# MIXED MESSAGES

Better Off

First Day

Re-claiming Charity

Tired of Tipping

STORIES TO LIVE BY

Chuck Trunks

Mixed Messages

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Nampa, Idaho

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I no longer believe it's possible to stop the world from hurling itself into the abyss like a runaway train destined for the proverbial brick wall. So, what do we do in the meantime—sit outside on lawn chairs and wait for the deafening whine of air sirens to tell us it's all over? Wouldn't it be better to accept what we cannot change and make the best of whatever time we still have left on this confounding planet?

I'm not suggesting we merely change our attitude and embrace the way of life that's been dictated to us—that would be the same as advocating a practice of self-delusion. Instead, I'm proposing that we make use of our remaining freedoms and rethink our approach to things like tipping, enlightenment, charity, and social media, which comprise the four narratives inside *Mixed Messages: Stories to Live By*.

Although I insist there's nothing we can do to eradicate the ever-present abominations in America without destroying society as a whole, I invite you to contemplate the alternative viewpoints expressed in *Mixed Messages*, where simply walking away from abject nonsense is our only remaining choice.

“When you’re born, you get a ticket to the freakshow. When you’re born in America, you get a front row seat.”

-George Carlin

“This work was written independently by the author without the use of generative AI.”

-Chuck Trunks

# CONTENTS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Preface | 1 |
| | Introduction | 4 |
| **Theater 1** | Tired of Tipping | 8 |
| **Theater 2** | First Day | 45 |
| **Theater 3** | Reclaiming Charity | 91 |
| **Theater 4** | Better Off | 137 |
| | About the Author | 219 |
| | Additional Books | 220 |

# Preface

I didn't set out to publish an eleventh book; it just happened. Like many prolific authors who take a much-needed hiatus from writing one book after another, I settled into something more self-indulgent, more manageable—the fictional short story. But one story soon became two, then three—then ultimately four seemingly unrelated narratives centered around tipping, enlightenment, charity, and social media. Creatives, whether they're restoring a classic automobile, digging a flowerbed in the backyard, painting a still life, or writing a series of short stories, need to step back every so often to assess their overall progress, the "big picture," as they say. When I examine these four tales as a whole, I can see their interconnectedness—their least common denominator.

Much of what's been fed to us in life has been a series of lies supporting a non-negotiable script ensuring that power and control *stay* in the hands of only a self-serving few. In *Mixed Messages: Stories to Live By*, all four stories are, essentially, rewrites of portions of this indoctrinating script—complete with the proverbial cross-outs, red lines, and scribbled notes along the margins. In other words, each story goes precisely

against what the script writers are selling, asking readers to reconsider their blind obedience and ask questions. That's all I do these days: rethink everything I've been told and invite conventional wisdom to debate my assessments. *Mixed Messages* could have easily ballooned into much more than just four stories, showcasing the rampant nonsense and hypocrisy of other "acts" within the script, like healthcare, marriage, education, and employment, as well as smaller "scenes" like grocery shopping, having coffee at a café, gym workouts, and commuting.

Part of me feels like a Bible-thumper who walks around wearing a sandwich board proclaiming "REPENT!" on one side, "THE END IS NEAR!" on the other. But instead of shaming people into subjugating themselves to government, corporate, or religious doctrine, I'm merely offering a series of logical perspectives that reveal how much of our daily lives have been structured to further empower and enrich those who already hold all the cards. My story conclusions aren't calling for either rebellion or Congressional oversight—those days are long gone, as the flow of money openly dictates the course of all things. With the proper checks and balances, capitalism works by rewarding those who innovate and take risks;

without them, it's an economic system that quickly degrades into monopolies and orgies of greed and exploitation—which is where we are now in America.

As you'll read in *Mixed Messages*, the evidence behind my claims is all around us—from tipping request screens to the number of abominations seen through enlightened eyes to TV pitchmen pleading for donations of $19 a month to social media algorithms profiting off human weakness. Regardless of where you are in this country, what you do, or where you look, the truth is plain to see—that is, if you're willing to acknowledge it.

# Introduction

*Mix Messages: Stories to Live By* is not just a book of short stories; it's your ticket to a film festival of sorts. However, the multiplex isn't located in your city's arts district or even the theater district; it's in your mind, where a stack of blank movie reels await your imagination. Take heart! This particular multiplex doesn't require you to maneuver through a cramped parking lot and squeeze into a narrow space better suited for a golf cart than your sedan. The seating is quite comfortable, too, allowing you the option to drape a blanket around your shoulders on your choice of a recliner, couch, or even a bed! Hungry? Thirsty? No worries—skip the hassle and exploitative pricing of the concession stand because your refrigerator and pantry are stocked with your favorite drinks and snacks from Costco!

What's that you say? Why is there a red carpet in front of the multiplex? No, we're not expecting any celebrities rolling up in shiny black limousines; they weren't invited. The carpet was laid out exclusively for you, the guest of honor, leading you to four distinct theaters, each showcasing an aspect of daily life in America, six years after the latest global

pandemic. Of course, you're welcome to view the narratives in any order that you'd like.

In Theater One, you won't ever be pestered for a single gratuity. Instead, your wallet can rest assured while you relax and read a series of vignettes about how never-ending tip requests are ruining most meals eaten outside the home. In Theater Two, you're invited to join a young family for dinner, where the conversation will transition from its youngest member's first day of school to the power and responsibility of social and spiritual enlightenment. Need a bathroom break? No problem—say goodbye to standing in line, breathing through your mouth, and pretending not to notice the shameless person taking selfies in the mirror. *Your* bathroom is empty, smells like jasmine, and is conveniently located between the garage and laundry room.

The narrative in Theater Three also centers on a young family, who, unlike the family depicted in Theater Two, are blue-collar migrants, struggling to stay together in an economy that demands long hours of work and dual incomes to survive. They—like the abused dogs, disfigured children, and wounded servicemen and women featured in round-the-clock

ads asking for donations of $19 a month—are also deserving of such support and generosity. Without asking for help, the family acquires it—but through an unlikely source, an older neighbor, who's decided to listen to his heart instead of a TV spokesperson. And, finally, in Theater Four, you'll be taken to a sold-out country music concert, where you'll go no further than the parking lot. However, you'll bear witness to two coworkers abandoning the friend zone while explaining to concertgoers dressed as cowgirls why they're better off without social media.

Had this event been an actual film festival, like the famous ones in Cannes and Park City, you might've been approached by clipboard-carrying market researchers, asking you questions about your experience, determined to find out if you'd caught the underlying theme common in all four stories.

"That the world is going to hell in a handbasket?" you'd guess.

The researcher would give you an inquisitive look. "No, that's much too pessimistic. Nobody can live without hope," he'd say while writing notes on whatever was attached to his clipboard.

“Then is it our free will that affords us a different path—a direction that goes against government-sanctioned indoctrination, allowing us to live and think in a way that feels more meaningful, more human?”

The researcher’s pen would come to a screeching halt mid-sentence before looking up at you, smiling. “Are you serious right now? You freaking nailed it!”

# Theater 1: Tired of Tipping

## Introduction

"Why am I even here?" I chided myself, thinking I could be at home, eating a grilled cheese sandwich with a bowl of tomato soup. Despite my better judgment—or perhaps due to a craving for empanadas—I decided to treat myself to lunch, a rare indulgence for someone like me, who no longer finds comfort or pleasure in public spaces. But there I was, lined up behind the other hungry sheep, preparing myself for the abuse to come.

I live in a society where culture is defined by soulless corporate executives who obey the first commandment of the god of profit, "Thou shall prioritize greed above human need." Society used to be centered around God, community, family, fellowship, and contribution—now it's been reduced to individuals pursuing any means of survival. Since the pandemic, the high cost of living has made it nearly impossible for most Americans to afford a spouse, children, a family, a permanent home, reliable employment, higher

education, health, and leisure. Today, that includes going to restaurants, where the illusion of choice extends to tip-giving.

Sadly, I've grown accustomed to corporate deceit, high prices, and shrinkflation. Now, I *expect* to discover skimpy portions hidden within oversized packaging, fine print that contradicts the sales pitch, and a feeling of slowly being hollowed out, one tip request at a time. As someone who's held several tip positions during high school and college, I understand the lure of opportunities to earn "on the spot" extra cash by going above and beyond what is required. But that's not how it works in today's restaurants, where customers are forced to face brainwashed, entitled servers; screens suggesting exorbitant tip amounts attached to rotating bases; and credit card receipts asking for tips before your order even reaches the kitchen.

My formula for writing books—or, in this case, a rant about the scourge of tipping—is always the same: I attempt to not only convince the reader that there is, indeed, a major problem but also to go one step further by offering a rationale for why a particular societal bane continues to plague our daily lives with no end in sight. In the following four sections, I'll take

the reader to Starbucks for an afternoon coffee, lunch with a girlfriend, a first date, and Cody's Rib Ranch for takeout during a freakish springtime snowstorm to showcase how forced tipping disrupts the natural flow between customers and businesses. Finally, I'll offer my thoughts as to why I believe the surge of forced tipping cannot be defeated in a society moderated by a small number of people who control and own everything—and who can callously turn a blind eye to the plight and desperation of their fellow human beings.

As I shuffled closer to the front of the line at the Argentinian eatery, I began to notice the changes since my last visit. First and foremost, the owner wasn't behind the counter. And the overhead chalkboard menu was replaced with three digital menu boards mounted above two ordering lines that terminated in front of gleaming white iPads manned by two girls wearing matching red t-shirts and hats. I already knew the prices had practically doubled overnight, so I wasn't overly shocked when I saw the dollar amounts listed on the electronic screens, which, of course, didn't include the upcharges of sales tax and the forced tip. No, the shock came when I saw the shrunken size of the empanadas as a construction worker retrieved his order in front of me.

I was still looking at the meat-filled pastries when the smiling girl in front of me said, “Are you ready to order, sir?” At the same moment, I noticed the other girl swiveling her iPad toward the customer beside me for the customary tip-begging segment of the transaction. “Sir?” she continued. “Are you ready?”

Ignoring her, I turned to the man behind me. “You go ahead,” I said, before exiting the small restaurant, feeling motivated more than ever to learn how to make my own empanadas.

## No Room

I held my breath as I opened the heavy glass door, hoping that my preferred table—a rare two-seater pushed up against a solid wall instead of scorching hot windows—wasn’t unoccupied. If it was, I’d look at my second option—a round bistro table in the far corner. Lastly, if my first two choices weren’t available, I’d have to join the ranks of the mere commoner and resign myself to the long table in front of the counter, the equivalent of Siberia inside Starbucks. Luckily, the sunless two-seater was gloriously vacant, allowing me to plop my army-green backpack on its surface like a victory flag

upon a conquered land. With only a smattering of catatonic people camped out with their phones and laptops and a vacant ordering line adding to my good fortune, I knew today's dreaded writing slog would result in journalistic gold.

My mood, which normally took an immediate nosedive while placing a coffee order with a deadeye automaton behind a cash register, remained inwardly upbeat as I asked for the cheapest drink on the menu—in the most robotic and succinct manner possible. "Tall Pike—no room," I said brusquely.

"$2.81," sighed Renata, whose handwritten nametag was adorned with red hearts and pink flowers and stood out against her black t-shirt. Like the other four girls buzzing behind the counter, she wore a headset on top of a black hat and tied her long dark hair in a loose pony tail. Her pale arms were covered in more than a dozen random tattoos that reminded me of doodles I'd draw while on the phone: stars, a rainbow, dice, a gecko, etc. They made no sense to me—just like the screen that suddenly illuminated on my side of the counter. Bold white lettering against a black background prompted me to tip either $1, $2, or $5. At the bottom of the screen—looking like

an afterthought in its much smaller font—were the words "custom tip." But I was prepared.

"Oh, okay," she mumbled after watching me whip out my Starbuck's gift card like a wooden cross to ward off advancing corporate vampires. "Scan it here," she continued while gesturing toward a flimsy scanner behind rows of packages containing two tiny macaroons for $3.49.

Years ago, I figured out that a gift card mercifully reroutes the transaction away from having to deal with the uncomfortable tip consideration. The audible beep from the scanner never fails to please me, as it signals the welcomed end of the soulless exchange. Whereas Renata heard the actual sound of the beep, I heard "$2.81" instead of a ghastly $3.81, $4.81, or an insane $7.81. "What is wrong with the corporate overlords at Starbucks headquarters?" I asked myself while waiting for my 12 ounces of brain fuel. When I first saw the $1, $2, or $5 tip options, I was outraged by the underlying mathematics. Customarily, it's understood that tip amounts should be based on the pretax subtotal, which in my case was $2.65, making Starbucks' suggestions even more absurd. Starbucks, whose CEO earned $31 million in 2025, is essentially offering me the

choice of giving a 44%, 82%, or 195% tip to an uninspired and underpaid employee to get me a cup of coffee in the one and only way possible—the nerve!

However, the coffee giant rarely loses. While my gift card helped me avoid the discomfort of having to select NO TIP in front of a barista who may or may not live in her car, where the bottom line is concerned, Starbucks always wins—and the proof is in my hand. The world's largest coffee chain holds approximately $2 billion in prepaid gift card sales at any given time, allowing the $120 billion company to use the capital for operations without having to answer to traditional banking regulations. In other words, by purchasing the gift card, I, in essence, provided Starbucks with an interest-free loan, where I'm paid back with overpriced coffee if I don't lose or misplace the card first. *Well played, corporate overlords!*

"Would you like anything else?" asked the woefully scripted Renata, placing my order on the counter.

I wanted to sarcastically say, "Actually, yes, Renata. Like most people, I prefer separate transactions for each item I'd like to purchase." Instead, I ignored her and pulled off the lid

to see how much coffee was in the cup. “Would you fill this up, please?” I asked, making no attempt to hide my annoyance.

“Oh, I thought you wanted room for cream,” she replied innocently, taking the cup back.

Having learned a long time ago that I live in a world filled with unteachable worker bees, I fought the urge to explain to Renata how the seemingly innocuous question, “Do you want room for cream?” is nothing more than a blatant money grab by the corporate overlords to sell 10 ounces of coffee for the price of 12. That’s like me offering to give you $2.00 instead of $2.81 so you can have more room in your cash register drawer. Here’s a thought, worshippers of the god of profit: serve the coffee in a bigger cup—duh!

## Showdown

“What are you going to get?” whispered Tiffany while we both surveyed the giant menu board from our place in line.

“I think I’ll get the number 16,” I whispered back.

“Which one is that?”

“It’s a roast turkey club with sprouts and homemade cranberry sauce,” I replied. “It comes with a side of macaroni salad, too. Drinks are separate, though.”

Tiffany looked back at the seating area and said, “I’m going to grab that table for us near the window. Just order a BLT and a Seven-Up for me, okay?”

Without my girlfriend beside me, occupying my headspace with playful touches and inside jokes, I was left alone with my thoughts, which at the time were centered solely on why I no longer enjoyed eating out. If I wasn’t meeting Tiffany for lunch, I’d be eating at home and avoiding this charade altogether. But Tiffany had a way of making me look past the ungrateful restaurant staff, ridiculously high prices, and customers who order and eat without disengaging from their phones. I looked back at where Tiffany was sitting and caught her eye. Always the jokester, she quickly looked away, pretending not to have seen me, and began texting wildly on an imaginary phone four inches away from her face. I laughed

loud enough for the two people behind me to stop looking at their phones.

Facing the counter, I began the mental gymnastics in my head, adding up the $13.95 for the turkey club, $11.95 for the BLT, and $2.95 for each can of soda. But before I could calculate the sales tax, the person in front of me veered off to the right, leaving nothing but the counter between me and Kirby, a rotund manboy whose fresh face offset his middle-aged body. His name was stitched whimsically on his dark-green apron in white thread. “What can I get for you?” he asked brightly, standing in front of the worst invention in the history of mankind: a computer tablet attached to a swivel mount. Stepping forward, I said hello and even personalized it by including his name, which prompted Kirby to nod and repeat himself, as if I needed to be reminded that time is money. “What can I get for you?” he urged again.

Reciting the order, I found my attention split between watching his stubby fingers tap against the screen and the two big-boned women in the kitchen behind him. They wore aprons like the green one in front of me, except theirs were white. The talkative duo appeared to be in mid-conversation

about something they both found amusing, lumbering about the prep area at a pace that negated Kirby's sense of urgency. Their process was simple: They'd place a completed order on the pass-through shelf and shout, "Order up!" signaling the order taker to transport it to a pickup area at the other end of the counter. Then Kirby would do one of three things. He'd either call out a name or number or bring the food to the appropriate party. Based on my current relationship with the world, odds were I'd most likely hear my number called.

"Okay. That'll be $33.70," declared Kirby, who quickly spun the tablet around so that the screen was facing me. "It's going to ask you a question," he added.

"Gee, I wonder what it is?" I grumbled under my breath, fully aware that my relationship with Kirby, the man who had access to the food I was about to put in my mouth, depended on the financial decision I'd make in the next five seconds. I could feel the heat of my blood rise to a boiling point as I stared down at the greasy screen asking for an 18-, 20-, 22-, or 25-percent tip, with another grotesque button displaying the words "or higher." At the bottom, in much smaller font, looking like the obvious runt of the group, was the sad little

button with the words “custom tip.” It all happened so fast; I didn’t even have an opportunity to figure out if the suggested tip percentages were based on the supposed pre-tax subtotal. But now that consumer protection agencies are the equivalent of rotary phones in America, I was confident these were after-tax calculations.

The way Kirby and I stared at each other reminded me of two high-plains drifters squaring off under the noon-day sun in the middle of town, their dusty fingers idling above holstered guns. In reality, my finger hovered over an option to leave no tip while Kirby’s eyes were saying, “It’s up to you, cheapskate, if you want your girlfriend to eat a BLT with a tomato we found near the floor drain or if you’d prefer to eat macaroni salad that may or may not have been in the trunk of my car since yesterday.” But I envisioned a way out of the situation, where both gunslingers had no choice but to abandon the fight altogether: All I would have to do is show my phone to Kirby.

“It’s going to ask you a question,” I’d say in my fantasy.

“I don’t get it,” he’d say, leaning over the swiveled tablet screen, prompting the same requested actions.

“Can’t you see?” I’d continue. “It’s asking you for either an 18-, 20-, 22-, or 25-percent tip based on how competent of a customer I am. Keep in mind that I used your name when I said hello and didn’t waste your time asking a bunch of questions about the lunch special. I walked up and succinctly gave you my order without any substitution requests. Plus, I smell good.”

“Huh? I can’t give you any money.”

“Of course you can’t, Kirby, but you can subtract the amount from my total. So, what’s it going to be? A 25 percent discount or two free sodas?”

“With all due respect, sir, I think you’re crazy,” he’d reply. “That’s not how tipping works.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Kirby. You see, the transaction between the business and customer requires two parties to perform their required roles, yet the business shamelessly begs

for additional compensation for simply doing what is expected of them. To a reasonable person like me, that puts tipping requests somewhere between abject greed and extortion. So instead of giving you a big fat zero tip, why don't you give me a 25 percent tip, and I'll do the same? That way, they cancel each other out and we can be finished with this nonsense."

"Okay, I'll play along," Kirby would say. "Why would I give you a tip at all when I don't even know if you're the type of person who disturbs other customers or leaves a mess or doesn't throw their trash away?"

"You're making it too easy," I'd say. "Do you see what's happening here, Kirby? Predictably, as soon as customers turn the tables, the business has the exact same concerns. As it stands now, customers are pressured and shamed into giving tips *before* the business has completed its portion of the transaction, leaving patrons to wonder if they'll receive poor service or quality or even retaliation for not giving enough of a tip. Somewhere along the line, tips went from being given with discretion and, in many instances, with gladness, at the *end* of the transaction; now it's an upfront, faceless, and joyless tap on a screen that's nothing more than an insurance

policy to avoid thinking your tuna melt contains some kind of nasty retribution."

"People are waiting," Kirby said dully, jolting me from my satisfying daydream. By his unwavering stare, I could tell he was practically daring me to select "custom tip"—the precursor to tapping "no tip." I looked back at Tiffany and succumbed to adding a wildly undeserved 20 percent tip, thinking I'd survive if I ate day-old macaroni salad from Kirby's car, but I wouldn't be able to stomach the possibility that my precious girlfriend could be eating a BLT with a slice of tomato peeled off a floor drain.

## No Tip for You

"Did you see that?" I huffed as soon as the waitress was safely out of earshot.

"See what?" asked Vivian from the other side of a bistro table that required me to jam a stack of cocktail napkins under one of its legs to keep it from wobbling. She agreed to a first date because, according to her, she liked that I used her full name instead of a monosyllabic "Vee," which her friends and family

preferred. She couldn't tell me the difference between nuclear fission and fusion, but she was pretty, smelled nice, and laughed at my jokes.

"You didn't see her roll her eyes after taking our drink order?"

"She did?"

"Yes, and I know why," I replied, leaning over my folded arms on the table and congratulating myself on how stable the surface felt. "She was thinking about how low of a tip she'll be getting from a lousy Diet Coke and an iced tea, which I can understand. What bothers me is that she's willing to show us her annoyance. I don't like that."

