a particularly long and painful divorce. 60 members of the dance studio, along with at least two hundred onlookers, filled the strip mall venue, making me nervously plan an exit strategy should I begin to smell smoke.

The premise was simple. Each studio member would dance three to four times, ranging from waltzes and quicksteps to merengues and tangos. This all took place years before there were TV shows like *Dancing with the Stars*, so I really didn't know what to expect. Little did I know that the friends and families of the Arthur Murray dancers, as well as their fellow performers, would behave exactly like the overenthusiastic celebrity judges and studio audiences we've come to expect from these tired and stomach-churning programs. After an hour of incessant overstimulation, rapid-fire clapping, and shouts that sounded more like words of validation than appreciation, I had no choice but to excuse myself from the melee, thus earning a spot in my friend's dog house for several days.

“So, why did you leave so soon?” she asked after ignoring my phone calls and texts. “You didn’t even get to see my cha-cha.”

“I saw you dance that first time, and I have to say you looked great. But after a while, it felt like I was trapped inside a self-help book.”

Needless to say, I wasn’t invited back to another practice party at the Arthur Murray dance studio on Reseda Boulevard. But like everything unpleasant in life, there’s always a lesson to be learned. In this case, I gained not one but two valuable insights, the first being that I wasn’t a fan of ballroom dancing and the second being that I’d choose a seat along the back row in the Swayne Auditorium if I ever went back to NNU for a second concert.

The Golden Hearts Club

Maybe my coworkers from 20 years ago were right, I thought, laughing as I pulled into the exact same space I parked in the first and only other time I came to Northwest Nazarene University. Maybe I did have a touch of obsessive-compulsiveness, like Detective Adrian Monk from the popular TV series. It was either that or great preemptive planning on my part since I’d avoid the parking lot logjam once the house lights came on at the conclusion of the Great Hymns of Our Faith concert. By the number of people filing into the Brandt Center, I knew the evening’s performance would live up to the university’s online huckstering. The spring event would not only include both a chamber and symphonic orchestra but also the university choir and wind ensemble to boot. Not too shabby for a \$10 donation.

A quick survey of the crowded lobby outside the Swayne Auditorium told me that if I wanted to nab an aisle seat along the back row, I’d need to get in there as soon as possible and stake my claim. Plus, I’d be able to exchange the bright overhead lights of the reception area for the dark recesses of the mezzanine, removing me

from the awkward conspicuousness of having arrived alone. *Nothing to see here, folks. He's just a loveless, sad sack with no friends. Pointing and gawking will only make him feel worse.* I positioned myself at the back of the shortest line to enter the theater and soon discovered that the ticket taker was a frail-looking, elderly woman, making it the slowest moving of the six. Then, as the line inched glacially forward, bringing me within a few feet of the diminutive octogenarian, I suddenly became aware of a feeling that rarely ever happens to me. Sometimes, when I venture off my beaten path—and get lucky—I'll encounter a special person like Mildred once in a blue moon.

Three years prior, I met a grocery store cashier named Swati, a middle-aged Indian woman who immigrated from New Delhi, India, to Raleigh, North Carolina, four years earlier. For the 10 months that I lived there—no matter how long the line was—I never missed going through her register just so I could feel her radiating waves of positivity and appreciation and listen to her melodious Indian accent, lulling me into believing that all was right with the world. A year later, while working on a book in Lumberton, NC, I met a widowed retiree who was not only a fan of my writing; she turned out to be the honorary homecoming queen of what I call my Golden Hearts Club. In the amount of time it took to drink a cup of coffee with Linda, I could tell that the well-dressed and perpetually smiling blonde with the ice blue eyes had spent time atop more than a few slow-moving convertibles, waving to her adoring fans without a shred of entitlement. Like Swati and the ones who came before her, Linda had something to teach me—life lessons I somehow missed while busy climbing the wrong ladders.

I watched Mildred collect paper tickets, scan e-tickets off cell phone screens, and hand out beefy-looking programs to jittery music lovers who were most likely worrying about the dwindling seat choices like me. Although she moved in slow motion, I could tell she was at top speed, with a rhythm that included direct eye contact, a whispered “Thank you,” and a smile for each and every patron. Like the other dozen or so docents, she dressed like a cat burglar without the safe-cracking

tools: black shoes, black pants, and a black turtleneck. The stark contrast between her uniform and skin color made her face and hands appear almost bloodless, yet her shoulder-length graying hair was surprisingly thick and full. When it was my turn with Mildred, I held up my phone for her to scan the barcode. Then, I watched her eyes move from the screen to mine.