"Should we leave?"

Because she didn't say something like "Oh, just get over it" or "You probably imagined it," I decided right then and there I wanted a second date with Vivian—but the evening was still young. Anything could happen. "No, let's stay here," I said. "Maybe she'll lose the attitude after we order some food. Plus,

I don't want to leave after having performed an engineering miracle under this table."

Listening to her giggle made me feel like the date was back on track. "I'm going to have a chicken Caesar salad," I announced while closing the laminated menu. "A man needs to watch his girlish figure, you know."

"There are way more calories in that than you'd think," laughed Vivian. "You'd be better off getting a bacon cheeseburger with curly fries. I think I'm going to get an appetizer. I just want a small plate of something like the stuffed crab cakes."

"That's it?"

"That's it," she confirmed.

"Oh, boy."

"What?"

“I don’t think our waitress’s attitude is going to change much after she’s heard our order for a $14 salad and an $8 appetizer, especially in a place known for its steaks,” I cautioned.

Vivian suddenly sat back on her stool—a telltale sign that someone was approaching—as she was facing the restaurant’s interior. “Why would she expect us to order steaks when we’re sitting in the bar?” she reasoned.

Before I could respond, Teresa reappeared with our drinks, wearing the same exhausted expression—a look of pained tolerance, like she was taking one for the team. She couldn’t have been more than 23 years old and gave me the impression she was a stressed-out single mom of a 3-year-old—the result of an ill-timed one-night stand in the guest room of a house party. I appreciated how carefully she placed our drinks in front of us, making sure not to spill either glass—but ruined it in the next moment by exhaling a little too loudly when I asked her for a couple of straws. She further exacerbated the situation after hearing our food choices, curtly saying, “Got it,” before collecting the menus and scuttling away.

“You’re right,” whispered Vivian. “She’s clearly not a fan of ours. Are you sure she isn’t a daughter of one of the women you dated and dumped?”

By her wry smile, I knew Vivian was joking. Still, I made a mental note to stop talking about my exes. “No, but doesn’t it seem like most servers are like her these days?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen hostility like that in a long time, Chuck. Maybe you’re doing something to attract the negativity. Didn’t you tell me most people ignore you and that dogs are constantly trying to attack you?”

“That’s true, Vivian,” I said with a heavy dose of sarcasm, “but you forgot to mention that small children are terrified of me and holy water burns through my skin like sulfuric acid.”

We spent the next few minutes laughing and exchanging self-deprecating jokes at my expense, which I didn’t mind ever since my ego no longer craved external validation. Besides, my flaws and eccentricities are like bright yellow ducks in a shooting gallery: you can’t help but want to pick them off one by one. Things were going so well between Vivian and me that

we soon forgot we were the unwitting enemy of a war we wanted no part of—that is, until Teresa returned, bringing gloom and doom to our sunny little picnic. Without a smile or a polite "Excuse me," she placed the crab cakes in front of Vivian and the salad in front of me. But when she put my plate down, it hit the table with enough force to cause a couple of lettuce sprigs to fall. There wasn't a forthcoming apology or even an attempt to pick up the errant leaves.

After Teresa left without so much as a "Can I get you anything else?" Vivian, looking visibly upset, suggested, "We should talk to the manager. Her behavior is ridiculous. She didn't even ask if we wanted refills."

Although I was thrilled to finally have someone on my side for once, I cautioned Vivian about entering every battle—even the ones where you've been clearly wronged. "It's not worth it," I said. "Who knows what's going on in her life at the moment? That doesn't mean I'm excusing her behavior; it simply means I won't be giving her a tip."

Besides saving me roughly $6 in unearned tip money, Teresa unknowingly served up excellent conversation fodder

between me and my date, handing me the opportunity to tell Vivian how I financed more than half the cost of my college education on tips alone. Even as a teenager, I understood how tips were earned: you simply had to have a good attitude and look for ways to go above and beyond what was required of you. That meant memorizing course distances and wiping club faces after every shot while caddying; being ready to suggest where the best bars, restaurants, and strip clubs were located in the city as a bellhop; and knowing when and when *not* to talk to guests while driving a limousine.

Eventually, long after my date and I had finished the salad and crab cakes, Teresa showed up with our refills, prompting me to ask her for the bill. When she returned with it 10 minutes later, I quickly checked the amounts and scanned it for any unwarranted fees, as I now live in a predatory society where hyper-vigilance is as necessary as a smartphone. I handed it back to her with my credit card and returned to the conversation with Vivian, who was in the middle of telling me how she, too, felt anxious around dogs. On her way back from a boisterous table containing a foursome of yuppies seemingly immune to the sticker shock of $15 cocktails, a smiling Teresa slid a pleather bill folder on our table and said, “Thank you,”

before returning to the group she just left. “Too little, too late,” I whispered to Vivian while I opened the folder to find her name in cursive and a smiley face at the top of the credit card receipt. I signed it and put the card back in my wallet before asking Vivian, “Are you ready?”

Outside, we were just about to step off the sidewalk and head across the parking lot when the door behind us flew open, startling both Vivian and I. She was clearly shocked, but a part of me was expecting a scenario like this to happen at some point.

“What’s *this* all about?” shouted Teresa, who was waving the credit card receipt containing two hand-drawn circles: one with a smiley face and one with a dollar sign next to it. “I knew you’d stiff me!”

I took hold of Vivian’s hand and walked toward the red-faced waitress and calmly asked, “Do you want to know why I didn’t leave you a tip?”

From her posture, I could see that Teresa wasn’t afraid of me in the least and that she felt she was clearly in the right. She

was probably thinking of herself as a heroine, a vigilante against the cheapskates of the world. But I had dealt with women like her before—the ones whose brand of boldness is fueled by a pathological need to cut men down to size, knowing they can act with impunity from behind a convenient double standard.

“Yeah, I do,” she snapped. “Waitresses don’t work for free, you know!”

I fought the urge to explain the irrationality of her logic under the neon glow of adjacent businesses, recalling that her youth meant her mind was most likely warped from having grown up with a phone in her hand. “Okay, but let’s go back inside and find your manager. If you’re so confident that you were unfairly stiffed, then let’s have this conversation in front of your boss. I’m willing to do it; are you?”

It was fleeting, but I saw it flicker across her face like a strobe light—a look of incoherence: someone wasn’t stooping to her level of savagery, where impulsive boldness overrides thoughtful discourse. Her hesitancy to answer my question created enough of an opportunity for me to continue. “I must

warn you, though: if you proceed, you will not only lose your case in under a minute, but it will also be thoroughly humiliating. You might even lose your job, while my girlfriend and I will probably leave here with a couple of dinner vouchers. If I were you, I'd go back inside."

I watched Teresa's expression transform from bewilderment to utter contempt. Her eyes narrowed as she turned toward the restaurant entrance—the credit card receipt still flapping in her grip. "Good choice," I said, still holding Vivian's hand. However, our waitress wasn't finished.

"Asshole!" she shouted while giving me the middle finger with one hand and opening the door with the other.

When she disappeared behind the dark tint of the glass door, I turned to Vivian and said, "Can you believe that?"

Vivian squeezed my hand and asked, "So, I'm your girlfriend?"

# Takeout

My plan wasn't complicated, but I still felt the need to write it down on the back of an envelope and jam it into my pocket, boosting my confidence that I'd be well prepared to counter their expected objections with irrefutable logic. Based on what the lady at the front desk told me, the walk from the Holiday Inn Express to Cody's Rib Ranch would take no more than 10 minutes. Normally, I wouldn't think twice about it. What's a 10-minute walk to someone who runs every day? The problem wasn't an unexpected snowstorm hitting Rawlins, Wyoming, in the first week of May as I was traveling to Boise, Idaho, from Raleigh, North Carolina—the problem was that *all* my winter clothes were packed away in the back of my truck, leaving me only a pair of sneakers, shorts, a t-shirt, and a windbreaker to protect me from the elements while slogging to the other side of the snow-covered business park.

There were no two ways about it; I was one of the lucky ones. I had a confirmed reservation for a hotel room at one of the last open exits before the Wyoming Highway Patrol was forced to shut down I-80 in either direction due to hazardous driving conditions. Plus, if it hadn't been for all my worldly

possessions weighing down my pickup truck—increasing the traction between the road and my rear tires—I might've had to spend the night in the emergency room instead of a junior suite with two queen beds and a walk-in shower. After having nabbed a prime parking spot in front of the hotel's entrance, where the snow hadn't yet accumulated, I wasn't about to press my luck by getting back in my truck and driving to the popular rib joint.

I felt conspicuous walking into the busy restaurant wearing attire better suited for tennis than for foraging for food in a snowstorm in Wyoming. The smell alone was enough to warm me up—a mixture of barbeque sauces slathered on sizzling baby back ribs, pork spare ribs, beef ribs, and St. Louis-style ribs. The lady at the front desk was right; Cody's Rib Ranch was worth the trek. I brushed the snow off my shoulders and shoe tops without making eye contact with the half-dozen people waiting for their takeout orders or to be seated. I could easily guess what they were thinking about me—a shivering adult man, stepping out from the winter weather, dressed like a third grader ready for a game of kickball. Dripping hair and frozen hands forced me to postpone ordering to find a

restroom, where I could blot myself dry with paper towels and thaw my fingers under hot water.

After reviewing my scribbled notes in front of the sink, I returned to the hostess station and placed my takeout order for a combo plate of brisket, baby back ribs, and pulled pork, with baked beans and coleslaw as must-have sides. With a cooler full of soda, beer, and Gatorade in my hotel room, I didn't need to add a drink.

"That'll be $28.71," chimed the blonde, blue-eyed hostess, who stood behind an old-school cash register—the kind that couldn't be swiveled toward the customer to beg for a tip or, as I like to call it, an extortion tax.

"Okay," I replied, while gesturing toward the waiting area. "I'll be sitting right over there."

"You have to pay before I can place the order with the kitchen," she explained.

I looked behind me to make sure no one was waiting. I turned back to Denise and smiled. She smiled back, anticipating the

appearance of my credit card, which, unbeknownst to her, wouldn't be forthcoming until the order was ready. I knew it was pointless attempting to explain my rationale to someone who looked fresh out of high school, but I proceeded anyway—only to have her cut me off and say, "Maybe you should talk to the manager." A few minutes later, a tall man in his early 30s, who I imagined had graduated from the same high school as Denise, approached me and introduced himself as the shift manager.

"What can I do for you?" he said.

I quickly recounted what I had told Denise, explaining that I had had some negative experiences with recent takeout orders getting lost in the kitchen shuffle, missing items, exceedingly long wait times, tepid food, etc.

"Well, that won't happen here," he assured me. "I'll personally see to it that your order is assembled and packaged to your liking."

"That's wonderful," I said enthusiastically. "I'll be right here when it's ready."

“However,” he continued, “we do ask that our takeout customers pay for their orders first.”

Although I was prepared for the debate, a part of me wasn’t looking forward to having it with such a likeable and accommodating person. But what Brad, the manager, didn’t know was that my noncompliance was geared toward avoiding the upfront tip request for a takeout order, which made no sense to me or any other customer, for that matter. It wasn’t Denise’s or Brad’s fault; someone had to take a stand against this tipping nonsense.

“I heard someone call you Brad,” I began, doing my best to sound and act like my TV hero, Sheriff Andy Taylor from the *Andy Griffith Show*. “May I call you Brad?”

“Of course.”

“You see, it’s like this, Brad. Your policy is unfair because you don’t ask your dine-in customers to do the same thing. I’m literally perched on this bench, 15 feet from those sitting at a table, waiting for my food just like they are, and yet I’m

singled out to pay *before* my order is prepared, making me feel like a second-class citizen. What am I missing, Brad?"

I wasn't surprised when I saw his wedding band as he ran his fingers through his thinning hair; he looked like someone who married his high school sweetheart and had a couple of kids right away. I could imagine him mowing his lawn on Saturdays, attending church on Sundays, and coaching youth soccer, Little League, or both. I could tell he didn't need a lecture on ethics at the cusp of the dinner rush—especially from a customer who was old enough to be his dad yet dressed like one of his kids.

"Or, I could simply ask to be seated in the dining area," I continued. "Then, when my food arrives, I could orchestrate a fabricated emergency, asking the server for a couple of to-go boxes and a plastic bag because of an urgent text I just received from my imaginary wife, who's about to go into labor with our third child. In that scenario, Brad, I'd accomplish my goal of leaving here having paid for my takeout order *after* it was prepared, which is what all your dine-in customers are permitted to do."

Brad looked at the wall clock behind me and sighed. “Okay, we can do that,” he said.

“Thank you,” I replied. “For me, the policy makes sense if I were ordering over the phone or online.”

“I get what you’re saying,” Brad said dismissively while nodding at Denise. “I need to get back to work now.”

After Brad walked past the hostess stand and into the kitchen through a pair of squeaky saloon doors, I repeated my order to Denise and returned to the waiting area, feeling both vindicated and weary from my never-ending war against forced tipping, which is nothing more than an extension of exploitative corporate greed. I closed my eyes and imagined what would happen next. Denise would inform me that my order is ready, prompting me to pull everything out of the to-go bag to inspect its contents. She would be frowning at my blatant distrust as I hand her my credit card. I’d take the two paper receipts from her and pen the same three things on each one: zero tip, total amount, and a signature. Then, I’d hand her the merchant’s copy while saying, “Thank you,” before stepping back into the swirling snow.

“Your order’s ready!” shouted Denise from the hostess stand, jarring me away from my meditative state. She was holding a white plastic bag weighted down with enough meat to feed a family of four.

As I weaved through the growing dinner crowd toward the hostess stand, I questioned if it was worth it, going through this tiresome charade just so I could inspect what I was buying before I paid for it and putting the tip-begging back where it belongs—at the end of the transaction. Call me cheap, but I don’t believe in tipping a restaurant for *not* renting one of its servers or dirtying its tables, plates, glasses, or utensils. But Denise doesn’t need to know that—and neither does anyone else taking face-to-face takeout orders. Who knows what kind of retaliation awaits my baked beans after they see a zero scribbled above the receipt’s tip line?

Asking for upfront payments for takeout orders isn’t my biggest gripe—it’s when that payment *conveniently* includes the tip request when the transaction hasn’t even started. That’s like arriving to pick up your date, only for her to slide into your car and announce that a good-night kiss is already off the table. So instead of a lovely evening of effort and promise,

both parties lose. He doesn't try as hard to charm her, and she wonders if he'll drop her off early. There's a simple solution: leave the mystery and potential of a tip at the backend of the transaction instead of killing the mood at the onset.

## Conclusion

Nothing short of a complete breakdown of society will eradicate the toxic scourge of tip requests in the restaurant industry, where the question, "Would you like to leave a tip?" is asked by a machine rather than the human being in front of you. After seeing the suggested tip percentages, I can understand why they choose to hide behind their screens—nobody in their right mind would have the nerve to ask a customer for a $15 tip on a $50 takeout order without feeling like they were begging for charity. The cost of maintaining and driving a car has skyrocketed, and yet traffic congestion never subsides. Tickets for NFL games are ridiculously expensive; however, stadiums are filled to capacity every Sunday. And, lastly, restaurant dining areas bustle with frenzied activity as if it were still 2018 despite exorbitant menu prices and outrageous tipping expectations.

It's a simple and logical tenet, and yet, I sometimes think I'm one of the few who actually adhere to it: I only engage with the kinds of people, places, and things that *attract* me. However, when I look around, I see hordes of people participating in the very activities I no longer enjoy, making me think I'm either too picky or their standards are too low. But I know—and the reader knows—that human nature is more complicated than that. I haven't walked into a restaurant or picked up a takeout order in more than a year simply because the financial, emotional, and spiritual tolls are too much of a burden for a person like me, who's willing to walk away and seek other means of acquiring healthy food—a basic need ruthlessly turned into a luxury in the world's wealthiest country, no less.

When I first noticed menu prices and suggested tip percentages steadily increasing while portion sizes and friendly service decreased, I figured these offending restaurants would soon go out of business. Who could ignore such obvious and shameless grift? Shockingly, despite prioritizing gargantuan profit margins above customer value, these establishments remained open, full of diners willing to accept today's higher costs, smaller portions, service with

attitude, and forced tipping—aspects of a new restaurant culture I'm no longer willing to tolerate. As I watch them order and consume their meals, I'm astonished at how calm and normal-looking they appear—as if they have no idea they're eating inside a machine specifically designed to strip them of what little money they have as efficiently as possible. For a while, I didn't get it, but I eventually figured out why I was witnessing this nightmarish phenomenon—one I wouldn't have predicted in my wildest dreams, where monopolies had yet to replace free-market capitalism.

The scourge of tip requests isn't new; it's been around for decades, shamelessly increasing in its persistence, boldness, and percentages over the years. How is this blight on society even possible when the vast majority of customers find tipping requests repugnant and waitstaff are paid 70% *less* than the standard federal minimum wage? If diners and servers aren't happy, then who is? Not surprisingly, the victors of this sad scenario are the restaurant owners; yet, they too are mere pawns of a controlling echelon whose intentions have never been more transparent: keep the working class impoverished, uninformed, and divided. There is no better example of the

success of this diabolical strategy than the epidemic of tip requests.

Incredibly, the ruling class has created a perpetual influx of paying customers, who will automatically parrot the propagandized narrative, blaming steep menu prices on fictitious food shortages and higher production and shipping costs. In other words, they simply rationalize the ruling class's self-serving lies as "the cost of doing business." Even more amazing is how they're able to consistently fill open waitstaff positions with workers willing to rely on customer charity for the bulk of their compensation. Calling them out on their job choice only results in being labeled as a "cheapskate, cold-hearted, unsympathetic, selfish, or simply part of the problem." If I were to press diners as to why they're willing to pay $32.75 for a lunch that cost $21.25 in 2023—reflecting a 54% price hike and higher tipping suggestions—I'm sure I'd hear responses like, "What are the alternatives? That's just what it costs now," or, "I like to support my local restaurants. Plus, where else can I meet up with friends?"

But to sustain this level of corruption, the ruling class must print more dollars, manufacture more fake news, own the

entire supply chain, remove consumer protection agencies, make customers believe it's their civic duty to pay the salaries of waitstaff, and have waitstaff *enforce* the system by making them believe that a 30% tip is not optional. Choosing to withhold or provide too small of a tip at the front end of the transaction merely increases the customer's chances of even worse service, hostility, and even retaliation. Conversely, leaving no tip or a minimal amount at the back end of the transaction can land a customer on a secret blacklist or lead to an uncomfortable parking lot confrontation with a server expecting to be better compensated for average, below-average, or non-existent service.

Instead of there being a war between the ruling and working classes over the tipping nonsense, the powers that be have carefully orchestrated a greed-inspired conflict between the slaves themselves—in this case, between diners and servers. Meanwhile, the ruling class not only accomplishes its mission of keeping the working class impoverished, uninformed, and divided, but they also bask in the bloated profit margins of the restaurant industry, contributing to what we're all witnessing in America: the greatest transfer of wealth in the history of the world.

# Theater 2: First Day

## Introduction

When I first heard the term “enlightenment,” I assumed it was merely a grandiose label for an alcohol- or drug-induced euphoria given by societal rejects who couldn’t keep up with the demands of mainstream living. Then, after learning more about what it means to be enlightened, I figured this level of spiritual insight was reserved for special people, like monks, swamis, and gurus, who are willing to live under extreme measures and look a certain way to achieve such lofty awareness. I imagined an old man with a long, white beard, sitting in the lotus position on a mountaintop, looking oddly like Caine’s master from the 1970s television series “Kung Fu.” Now, after having taken the path to enlightenment for myself, I realize that the journey is not only a rite of passage, but it’s also open to anyone (at any age) should they possess the desire and courage to do so.

I came up with the idea to write “First Day (of Enlightenment)” after reading Hermann Hesse’s novel, *Demian* (1919), a coming-of-age story that follows ten-year-

old Emil Sinclair from his elementary school days to his first year of university studies. As he transitions from childhood to adolescence, Sinclair meets and befriends another boy, Max Demian, who turns out to be his fated spiritual guide, turning up time and again in moments when Sinclair needs him most. It was then that I realized that the path to enlightenment can begin as soon as one enters the world without Mommy or Daddy. But that wasn't the only revelation; I soon discovered another aspect of enlightenment—one that I had failed to capture in my book, *Pillars of Society* (2026), an allegorical tale of personal transformation revealing the true costs of enlightenment: that society is more than just an amalgam of evil-inspired abominations.

"First Day," like *Pillars*, offers an emblematic premise disclosing the harsh realities and social costs of budding awareness; however, it also sheds light on the elusive upside of enlightenment—that moments of splendor do exist if one knows where to look. In "First Day," a fictional family dinner frames a deeper philosophical discussion on the true nature of enlightenment—a strikingly different setting than the make-believe caterpillar colony in *Pillars*. "First Day" opens in its first section with a young mother anxiously waiting for her

five-year-old son, Christian, to return home from his first day in kindergarten. In the second section, you'll learn why Christian stepped off the bus in tears, and by the end of the third and fourth sections, you'll come to understand why he has trouble relating to the outside world.

Over the last three sections, where the family of five is gathered for dinner around the kitchen table, the story's emphasis shifts from Christian's inner world to his parents, who use their son's first-day-of-school experience as fodder to launch into a lecture about the path to enlightenment. Working together like tag team wrestlers, Adam and Eve teach Christian and his two older sisters, Mary and Josephine, how enlightened people differ from the unenlightened and explain what impact abominations and splendor have on each. It's a story that will not only ease the mind of the enlightened—those who can't help but see that the world is governed and policed by the blackest of hearts—but it will also offer the unenlightened a chance at personal redemption—a chance to reconnect with nature, spirituality, modesty, simplicity, fellowship, and, most importantly, themselves.

# He's Had a Rough Day

Eve paced back and forth at the foot of the driveway. Her eyes did the same, bouncing between looking at the time on her phone and the crest at the top of her street, where a yellow school bus should've appeared five minutes ago. Understandably, she was nervous, thinking about her son Christian's first day of school at Pine Branch Elementary. She would have driven him, but her husband, Adam, had taken their only car to work—one of the few drawbacks of an agreed-upon minimalist lifestyle. She inhaled deeply, letting the air out slowly while convincing herself that her sensitive five-year-old needed to start experiencing life without his parents or sisters holding his hand. Eve, again, gazed hopefully at the top of the hill.

Suddenly, the jarring sound of a gas-powered leaf blower swept her thoughts away. Across the street, she saw her neighbor, Reed, wearing the offending contraption over his shoulders, like a metallic backpack from the future—but instead of lifting him into the sky, it created clouds of cut grass, dry leaves, and dust. Even with a wife and two middle schoolers, Reed spent most of his downtime doing yardwork.

His latest toy—the leaf blower backpack—was clearly his favorite, at least from what Eve could tell as she'd seen him climb on his roof with it to scatter clumps of brown pine needles off the eaves. She sighed heavily, longing for simpler times when rakes and brooms didn't obliterate the peaceful sounds of nature—or one's thoughts.

Before Reed could turn around to lift freshly cut yard debris into the air from the other side of his driveway, Eve quickly busied herself by checking the mailbox. It wasn't that she disliked Reed or that she was antisocial; she simply wasn't in the mood for small talk with a man obsessed with lawn care. Unfortunately, it wasn't one of Eve's luckier days.

"Howdy, neighbor!" shouted Reed over the idling two-stroke engine.

Eve turned and acted surprised. "Oh, hi, Reed. Did you quit your job to work full-time in the yard?" she joked while closing the mailbox lid.

Reed walked toward her wearing khaki shorts and a white V-neck t-shirt that did nothing but accentuate his potbelly.

Glancing at it, Eve suddenly recalled hearing her late father say how a belly looks a lot worse on a thin man. “I wish,” he replied. “I’m just working from home today.” He dropped the blower tube and made air quotes as he said, “working from home.” Reed chuckled at his inference, drawing Eve’s eyes to his jiggling paunch, making her think it obeyed an unknown law of physics. “So, what are you guys going to do about your yard?” he asked.

Three months earlier, in the middle of an unusually wet summer, a tornado had whipped through the old, tree-lined neighborhood, haphazardly uprooting trees, one of which landed on Eve’s front lawn, leaving deep depressions after it was chopped up and hauled away. She was about to tell him—for what would’ve been the third or fourth time—that she and her husband planned to fill in the holes with sand and topsoil next spring, when the school bus crested the hill like a perfectly timed superhero, rescuing her from the clutches of a man whose self-worth is tied to the appearance of his lawn. Eve reflexively looked at the time on her phone and back to the approaching bus. “I’ll talk to you later, Reed,” she replied.

“If you guys need any help, don’t hesitate to ask,” he offered before reengaging the throttle of his leaf blower.

Without taking her eyes off the bus, she stepped back into the driveway and shouted, “Thanks!” to Reed, who was already blowing chopped leaves and grass toward his neighbor’s yard.

Eve put her phone in the back pocket of her shorts and watched the bus roll to a stop; its brakes squealed in protest. The doors opened mechanically, allowing Eve to make eye contact with the driver, a large black lady with an easy smile. “Christian!” she shouted while looking over her shoulder. “This is your stop, honey!” She turned back to Eve with an expression that said, “He’s had a rough day.” Christian was too short for Eve to see her son making his way to the front of the bus. When he appeared at the top of the stairs, she could see that he’d been crying. “I’ll see you tomorrow, sweetheart,” said the bus driver as he climbed down toward the pavement.

Eve dropped to one knee and opened her arms, giving her son a target to crash into. Unlike her two daughters, Christian looked like her; he had her angular face, hazel eyes, and wavy brown hair. He wore a light blue long-sleeved t-shirt over dark

brown shorts because short sleeves made him feel “too exposed.” When he came closer, she saw that he had two stains a few inches below the collar. She recognized one of them as mustard, most likely from the turkey sandwich she packed for him that morning. He made a beeline toward her, his legs comically churning, averting his eyes as he stepped into his mother’s embrace.

As the bus pulled away, a boy teasingly yelled, “See you tomorrow, *sweetheart*,” through an open window, putting the kibosh on the precious mother-son bonding moment. Within a few seconds, the lumbering vehicle came to an abrupt stop, followed by the admonishing tone of the bus driver. “That wasn’t a nice thing to say, Jeffrey.”

“But I was just saying goodbye to Christian,” he explained innocently.

“That sounded more like teasing, Jeffrey. You know the rules,” she continued. “Since you need a babysitter, come sit up front next to me.”

Eve and Christian listened to the stifled giggles from the children when they heard the word “babysitter.” They could still hear them laughing as the big yellow bus turned right at the bottom of the hill.

## How Was Your Day?

Eve removed her son’s backpack as he continued sobbing into her shoulder. She set it down next to her and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him closer. She felt the little spasms pulsating against her chest—the result of his diaphragm trying to keep up with the demands of his lungs. Oddly, he made very little noise—only an occasional whimper or sniffle. The sheer volume of Christian’s tears saturated the upper right quadrant of her blouse, making Eve wonder when she had last cried as vehemently as her son. A pang of jealousy bubbled up within her consciousness—a selfish wish that she, too, wanted to let it all out sometimes.

When his steady heaving slowed to sets of soft hiccups, he let go of his mother. Despite the dirt-lined tear streaks and damp eyelashes, Christian had regained his composure, proving, once again, that one always feels better after a good, long cry.

Eve wiped his cheeks with her thumbs and asked, “What happened today?”

Christian picked up his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. “Can we go inside?”

“Why don’t we sit and talk on the front patio instead, okay?” She gestured toward the two wrought iron chairs between the front door and the kitchen window.

One of the benefits of living in an old neighborhood, in a nicer part of town, is that all the houses are set back behind expansive front lawns, allowing cautious homeowners to people-watch without the obligation of having to acknowledge them. Eve enjoyed sitting out front. Besides the distance from the street, the front patio was encased in wrought iron fencing and boxy-looking hedges cut at near-perfect angles, offering even more of a protective barrier between her and prying eyes. Once they sat down, Christian unzipped his backpack and began digging through it, saying, “I’m supposed to give you something.” While she waited, Eve watched Reed move about his front yard like an insect, fastidiously clipping, weeding, gathering, and edging.

“Here you go,” said Christian, handing over a crinkled piece of paper that was damp at the bottom.

“Eww! Why is it wet?” She held the paper away from her with her fingertips as if it smelled, too.

“I can’t get my water bottle to close all the way,” he replied, zipping up his backpack.

“Oh, it’s just a list of activities you’ll be doing in September,” she confirmed, setting the paper down on the little wrought iron table between them. “Now tell me what happened today.”

“I don’t want to go back.”

“Why?”

He absently rubbed a purple splotch on his knee and said, “The kids are mean and the teacher doesn’t like me.”

“What happened to your knee?”

“Matthew pushed me into a desk.”

Eve moved Christian's hand away to inspect the damage. There was indeed a small bruise with two scrapes on either side—one twice as long as the other. She gently rubbed his knee and waited for her son to continue.

"I was playing with a Rubik's Cube," explained Christian. "Matthew came over and said he was playing with it first and wanted it back. I never saw him with it and told him he could have it after I was finished. That's when he pushed me."

"That's awful. What did your teacher do?"

"Mrs. Thompson came over and told me to stop crying and that I have to learn to share. Then she took the Rubik's Cube from me and gave it to Matthew."

Eve fought the urge to overreact, knowing that if she did, her son would experience the indignity all over again. She knew Christian was highly observant, noncompetitive, and diplomatic. She couldn't have asked for a better son than the one sitting in front of her. Instead, she remained calm and said evenly, "Okay. Did anything else happen today?"

Christian's eyes followed the low trajectory of a swooping cardinal and replied, "These two girls said I was stupid for carrying my backpack around."

"I see," acknowledged Eve. "Don't the other kids hang their backpacks on hooks at the back of the classroom?"

"They do. But I didn't want anyone going through my stuff." Christian pulled his backpack up to his lap and reached into a side pocket for a baggie of partially eaten pretzel twists.

Suddenly, the high-pitched sound of a gas-powered string trimmer startled both Christian and his mother, making Eve roll her vexing eyes toward their next-door neighbor's yard. She looked at her son, careful not to say anything negative about Pastor Joe in front of him. She stood up and peeked around the bushes to confirm what she already knew. There he was—a tall man in his early 70s, circling the small trees in his front yard, carrying what tall grass and weeds would call "a weapon of mass destruction." He wore music headphones over a black cap and pretended not to notice his dog defecating on the front lawn of the house next to Reed's. For a family man who split his employment between a Baptist church and a

funeral home, Pastor Joe, in Eve's opinion, was a self-centered prick.

She sat back down and smiled at her son, who was busy chewing. "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

Christian put the remaining pretzel twists in his mouth and replied, "I got in trouble for lowering the blinds in Mr. Beck's classroom because I didn't ask for permission first."

"Did he punish you?"

"No," replied Christian, who reached for his backpack to retrieve his leaky water bottle.

"Then why do you think you got in trouble?"

He gulped from the open spout, spilling drops of water on his shirt. "I told Mr. Beck that the sun was in my eyes and everybody laughed at me."

Eve picked up the paper and stood up. "Let's talk more about this at dinner," she said, looking down at her son. "I'm sure

Daddy and your sisters will want to hear about your first day, too. In the meantime, why don't you work on your big drawing while I get started making your favorite dinner, okay?"

"Spaghetti?" asked Christian, a tinge of hopefulness in his voice.

"Wait. What? Do I even know you? I thought liver and onions were your favorite," she teased.

Christian giggled and yanked his backpack from the ground. He ran around his mother and fumbled for the storm door handle. Eve watched him pull on it and then push in the front door while maneuvering his lumpy load into the house. "Don't forget to put your water bottle and lunch box in the kitchen!" she shouted after him.

Eve wanted to retrieve the stack of mail she'd seen in the mailbox earlier, but the scene in front of her made her decide to wait until later. While Reed carved his already-sculpted bushes with a hedge trimmer, his big brown dog barked wildly from the backyard at Pastor Joe's big black dog. Both men kept their eyes peeled on the business ends of their screaming

weapons like grizzled generals after having declared war on nature decades ago. On the street between them, two other men, walking in opposite directions, scuttled along, each staring at their phones while being pulled forward by their leashed best friends. One wore flip-flops; the other, a pair of Crocs—neither footwear would suffice should an emergency arise. Eve sighed heavily and folded the still-damp paper in her hands, mumbling, “What the hell happened to men?”

## Ten Times Better

The moment Christian saw the rug underneath the little chairs and tables in the library’s reading area for children, he was inspired to create something even more intricate. At first glance, the rug simply looked like a mosaic of superimposed squares and rectangles; however, on closer inspection, he realized it was a city map of sorts, complete with roads, buildings, bridges, parks, and more. Later that same afternoon, Christian convinced his dad to cut out one of the sides of the big white cardboard box that had been sitting in his office ever since he pulled his new monitor from it. Christian was excited after his dad handed him the smooth drawing surface that would soon contain the metropolis he had already erected

inside his mind. If anyone asked him about it, he'd tell them it was light as a feather and as big as an oven door. As ironic as it sounded, Christian had his work cut out for him.

As the only boy, he didn't have to share a bedroom, a gender-based dynamic his sisters accepted without protest after having grown accustomed to sharing late-night confessions with each other, especially after becoming exceedingly aware of cute boys and mean girls. Christian's room was a reflection of how he processed life; it was tidy, organized, and curated, displaying previous works of art he was most proud of. There was the blue snowman, the thinking girl, the psychedelic turkey, and his favorite, the shoe machine. In his five-year-old mind, all would be topped by his current project—an entire city bisected by a river of snowmelt, surrounded by foothills with hiking trails, campgrounds, creeks, and grassy meadows. In other words, it would be ten times better than the rug in the library.

After such a stressful and unpleasant first day of school, Christian found comfort in his artwork. His mother had suggested he lean the cardboard against something to mimic the position of a drafting table, but he preferred to lay it flat—

either on his desk or on the braided rug between his bed and the window. That way, he could lean over it like a surgeon performing life-or-death medical sorcery. But instead of a scalpel and a pair of forceps, Christian created magic with a ballpoint pen and a pencil. Later, when everything was outlined and detailed, he'd color it using a combination of colored pencils and watercolors. When his parents and sisters asked him if he was copying something, he'd point to his head and tell them, "Nope. It comes from here."

While carefully darkening the pencil lines of a bridge with his pen, Christian almost made a mistake when his oldest sister, Mary, stepped into his room, startling him. "Mom said to tell you that dinner is at six-thirty. That's when the big hand is on the six and the little—"

"I know what six-thirty looks like on a clock," he interrupted without turning away from his masterpiece.

Mary stepped closer and hovered over her brother's back, who was crouched underneath the window. "Why aren't you sitting at your desk?"

“There’s better lighting over here,” he replied.

“Well,” she began matter-of-factly, “you’re going to hurt your back and ruin your eyes. Your face is like an inch away from the cardboard.”

Mary acquired her physical traits from their father’s side of the family. The gangly 13-year-old preferred her long dark hair free, unencumbered by headbands, ties, or barrettes. Her face was wider and rounder than her brother’s, with steel-blue eyes, thin lips, and a ghostly-white pallor. From the way she dressed and carried herself, people assumed she was carefree and easy-going, but as her little brother, Christian thought she was bossy, overprotective, and too assertive—personality traits more indicative of a nagging mother than a big sister.

Christian looked at the Spider-Man clock squeezed between a bag of plastic army men and a box of Legos on his bookshelf. In glowing red numbers, it read 6:06. “Is Daddy back from his run yet?” he asked.

Their father worked as a business analyst for an established biotech company specializing in gene therapy. Despite having

been employed at Gen-Core for nearly 16 years, starting out as a junior research assistant fresh out of college, Adam felt his days were numbered due to the lure of advanced greed technology—courtesy of artificial intelligence. In short, he believed it was only a matter of time before his job was reassigned to a machine. He began his weekdays early, chauffeuring his daughters to their middle school, conveniently located on the opposite side of the business park where he worked. After school, Mary and 11-year-old Josephine simply walked to Gen-Core's child care center to wait for their father while spending time with friends, participating in activities, and getting a head start on any assigned homework. As a lifelong cardio junkie and a man who knew how to wash away corporate stress, Adam always looked forward to his three-mile run before dinner.

"I doubt it," replied Mary. "We got home later than usual. We had to stop at the store to pick up milk and some other stuff. Mom said you had a rough first day, and that's why we're having spaghetti tonight."

Christian nodded in acknowledgement without looking away from his drawing, penning the final strokes of a brick pattern

covering the main bridge. “Well, that’s it for today,” he sighed, standing up with the cardboard in his hands.

Mary stood in front of Christian’s desk with her arms folded across her chest. “So, what happened at school?” she pried.

“Mom said we can talk about it while we eat,” replied Christian. “Now can you move, please? I have to put this away.”

Mary left her brother’s bedroom as if he had thrown a dirty sock at her. While she clambered down the wood staircase to the living room, Christian positioned his work-in-progress on his desk, standing it upright against the wall and sliding his piggy bank in front of it so it wouldn’t slip forward on the smooth surface. He was very careful with the things that mattered to him.

## Buried Treasure

Christian was about to join his sister downstairs when he heard the sound of two familiar voices coming from the backyard. After setting the pen and pencil next to an oblong pink eraser

on his desk, aligning them in a manner that clinicians would diagnose as obsessive-compulsive, he strode toward the window to look outside. Below, Josephine was sitting at the patio table in front of an open workbook with her yellow backpack spilling half its contents beside her. She, too, inherited most of her physical features from her father's side of the family, except her shoulder-length, straight hair was sandy brown with blonde highlights. Whereas Christian was the "creative one" and Mary was the "bossy one," even-keeled Josephine was known as the "studious one." She simply wasn't satisfied being a top student in her sixth-grade class; she had to be *the* top student.

Across from her, on the other side of the table, Adam was using one of the patio chairs to stretch his hamstrings. Christian figured he hadn't been there long because he was still wearing his running vest, which contained dog deterrents, including an air horn, pepper spray, a collapsable baton, and his cell phone to document the aggressiveness of both the dogs and their owners. When Christian asked his father why he didn't run inside to avoid the scary dogs and mean people, he told his son that gyms make him sad because everyone ignores each other; they just look at their phones and listen to music

through earbuds. From downstairs, Christian heard his mother ask Mary to set the table. “In a minute, Mom!” she shouted, followed by Eve shouting back, “Okay, I’m watching the clock!” The smell of pasta, spaghetti sauce, and garlic bread wafting up from the kitchen made his mouth water.

Christian turned his attention back to the conversation going on beneath his window. Although he couldn’t hear what they were saying, he instinctively knew his father was consoling Josephine about something because he was patting her hand from across the table and murmuring in a hushed tone. It seemed to him that he wasn’t the only one who had had a rough day. As he stood up to stretch his lower back, Adam saw Christian looking down at them.

“Hi, Christian,” he said while rotating his hips. “I see you up there.”

Christian waved from behind the screen. “Hi, Daddy.”

Josephine swiveled in her chair and craned her neck toward her brother. “Hi, Christian. Are you working on your drawing?” Out of everyone in the family, Josephine was the

most interested in his art projects, preferring to lay on his bed or sit at his desk while he silently worked on the floor.

“I’m almost finished with the bridge,” he replied excitedly.

While she nodded and turned back to her open workbook, Adam walked closer to the house so that he was looking straight up at his son. “Mom told me about your first day while I was changing into my running stuff,” he said.

Christian felt his heart move into his throat. “I don’t want to go back.”

“I know. That’s what your mother said. We’re going to eat soon, so let’s talk about it then, okay? Right now, I need to jump in the shower.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Christian watched the top of his father’s head disappear beneath him and heard the back door open and close in quick succession. He turned his attention to the spacious backyard—the inspiration for many of the nature scenes in his current art

project. A row of four-foot gardenia bushes separated the cement patio from the grassy center of the backyard, which was as expansive as the front. White oak and sweetgum trees, growing among thickets of shrubs and smaller trees, lined much of the outer edges of the property, making the backyard a bastion of shade at any hour of the day. Looking into the far distance, Christian admired the majestic Loblolly Pines, which bordered the nearby army base. He liked their height and the way they appeared to move in slow motion no matter how strong the breeze.

In the far-right corner, two dilapidated sheds, one in the shape of a barn, contained old furniture, forgotten household items, and boxes of ancient junk from a bygone era—left behind by the previous owners. Christian recalled hearing his parents complain about the cluttered storage spaces, but he loved scouring the dusty sheds for buried treasure whenever they were unlocked. His latest finds were salvaged only a week earlier—an amber-colored glass ashtray and a handful of stainless-steel ball bearings. He enjoyed the sound of the balls rolling on the glass so much that he brought the whole assembly up to his bedroom and put it on his dresser. Christian, even at five years of age, tended to gravitate toward

the things that calmed him. As he took one last look outside, he hoped he could convince his parents to let him stay home instead of going to school. In his mind, his bedroom and the backyard were more than enough for him.

## Dinner Time

When Christian came downstairs, his father and Josephine were already seated at the kitchen table. Mary stood dutifully next to her mother holding a plate of steaming spaghetti while Eve ladled the sauce with the intention and flare of a TV chef. “That one is for your brother,” she told her daughter. While his mother and Mary dished and distributed the comfort food, Christian pulled out his chair and sat down in front of a big glass bowl of salad and a platter of buttery garlic bread. He was delighted to see cans of cold Pepsi in front of everyone’s place mat. Normally, he and his sisters drank milk at dinner while his parents sipped wine or shared a beer.

Adam noticed Christian eyes moving from can to can. “We figured that since everyone had a challenging day, your mother and I thought we should treat ourselves with a little soda,” he explained.