“There are so many people here tonight,” I commented, noticing that she had the facial bone structure of a Hollywood screen actress. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

“I’m so happy to see such a big turnout. The orchestra won’t be performing again until after the summer,” she responded, her hazel eyes looking clear and lively from behind delicate wire-framed glasses.

After she handed me a program and said, “Enjoy the show,” it was confirmed. Mildred belonged in the Golden Hearts Club, as her kind soul and good nature filled our brief bubble of interaction. As I hastily entered the dimly lit theater in search of the best available aisle seat along the back row, I thought about Swati and Linda.

Is This Seat Taken?

If the first concert I attended at NNU was like an NFL wildcard game, then tonight was shaping up to be the Super Bowl. Mildred was right. The place was already packed. With more people streaming in from the lobby, I knew I had to say goodbye to an enjoyable evening, mentally preparing myself for ill-timed shouts of support and way-too-vigorous clapping from the Arthur Murray crowd. *You look amazing, Sasha! Way to rock the cello, Caiden! We love you, Jennifer! Ugh.*

For the most part, my plan was working. But that would be short-lived. In the first 15 minutes, nobody chose seats near me. At the time, I figured my back row aisle

seat either fell within the theater's version of the Bermuda Triangle or the sight of a solo concertgoer understandably frightened them away. Soon, the burgeoning crowd had no choice but to join me underneath the balcony in the right corner of the mezzanine. Luckily, two empty seats separated me from a talkative, multigenerational family of eight, who played musical chairs until everyone was happy with the arrangement. When the lights dimmed and the orchestra began playing Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, I made a critical error. I started counting my chickens.

When all eight members of the Walton family to my left began standing up one by one, my heart sank. *Bye, bye, seat buffers*, I thought, readying myself like a window seat passenger just before fellow travelers wedge themselves into the middle and aisle seats. If confronted with actual or even perceived unpleasanties, I tend to adopt an heir of indifference—a bubble of aloofness to protect me from strangers, who by and large ignore me while acting in their own self-interest. Without turning my head or shifting my eyes, I could reasonably make out who was shuffling toward me in the dark. What can I say? It's a skill I've acquired and honed while battling the general population since leaving home at the age of 17.

By the way they scooted, I could tell they were quite old and were most likely a married couple. Both were wearing comfortable, all-black attire. They were carrying dark jackets, which ended up on their laps as soon as they sat down. A glance at the two bloodless hands clutching a program beside me instantly lifted my mood, giving me a rare moment to call timeout in my private war with society. *What are the odds?* I surmised, mentally running through statistical probabilities typically reserved for things like the lottery. *I can't believe it. I'm actually sitting next to the lady who scanned my ticket!* But that was only the first of three serendipitous moments I would share with Mildred—the next two taking place during the concert's extended intermission.

After the house lights came on, my seatmate and her presumed husband whispered something to each other before he got up to leave. Once he spun around and began navigating a forest of knees and feet from the nearby family tree, his wife and I turned toward each other at the same time, both of us practically pouncing on the opportunity to get acquainted privately.

“So, is this why you volunteer to be a ticket taker? So you can attend the performances for free?” I teased, thinking a lighthearted jab would be the perfect icebreaker.

As she detected my playful sarcasm, I watched her eyes widen and soften before replying, “Yes, it’s a pretty good deal until we have to clean the theater and bathrooms afterward.”

What? Did this 90-pound grandma just dish it back to me? “Ha ha, I deserved that,” I said. “So, why *do* you volunteer here at the university? Oh, and by the way, I like the black-on-black outfit. It’s very slimming.”

“Really? I just got over a month-long bout with the flu and lost a lot of weight. It’s that noticeable, huh?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. No, it isn’t. I was just being silly. If there’s a mouth that needs a foot in it, I’m your guy.”

“Ha ha. You’re fine. Believe it or not, I met my husband here more than 60 years ago when I came to NNU for school. After we graduated, we got married and started working for the university. Of course, we’re both retired now. Besides our careers, we raised a family and did over 40 years of ministry work in Africa and Southeast Asia.”