Although the family had a separate dining room with a large table and windows facing the forest-like backyard, they preferred to squeeze themselves around the much smaller kitchen table, which gathered more of the late afternoon sunlight and allowed them to see out toward the street while they ate. The circular table was pushed against the sill of a large double window covered by open blinds and flanked by heavy red drapes. Adam and Eve typically sat across from each other closest to the window while the children sat between them, with Christian separating his two sisters. While Eve was looking for the parmesan cheese in the refrigerator, Christian's eyes settled on his greatest find thus far in his young life.

A few weeks after his fifth birthday, he had accompanied his mother to Goodwill, where he spotted a small lamp that he believed would be perfect for the kitchen table. It had a round, tan-colored shade attached to a ceramic square base with an abstract, whimsical pattern, containing colors that matched the drapes and the framed art prints hanging on the kitchen walls. He remembered everything about that afternoon in the store:

“There you are,” she huffed. “Don’t scare me like that, Christian. You need to stay with me.” Then she saw what was in his hands and asked, “Do you want that for your room?”

“I thought we could put it on the kitchen table,” he said while holding up the lamp as his mother approached. “I don’t like the overhead lights on the ceiling.”

Eve took the lamp from him and turned it upside down. She saw the eight-dollar price written on a yellow tag stuck to the base. “You don’t? Why not?” she pried.

“They make me feel nervous. They’re too bright,” he explained.

Having located the parmesan cheese, Eve closed the refrigerator door and turned off the harsh overhead lights, signaling Adam to switch on the lamp. Although everyone liked how the lamp gave the dinner table a cozy ambience, nobody articulated it in a way that matched Christian’s feelings about it. He felt the softer low light brought everyone closer together, making them feel relaxed and their discourse more calm and pleasant.

Just as they were about to begin eating, Christian suddenly shouted, “Listen!” It was the sound of a certain melody that always seemed to find his ears before everyone else’s—a distant bugle playing the music of retreat, officially ending the day at the nearby army base. Ever since his father told him about the sunrise and sunset ceremonies, Christian liked to imagine all the soldiers standing at attention, saluting the flag as it was raised and lowered. After having called attention to the wistful song of the solo bugle so many times before, he thought his parents and sisters would’ve shushed him, but they appeared to appreciate the somber moment of reflection as much as he did.

Mid-way through the meal, after Christian recounted what had happened to him at school that day, Adam looked at Josephine and asked, “Would you like to tell everyone what happened to *you* today?”

Without a shred of emotion, Josephine replied, “Beth Shillingford, the other girl in my class who gets straight A’s, told me she doesn’t have to study all the time like I do to get excellent grades. Her mother said that she’s naturally smart while I’m only book smart.”

“What an awful thing to say,” blurted Eve. “Kids can be so cruel—and to think her mother would say such a disparaging thing about a wonderful girl like Josephine. My goodness!”

“It’s okay, Mom,” said Josephine. “Daddy and I talked about it. It doesn’t bother me anymore.”

Adam reached for another piece of garlic bread to soak up the residual spaghetti sauce on his plate and asked his other daughter, Mary, the same thing he had asked Josephine.

Unlike her sister and brother, Mary wasn’t as confident expressing herself verbally; however, she had no issues with delegating and giving orders. “Well,” she began cautiously, “class was boring as usual, but I saw something I wasn’t expecting today at the child care center after school.”

“How come you didn’t tell *me* about it?” interrupted Josephine. “I was with you the whole time today.”

“No, you weren’t,” replied Mary.

Adam intervened immediately. “Let her tell her story, Josephine.”

Mary took a sip of her Pepsi before continuing. “There’s this big bush on the side of the building. It’s not close to any of the play areas, so none of the kids go near it. Even though it doesn’t have any flowers on it, I wanted to take a closer look. When I did, I noticed that there were so many ladybugs on its leaves. Then I saw what I thought was a *big* ladybug, but it turned out to be two ladybugs having sex.”

Eve laughed out loud, making Adam shake his head and say, “Well, that makes two of us, Mary, because *that* wasn’t something I was expecting you to say.”

“No way,” said Josephine. “You’re making that up.”

“What? Ladybugs have sex?” pondered Christian.

Mary’s posture took on a more authoritative air as she sat up straighter and shifted in her seat to face her unconvinced sister directly. Using her hands to represent the mating insects, she explained, “The boy ladybug was sort of behind—”

“Okay, Mary. We get it,” interrupted Adam. “Now let me tell you why I asked each one of you to tell me something about your day. It has something to do with the path to enlightenment.”

Christian loved to listen to his dad explain things because he was so passionate, animated, and easy to understand. Even so, he still wanted to be excused so he could go search for ladybugs in the backyard.

## Abominations & Splendor

Eve started to get up to clear the dishes from the table, but Adam asked her to wait and let the kids do it after he was finished telling them about the path to enlightenment. He looked at his children and said, “Before we can talk about the path to enlightenment, we have to know what enlightenment is, right? Ultimately, it’s knowing who you are—what you like and don’t like—without needing someone to tell you. It’s understanding how the world works and knowing where your place is in it. It’s grasping the reasons why certain things are a reality while others aren’t. And lastly, it’s having the wisdom

to reimagine the world in such a way where everyone could be happy, healthy, successful, and fulfilled."

"Today, like the two of you," he said while nodding at his daughters, "Christian had his first day of school, or as I like to call it, his first day of enlightenment. This morning, as he climbed onto the bus, Christian took his first steps along the path to enlightenment. In doing so, he left the comfort, familiarity, safety, and the unconditional love and support of his family, venturing into a frenetic world filled with people who think enlightenment is just an excuse for not being able to keep up with a society coerced into pursuing validation from strangers and forced to obey the god of profit."

Eve noticed the look of confusion on Josephine's face and explained, "Your father is referring to people who only care about acquiring more money than they'll ever need and getting likes and comments on social media, like Facebook and Instagram." She looked at her husband and recognized the gleam in his eye; he was on a roll.

Adam continued his monologue. "It's not uncommon for a newly enlightened person to suddenly notice the cruelty,

brutality, corruption, hypocrisy, etc.—or what I call the abominations underpinning a supposed civilized society where the rules are arbitrary and the game is rigged to maintain a status quo that benefits only a few."

Eve found herself needing to fill the role of interpreter. She shifted the children's attention from Adam to her. "What your father is saying is that when you first start to become enlightened—or aware of the world around you—there's a natural tendency to only notice the bad things, the abominations. For instance, when Christian told us about his day, he *only* mentioned the abominations of being shoved into a desk and having the Rubik's Cube taken away from him. Josephine's report wasn't much different than her brother's; her top story focused on the hurtful words of a fellow student."

The heads of the three children rotated toward Adam as he began to speak. "Your mother is exactly right," he began. "Abominations are only one part of the enlightenment story. The other part has to do with what's beautiful and decent about the world we live in, or what I like to call splendor. As the enlightened person begins to mature, they soon realize they've become consumed with detecting and pointing out all the

needless suffering and injustices of the world. They become so adept at seeing abominations that they overlook all the splendor."

Adam met Eve's eyes, asking for her input on what he had just said. They made an effective team as life partners and as parents. "Thanks to Mary's story about the bush at the child care center, we have a wonderful example of what your father is talking about," she said. "Mary found splendor in the form of a colony of ladybugs that made the bush their home. Plus, she was amazed to see that insects find mates just like animals do."

"Your mother made an excellent point," interjected Adam, causing the kids to turn their heads yet again as if they were watching a tennis match in slow motion. "Whereas Mary *found* splendor, *abominations* found Christian and Josephine in the form of unwanted harassment. It doesn't seem fair, but that's how life works—the abominations seek you out; splendor awaits your discovery. For example, when I was sitting at my desk today contemplating what I wanted for lunch, I received an email from a coworker and a phone call from my boss; both were abominations asking for more of my

time without considering my current workload. I decided to pick up my usual Italian sub at the deli across the street, but when I walked outside, I noticed a food truck parked in front of the trade school in the business park."

"Was it a black food truck?" interrupted Mary.

"Yes, it was," replied Adam.

"Did it have Vicious Biscuits painted on the side in big gold letters?" she pressed.

"It did," he answered skeptically. "How did you know?"

"I've seen it parked at the construction site next to the school. Some of the teachers bought food from it. They said the biscuits are really, really yummy."

"You're right, honey," said Adam while putting his arm around his daughter, "and your teachers are right, too. I ordered the Fat Boy biscuit with fried chicken, and I can't remember having tasted something more decadent. One of the

guys in line told me they just opened a new restaurant in town, and I was thinking we could all go there this weekend."

"Let's go late Sunday afternoon and have an early dinner," suggested Eve. "That way, we'll have enough time to prepare for the week before settling in for a family movie night."

The mere mention of family movie night incited an immediate three-way campaign of movie ideas among the children, requiring Adam to restore order at the dinner table. "Hey! I'm not quite finished," he said. "We can vote on a movie title another time. Right now, I want to finish what I started talking about."

"Sorry, Daddy," said Josephine.

"Yeah, me, too," said Christian.

"It's okay. You're just excited," explained Adam. "I mentioned the Vicious Biscuits food truck because it's an example of splendor. It didn't come looking for me; I had to stumble upon it on my own—and now we have a wonderful Sunday plan because of it. That's the nature of splendor. So,

now that you know the difference between abominations and splendor, I have one more thing to tell you before you kids clear the table."

## Conclusion

Adam looked at his wife with an expression that said, "If you've changed your mind and don't want me to tell the kids this last part, I'll understand." But Eve remained steadfast; she felt her children could handle what her husband was about to tell them. Plus, in her mind, she believed she and Adam had given Mary, Josephine, and Christian a healthy balance of a carefree childhood along with sobering lessons about society and the world in general. She was confident these fundamental truths would help guide them toward sustainable peace and happiness while steering them away from meaningless distraction, trivial pursuits, and those who only want to steal their joy.

Adam wanted to preserve his children's remaining childhood, keep them worry-free, and avoid making them fearful of the outside world. So, to him, it was mission critical that he deliver the final part of the lecture in the most upbeat and positive way

possible. Although it took him several attempts to persuade his wife to fully understand his take on the ratio of abominations to splendor, Adam had her full support going forward. He looked at each one of his kids and said, “If you asked an ordinary person—the kind who has no interest in enlightenment—whether abominations outnumber moments of splendor, they’d likely agree. ‘Of course they do,’ they’d scoff. ‘For every glimpse of splendor, there are at least ten abominations.’”

“But that won’t happen to us,” decreed Mary. “Because we’re enlightened, it’ll be the exact opposite for us: 10 splendors for every one abomination, right?”

Adam looked at Eve and then Mary. “No, honey, it’s much worse for those who choose the path of enlightenment over a life of indoctrinated servitude.”

“What your father is saying—and you kids already know this—is that it takes courage to go your own way, away from the crowd mentality, to do your own thing, to be your true self rather than conform to what’s deemed safe, acceptable, or popular.”

“For the enlightened person, it’s an unfair reality,” interjected Adam. “There are 10 times more abominations that seek the enlightened than the unenlightened.”

Josephine lifted one of her legs and placed her bare foot on the chair, pulling her knee to her chest with her wiry arms. “So, for every single splendor we manage to find, we’ll have to deal with 100 abominations?” she asked, her voice choked with incredulousness.

Adam again looked to his supportive wife, who nodded solemnly as if to say, “Don’t hold back.” He turned toward his youngest daughter and said, “Yes, but that’s not all, sweetheart. Splendor is more elusive for the enlightened as well.”

“What does elusive mean?” asked Christian.

Eve scooted her chair back and motioned to her son to come sit on her lap. “It means that something is difficult to find,” she answered, wrapping her arms around Christian as he leaned his back against her chest.

“Not only is the majority of society made up of unenlightened people,” continued Adam, “but it’s also designed and governed by the unenlightened, who despise those who can think and discern for themselves, who aren’t motivated by what motivates others, and who can’t be brainwashed into believing slavery is freedom. That’s why people like us are confronted by so many abominations and why splendor is so elusive. An unenlightened person might jump for joy after winning tickets to a Taylor Swift concert, proclaiming the moment as pure splendor. But for the enlightened soul, this is far from splendor; it’s hours of traffic, outrageous parking fees, and exploitative concession stands; it’s watching phone-addicted people document themselves dancing in front of their seats; it’s clapping for a billionaire whose average ticket price for floor seats is $500.”

“So, where do people like us find splendor?” asked Mary.

Adam smiled because he and Eve had planned to end the lecture on that very note. “I’m glad you asked, Mary, because the splendor of the enlightened is 10 times better than the so-called splendor of the unenlightened. The enlightened find splendor in places that the unenlightened rarely take time to

visit, but even if they did, they still wouldn't recognize it. For people who are enlightened, splendor exists in spiritual, intellectual, and creative pursuits; it constitutes all of nature and the cosmos; but most importantly, it resides within human qualities like tolerance, kindness, generosity, loyalty, honesty, empathy, trustworthiness, and, of course, unconditional love and support."

"Your father is so right about this," added Eve, squeezing Christian with one arm and reaching for Josephine's hand with the other. "The most difficult challenge for the enlightened person is not to allow the many abominations to consume their thoughts or fill them with dread. You kids must learn how to cope and protect yourselves from the abominations while always being on the lookout for splendor. Sometimes, you'll have no choice but to manufacture moments and situations that'll improve your chances of finding something meaningful and satisfying. For instance, Josephine could offer to tutor those who are struggling to keep up with the class, and Christian could bring some of his artwork to school for show and tell. In both cases, they might make a friend or two since fellowship is another source for splendor."

“What about me, Mom?” asked Mary, who was feeling left out despite having her dad’s arm around her.

“Oh, I didn’t forget about my natural-born leader,” replied Eve, referring to her oldest daughter’s preference to boss and delegate. “I thought we could go through the sheds and figure out what we should keep, donate, or throw away. I know for certain there’s an antique desk and a matching mirror in one of them. I was thinking we could restore both and put them in yours and Josephine’s room. That way, you girls wouldn’t have to always use the dining room or patio tables.”

Mary liked the idea, especially the one-on-one time she’d have with her mother. “Can we paint them pink?” she asked hopefully.

“Maybe, but I think—”

“And can we put the mirror on the wall between the closet and dresser?” interrupted Mary.

Eve understood her daughter was just excited. “Shouldn’t you check with—”

“And can we move Josephine’s bed to the corner so the desk can go in front of the window?” pressed Mary.

“No way! I like my bed where it is,” huffed Josephine.

“Don’t worry, Josephine,” cautioned Eve. “Nothing is going to change without your consent. Your sister needs to learn the difference between a dictatorship and a democracy, which means the two of you will have to agree to an arrangement before any furniture is moved into your bedroom. Right, Mary?”

“Okay, Mom.”

Adam removed his arm from around Mary’s shoulders and stood up. “Well, kids, that’s all your mother and I wanted to tell you this evening,” he announced. “Now you know what enlightenment means and why it’s a path few will choose to take. However, in this family, we have no choice but to embrace the journey toward enlightenment; it’s our destiny, given to each one of us by the universe. We simply must accept a life full of abominations, especially earmarked for the enlightened. At the same time, we must also be grateful for the

top-tier splendor that's reserved for the special few who can see and appreciate it."

After Eve put the leftovers in the refrigerator, she joined her husband on the front patio, leaving the kids to finish their after-dinner chores. It was Christian's job to wipe the table and sweep the floor while his sisters washed and dried the dishes. As he dumped the contents of the dustpan into the pull-out trash bin, Christian thought about his next art project—the one he'd immediately start after finishing what he titled "City Mountain." He put away the broom and dustpan and walked directly into his father's office to inspect what remained of the white monitor box. To his delight, he saw that his dad *would* be able to cut a second piece from it—one just as big as the first. After going out to the patio to ask, his father agreed and questioned Christian what he planned to draw next. "It's a surprise," he replied before heading up to his room.

With the twilight fading, Christian decided to work on his current art project from his desk. He switched on the lamp and noted the time. He had no more than 30 minutes before he had to start getting ready for bed—plenty of time to finish the bridge and draw a parking lot, complete with little arrows and

lines for each space. Christian wasn't exactly sure what his mom and dad were talking about at dinner, but he somehow felt he and his family were too soft for this world. All he wanted was to feel good and be nice to others—that's why his next art piece would be a present for his oldest sister, a big green bush with red ladybugs on every leaf. He planned to call it "Lady Bush."

# Theater 3: Reclaiming Charity

## Introduction

More than a decade ago, the corporate worshippers of the god of profit convinced us we needed a phone and a dating app, charging $39.99 per month, to access love. Unbelievably, instead of turning our backs on yet another for-profit business model shamelessly crafted to cash in on what comes naturally to most people, we embraced it like mindless lemmings, including me. I've long since deleted my dating profiles, dismissing the faceless algorithms standing between me and my future mate. However, there's a new middleman to contend with, one who's just as opportunistic and exploitative as the dating app matchmakers. He's on your TV, and he's asking for $19 a month, only 63 cents a day!

I'm the type of person who quickly identifies recurring patterns, often asking things like, "Why am I seeing so many single people with dogs?" "Why is America's infrastructure crumbling before my eyes?" "Why isn't there safe and reliable public transportation?" "Why is employment required for basic healthcare?" and "Why are the bulk of commercials

asking for monthly donations?" Whether these commercials are supporting disabled veterans, dementia patients, abused animals, sick children, or civil liberties, they're all recycling the same manipulative script, shocking imagery, and suggested dollar amounts to prod already-financially strapped viewers into handing over what little remains of their paychecks after paying rent and buying groceries.

I used to give easily: dropping cash in the Salvation Army's red kettle at Christmastime, mailing a check to NPR during one of its fundraising drives, or pledging a dollar amount to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society in support of a friend's marathon effort. Those days are long gone—replaced, at least in my case, by constant scrutiny and demand for third-party-approved budgetary and financial transparency before I give any so-called nonprofit organization a handout. You may dismiss my opinions on the grounds that I believe the world is run by an evil empire obsessed with power and control, but you'd be hard-pressed to explain away the near-weekly headlines touting scandal and corruption within institutions, organizations, and foundations created to help the less fortunate—not profit off them.

I don't have access to their accounting records, but I'm sure these commercials bring in a lot of money. How else can we account for seeing the same St. Jude Children's Research Hospital commercial three times during a half-hour TV show? How can we not conclude it's a feeding frenzy for $19 a month when the same type of pandering ads are aired by Easter Seals, ACLU, ASPCA, Shriners Hospitals for Children, No Kid Hungry, Humane Society of the United States, American Cancer Society, Habitat for Humanity, Alzheimer's Association, Save the Children, Wounded Warrior Project, Make-A-Wish Foundation, UNICEF USA, Feeding America, Covenant House, American Red Cross, March of Dimes, etc.?

I'm not suggesting that charitable organizations as a whole are intentionally deceitful; I'm merely pointing out there's reasonable doubt they're immune to reckless behavior with other people's money—money they didn't earn. You'd think "reasonable doubt" would inspire those asking for donations to be more forthcoming about their operating expenses—and incite donors to demand them. Instead, a mutual apathy ensues, where the askers believe they're above reproach and the givers convince themselves their monthly donations aren't paying for the ubiquitous commercials and C-suite salaries. It

may sound pessimistic, but I don't believe it's possible to change these organizations—not even through boycott or Congressional oversight. That's why I wrote this short story; it's a rationale for walking away from institutionalized benevolence and reclaiming charity for ourselves.

*Reclaiming Charity* tells the story of two people seeking personal redemption through charitable contribution. One goes about it in the way the TV ads dictate; the other blazes his own trail. Two different methods. Two different outcomes. You decide which path feels right to you.

## Harriet & Walter

Harriet plopped down on the couch with an audible sigh. It had been another tiring day at the DMV where she toiled at the elevated desk behind window number five for the past 11 years. Now it was time for her to relax in front of the TV for a couple of hours before calling it a night. As she fumbled for the remote, Max, one of two Labradors she acquired since her second marriage ended in divorce six years ago, jumped on the couch and settled in beside her. The black retriever had been with Harriet two years longer than Lucy, a long-haired

yellow retriever that understood her place in the pecking order. Alerted by the sound of the TV, Lucy trotted into the living room and hopped into the adjacent recliner. She adjusted herself and lay down, making sure she could keep both eyes on Harriet and Max.

Harriet scrolled through the TV listings until she found what she was searching for: an episode of NBC's *Dateline* on the True Crime Network. She had seen so many episodes of the popular show that she no longer hoped for one she hadn't seen at least two or three times before. Seeing that she had five minutes before the program started, she quickly remedied the situation by opening her phone, which rarely left her right hand. For the umpteenth time that day, she checked to see if anyone liked her latest photos of Max and Lucy on Facebook and Instagram and then went to her online dating accounts, Bumble and Hinge, to see if she had received any new messages from men willing to comply with her "must love dogs" decree.

Harriet is 62 years old, single, and lives alone with her two dogs and nine-year-old cat, Mr. Jangles, on the first floor of an aging apartment building. She doesn't have any children of

her own, but she was a part-time stepmother in each of her failed marriages. Despite her bitterness toward men in general, Harriet still "puts herself out there" on dating sites, but her heart isn't in it anymore; she does it just so she can tell her equally sour coworkers that she hasn't given up the dream of finding Mr. Right. It's a lie she perpetuates to keep them from asking too many questions or discovering she's become a full-time fur-baby mommy. Deep down, somewhere between her heart and soul, Harriet feels empty, knowing there's more to life than issuing registration tags and organizing her life around three pets. More than anything, she yearns to make a difference in the world—even if it's in the smallest of ways.

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Unbeknownst to Harriet, her neighbor on the third floor was settling into a similar evening. Walter, a 64-year-old retired business analyst, entered the living room from the kitchen and eased himself into his recliner—one of the few pieces of furniture he retained after having sold his house three years earlier. At the time, he wanted to make a fresh start, meet new people, make friends, and maybe even find a woman to share his life with. Sadly, none of his desires had yet materialized,

filling him with regret for having retired early and selling his peaceful home of 21 years. It wasn't entirely his fault; the world had changed in ways he never would've imagined.

Walter is a widower with two grown children who've elected not to expand their families beyond their spouses, claiming it was too expensive and leaving him without any grandchildren to spoil or spend time with. And with his son and daughter living so far away and holding down demanding jobs, he rarely sees them. He opted for early retirement, thinking that having more spare time would improve his relationship with Dawn and Walt Jr. However, that wasn't the case. Instead, he ended up working as an unpaid maintenance manager on his own property, repairing things like broken sprinkler heads, a crumbling brick retaining wall separating the front yard from the driveway, and a sagging length of backyard fencing threatening to spill over into his neighbor's yard.

With Gladys having passed away eight years earlier and his kids too wrapped up in their own lives to come visit him, Walter opted for the ease of apartment living, thinking there was more to life than mowing the same lawn over and over again and serving as a live-in caretaker on land he already

owned, yet the county made him pay taxes on it every six months. When friends and family voiced their dismay at him for choosing to sell his home and rent an apartment, he simply told them, “It doesn’t matter whether you own a home or not; we’re all renters in America.” What surprised him the most was how unfriendly his new neighbors were. When they weren’t glued to their phones, they were focused on their dogs or listening to something via their earbuds—anything to avoid acknowledging others, making eye contact, or even saying hello. To Walter, it was both sad and ironic that he experienced more interaction with people while cutting his grass than he did walking around his new community for more than an hour each day.

Walter picked up the remote and turned on the TV. He set it back down without having to select a channel; it was already tuned to what he wanted to watch. As a scholarly type, Walter intrinsically knew that television was a waste of precious time—that he should be reading his latest Bill O’Reilly book instead of consuming back-to-back reruns of *Frasier* on Cozi TV—but he loved the pace and hilarity of the show. In many ways, he related to the iconic sitcom’s main character, who struggled with his place in the world and in finding the perfect

mate. Seeing that he had five minutes before the program started, he quickly remedied the situation by muting the volume so he could hear himself think. Like his neighbor, Harriet, two floors beneath him, Walter yearned to make an impact on the world in whatever way he could. He, too, felt lonely and empty inside.

## "Only $19 a Month!"

Midway through the two-hour episode of *Dateline*, where a respected doctor allegedly killed his wife between surgeries, Harriet got up from the couch to pull her favorite indulgence from the freezer—a Klondike bar. She knew, of course, her dogs would be upset if she didn't come back with something for them as well, so she gathered two Zesty Paws Bedtime Treats from a ceramic container that used to hold flour and returned to the couch. She smiled as she watched Max and Lucy devour the Fig Newton-sized biscuits in one slobbery bite, knowing the ingested chamomile and melatonin would lower their anxiety and help them sleep better. Just then, Harriet was startled by the sound of rustling papers on the dining room table. "There you are," she cooed. "You wanted to be with the rest of the family, didn't you?" Mr. Jangles

looked at Harriet with cool indifference and promptly situated himself between a stack of unopened junk mail and an unfinished jigsaw puzzle of bull dogs wearing oversized sunglasses at the beach.

Like everyone in America with a functioning brainstem, Harriet noticed that commercial breaks were longer and more frequent, eating up to 45 minutes of a two-hour broadcast like *Dateline*. Typically, she'd spend the commercial breaks scrolling and texting on her phone, but a Klondike bar is impossible to eat with only one hand. So, Harriet was stuck watching ad after ad, created by manipulative marketers who believed the viewing audience was no smarter than a seventh-grader. The commercials were both relentless and shameless: pitching prescription medication, extended car warranties, personal injury lawsuits, or hitting viewers up for monthly donations. Although Harriet felt she had seen the Shriners Hospitals for Children commercials at least 50,000 times, she couldn't help being drawn to the plight of the families with children suffering from such debilitating diseases.

She went back to the kitchen to discard the ice cream wrapper and wash her hands. To her surprise, neither dog followed her.

She looked at her reflection in the window above the sink as she soaped up, recalling the days when her hair was longer and her body slender. Now her hair was more gray than blonde, and her figure was spreading out like an inflatable raft. She dried her hands on a dish towel and returned to the couch only to find Mr. Jangles had taken her spot. “Oh, no, you don’t,” she admonished while shooing him away. “I'm not letting you get away with it *this* time!” Mr. Jangles yawned at her waving hand and moved to the top of the couch as if he preferred to be there in the first place.

Harriet couldn’t have timed her return to the living room any worse, as another round of commercials was just beginning. Once again, she felt moved by the Shriners Hospitals for Children ad, where wheelchair-bound Kaleb and his best pal Alec, another wheelchair-bound spokesperson, pitched the benefits of donating $19 a month. She loved their personal stories and wanted, if it were possible, to adopt them both, especially little Kaleb, whose squeaky voice and munchkin-sized body made him appear almost animatronic. Harriet wasn’t sure why she felt compelled to donate on that particular night; it wasn’t like she hadn’t seen the commercial before—in fact, she had seen the very same commercial three times

already that evening! “Don’t look at me like that,” she said to Lucy, whose ears perked up at the sudden mention of her name. “It’s only $19 a month. That’s about the same amount for one lunch at KFC. I think our budget can handle that.”

And with that, Harriet picked up her phone and navigated to the Shriners website. It didn’t take long for her to commit her monthly donation. She even received a confirmation email before the last commercial ended, where washed-up celebrities, Ice-T and Danica Patrick, reduced themselves to hawking extended car warranties from a company in litigation with the Better Business Bureau. She absently stroked Max’s sleeping form and continued watching *Dateline*. At this point in the program, grainy footage from inside a police interrogation room showed the beleaguered surgeon answering a detective’s question while shaking his head and gesturing wildly with his arms. The next round of commercials sent Harriet straight to her phone. In the darkened room, her eyes reflected the device’s bluish glow. There were no messages, comments, or likes. But that was okay with her; she just committed $19 a month to ease the suffering of children she’d never meet.

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Although he'd seen the episode of *Frasier* at least five or six times over the years, Walter laughed out loud at the moment when Frasier realizes he's booked a hotel room with his new girlfriend in Hawaii next door to his ex-wife, Lilith, and *her* new significant other. Walter preferred watching reruns from top-shelf sitcoms like *Seinfeld* and *The Office*, but second-tier reruns of *Frasier*, *Cheers*, and *The King of Queens* kept him laughing, too. He was a man who'd consume anything he believed would help him better understand the world, ranging from silly television shows to documentaries about the universe to fine art and classic literature. Besides enjoying obvious TV punchlines seen coming a mile away, Walter had another secret his family and friends would find hard to believe given his longstanding penchant for diet and exercise. Every now and then, he liked to eat a big bowl of the worst kind of kid's cereal right before going to bed.

Walter reached down and pulled the lever on the side of his recliner, disengaging the leg rest mechanism, allowing him to stand up. While en route to the kitchen for the cereal, he detoured to use the bathroom. As he washed his hands in the basin, he looked in the mirror, liking what he saw. For a senior

citizen with thinning hair, age spots, and deteriorating eyesight, the five-foot-ten sexagenarian looked decent for his age, requiring no medication to maintain the same fortuitous health he's enjoyed since childhood and the same weight of 175 pounds since college. Even his hazel eyes still had the same sparkle. Walter assumed it was because he was never the type to give up or lose hope for better things to come.

He returned to the recliner and sat down holding an oversized bowl of Lucky Charms doused in low-fat milk. Although the top of the box touted "New Larger Size," Walter figured he'd only get two servings out of it. "Damn shrinkflation," he muttered. Since he needed one hand to hold the bowl and the other to shovel the sugary concoction into his gullet, he wasn't in a position to mute the TV during a commercial break. Instead, he had to endure listening to the same commercials that Harriet was being subjected to: has-been celebrities endorsing predatory insurance products; retired athletes trading their fading popularity to promote prescription medication for a sponsorship fee; suit-wearing personal injury lawyers urging viewers to file a claim in front of an obviously fake law library; and a litany of requests for $19 a month.

Walter had long since accepted the idiotic and deceptive practices of television advertisements as an unavoidable abomination—the price one pays for pilfering high-definition sub-channels for free using a $14 HD antenna. But what bothered him the most was the array of highly manipulative ads asking for monthly donations of $19 from charity organizations like Save the Children, Wounded Warrior Project, ASPCA, ACLU, Planned Parenthood, and, of course, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and Shriners Hospitals for Children. With the number of scandals involving the misappropriation of donated funds, Walter couldn't wrap his head around why people would give away their hard-earned money to supposed non-profits that feel no obligation to disclose the salaries of top management or account for their spending. He was astonished that people would still choose to believe that their money was being used to buy medical supplies for suffering children rather than a corporate offsite at The Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas for a "strategy meeting."

Like Harriet, Walter had a soft spot in his heart for innocent children. In fact, he felt all the recipients of the charitable organizations were worthy of such representation and support; however, he couldn't stomach uploading his credit card

number or sending cash to a faceless and nameless middleman who may or may not do right with his contributions. Was he supposed to believe that these middlemen were as incorruptible as he is—in a world where corporations can buy lawmakers, where one in five children in America lives in food-insecure households, and where nearly a million Americans are homeless due to the affordability crisis? He just couldn't do it—at least not in the way the pandering ads were telling him to do it.

Walter set his empty cereal bowl on the end table beside his recliner without a shred of guilt for having consumed at least a half-cup of processed sugar. He wasn't concerned about the needless 700 calories stretching his stomach at 10 o'clock at night; he knew he'd walk it off in the morning. Satisfied, Walter eased back in his favorite chair and propped his feet up to watch another episode of *Frasier*. This time, a relationship expert sets Frasier up on a series of hilarious blind date blunders. Walter loved this particular episode because he could relate to it completely. He settled into his recliner, still feeling lonely and irrelevant, but he had an idea where he could be charitable *and* meet the benefitting children. Walter had a plan

# Sugar Beets

The next morning, Walter set out for his usual walk. It was late enough to avoid most of the unfriendly dog walkers, but early enough to see children playing outside before the summer heat climbed above 80 degrees on its way to over 100. He was grateful for the sounds of nature: wind blowing through the trees, unseen birds singing, squirrels scurrying across dry leaves, and children shouting and squealing while in perpetual motion. As he walked through the apartment complex toward the adjacent neighborhood, Walter filled his lungs with sweet-smelling air, knowing that the appreciated ambience was unusual. Typically, the pleasing sounds of nature were drowned out by the head-splitting explosions of thundering car engines, lawn mowers, string trimmers, leaf blowers, chainsaws, circular saws, and, of course, barking dogs—lots and lots of barking dogs. Even the air was different. No longer was Walter breathing in the heavy aroma of rotting sugar beets from the nearby sugar factory; instead, he detected the scent of linden, locust, and lilac blossoms.

Walter couldn't believe his luck when he saw three Hispanic children coming toward him on the opposite side of the

parking lot. He recognized them immediately as the offspring of a young couple in the apartment building across from his. Their apartment was on the ground floor, allowing Walter to see into their patio from his third-floor balcony. First-floor patios weren't fenced in; they opened up and blended into a greenbelt that ran behind each of the apartment buildings. Sometimes, if he was in the mood, Walter would offer a friendly wave from his balcony at the parents while they were barbequing or hanging wet laundry on folding clothes racks. From what he could tell, they only had one car, which the wife used almost exclusively, while her husband drove a company van emblazoned with "TDS: No Gimmicks. No Gotchas," from a local internet provider.

To Walter's keen eye, all three children appeared to be under 10 years of age. The oldest-looking, a tall, sinewy girl with long black hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, was riding a pink and white bicycle that was much too small for her lanky frame. Behind her, her younger sister and brother pushed rusty, leg-propelled scooters, doing their best to keep up. Walter guessed that the younger girl, who was a smaller replica of her older sister, was seven years old and that the curly-dark-haired boy next to her was around five or six. All

three wore brightly colored t-shirts over shorts and sneakers while only the middle sibling carried a backpack. Like all the other times he'd seen them, they were laughing and shouting to one another in Spanish. As they approached, the older girl looked at Walter, prompting him to wave at the passing trio. The two girls smiled at Walter as they passed, but their little brother attempted to steer his scooter with one hand while waving back with the other. Bad idea. He went down immediately, landing on top of his two-wheeled vehicle in a heart-stopping heap.

Before he could reach the sprawled-out child, who hadn't made a sound since hitting the pavement, Walter watched his two sisters respond within seconds, letting their bike and scooter drop underneath them to rush the scene and assess the damage as if they had had EMT training. Remarkably, aside from a skinned knee and a bruised elbow, he wasn't seriously injured. What struck Walter the most was how the two girls consoled their little brother in such a loving and compassionate manner, rubbing his injuries and saying what had to be soothing words in Spanish.

“Oh, my god. Is he alright?” asked Walter as he removed his sunglasses to get a better look at the boy.

“He’s okay,” replied the older sister in perfect English.

Walter watched the two girls help their brother stand up. He wasn’t crying, but he had tears in his eyes, both of which were looking at his downed scooter. At that point, Walter sprang into action. “Let me have a look at your scooter,” he said. “I know a lot about bikes and stuff, so let’s see if there’s any damage.” Walter recognized the brand and knew their scooters were basically indestructible. Still, he put on a little show in front of the kids to make them feel confident that the scooter was safe to ride. “Looks rock solid to me,” he said, positioning the battered scooter upright and presenting it to the relieved kid. When he took possession of it, Walter asked, “Is your name, Hermano?”

“No!” laughed the younger girl. “His name is Miguel.” She, too, spoke in perfect English.

“Well, I kept hearing you and your sister saying, ‘Hermano, Hermano,’” explained Walter.

“Hermano means brother in Spanish,” explained the older sister before picking up her bike.

Walter stepped back to allow the kids enough space to mount their rides and continue the trek, presumably to their apartment. “Oh, okay,” he replied. “But Hermano sounds like a cool name, too.”

The two girls laughed at that and looked at their brother, who was already pushing his scooter.

“Next time somebody waves at you while you’re riding your scooter, Miguel, keep both hands on the handlebar and just smile or say, ‘Hi!’” cautioned Walter. He wasn’t sure if Miguel understood him or not, but he knew the girls did.

Walter watched and listened to the children ride away from him in the parking lot. He could still hear them laughing and shouting in Spanish even after they disappeared behind the apartment clubhouse. “What are the odds?” he asked himself, thinking that it was incredible that he’d encounter *and* interact with the very same kids he was planning to be charitable to. Walter crossed over an irrigation canal using the footbridge at

the rear of the apartment complex and walked toward the eerily quiet elementary school. The schoolyard was empty, of course, due to the summer break. Having walked this particular route routinely during much of the school year, he thought about what the kids at play would always do at recess: moving under their own energy, shouting with excitement, and touching one another—behaviors adults sadly stopped doing somewhere in their 20s.

Even if school were in session with the kids playing outside, he wouldn't have been able to hear them anyway. The city's landscape crew was in full force at the adjacent park, cutting grass on top of insanely loud tractors that looked big enough to work the nearby farms. Walter continued walking along the service road separating the elementary school from the park. At the end of it, he crossed a busy road and entered a neighborhood subdivision called Sherwood Forest. Although he was less than a half-mile from his apartment complex, Walter felt far removed from the earlier sounds of nature and his chance encounter with his neighbor's children. Besides the distant shrill of the monstrous mowing machines, his thoughts were further scattered by the suburban sounds of pneumatic nail guns, idling diesel engines, a miter saw, a gas-powered

generator, and, of course, barking dogs—lots and lots of barking dogs. Walter let out a heavy sigh, and after breathing back in, he immediately recognized the unpleasant and noxious odor of rotting sugar beets.

## Welcome to Costco

Walter groaned irritably as he drove his old truck into the parking lot. By the sour look on his face, one would think he just pulled into the DMV without an appointment or a CVS to pick up a prescription on a Friday before a three-day national holiday. Instead, he was at a perpetually busy Costco, looking for a parking spot. The frenetic hub of near-constant activity reminded Walter of a beehive after striking it with a broom. He parked 100 yards away in front of a Bed Bath & Beyond and joined the swell of late-morning shoppers angling toward the big-box entrance with their membership cards already plucked from wallets and purses.

Knowing that he planned to limit his spending to around $230, Walter opted for a standard shopping cart over a flatbed cart. Since the cost of living had skyrocketed after the pandemic, he was well aware that just one of Costco's regular shopping

carts could easily hold $400 worth of merchandise. Like the obedient sheep in front of him, he joined the queue to scan his membership card while enduring the scrutiny of an unsmiling employee blandly repeating, “Welcome to Costco.” Walter gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on the cart’s push bar. He held his breath and pushed the wheeled basket past the entrance monitor, fighting the urge to make a loud farm animal noise—preferably that of a sheep. Even if he had the guts to yell “Baa” or “Moo,” Walter figured no one would appreciate his wicked sense of humor or the appropriateness of the reference.

After a series of lefts and rights toward the snack aisle, Walter found himself surrounded by camping equipment and patio furniture. “God, they’re so obvious,” he huffed. “They’re always rearranging the merchandise so their customers will spend more time in the store, which, of course, exposes the weak-minded to more impulse buying. Have they no shame?” Walter prided himself on his acute awareness of any and all manipulative and self-serving gimmicks employed by greed-centric corporations to entice, distract, and swindle their own patrons. He wasn’t surprised by what he was experiencing in Costco; after all, 70% of the shareholder-owned company is

controlled by private equity firms like BlackRock and Vanguard, whom Walter likened to mob bosses of legalized crime.

Once he found the snack section, Walter had to hand it to Costco's corporate merchandising team. They repositioned it between tables of folded kids' clothing and the wine area. "Well played, corporate overlords," he mumbled under his breath. "After mom gathers the necessary snacks, she can impulsively pick up play clothes for the kids and a box of wine for her." Walter imagined Mom yelling at the kids later that afternoon to take the ruckus outside while she steadied her frazzled nerves with a couple of glasses of Kirkland's signature Pinot Grigio. The health-conscious 64-year-old didn't need wine to calm his nerves; he needed a few deep breaths to center himself. The absence of sunlight, a fire marshal, and social discourse inside Costco's cavernous warehouse tended to drain Walter of his life energy within minutes. He pulled his cart to the side and reminded himself that he was here on a mission of charity.

It didn't take long for Walter to fill his cart with fruit bars, banana chips, applesauce pouches, beef sticks, peanut butter

pretzels, granola bites, trail mix, popcorn, juice boxes, and protein shakes. After determining a rough estimate of the total cost of the basket's contents, he figured he was still below his limit of $230. But instead of adding cereal and Kraft Mac & Cheese in bulk, Walter had a better idea. He pushed his loaded cart back to where the snack aisle used to be, remembering that sporting goods merchandise was usually paired with camping gear—unless Costco's corporate merchandising team figured out a way to make more money moving items like golf clubs, baseball gloves, and bicycles into the big walk-in refrigerator. Luckily, Walter's first hunch was right, finding exactly what he was looking for on a shelf beside an array of skateboards, roller skates, and scooters. The package of protective knee and elbow pads cost more than he anticipated, but he added it to his cart anyway, thinking they were too perfect of an addition to pass up.

Walter didn't argue with the self-checkout monitor who redirected him toward the cashier lines, saying, "Sorry, these registers are for members with 15 or fewer items." Despite having only 13 items in his cart, he knew better than to go toe-to-toe with an imperious Costco employee who had a disturbing habit of fingering the RF gun clipped to his belt.

While he waited to get checked out, Walter looked past the anxious people lined up in front of him, surveying the scene unfolding in Costco's hectic food court, where reasonably priced hotdogs and pizza slices garnered a standing-room-only crowd. He liked hotdogs and pizza, but he wanted no part of what looked like organized chaos one outburst away from disintegrating into an outright melee. Those lucky enough to score a table sat and ate beside their carts of paid merchandise, looking like they had walled themselves off from possible discourse with their fellow shoppers. Others stood and ate their food off counters surrounding the ordering kiosks. In Walter's mind, all that was missing was a trough and a scratching post.

11 minutes later, Walter steered his basket away from the checkout and into an even longer line. This one required him to present his receipt to the exit monitor standing at the threshold between the warehouse and the semi-enclosed cart lobby. Nothing gave Walter the warm and fuzzies more than having to scan his membership card at the front entrance and again at the cash register, followed by having to wait for someone to reconcile his purchases against the receipt. If the exit monitor was satisfied with his or her findings, they'd whip

out their Costco-issued highlighter and put a blue stripe down the middle of the receipt. Walter likened Costco's assertion that no store members can be trusted to TSA's mandate that all passengers are potential terrorists until after they've been verified, screened, and humiliated.