“Wow. So, what you’re basically telling me is that I’m sitting next to NNU royalty?” I joked, hoping she’d continue to appreciate my sarcastic sense of humor.

“Ha ha. You’re funny,” she replied, swiveling in her seat as best she could while extending her hand. “I’m Mildred, by the way, and my husband’s name is Manfred.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mildred. I’m Chuck,” I said, gently taking her hand and thinking it weighed as much as an empty tissue box. “Now it’s my turn to tell you a ‘believe it or not’ story. You’re the first person I’ve met since moving to Nampa a year ago.”

“I’m surprised to hear that. You seem so personable and outgoing,” she offered, taking her hand back and leaning further into the conversation. If anyone was watching us, they’d think we were planning a bank robbery. “What brought you to Nampa?”

“I moved here from North Carolina to write a series of books that I’ve been itching to put down on paper for a long time. In fact, I just published my last book two weeks ago,” I replied, matching her vested interest by leaning closer to her.

“How interesting. What’s it about?”

Calm down, dude, I reminded myself. *Do not—repeat—do not subject this nice lady to a one-sided dissertation just because no one ever talks to you or asks you about your books. Show some restraint and give her the 10-second answer.* “The book’s title is *It’s Not Your Fault: But It Could Be*, and it’s the sequel to *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*. The first book describes my formula for finding happiness, and the second one offers a way to maintain that happiness despite living in such a corrupt and toxic society.”

“You may be sitting next to royalty, but I’m sitting next to a modern-day philosopher,” beamed Mildred with the kindest of smiles. “I’d like to read your latest book. Who knows? I might be able to get it and your other books into the university’s library.”

“Really? You have that kind of pull around here?” I asked.

“I think I do. I only worked there for over 40 years,” she deadpanned, while at the same time reigniting my belief that kindred spirits can still exist in the world—even in dusty, old Nampa.

Before I had a chance to ask this intriguing woman about her role at NNU’s library, the family to our left suddenly began taking their feet again, signaling the return of Mildred’s husband, most likely putting the kibosh on our spirited conversation. Once he returned to his seat, the two whispered something to each other as he discretely placed a bottle of water on her lap. While leaning back in her seat to give her husband a clear view of me, she gestured with her hand and said, “Chuck, this is Manfred.” Then she turned to him and continued the introductions. “He’s only been in Nampa for a year, and he’s a writer.”

“Nice to meet you, Chuck,” he said.

“Likewise,” I replied, extending my arm over Mildred’s lap.

Upon taking Manfred’s hand, I experienced the polar opposite of what I felt when I held Mildred’s only minutes earlier. Instead of wanting to open myself up to let someone in, a chill went up my spine, making me feel vulnerable, measured, and judged. Gone were the feelings of connection, acceptance, and appreciation. When I let go of his hand and settled back into my seat to listen to the second half of the concert, I forced myself to focus on the orchestra and choir. But when I

glanced back down to look at Mildred's bloodless hands, they were nervously flicking the corners of her program.

Name, Rank, and Serial Number

When the house lights flooded the theater for the last time at the conclusion of the performance's grand finale—a spirited rendition of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor—the three of us remained seated, wordlessly agreeing not to add to the spectacle of an impatient and slow-moving herd shuffling toward the exits. Once again, the situation reminded me of airline passenger behavior—this time how people tend to react as soon as the captain turns off the seatbelt sign. Most will immediately jump to their feet as if Jeff Bezos is waiting to sign a deal with them at the Cinnabon in Terminal B, while others wait passively, having realized long ago that any effort toward a speedier exit was both futile and delusional. With the added illumination, I was able to collect my first hard glimpses of Manfred—especially when he stood up to put on his jacket.

He was taller than Mildred, but not by much. And for some strange reason, he reminded me of every bad guy in a James Bond film, appearing cultured, dapper, and well-educated while giving off a sinister air of coldness bordering on cruelty. Maybe it was because he still had more blonde in his hair than gray. Or that I could imagine him being at ease in a tailored tuxedo while playing high-stakes Baccarat in Monte Carlo. I could even envision him working up a hearty appetite for a meat lover's lasagna after torturing a captured double agent for hours. To me, there was something duplicitous behind his icy blue eyes and mechanical smile. As I watched him help his wife to her feet, I knew that the path to an NNU library connection and a friendship with Mildred would require careful navigation around Manfred.