After 40 minutes inside Costco's windowless version of a town center, the early-afternoon sunlight temporarily blinded Walter, who lumbered into the parking lot, pushing $248-worth of charity. Although his eyesight quickly readjusted, he didn't need to see what was going on in the parking lot—he could feel it. It didn't matter when he came to Costco; the parking lot vibe was always the same: filled to capacity and anxious. If he were to describe it to a prospective member, he could visualize himself sounding like Rod Serling of *The Twilight Zone* TV series and saying, "Imagine going to a grocery store where every shopper acts like it's the day before Thanksgiving. Tensions are high. Panic is in the air. Competition is palpable. But that's not all," he'd continue. "Now imagine informing those same customers that a Category 5 hurricane was due to strike later that day, resulting in widespread ruin, long-term power outages, and unhabitable

conditions. You don't have to ask where such a store is located. You can find it in *The Twilight Zone*."

After loading everything into his truck, Walter set out to return his basket to the nearest cart corral. It never ceased to bother him that people would opt to leave their used carts scattered about instead of simply returning them to make life slightly more dignified for the minimum wage earner who was tasked with retrieving them and restocking the cart lobby at the front entrance. As Walter serpentined toward the nearest corral, he observed two carts occupying parking spaces, one propped against a sign, and two more left straddling a curb. At the corral, he pushed his cart into the stack before walking back to his truck. Suddenly, and with great ferocity, a German Shepherd went berserk and started barking wildly at Walter from behind a partially rolled-up and slobber-coated car window. Operating on instinct alone, he recoiled against the passenger door of the SUV opposite the car with the blood-thirsty hellhound. He slid along its smooth surface until he was out of harm's way, reminding himself, once again, that he had come here on a mission of charity.

# “Hi, I’m Walter”

Walter peeked over the railing of the balcony and saw that the entire Hispanic family was home. Dad was cooking something on the grill; Mom was watering a row of potted herbs; and the kids were playing a game that involved running back and forth between the patio and a trio of newly planted samplings in the middle of the greenbelt. It had only been since yesterday that he had encountered the three children and been to Costco. So, he knew time was of the essence; he had to make his move that evening before he lost his nerve. Buying the stuff was the easy part; giving it to the family without insulting them was the hard part. But Walter had a plan for that, too: he’d have to lie.

Walter planned to knock on their door at 7:30—a time he figured wouldn’t interrupt their dinner or the chores that followed. He loaded the bed of his truck with the Costco merchandise and made sure to place the package of protective pads on the center console. Lucky for him, he found an open visitor parking spot, which was near the family’s front entrance. He grabbed the pads and stepped out of his truck, feeling his heart pumping in his throat. He never did anything

like this before, but Walter wanted to make a point; plus, above all else, he wanted to "walk the talk"—especially since he planned to tell this story, maybe even write about it, to anyone who'd listen. Basically, he wanted to not only stress the necessity of giving to those who are less fortunate but also the importance of doing it in a way that fosters fellowship and a sense of community. In other words, offer charity in a way not promoted by the plethora of donation-seeking television ads: do it directly and close to home.

After a deep breath, Walter knocked on the door, causing their TV to lower almost immediately. Suddenly, he was filled with dread, second-guessing why he was even attempting this experiment in the first place. He imagined the mother saying on the other side of the door, "Go away. We don't want any," in a thick Spanish accent. He could see the father thinking he's some kind of weirdo too interested in his kids, picturing him muttering, "Who the hell comes over uninvited on a random Thursday evening?" If he did, Walter would have to agree with Miguel's father. Why, indeed, *was* he barging in on them unannounced in the middle of their favorite show on Telemundo? But just before Walter turned to hightail it back to his truck, the door opened.

Walter lowered his gaze at the figure standing in the gap between the door and door jamb. He recognized her as the older sister. The barefooted girl wore a pair of shorts and a long-sleeved t-shirt with a yellow smiley face on the front. Her dark brown hair was no longer held back in a ponytail; instead, it fell on either side of her face, framing a curious expression.

“Hi, there,” he said. “My name is Walter. I’d like to talk to your mom or dad.”

She stepped back into the hushed apartment, leaving the door ajar. Walter also stepped back and listened to the muffled exchanges, which were mostly in Spanish. His ears perked up when he heard the girl refer to him as “the man from yesterday.” He was relieved to know she remembered him, bolstering his resolve to stick to the plan. She returned to the door with her younger sister and mother. Whereas the girls appeared intrigued by the interruption, their mother’s expression could only be described as wary mixed with skepticism. She, too, stood in bare feet and wore a long green calico dress printed with orange and white flowers.

“This is for Miguel,” he said, extending the package of knee and elbow pads to the girls’ mother. He wasn’t sure if she could understand him, but he continued anyway. “It was sort of my fault that your son fell yesterday. He was waving back at me when he lost control of his scooter.”

While the oldest daughter translated what Walter had said, the younger girl, who was wearing pajama pants and a tank top, snatched the package from his hand and disappeared inside the apartment. After listening to her oldest child, the mother looked at him with a sympathetic expression. “It’s no problem,” she said. “You live here, too, yes?”

“I do,” he replied, gesturing toward the building behind theirs. “My name is Walter.”

She brushed her shoulder-length hair from her face, looking no more than 28 or 29 years of age. Her expression changed to one of recognition. “Ahh, yes, top floor?”

“Yes,” replied Walter, thinking this initial exchange was going way better than expected.

“My name is Isabella, and this is Victoria,” she said while placing her hand on her oldest daughter’s neck. “I’m sorry my English is not very good.”

Victoria smiled at Walter and looked down at her feet, which were rocking back and forth on the doorway’s metal threshold.

Before Walter could respond, the door was pulled open from inside. Now the whole family was in the doorway, looking at him. Without missing a beat, Isabella introduced the rest of her family. “This is Rafael,” she said, nodding toward her husband. “And this is Mia and Miguel.”

Walter extended his hand toward Rafael, who shook it without hesitation. “I’m Walter,” he said for the third time in the last two minutes.

Before they could get better acquainted, Miguel came out from behind his father wearing all four protective pads, prompting Walter to again explain why he bought them for his son. However, he didn’t get the chance. Victoria, sensing that her father wouldn’t understand him, launched into a Spanish rendition explaining why her brother was wearing safety gear.

Meanwhile, Walter, Isabella, and Mia watched Miguel repeatedly fall to his knees and elbows on the grass in front of the building. It was hard for everyone not to laugh at the boy's antics, which were hilarious.

Walter looked at Mia and asked jokingly, "Did you help Hermano put those on?"

"Yes," she laughed before joining her brother on the lawn. Apparently, she thought her brother's protective gear was an invitation to push him back down each time he tried to stand up.

Walter laughed at the roughhousing duo alongside their parents and older sister. It reminded him of a previous life he led 40 years earlier. But once Miguel started whining, Isabella said something in Spanish, making the kids stop. He watched Mia help her brother up, recalling how sweet and nurturing she was after he fell off his scooter. And just like that, the levity was over—the moment had run its course. The whole family looked at Walter, expecting him to say a few parting words about the importance of scooter safety and shove off.

However, unbeknownst to the tight-knit family, he was far from finished. It was time for him to lie.

## "Wait, There's More"

Walter inhaled deeply, preparing himself for part two of his plan. He stepped back, allowing the two younger children to dash into the apartment, where, presumably, they'd continue to antagonize each other in between fits of giggling. He scanned the faces of Rafael, Isabella, and Victoria. They, too, looked ready to say thank you and call it a night with Walter. "Do you know Costco?" he asked, gesturing in the direction of the nearby shopping Mecca. "It's where I bought the pads for Miguel." All three nodded knowingly, prompting him to continue.

As he spoke, Walter maintained eye contact with the parents without excluding Victoria, who, at this point, was his little interpreter. He kept his explanation simple and to the point. "When I was at the checkout, the cashier informed me that I had around $200 in store credits that were to expire *that* day. I had no idea since I've only been a member of the store for a little over a year. Anyway, I used the credit to buy the pads

and some snacks I thought your kids might like. Think of it as a belated welcome-to-the-neighborhood gift."

Rafael and Isabella nodded at Walter before turning their attention to Victoria. She began speaking in rapid-fire Spanish, interjecting the words "cashier," "pads," and "snacks"—recognizable pronunciations for Walter, giving him the impression that Victoria was nailing the interpretation. When she was finished, both parents smiled at him. The 31- or 32-year-old, wearing dark jeans and a blue TDS work shirt, scratched the scruff on his chin and said, "It's okay. You keep it. Thank you." Isabella added, "Yes, you keep it. Thank you."

Walter knew this moment was inevitable. He'd offer the load of snacks, and they, in turn, would, of course, politely decline, forcing him to casually insist they accept. He had prepared and practiced a whole follow-up speech where he'd convince them that it wasn't a hardship for him—that his own grandkids lived out of state and that he was just being neighborly. But given the language barrier and the appreciative looks in Rafael's and Isabella's eyes, Walter opted for an abrupt change of plan. He pointed to his truck and said, "I brought it with me." Before the parents could respond, he looked at Victoria and asked,

“Would you help me carry some of it?” And with that, he began walking toward the visitor parking area.

He hadn’t reached his truck before he heard the telltale patter of bare feet scampering behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Victoria had, indeed, followed him. Walter quickly opened the tailgate and grabbed the nearest snack item. Seeing that she was dutifully waiting on the sidewalk, he transferred the glossy box of applesauce pouches to her extended arms. “I can carry more,” she said.

“Do you like bananas?” he asked. When she nodded, he added, “Then you’re going to love these banana chips.” He put the box on top of the first box and said, “Are you sure that’s not too heavy?”

“I got it,” she replied.

He watched her turn and head toward her parents. Rafael was looking at his wife, who appeared to be summoning her other two children. Walter hopped into the bed of the truck to gather the boxes that were out of reach and began stacking them on the open tailgate for easier access. As he was climbing down,

he saw Mia and Miguel scuttling toward him with smiles on their faces. Apparently, they had decided to share the protective gear; she was wearing the elbow pads while he kept the knee pads on. Walter assumed they were instructed to help with the off-loading.

“Here you go, Miguel,” groaned Walter as he pretended to struggle with the biggest of all the boxes. Ironically, it was the lightest since it contained bags of flavored popcorn. He handed it to the boy, saying, “You get to carry the biggest one.” Miguel wrapped both arms around it and waddled toward the apartment, hugging the tall, rectangular box like an oversized prize he’d won at a carnival game.

Walter looked at Mia, who was patiently waiting beside his truck. “Think you can handle carrying two things?” he asked. She smiled and held out her arms. “I hope you like peanut butter pretzels and fruit bars because you have a whole summer’s worth here.” He stacked the two boxes on her arms and helped her negotiate the curb between the parking lot and the sidewalk. “Take your time,” he called after her.

After each of the kids made two trips to Walter's truck, all the snacks had been successfully transferred to the apartment without incident or too many words. Everyone appeared to have simply accepted the good deed as a gesture that both the receiver and giver could revel in. "This was perfect," he whispered to himself as he closed the tailgate and strode toward the family of five standing in front of their wide-open door. He made it a point not to look inside their apartment as he approached, cognizant of their privacy and not wanting to come off like a snoop. But something inside their place caught his eye—something that took him back 25 or so years when he worked as a business analyst for a biotech company headquartered in Los Angeles.

Walter looked at Rafael and asked, "Are you from Puerto Rico?"

"Yes," he replied emphatically, smiling at his wife.

"I couldn't help but notice the Puerto Rican flag inside your place," Walter explained while drawing an imaginary rectangle with his hands and pointing to the interior of the apartment. He looked at Victoria and continued. "25 years

ago, I lived and worked in Puerto Rico for two years. It was such a wonderful experience. I'm sorry to say, since then, I've forgotten all my Spanish."

Over the next several minutes, the three adults spoke excitedly through a precocious nine-year-old, discovering that Walter had lived in Humacao while working in Juncos and that Rafael and Isabella were from Bayamón. They shared their favorite places in Puerto Rico, Walter's being Condado Beach in San Juan, while the young couple preferred Flamenco Beach on the nearby island of Culebra. There was talk of shrimp-topped mofongo, rum-laden piña coladas, whistling coqui frogs, fiery-red Flamboyan trees, El Yunque National Forest, and even the bioluminescence bays in Fajardo and Vieques. There was no doubt about it: common ground had been established between lonely old Walter and the young family from *La Isla del Encanto*.

## Conclusion

Walter sat on an aluminum lawn chair, watching Victoria, Mia, and Miguel kick a junior-sized soccer ball on the grass behind their apartment. Beside him, Rafael was cooking

chicken and pork skewers on an old-school charcoal grill. The simple act of the children playing outside without a phone or computer screen in sight brought Walter back to his own childhood, where boredom stood no chance against an active imagination. Back then, growing up in 1970s suburban Philadelphia, life was simpler for young Walter—and much more innocent than what kids face today. He drank water from garden hoses, rode his bicycle without a helmet, built forts in the woods, and let the street lamps tell him when it was time to go home. Walter respected the way in which Rafael and Isabella were raising their kids—no small feat in a world full of dubious marketing campaigns competing with parents for the minds, hearts, and souls of their children.

With Victoria and Mia keeping the ball away from Miguel, it was only a matter of time before the boy started whining out of frustration. Isabella came out to the patio carrying two cans of Medalla Light. She gave one to her husband and the other to Walter. It was ice-cold—exactly how he liked it. “Don’t tease your brother,” she said to the girls, who immediately set out to make up a new game to satisfy Miguel. Isabella looked at Walter with an expression that said, “How was that?” Walter lifted his can of beer and replied, “Muy buena, Isabella.

Your English is getting better and better." Over the past six weeks, two to three times a week, Walter had been helping the couple with the many challenges that come from having to learn a second language in a society that touts "sink or swim" while hoarding all the life preservers.

It wasn't like Walter was conducting ESL classes for his new friends; he was explaining what certain words meant on things like utility bills, credit card statements, pay stubs, insurance policies, and school memos, as well as notifications from the apartment complex. For the first time in a long while, he felt useful, trusted even. Rafael told him that he had worked in Boston for about six months before landing the job with TDS in Boise, Idaho. It took another six months to move his family from Puerto Rico. Early on in their friendship, Rafael needed Victoria to help explain what he did for TDS. She told Walter that he and his work crew were responsible for digging trenches, installing underground conduit, and running fiber optic cables for high-speed internet. Having seen similar work crews in some of the surrounding older neighborhoods, Walter knew that the work was dirty and back-breaking, requiring incredibly noisy horizontal directional drills, vacuum trucks, and trenchers—not to mention pickaxes and shovels.

Isabella, on the other hand, worked inside, splitting her hours between housekeeping for the nearby Courtyard by Marriott and preparing food as part of the kitchen staff at a local Mexican restaurant. She, along with her husband, had asked if he'd check in on the kids from time to time while they were at work. He agreed, adding that the children were welcome to come to his place anytime, especially if they had to work overtime or there was an emergency. For Walter, it all felt surreal, finding purpose and meaning from something as simple as a budding new friendship. "No wonder the government conspires with corporations to keep people isolated and feeling lonely," he murmured to himself. "They don't want their slaves turning newfound fellowship, community, and like-mindedness into challenges against the self-serving status quo."

Walter awoke from his thoughts about his new Puerto Rican friends when Rafael announced the skewers were done, signaling Isabella to tell everyone to come inside to eat. Earlier that evening, he had brought over a big garden salad and a pot of Kraft Mac & Cheese, knowing the kids simply couldn't resist the stuff, including him. It was the second time Walter shared dinner with the Colón family. As he looked around the

table in the cramped dining room, appreciating the people who had accepted his generosity and, eventually, his friendship, he realized how incredibly lucky he was to have chosen such a special family. Logically, he understood that future attempts at his style of charity would likely be less fruitful, at least statistically. But that wouldn't stop him.

After a spirited game of UNO, which Victoria won, Walter picked up his empty salad bowl and cooking pot and said goodnight. He stepped onto the patio and slid the glass door shut behind him, smiling and waving to the kids one last time. He felt an unseasonable chill in the night air and looked up at the sky. It was darker than usual, with the moon and stars hidden behind thickening storm clouds. He began walking across the shadowy greenbelt, hoping his new sneakers wouldn't encounter any dog waste while en route to his apartment. While stepping gingerly on the grass, Walter noticed an erratic light source emanating from the apartment on the ground floor of his building.

Inside, he saw a woman about his age sitting on a couch, flanked by two dogs: one on the couch beside her, the other in a recliner. She was watching TV in near darkness on a

Saturday night, which explained the erratic nature of the light source that caught his eye in the first place. Walter recognized her as one of the crabby dog walkers, who didn't care if anyone heard her carrying on full conversations with what she believed were her canine children. On closer inspection, she was hunched over her phone, her face bluish from both the TV and phone screens. What Walter couldn't see was that she was wearing a gray Shriners Hospitals for Children's t-shirt that read, "This T-Shirt Saves Lives," or that she was checking her social media and dating profiles for any new likes, comments, or messages. He also didn't see the sleepy black cat on the dining room table that didn't care either way.

# Theater 4: Better Off

## Introduction

“Stop staring at them!” She had to shout over the heavy bass and thumping drums emanating from a stack of industrial-grade amplifiers surrounding the stage.

“I can’t help it!” He, too, had to shout over the music.

She pulled on his shirt sleeve like an admonishing mother and bellowed, “You’re letting them affect your evening, which is ruining mine!”

He pulled his arm away from her and shouted, “I’m sorry! It’s freaking mesmerizing to me, and at the same time, deeply disturbing!”

At 40, Cameron wasn’t one to attend concerts anymore, but Bon Jovi was a favorite of his on-again, off-again girlfriend Becca. They both liked the band, beginning in the mid-80s when their debut song, “Runaway,” became an overnight staple on every FM radio station across the country. His eyes

drifted back to the foursome sitting five or six rows in front of him. Stadium-style seating gave Cameron a bird's-eye view of the three young ladies and a young man who appeared to be the boyfriend of one of the phone-wielding girls. While his 20-something-year-old girlfriend texted and the other two filmed themselves reacting to the concert, he sat motionless, except for an occasional knee slap or head bob. Cameron sighed deeply. *Four people came to the concert together, and yet each of them is having a separate experience from the other three. That's crazy!*

Despite Becca's disapproving glare, Cameron continued surveying the crowd in front of him. While his and Becca's phones were neatly tucked away in her car, he realized that the majority of the concertgoers were holding theirs, especially the women, no matter their age. Many were busy taking pictures and videos while others scrunched down in their seats, pecking away on their phones with both thumbs. From his superior vantage point, Cameron had a clear view of what was illuminated on several dozen screens bobbing in front of him, which, not surprisingly, were connected to social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Messenger, WhatsApp, etc. If their phones weren't dialed into social

media, they were displaying the telltale screens of an Android or iPhone texting app. Cameron shook his head in disbelief. *I can still remember when people actually talked to other people with their phones. The world is freaking upside down!*

"Oh my god. Look over there," said Cameron, gesturing toward a woman with yellow cornrows and long pink fingernails. "Now I've seen everything."

Becca didn't even try to mask her annoyance. "Really, Cam? I don't know where *you* are, but I'm at a concert."

Becca had a right to be exasperated. Bon Jovi didn't come to the Pacific Northwest very often; plus, they were in the middle of playing "You Give Love a Bad Name." The irony of the song title did not escape Cameron. Still, his attention was drawn to the woman in question, who was holding a selfie stick with one hand while the other waved around her face. Her phone, of course, was attached to the business end of the telescoping wand with a luminous ring light encircling it. Although his girlfriend was ignoring him, Cameron leaned toward her and said, "If you think *I'm* a terrible person to

attend a concert with, take a look at that selfish lady with the ring light to your right. You literally can't miss her."

Cameron didn't wait for Becca to respond. He scanned the faces of the people surrounding the inconsiderate egomaniac, especially those unlucky enough to sit behind her, where the glowing ring light was an unquestionable distraction. Secretly, he wanted nothing more than to see an usher confiscate her ring light or an annoyed Bon Jovi fan grab it and smash it at her feet. Instead, he watched everyone around her act like she wasn't there, which Cameron chalked up as par for the course in a society where people are routinely attacked for standing up for what's obviously right. Phones, selfie sticks, and ring lights have no place in a music venue that requires only a set of working ears, and yet here they are, including three or four more ring lights on the other side of the arena.

Just as Bon Jovi began singing the chorus of "It's My Life"—their big comeback hit from 2000—Cameron decided then and there that he needed more out of life than a full-time corporate job and a part-time girlfriend. Once again, the irony of the song title didn't elude him. Deep down, Cameron knew he saw the world accurately, and from what he could gather, most

people—especially the younger generations—were blindly marching toward the edge of a precipice with their faces glued to screens that distract, dull, and commandeer their minds. *Social media is the single greatest propaganda and mind control machine ever unleashed on mankind, and they can't see it.* Cameron felt he had to do something—anything to wake them up from their half-dead stupor, reminding them that there's more to life than a steady diet of trivial, often insidious, news and information.