“So, how should I get in touch with you, Mildred?” I asked, my eyes bouncing from hers to his and back to hers again. Manfred's distrustful stare communicated

what I expected: *Why the hell would my elderly wife need to continue this random conversation beyond the confines of the Swayne Auditorium's now half-empty mezzanine?*

Instinctively, Mildred spun around to face her husband, abruptly abandoning the process of putting on her coat. With only one arm inside the heavy garment, she quickly explained that she wanted to read my latest book and that I had a copy for her. "Give him our number, dear."

Without looking at me, Manfred whipped out his cell phone, indicating that his wife and I would indeed be moving forward with the book exchange. But it also meant that he'd oversee and control our communication. "What's your number and where do you live?" he asked, jolting my hyperactive imagination into making me believe he had asked those questions many times before—the only difference being they were more like threats whispered in a heavy German accent inside abandoned warehouses far away from posh European casinos.

I obediently gave him my information and asked, "What's *your* number?"

"I'll text you," he quickly replied while helping Mildred finish putting on her coat.

Touché, Manfred, I thought, knowing he'd probably Google me, hoping to find similarities between his wife's new book friend and any of the homicidal monsters he'd seen on NBC's *Dateline*. "Oh, okay," I said, doing my best to mask my disappointment and adding polite discourse as one would expect. "It certainly was nice to meet you both, and I look forward to seeing you soon."

"Likewise, Chuck," lied Manfred with eyes that never found mine.

“It was such a pleasure, Chuck. And I can’t wait to read your book,” chimed Mildred.

“I’ll be very interested in hearing what you think about it,” I said, taking care not to crowd them as I slid past toward the closest of the two exit doors.

Before stepping into the lobby, I took one last look at the two polar opposites and caught Mildred staring back at me. Manfred was still facing her, his back to me. She wasn’t smiling, but her eyes said otherwise. And by the time I reached the parking lot, I had already resigned myself to believing I’d never hear from either of them—especially since Manfred had positioned himself as the gatekeeper between me and his wife.

In A Galaxy Far, Far Away

Six days had passed without a text or phone call from Manfred. Of course, I wasn’t surprised. However, because I remembered most of my conversation with Mildred, I was able to do my *own* Google search on the two of them, quickly learning that I wasn’t too far off when I joked they were NNU royalty. As it turned out, they had been pillars of the university’s association with the Church of the Nazarene in Nampa for nearly 50 years, having continued their involvement well into their retirement. But despite their impressive online resumes, I was still disappointed in them for not following through. After all, it was Mildred who brought up the library, and it was Mildred who wanted to read a copy of my latest book. And even though the evidence stacked up against the spirited former librarian, I found it nearly impossible to think poorly of her. It was her husband’s passive aggressiveness that drew my indignation.

Less than 24 hours later, while loathing myself for watching a TikTok video of two women trading punches over the counter in a Burger King somewhere in Florida, a text from Manfred popped up on my phone: Hi Chuck. Mildred and I

are leaving to visit family in the Midwest tomorrow morning. We'll be gone for two weeks. Could you meet me at the Flying M coffee shop on Second Street this afternoon? Mildred won't be there since she's busy packing.

Well played, Manfred, I thought, feeling the need to recognize his uncanny ability to continually zig when I thought he'd zag. But he's not the only one with clever gamesmanship. And my next move was not only going to require a perfectly placed drop shot over the net, but it would have to be for all the marbles: Good to hear from you, Manfred. Since you're both pressed for time, why don't I come by your house and deliver the book this afternoon? I'd love for Mildred to have it for the trip. How's 2:00 p.m.?

How could he pass this up? He doesn't have to drive. He can save his money for a coffee at the airport. And he can *still* block me from seeing Mildred. An hour later, I heard my phone chirp, indicating a text had just arrived. It was from Manfred: Okay. Let's make it 1:00 p.m. Our address is 704 Midland Avenue. Apparently, the old coot needed to put me on ice for a while and dictate the terms. And I could tell he was finished with the cordial pleasantries, making a serendipitous collaboration feel more like a dismal transaction.