*Better Off* picks up Cameron's story two years after the Bon Jovi concert.

## "Park Anywhere You Like"

Cameron opened his wallet and begrudgingly took out a $20 bill and handed it to the pimply-faced attendant, who wore a tattered trucker hat and a neon-yellow vest over a faded black t-shirt. "Park anywhere you like," he said brightly while removing the orange pylon blocking Cameron's old pick-up truck. He pulled into the vast parking lot of the Ford Idaho Center in Nampa and looked at his passenger, who already knew what her friend of more than four years was about to say.

“Can you freaking believe that?” he lamented. “Before the so-called pandemic, it only cost $5 to park at this venue. Why does everything have to be such a freaking rip-off?”

Maggie couldn’t help but laugh at Cameron’s outbursts, which were frequent and laden with passion and incredulousness, especially when it came to predatory abominations like exploitative parking fees. Unlike her husband, who didn’t like to challenge the status quo, Cameron had a personal vendetta against what he called “the evil empire.” When girlfriends at work questioned her about her friendship with Cameron, she told them that he reminded her of her two favorite comedians: Jon Stewart and Lewis Black. “I’m telling you, the guy is totally hilarious—and smart!” she gushed. And when they asked if her husband, Monty, was okay with her having lunch and hanging out with Cameron all the time, she was prepared for that question, too.

“He thinks he’s gay,” she’d said. “Monty met him a bunch of times—all of them at company functions like the annual summer picnic and holiday party.”

“Why does he think that?” asked Berta, one of her co-workers from the accounting department.

“Because Cameron’s always by himself,” replied Maggie. “Monty thinks it’s weird that he doesn’t have a wife or kids. He said that if a man is still fit after 40 and enjoys reading, writing, and the arts, he *must* be gay.”

“Is he?” asked Priya, a 25-year-old Indian woman from document control who loved gossip—the juicier the better.

“No, of course not,” replied Maggie. “He and his wife split up before they had kids. And now he’s enrolled in a master’s program at Boise State. I haven’t told Monty any of that because I don’t want him to worry. Cameron and I are just friends—always have been.”

Cameron and Maggie were one of the first to arrive at the Ford Idaho Center, affording them the luxury of choosing any parking spot in the giant lot. He always preferred parking near an exit to avoid the mayhem of everyone leaving at the same time, while Maggie was one of *those* people hellbent on parking as close to the entrance as possible. However, they

both understood that their parking preferences weren't conducive for what they were planning to do that evening; they needed a particular spot to work from.

"What about over there?" suggested Maggie, pointing toward a light pole with a big yellow flag affixed to the top of it. It waved limply in the gentle breeze, silhouetted against the setting sun.

"Good eye," beamed Cameron, noticing it was the only pole with a flag and not too far from the entrance. "Now we won't have to wait near the front doors after the concert; they'll know where to find us. I'll just say, 'Meet us under that pole with the big yellow flag.' Nice going, Maggie. I knew you'd be more than just a pretty face tonight."

Cameron was always insinuating that Maggie was attractive. At 48 with two sons inside a 23-year marriage, she stopped thinking of herself as pretty or desirable. When her youngest left home a few years ago for an out-of-state college, it was just her and Monty in their suburban house. She loved her husband, but at the same time, she felt like she could see her entire future: attending her sons' weddings, being the attentive

grandma, retiring at 65, seeing parts of the world from behind a railing on a cruise ship, breaking a hundred in her on-again-off-again golf game, and volunteering at the local hospice center. She chastised herself for not feeling as grateful as she should; yet, she yearned to walk into the abyss of the unknown—to take a chance in life and live with whatever consequences greeted her on the other side. No one noticed Maggy's quiet desperation—not even Monty—though she felt certain Cameron could see right through her.

Pointing through the windshield at the digital billboard displaying that evening's line-up, Cameron asked, "Have you ever heard of either Morgan Wallen or Midland?"

"Sorry, I can't say that I have," she said while picking up her purse from between her feet. "I'm less of a country music girl and more of a Korean pop fan. I can't get enough of BTS."

"Well, not that it matters, but I actually saw Midland at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville a couple of years ago, along with a busload of octogenarians. The band was so good, I actually downloaded a half dozen of their songs that same evening. For a while there, I couldn't start my day without listening to

‘Drinkin’ Problem’ and ‘Barely Blue.’ Although it would be awesome to attend the show tonight, we, of course, have more important things to do.”

Maggie abruptly stopped digging through her purse and said, “Wait a sec. You never told me about your trip to Nashville. You went to a concert with a bunch of old people? What other secrets are you keeping from me?”

“It’s a great story for another day,” laughed Cameron while stepping out of the truck. “Let’s stick to the plan and walk over to the pizza place across the street, okay? I want to go over the script; plus, I’m starving.”

“Sure, let’s go,” she said. Maggie slid out of the truck and closed the door. She walked around the vehicle and waited for her fussy friend to gather his backpack. She watched him put his phone in one zippered pocket, his wallet in another, and a legal pad, a book, and a light jacket in the main compartment. In the two side pockets, he kept gum, lip balm, tissues, lens wipes, and extra pens and pencils. She could name every item in his bag, having seen him pack it a hundred times before. It didn’t matter what they were doing or where they were going;

he'd have that backpack attached to him. When she first asked Cameron about it, he told her he didn't like to carry anything in his pockets.

"All set," he said, slinging his army-green backpack over his shoulder. "Pizza time!" Cameron locked the truck and led the way toward the restaurant.

They walked in silence, listening to the chatter among the parking attendants whose business wouldn't pick up for at least another hour. The setting sun felt warm against their faces. "Why *this* concert, Cam?" pried Maggie.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You've seen Midland once, and I'm guessing you're not a fan of Morgan Wallen," she began. "Why would you pick this particular concert to try your experiment?"

"Great question, Maggie," replied Cameron. "That's the first thing my academic advisor asked me when I told him this concert was where I wanted to run one of the experiments for my thesis."

“What did you tell him?” she pushed.

“I told him the tickets were ridiculously expensive and that the headliners were famous and good-looking.”

Maggie stopped and looked at Cameron questionably and asked, “And why is *that* so important?”

Cameron shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand and replied, “Because that’ll attract the women.”

## “Aren’t They Adorable?”

Cameron held the door open for Maggie as she walked into the Idaho Pizza Company, a local regional chain and franchise. A posted sign read, “Seat Yourself,” but she knew better than to start heading to a table—her eccentric friend had a system for picking a place to sit in a restaurant. He had a system for everything. Cameron followed her inside and immediately began scanning for boisterous groups, crying babies, rude teens, and dogs.

“How about over there?” he suggested, pointing toward a booth behind an elderly couple. Cameron led the way, whispering to Maggie that it was the perfect spot—a darkened corner, away from the sun’s last rays of the day.

“Aren’t they adorable?” whispered Maggie, referring to the older couple. “They’re on a little date.”

“If you say so,” huffed Cameron, noticing they were both looking at their phones while they ate.

At 42, Cameron was a man no longer satisfied with success in corporate America. Although considered the top business analyst at his company, he longed to contribute more to the world than just helping the rich get richer, which is why he enrolled in a master’s program at Boise State, concentrating on social psychology. Eventually, he’d resign from his job and hopefully work as a professor at a small liberal arts college somewhere in the northeast part of the country. One of the perks of his current job was that his work wasn’t limited to specific areas within the biotech giant; he could apply his brand of analysis to any department. Four years ago, when he was asked to find areas of improvement in the accounting

department, he'd met Maggie, the department manager. Back then, she was an accounting specialist.

He recalled their first encounter during a one-on-one meeting in her cubicle, a six-by-six gray box brightened by her preference for colorful knick-knacks and picture frames, one of which displayed her family on what looked to be a visit to the Grand Canyon. When he had asked around for the name of the person who knew the ins and outs of the accounting department, all roads led to Maggie. She was a happy person on the outside, quick to laugh and smile, but Cameron sensed a spiritual bigness within her that was constrained by responsibilities and expectations. In other words, he found her both charming and intriguing. Plus, it didn't hurt that she was easy on the eyes and smelled like the makeup counter at Macy's.

Before he had a chance to sit down, she had asked, "Do you have a background in accounting?" surprising Cameron with a bossy tone he didn't expect from such a petite woman with a Charlize Theron hairstyle.

“None,” he laughed while reaching for something inside his canvas shoulder bag. “But I think I have all the qualifications I need.”

“And how’s that?” she asked, sitting back in her ergonomic chair, crossing her arms, followed by her legs.

“Because I can balance one of these,” he replied, smiling, holding up his checkbook.

Cameron remembered feeling relieved that she had laughed at his little joke, thinking her ego might’ve taken offense at his assumption that accounting was nothing more than balancing a checkbook against a budget. He went on to explain that his inexperience allowed him to get away with asking simple yet important questions and gave him a pass to challenge current processes with an eye not compromised or influenced by traditional practices. Maggie, in turn, was impressed by his relaxed and confident demeanor. Cameron reminded her of a doctor whose bedside manner put his patients at ease and earned their trust. Plus, he was funny, had a calming voice, and made perfect sense. For her, what was there not to like?

Cameron surveyed the restaurant from his side of the booth. It was clean and spacious and, most importantly, smelled like a pizza parlor. Surprisingly, it appeared less than half full—strange, considering it was just after six on a Saturday evening with 12,000 people on their way to a sold-out show across the street. He certainly wasn't complaining, not after having become fed up with the lack of decorum and manners from fellow restaurant goers who think nothing of bringing in their dogs, wearing pajamas, eating like slobs, or talking at the top of their lungs. In addition to patrons indulging every self-centered whim, Cameron had quickly lost interest in dining out after private equity firms sunk their teeth into the restaurant sector. Suddenly, as if overnight, from fast food to fine dining, food quality plummeted, portions shrank, prices soared, while tipping went from being optional to non-negotiable.

"I'm opting for the pizza and salad bar," he announced. "At $15.99, it's the cheapest option in the place; plus, I'll only owe the waitress a tip for the soda. Why should I have to tip her on food I served myself, right?"

“She won’t be happy, but I see your logic, Cam,” she replied. “I was thinking of getting the same thing.”

After an uninspired visit from the waitress and a trip to the buffet, Cameron and Maggie talked over pepperoni pizza slices and garden salads. They both preferred classic toppings over exotic ones and minimalistic salads over chopped and loaded monstrosities.

“So, what’s the plan?” asked Maggie while plunging her fork into a cucumber slice smeared with ranch dressing. “Why are you targeting women, and what’s my role in all this?”

Camaron finished swallowing what was in his mouth and found the straw of his Diet Pepsi. After he took a couple of pulls, he replied, “Not just *any* women, Maggie—very specific women, which I’ll need your help spotting. But to pull this off, you’ll need to act as my girlfriend.”

Maggie, whose ability to mask her emotions helped her win more often than not at poker, couldn’t suppress the look of shock on her face. However, underneath her surprise was a feeling of guilty excitement. “Okay,” she stammered. After a

quick sip of her lemonade, she gathered herself and said teasingly, “So, is this like a first date or what?”

## “That’s Pretty Specific”

Cameron liked how they never missed a chance to banter back and forth, especially when they were joking about being a romantic couple. He was used to colleagues referring to Maggie as his “work wife,” constantly trying to embarrass him whenever they’d see them together in the cafeteria, gym, or Starbucks. The truth was, they were each other’s best friend. The secret of their success was like a match made in heaven: he loved to talk and joke; she liked to listen and laugh. As a man whose income relied heavily on his ability to think “outside the box” and come up with new ideas to revitalize stagnant operations, Cameron cherished Maggie’s no-nonsense pragmatism. In fact, one of his nicknames for her was “his little risk assessment manager” or RAM for short. More than once, she’d been able to identify holes in his logic regarding a new business process he was planning to pitch to his bosses in the IT department. Maggie was not only a prized confidante but also a much-needed sounding board for Cameron.

“So, what kind of women are we looking for? Voluptuous blondes or pouty brunettes?” joked Maggie.

“I wish it were that simple,” teased Cameron. “Ideally, they should walk with a limp, be morbidly obese, and have a service dog with them.”

“Huh? That’s like *every* woman in Nampa,” she quipped while pushing her plate away. It contained a ball of used napkins and the crusts of two pizza slices.

“Hey! I’m the only one who makes the jokes around here!” laughed Cameron. “Seriously, though, we need to keep an eye out for a very specific type of lady, which I don’t think will be difficult for us to spot. It’s more about how they’re dressed than their physical attractiveness. The lady we’re interested in is wearing a black concert t-shirt over denim shorts and a cowgirl hat with a pair of snip-toe boots.”

“Wow. That’s pretty specific,” interjected Maggie.

“That’s not all,” added Cameron. “She needs to either be holding her phone or carrying it in her back pocket.”

“Is that it?” she asked sarcastically.

“No—and *this* requirement is the kicker—she needs to be accompanied by two to four girlfriends dressed similarly. If there’s even one guy with them, the group vanishes from our radar screen, okay?”

“Okay. Do the other women have to be holding phones, too?”

Cameron took a sip of his Diet Pepsi—his second during the meal—and unzipped his backpack. Without looking at Maggie, he replied, “Great question. Yes, we need to confirm that each lady has a phone. It could be in their hand, back pocket, or purse.”

“Okay. Does it matter how old they look?”

Cameron put his student ID badge and notebook on the table. He made sure to wipe the space in front of him before doing so. This time, he looked at Maggie and replied, “Another great question. They need to be somewhere between 25 and 45—and if one group looks more attractive than the other, we choose the prettier ladies, okay?”

Maggie leaned back into the booth and folded her arms. “It sounds like I’ll be acting more like your wingman than your girlfriend,” she huffed.

Cameron detected a blend of sarcasm and actual disappointment in Maggie’s tone. He realized he needed to tread lightly, especially with her being so sensitive and possessive of him. “I highly doubt that I’m going to meet the love of my life in the parking lot of the Ford Idaho Center. To maximize the return of the experiment, we need to approach subjects that are historically and statistically most resistant to what I’ll be proposing to them,” he explained.

“So, you’re going to ask them to read a book?” cracked Maggie.

Cameron laughed and replied, “No, I’m going to ask them to refrain from taking any pictures of the venue, entertainers, or themselves during the entire performance.”

“There’s no way—”

“Wait. There’s more,” interrupted Cameron. “I’m also going to ask them not to text, take calls, or check their social media accounts.”

“Like I was saying,” continued Maggie. “There’s no way they’ll go for that. That’s just what girls do. They take pictures of themselves constantly—even if they’re alone in a restroom at Starbucks. But if they’re dressed up with friends at a concert, they’ll be on their phones all night. I remember seeing this girl at work who—”

“Sorry to interrupt your conversation,” said their unsmiling waitress, wearing a red polo shirt with the restaurant’s name stitched on the upper right quadrant. “Would you like another refill, or should I bring the check?”

Cameron gestured at Maggie, indicating they should start heading back to his truck. “You can bring us the check,” he replied to the 25-year-old, who mumbled something that sounded like, “Okay.”

As soon as she left, Cameron leaned over the table and responded to Maggie’s observation. He said, “You’re so right.

But the vast majority of people attending tonight's concert will, no doubt, do everything I'll be asking the cowgirls not to do. The only reason I'm targeting the cowgirls is that they're the ones *most* addicted to seeking external validation—especially the more attractive cowgirls. And by external validation, I mean a neurological dopamine hit in the form of a like or comment on a recently uploaded post that fools them into believing they're winning the game of life. And who's more insecure and competitive than a group of attractive women?"

"I'm not going to argue with you on that one, Cam," confirmed Maggie. "I totally agree with you. Earlier, you mentioned you had other experiments to run in support of your thesis. Can you tell me what the other ones are?"

"Sure, but I'm hoping you'll help me with those, too," replied Cameron, noticing the waitress heading toward their table. "Hold on, here comes Sheila."

"Who's Sheila?"

"Our waitress."

“Thank you for coming in,” said Sheila, who thought nothing of showing off the random tattoos along both her arms and on the tops of her hands: a single rose, more than one crescent moon, tiny flowers, shooting stars, a leafy vine, and empowering words like “surrender,” “faith,” and “unbroken.” She put the check face down on the table and added, “So, do you two have big plans for tonight? Are you going to the concert?”

Maggie knew what Cameron was about to say because she’d heard it many times before. To her, it never stopped being funny, especially in the way he’d say it to the unsuspecting waitstaff or cashier. Once again, she admonished herself for being more familiar with Cameron’s tendencies than those of her husband.

Cameron dragged the check toward himself and deadpanned, “You’re looking at it, Sheila—having dinner at the Idaho Pizza Company *is* the big plan. Now, we’ll go home and watch a rerun of *Dateline*.”

Like most people he encountered in Nampa’s dystopian society, Sheila didn’t know how to react to someone speaking

off-script. Since she didn't know whether to roll her eyes or smile, she did both at the same time. Her bazaar facial contortions didn't go unnoticed by either Cameron or Maggie. "Okay, have a great night," she said as she walked away.
"How much do you want to bet that there's a smiley face somewhere on this receipt?" he teased without turning it over.

Maggie scooched forward on the bench seat and replied, "Well, based on the fact she didn't know how to respond to your cute joke, I'd say there is one."

"I totally agree with your logic, RAM," he said before flipping the check over. "Boom! There it is! Are we good or what?" He pushed the check toward Maggie for inspection. She pushed it back, saying, "Nice try, buddy. If this is a first date, you're paying."

## "Dreaming of Cowgirls?"

Cameron decided to push his luck with Maggie by playfully retorting, "Well, if we're going the traditional route, then I can expect a sloppy goodnight kiss."

“Sorry, I don’t kiss on the first date,” quipped Maggie as she sat back in her seat with a wry smile.

Feeling a bit flustered, Cameron retreated to the business at hand. “I want to answer the question you asked before Sheila interrupted us,” he began. “My other experiments include ripped guys in the gym, nauseating couples on date nights, and families on exotic vacations.”

“It sounds like you know what you’re after,” said Maggie as she slid out from her side of the booth. “Don’t forget your man-purse,” she teased, nodding at Cameron’s backpack.

Cameron laughed and put his ID and notebook back inside the main compartment of his backpack and pulled out his wallet from another. He picked up the bill and followed Maggie toward the front of the restaurant.

“I need to go to the lady’s room,” she announced as she stepped toward the alcove near the entrance.

Cameron veered toward the cashier and teased, “While you’re in there, try to restrain yourself from taking a bunch of

selfies." He heard Maggie's signature giggle and turned his attention to the bored 19- or 20-year-old girl behind the register, who had the same kind of arm tattoos that Sheila had, plus an off-putting nose ring. After he paid the bill, he returned his wallet to its designated compartment and stared out the window at all the cars waiting to turn into the Ford Idaho Center. The sun had set, leaving a glowing twilight, mixing pink and blue with gray on a warm September evening. While he waited for Maggie, he recalled one of the first conversations he'd had with his graduate advisor, Dr. Arnold Pickford, an interpersonal relationships expert whose research and books center around why people form bonds, experience attraction, help others, or exhibit aggression and prejudice.

"Tell me, Cameron," began Dr. Pickford as he glanced over the 42-year-old's student bio. "Why would a successful and established business analyst want to pursue a PhD in sociology? It says here you've been with the same company for almost 20 years. Oh, and by the way, you can call me Arnold."

Cameron adjusted himself so he was seated on the edge of his chair, which was on the opposite side of Dr. Pickford's desk

inside a cramped office on the third floor of Bryce Hall. Cramped as it was, the one window between two tall bookcases overlooked an expansive lawn in front of the student union and allowed sunlight to brighten an otherwise dingy office. After two years of course work at Boise State, Cameron had become accustomed to answering this question.

"I've been noticing patterns my whole life, Arnold, starting when I was in elementary school. For example, growing up in suburban Philadelphia, sunny days were rare. Even at that age, I sensed a pattern between sunlight and behaviors. On cloudy days, my classmates and teachers appeared calm and deliberate—quite predictable for young Cameron. However, on sunny days, their behaviors changed drastically, becoming hyper and equally *unpredictable*, leaving me feeling anxious and unsettled. They no longer appeared attached to the present moment like I was, having exchanged it for incessant thoughts about what they were planning to do outside once school let out. But, of course, my pattern recognition skills didn't stop there; they followed me through college—ultimately, becoming the secret of my success in practically everything that I did, especially in my work as a business analyst."

“I would imagine so,” interjected Dr. Pickford, who leaned back in his squeaky office chair, giving his new graduate student the impression he wanted to hear more.

Cameron sensed he had already won over his new advisor but felt compelled to finish his well-practiced speech. “Poorly updated or undocumented procedures and multiple names for the same thing are common causes of business process inefficiencies and ineffectiveness; however, the number one reason, by far, is simply that people are, well, people,” he continued. “And by that, I mean it’s people who cause the most problems in any given enterprise. I’ve always said if it’s been written about in a Shakespeare play, sonnet, or poem, I’ve come across it while searching for the root causes of a lagging business process. It’s human faults like jealousy, pride, vindictiveness, pettiness, apathy, impatience, stubbornness, and others that force my company to send analysts like me to assess the damage. Basically, it’s people who screw everything up.”