Nonetheless, I pumped myself up and vowed to show up on time, dressed nicely, and smelling good. In my hand, I'd have a copy of the book with an inscription that began with "To my first friends in Nampa." And it wouldn't stop there. I'd be mindful of showing gratitude, knowing full well that a chance to make new friends after the age of 50 is a miracle in and of itself. The drive was pleasant and interesting, as I had not yet ventured to the west side of town toward Lake Lowell. The agro-industrial dominance and crumbling infrastructure were the same as on my side of town but somehow appeared more historically significant than depressing. Older neighborhoods gave way to much newer ones. As my truck rolled along West Greenhurst Road, I noticed the changing landscape: small, ranch-style homes on larger lots turned into tiny lots with hulking, two-story

residences—evidence that the steady infiltration of cash-heavy Californians wasn't limited to just Boise, Eagle, and Meridian.

I had imagined Mildred and Manfred living in a much larger and older house, so I was surprised to be pulling up to a small, modern, single-story home in a brand new, sparkling-clean community with wide streets and sidewalks. But as I approached the front door, it made sense. What 80-year-old couple wouldn't want to downsize into a prettier, more manageable residence? The only thing ruining the peaceful tranquility of the idyllic setting were the ubiquitous sounds of lawnmowers, weedwhackers, and leaf blowers, reminding me that the good people of the United States are truly at war with spring. To my relief, Mildred answered the door alone and greeted me as if she had been counting the minutes.

“Hello, Chuck! It's so nice of you to come by on such short notice,” she beamed while closing the door behind me. “I'm sorry we didn't get in touch with you sooner.”

“That's okay,” I said, keenly aware of the blatant lie. “I'd be running around like crazy, too, if I were preparing to be away for two weeks.” Once we were standing face-to-face, I presented the book to her. “Well, here it is. You may or may not agree with my perspective, but I'd be interested in hearing yours.”

“Thank you!” she said with graciousness, opening the book and finding the inscription. “Oh, I like what you wrote. That is so thoughtful. You seem to have an old soul, so I'm sure we'll agree on most things. Let's go sit in the living room.”

I followed Mildred through the foyer and into the open floor plan, where the living room, den, kitchen, and dining areas were in separate corners. Large windows permitted enough sunlight to brighten the space, allowing me to notice that most of the furniture was old and antique-like, offering credence to my theory

that they had recently downsized from a much larger home—most likely a place they had lived in for many decades. She settled down in the middle of the couch while I sat on the adjacent loveseat, leaving an empty wingback chair staring back at me from across the coffee table.

“I’m going to see my new great-granddaughter tomorrow,” she said brightly. “We wanted to go sooner, but I caught the flu, and our daughter is a nervous Nellie. But I don’t blame her for wanting me to be completely over it before coming to see little Vaydah.”

“Did you say her name is Vaydah?” I asked, barely containing my excitement for what would come next.

Mildred wore dark slacks and a long-sleeve, cream-colored blouse. She uncrossed her legs, scooted forward to the edge of the couch, and placed both hands on her knees. “Yes. Isn’t it pretty?”

“I guess it is—until a quick-witted seventh grader starts calling her ‘Dath Vayday’—you know, from Boston.”

Mildred fell back onto the couch with a laugh that made me feel like I had delivered the perfect punchline with impeccable timing. “Oh my gosh! You are so funny! I can’t wait to tell my daughter that joke.”

“Think twice about that, Mildred,” I deadpanned, leaning toward her. “Once you hear ‘Dath Vaydah,’ you can never un-hear it!”

“Ha-ha! That’s so true!” she laughed, giving me a momentary glimpse into her past. Her terrific sense of humor made me think she must’ve been a wonderful young lady and mother.

Laughing along with Mildred, I told her, “I might have to come up with some other characters. How about ‘Luke Skywhacka’ or –”

“I can hear the both of you clear outside,” interrupted Manfred, stepping into the house from the back yard. “What’s so funny?”

The sound of the sliding glass door had a sobering effect on both of us. Mildred and I looked at each other after Manfred asked the question. But we weren’t trying to determine who was going to let him in on the joke. Instead, it was a silent resignation we both understood: The party was over.

Alone Again, Naturally

When I turned toward the patio slider, I saw Manfred stooped over, removing his grass-stained sneakers. He, too, was a soldier fixated on beating back nature with machines too big and too noisy for the job. “Hi, Manfred,” I said, standing up to properly greet the king in his castle. “I see you’re getting the yard all tidied up before the trip,” I continued, hoping he’d forget hearing Mildred and me laughing out loud.

“Come sit down, dear. Chuck brought us his book, and he designed the cover himself,” added Mildred, making me think she didn’t want to revisit the ‘Dath Vaydah thing’ either.

Manfred strode toward the living room corner in his socks and sat down across from me in the wingback chair. He took the pastel blue-colored paperback with the big red heart on it from his wife’s outstretched hand and looked at it for two seconds before asking her a question about their morning transportation to the airport. Because he hadn’t pursued his earlier question, it was at that moment that I realized my silly *Star Wars* characters from Boston had transitioned from an impromptu punchline to an inside joke between just Mildred and me. Besides

looking annoyed at himself for not hearing my truck pull up to the house so he could intercept me before his wife answered the door, Manfred sat pensively on the edge of his chair.

No longer did he have that suave, dapper look I was impressed with at the theater more than a week earlier. He looked disheveled. His mop of hair was uncombed. The salt and pepper stubble on his face appeared to be three or four days old. And he wore a washed-out t-shirt with the logo of a sports team I had never heard of over a pair of filthy jeans. He looked nothing like the man honored in NNU's hall of fame. Instead, he looked tired, old, and ornery. Plus, he made me wonder why Mildred hadn't put plastic over the furniture.

With Manfred staring at me over the coffee table and Mildred looking like she'd rather be packing, I had to say something—anything—to break the awkward silence. “So the book starts off explaining how Big Government and Corporate America—mere puppets of an elite class of invisible shot callers—work together to enslave Americans on a proverbial nationwide farm that produces two things: tax revenue and profit.”

“That sounds deep but very interesting,” chimed Mildred, while her husband surveyed me with what looked like disdain. “What makes you think Americans are enslaved?”

“Love the question, Mildred,” I replied, sitting up straighter and scooting forward on the love seat. “To answer it fully, you'd need to read the book and then give me the better part of an afternoon to give you even more examples—examples that are everywhere and in plain sight, no less! Let me just summarize it by saying that the people who actually run this country want all of us to be overly obligated, overly responsible, and in debt before we're even ready for it. That way, they'll have us penned in on the farm our entire lives.”

“Sounds depressing,” blurted Manfred, putting an end to the silent treatment. His smug-like smirk did nothing to mask an obvious gaslighting tactic.

“I agree,” I said. “Who wouldn’t be depressed watching our government become the largest, most corrupt organization in the history of the world—putting corporate greed above human need?”

“I agree with you, Chuck,” added Mildred, looking at me with eyes that wanted more. She reached over and took the book from Manfred’s hands.

“Of course, the purpose of the book isn’t to depress people,” I continued. “It’s really about letting people know that they can have everything they want in life—a well-rounded education, excellent health, a meaningful relationship, a spiritual connection, children, a comfortable home, a satisfying job, enough money, and family vacations, for example. But there’s a catch. They can’t approach those pursuits in the way that Big Government and Corporate America lay out for them. Basically, it’s a trap—a trap that’s getting harder and harder to circumvent.”

“Do you talk about alternative approaches to the things you mentioned in your book?” asked Mildred.

“I do. I chose nine different—”

Manfred suddenly slapped his knees—the telltale sign that the conversation was over—before standing up and looking at his wife. “I think we’d better get back to preparing for the trip.”

“Okay, but doesn’t this sound like the perfect book for Steven?” she said as she got up from the couch. Then she looked at me and added, “Steven is one of our grandchildren.”

“Let’s not get into that right now. We have things to do, and I’m sure Chuck does as well,” he replied. “Thanks for stopping by, Chuck.”

Thirty minutes ago, Mildred welcomed me into their home as if I were Ed McMahon holding an oversized check from the Publisher’s Clearing House. Now, I was bracing myself to hear Manfred shout, “Don’t let the door hit you in the backside on your way out!” Still, I felt like I had done everything right at Manfred’s and Mildred’s home. I was presentable. I smelled good. I gave them a book with a heartfelt inscription, and I spoke passionately about a subject matter I feel more than qualified to write about.

Months later, after not hearing anything from either of them—even after texting Manfred the day after I met them at their home—I figured I never would. I was back to talking to the empty passenger seat in my truck, doing my best to accept the inexplicable midmorning traffic on Garrity Boulevard near Interstate 84 in Nampa. It’s been almost a year and a half since moving to the dusty town of 110,000, and I’ve yet to make any friends here—a destination I can no longer recommend on the map of a mad, mad world.

The End