“So that’s what piqued your interest in social psychology?” asked Dr. Pickford while looking at the wall clock above Cameron’s head.

Taking the hint that Dr. Pickford was pressed for time, Cameron mentally shortened his planned response and replied, “Yes, I figured if they’re the ones screwing everything up, I’d be better off studying the actual offenders rather than the carnage they’re leaving behind. I might as well go directly to the source, right?”

“You make perfect sense, Cameron,” said the gray-haired tenured professor. “I’ve read through your proposed thesis, and I’m willing to sponsor you. I think you’ll be a wonderful addition to our department. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a faculty luncheon to attend.” He stood up from his chair and offered his hand as a non-verbal “welcome aboard.”

“Earth to Cameron. Over. Do you read me? Over,” said Maggie in a voice reminiscent of NASA’s mission control in Houston.

Startled, Cameron backed away from the window and bumped into the “Seat Yourself” sign, practically knocking it over.

“My god. Where were you? Dreaming of cowgirls?” she huffed.

“Sorry about that,” he laughed. “I was just thinking about Dr. Pickford.”

“Who’s that?”

“My graduate advisor, Dr. Arnold Pickford.”

“Oh, now I remember,” she said. “I’m used to you referring to him as Arnold.”

Cameron and Maggie exited the restaurant and traversed the narrow parking lot to the sidewalk. As they prepared to J-walk across the busy road to the buzzing venue, Cameron noticed that the sky’s pink and blue hues had merged with black, making the dome above them a pleasing shade of violet. In the distance, toward Oregon, his eyes followed the stubborn white light hugging the horizon—the final curtain call of the sun’s withering rays. He felt no excitement except that he was eager to conduct an important experiment alongside his best friend. The sound of hundreds of vehicle engines drowned out the pre-concert country music emanating from speakers outside the flat-roofed arena, which shared its shape with economy-sized bars of soap in one-star hotels—a stubby rectangle with

beveled edges. Not even the fervor created by the arriving fans stirred his heart; Cameron felt he had nothing in common with most people, especially with those who relished the energy of raucous crowds.

“Okay, it’s clear on my side,” announced Cameron once there was a break in the flow of southbound traffic on Garrity Boulevard. He gently nudged her with his hand on her lower back and blurted, “Let’s go!”

They paused on the grassy median, assessing the inching northbound traffic waiting to turn right into what was a sugar beet farm 30 years ago. While following Cameron between the stopped cars, Maggie pointed out that the car behind them was occupied by two cowgirls already wearing their hats, prompting her detail-oriented friend to respond, “Yes, I saw them, but there were only two. We need groups of three to five.”

Once they were safely across, Maggie asked Cameron why he needed to approach the women with a pretend girlfriend in tow. He replied, “Because I might as well tell them I’m a bikini model scout, looking for natural talent—that’s why.

Without a supposed girlfriend as a cover, anything I say will be construed as a made-up premise just to meet women. Obviously, you've been out of the dating scene for a long time. Nowadays, women view men who approach them in public the same way they view guys who text them on dating apps: as creepy or pathetic."

"Which one are you?" teased Maggie.

"Creepy. Definitely creepy."

## "But What's The Harm in It?"

"Look how easy it is to find where we're parked," announced Cameron while pointing at the light pole with the yellow flag, which was gently furling and unfurling in the evening breeze. With the light illuminated at the top, the yellow color looked almost neon against the violet sky. He led Maggie through the maze of cars and blurted, "Your life will be better without social media!"

"What?" she asked, following closely behind Cameron as he took a shortcut between two SUVs.

“That’s my thesis,” he explained.

“What is?” she pushed.

“What I just said,” he replied, turning back to look at her. “Your life *will* be better without social media.”

“You think so?” she teased.

“I know so!”

Cameron unlocked the truck, and he and Maggie climbed inside, leaving the doors ajar since it was still too early to look for cowgirls. As they settled in to wait, Cameron said, “What do you think look-at-me cowgirls have in common with ripped guys in the gym, nauseating couples on date nights, and families on exotic vacations?”

“You know I hate it when you ask me questions like that, Cam. I get flustered. Just tell me.”

“Pictures!” he exclaimed. “It’s my belief—based on years of observation and analysis—that these specific groups are some

of the neediest attention seekers on social media, demonstrating a pathology that praises conceit and self-aggrandizement while saying adios to any semblance of humility or modesty. Of course, I'm generalizing here, but that's the nature of sociological study. Truth be told, I'm sure there are worse offending groups, and that, to some extent, *most* people on social media exhibit the same psychological need for constant attention and approval."

"I agree with you, but what's the harm in it? They're not hurting anybody; plus, nobody is being forced to look at their posts," said Maggie as she put a piece of gum in her mouth. "Want one?" she offered.

"No, thanks—not right now," replied Cameron, waving her off. "Actually, you're right; they aren't hurting anyone—they're hurting *everyone*, worst of all, themselves. The process begins when the offenders detach from the present moment, choosing to pull out their phones to gather photos and videos rather than participating or simply enjoying it. Next, they upload and post the collected proof of the moment on their social media pages to garner likes and comments from viewers they rarely spend time with or have never met or spoken to.

Neither the offender nor the viewer sees the photos and videos for what they really are: staged performances masquerading as reality. In other words, the posts are curated to make the offender's life appear more thrilling and enviable than it really is. Most viewers of the post fall within two categories: the subservient and the competitive. The subservient viewer will like the post and lavish the offender with an ego-stroking comment like, "You guys look amazing! What a wonderful view of Seattle!" The competitive viewer will also like the post but add a backhanded comment like, "Hi, girlfriend! Your lunch up in the Space Needle reminds me of when Don and I had dinner at the top of the Eiffel Tower on New Year's Eve!"

"Geez, now I feel bad about the picture I posted of Monty and me having lunch at the Olive Garden," joked Maggie. "Apparently, I'm living a pretty mediocre life, thinking it doesn't get any better than endless salad and breadsticks."

"You just confirmed my next point," laughed Cameron. "And then there are the viewers like you, who refrain from liking or commenting on posts that make them think they're experiencing life from a seat in coach while everyone else seems to be sipping champagne in first class. So, you see, just

as I suggested earlier, no one really benefits from viewing the offenders' posts on social media—at least in the way that the offender intended."

Maggie opened the passenger door to let more air into the cab of the truck. "Come on, Cam," she said. "You can't expect me to believe that. I'm happy to come across a post from one of my sons."

"Of course you would," replied Cameron as he opened the console between them to retrieve his lip balm. "You're their mother—but let me ask you: would you prefer to see a photo of your son receiving an award at his job on Facebook, where anybody could stumble upon it, or in a text message he sent specifically to you?"

"Hmm, that's a good question," she said. "I guess I'd prefer the text message because it would make me feel special—like it was important for him to share that moment with me."

Cameron applied the lip balm and tossed it back into the console, closing the lid until a satisfying click was heard. "I'm glad you said that," he said, sounding relieved. "Otherwise, I

was prepared to start a debate with you. You see, the reason why you feel that way is because a texted photo inherently feels more exclusive, an intentional act signaling that you mean something to the sender. Conversely, if you discover the photo on social media, that exclusivity goes right out the window, making the viewer feel more voyeuristic than valued. Photos and videos aren't the problem; it's the people behind them—the offenders—who must disrupt their present moment to promote themselves indiscriminately in order to feel like they matter. They troll for likes and comments from faraway viewers doing the exact same thing—everyone advertising their brand of living, shamelessly idolizing and worshipping themselves. It's like going to see a live performance, where the entire audience is on stage, obscuring the actual talent."

Motivated by Cameron, Maggie reached into her purse and pulled out a pink tube of lip gloss. She looked at her friend and said, "Wow. No offense, but you make it sound like it's a crime against humanity to share a photo on social media."

"Of course, it isn't a crime," he continued. "But it certainly doesn't add any value to society. In fact, I believe it actually hurts people. Let's stay with the example of your son receiving

an award at his job, okay? Nobody is happy for him—and I mean no one—except you, his mother, his girlfriend, and maybe his best friend since the sixth grade. As far as the rest of the viewers are concerned—the 99% who aren't happy for him—they're experiencing every unpleasant emotion between feeling jealous of his success and nauseated by the braggadocios vibe of the post. Even his mother, girlfriend, and best friend aren't feeling as happy for him as they could be—not since having to view the post on social media where exclusivity is an illusion. Your son would've been better off sending the photo through a private text to the three people who actually do care about his success and happiness."

"I can appreciate what you're saying," interjected Maggie while looking at her glossed lips in the visor's vanity mirror. "You make sense, but the world is more gray than black and white. Even social media has its redeeming values."

"I can't argue with that logic, Maggie," he added. "But whatever those redeeming values are—and I'm not doubting that there *are* benefits—they're more than cancelled out by the staggering number of life-wasting and life-harming costs. Based on what I've seen and experienced with social media,

we're all better off without it. I weaned myself off Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, and LinkedIn over several months and finally deleted the apps from my phone. That was earlier this year, and I can honestly say I don't miss any of it."

"So *that's* why you never write me back on Messenger," she joked. Maggie slid off the passenger seat and stepped onto the cracked asphalt to straighten her tank maxi dress and smooth out the wrinkles. It was white cotton with two pink bows on each shoulder strap. Her purse and sneakers matched in color; both were baby blue. Her short brown hair combined a natural wave with frosted tips, making her look like a slice of wedding cake. "When you put it like that, I kind of agree with you," she continued. "Plus, I've had similar thoughts about social media. I get what you're saying about the viewers, but what about the offenders? How are they hurt by their own posts?"

Cameron, still seated behind the steering wheel, reached for his backpack on the backseat and put it in his lap. He pulled out his student ID, a handful of business cards, a pen, and a clipboard with a yellow writing pad attached to it. He looked at Maggie and replied, "Let's meet some cowgirls and find out, shall we?"

## “Not Even One Picture?”

Cameron and Maggie silently walked side-by-side toward the main entrance of the Ford Idaho Center, listening to the array of country music emanating from parked cars and eavesdropping on spirited conversations fueled by long-awaited anticipation and alcohol. The scene reminded him of another parking lot—the one in front of BSU’s Albertsons Stadium hours before a Bronco football game. In another life, he secretly wished he could take Maggie to such an event, where he could hold her hand under a blanket in the crisp, nighttime air.

“To make it look like we’re together, would it be okay with you if I held your hand as we approach the cowgirls?” asked Cameron. “It’ll make us look more legit as a couple and help bring their guard down even quicker,” he added.

“Okay!” she blurted, thinking she had answered a little too readily. To ease her embarrassment, she quipped, “I *guess* I can take one for the team. Anything for science, right?”

“Wow,” he deadpanned. “It’s not like I’m asking you to be a test subject for a new kind of eye surgery. You just have to hold my hand for like 10 seconds and pretend to love me.”

Maggie laughed, saying, “You’re so funny,” before dropping her eyes to the pavement in front of her.

Cameron liked the sound of her laugh. It was like an impish giggle—the kind you’d expect from a schoolgirl instead of a middle-aged woman managing an accounting department for a Fortune 500 company. He knew her well enough to recognize when their flirtatious banter had backed her into a corner. It wasn’t that she was embarrassed or uncomfortable with their back-and-forth innuendos; she felt too close to saying something that would reveal her true feelings for Cameron, risking a close friendship that made her feel like she was still in college.

“Do you see those two cowgirls over there by the white truck?” he asked, gesturing with a head bob to the right. “That’s exactly what we’re looking for. They have the hats, denim shorts, boots, and phones—just as I predicted. Thank you, very much.”

“I do,” she replied, anticipating his hand taking hers. “Do you want to go over and talk to them?”

“No. We need to approach groups of three to five.”

“Wait!” she cautioned. “There’s another cowgirl getting out of the truck.”

“You’re right. I guess it’s showtime!”

Cameron reached for Maggie’s hand, which fit perfectly into his, requiring neither of them to bend their elbows. His lanky five-foot-eleven height and long arms aligned with her five-foot-four stature and shorter limbs. Within seconds, their fingers were interlaced without a shred of hesitancy or awkwardness. Whereas he likened her overall appearance to a slice of wedding cake, he imagined himself as a flute of champagne walking next to her. In other words, they complimented one another.

He wore a pale-gold polo over tan khakis with a pair of light-gray Sketchers slip-ons. His college ID swung pendulously from a blue and orange lanyard around his neck. Under his left

arm, he carried his trusty clipboard, making him look like a man who appraised houses for a living. Like Maggie, he had brown wavy hair, but his was much longer, lightly accented with strands of blonde and silver. It spilled well past his ears and over the back of his collar down to his shoulders. A thin beard and a pair of corrective lenses in a teardrop-shaped frame completed the look of a 1970s TV detective.

Cameron pulled Maggie up to the white truck, making sure each cowgirl saw that they were holding hands. “Excuse me, ladies,” he began. “May I have a word with you? I promise this won’t take but a moment.” When they hesitated to dismiss him, he immediately pressed forward, saying, “I’m Cameron, and this is my girlfriend, Maggie. I’m a graduate student in the sociology department at BSU, and I’m working on a thesis regarding the use of social media.” He presented his ID and removed a business card from his clipboard and handed it to the cowgirl standing closest to him. “Here’s my card,” he announced.

“What’s it say?” slurred the shortest cowgirl whose over-bleached teeth looked whiter than Maggie’s dress. The hat-

wearing brunette was chewing a piece of gum and cradling a phone close to her face.

Cameron took a step closer to the blonde cowgirl holding his card without letting go of Maggie's hand. "I work for Gen-Core as a business analyst, but I'm also a graduate student at BSU," he explained. "The link to my graduate profile is on the back in case you want to verify that I am who I say that I am." He looked at the cowgirl furthest from the group gathered at the back of the truck and asked her to join them. The chubby girl looked to be in her early 30s and was using the truck's passenger-side mirror to check her eye makeup and reapply her lipstick. When she finished, she joined her two friends standing opposite of Cameron and Maggie. Although the three concertgoers looked to be at least a dozen years past their high school graduations, they reminded Cameron of 18-year-old seniors on their way to the big homecoming football game.

He glanced at Maggie and let go of her hand. Instantly, he was aware of their disconnectedness and the sudden void in the palm of his right hand; he sensed Maggie was feeling the same way. He looked at his clipboard as if to remind himself of what he was about to say, but he required no such notes. Cameron

knew how he wanted to broach the polarizing subject; his antics were merely for effect.

“I have a proposal for you,” he began, making eye contact with each cowgirl. “Should you meet the terms of the proposal, I guarantee that the three of you will become even better friends. Who wouldn’t want that, right? All you have to do is refrain from using your phones during the entire concert, which means no pictures, videos, posting, texting, etc. Leaving your phones behind in the truck will essentially eliminate outside distraction along with the temptation to document your experience for posterity or validation.”

“We have to take our phones with us,” interjected the blonde cowgirl. “Our e-tickets are on our phones,” she explained.

“That’s fine,” he replied. “After they scan the barcode, just tuck the phone in your pocket and forget about it until after the show.”

“Not even one picture of the three of us to keep as a memento?” asked the brunette cowgirl whose teeth appeared

to glow brighter in the fading twilight. “Wouldn’t having a photo like that *make* us better friends?”

Cameron nodded at the cowgirl as he listened to her questions. When she finished, he calmly replied, “I know the picture you’re referring to; it’s the one where the three of you will be mashed together with Morgan Wallen or Midland in the background on a lit-up stage. Either one or two of you will be holding up a $14 Michelob Ultra, wildly smiling as if it’s the greatest watered-down beer you’ve ever tasted.”

“Oh my god!” laughed Maggie. “I’m *definitely* guilty of posting photos like that on Facebook—except, I’m holding up $17 cans of Corona!”

All three cowgirls laughed along with Maggie, including Cameron. He appreciated his partner’s near-perfect comedic timing, bringing a respite of levity to a sobering existential topic. “I get it,” he continued. “Each of you has invested a lot of money in attending the show tonight. Between the tickets, parking, outfits, and cowgirl hats, you’re probably in the hole for around $300.”

“More like $600,” chimed the chubby cowgirl, holding up one of her boots. “These alone cost me $300,” she sighed.

Cameron complimented her boot selection and continued with his explanation. “After spending so much money, time, and energy, who wouldn’t think a few pictures were in order—even mandatory? But here’s where you can separate yourselves from the herd of cowgirls attending the concert tonight. By leaving your phones at the door, so to speak, this night will become an exclusive, cherished occasion between the three of you instead of a pathetic gathering of documentation to prove to others that you’re winning the game of life. In other words, your night will be more about relishing a shared experience rather than performing for an invisible audience.”

“And *that’s* supposed to make us closer as friends—by *not* having *any* record of being at the concert together?” huffed the blonde cowgirl, who glanced at the time on her phone.

Cameron sensed he was close to overstaying his welcome and quickly launched into his final statements. “Yes, it will,” he replied confidently. “Imagine running into each other next

month at a mutual friend's backyard barbeque or at a bar or restaurant during a girls' night-out get-together. You'd have this shared secret—an exclusivity between all of you because life isn't a competition or a popularity contest; it's about the depth of experience, a reverence for the present moment."

He pointed to where he had parked and took Maggie's hand into his. She didn't resist. "After the concert, you'll find us under that light pole with the yellow flag. If you were able to keep your phones tucked away during the entire show, I want you to come see me so we can exchange information since your feedback will be included in my graduate thesis. Don't worry. It only involves filling out two short surveys and participating in a follow-up interview at a later date. If I don't see you again, I'm going to assume you couldn't resist the urge to snap a bunch of group selfies and upload them to your social media accounts before Midland's first encore."

"It was nice meeting you," chimed Maggie. "Hope to see you after the show. Love the hats, by the way!"

Cameron tucked his clipboard under his arm and thanked the ladies for giving him a moment of their time. "I know you can

do this," he added while pulling Maggie deeper into the parking lot. "See you under the yellow flag in a few hours!"

Once they were out of earshot from the three cowgirls, Maggie whispered to Cameron, "Do you think they'll come find us after the show?"

"Not a chance."

They set out to find the next group of cowgirls. Neither of them let go of the other's hand.

## "You Sound a Little Bitter"

Cameron and Maggie managed to find and speak with 11 more cowgirl clusters, giving the latent graduate student a total of 12 opportunities to run through his spiel, two more than he had hoped for, with the last one conducted while walking alongside a tardy foursome to the venue entrance. They walked back to Cameron's truck, which was one of at least 4,000 vehicles circumventing the front of the Ford Idaho Center. Both were exhausted—but for different reasons. He was tired of talking; she was tired of listening. Cameron felt

satisfied with his selection of cowgirls and had no regrets with how he delivered each proposition. Maggie, for her part, felt pleased with her support and involvement, as she realized that her role as a buffer helped soften Cameron's shocking and often depressing disclosures of the costs of social media addiction and phone-centric lives.

They no longer were holding hands, mutually opting to let go of one another after the last of the cowgirls blended into the gathering mob, eagerly oozing into the flashing and thumping epicenter like a lava flow in reverse. Neither Cameron nor Maggie was envious of the amped and costumed cowgirls, preferring to listen to the muffled sounds of the concert from inside the spacious comfort of Cameron's truck cab.

"I'm impressed," said Maggie as she climbed into the passenger seat. "None of the ladies turned you away when you approached them."

Cameron groaned as he plopped down into the driver's seat, feeling drained from having played the part of a persuasive salesman for the past hour. "You mean when *we* approached

them," he corrected. "That certainly wouldn't be the case if you weren't with me, acting like my significant other."

"You don't give yourself enough credit," she countered.

Without looking at her, he replied, "Thank you, Maggie, but it's no longer about me; it's about conditioning." Cameron stared blankly through the windshield, feeling his inner frivolity losing ground to existential sadness and spiritual weariness. Maggie sensed the heaviness of his heart. "30 years of the internet and 20 years of social media," he continued, "have hijacked and reprogrammed the natural thought processes of hundreds of millions of exploitable people, turning them into unquestioning tax-paying consumers who can't distinguish freedom from tyranny—people who've been forced to prioritize money above all else, to suppress their individuality and common sense, to normalize cruelty and indifference, and to assume the worst of anyone not found in their list of contacts."

"I can't say that you're wrong, Cam, but do you *really* think the internet is to blame—that social media single-handedly ruined our quality of life?"

“No, of course not, Maggie,” he replied, keeping his eyes focused on something far beyond the parking lot. “I choose to believe the internet and social media were conceptualized and created with the best of intentions. But as expected in a world historically ruled by exceedingly ruthless human beings, they eventually commandeered the internet and social media, turning the technology into the most successful pair of propaganda machines ever unleashed on humanity. However, the self-serving ruling class—as obsessed with power and control as they are to the detriment of innocent lives—shares the blame with anyone who willingly accepts government and corporate lies as truth based solely on the fact that they appeared on their phone, computer, or TV screen.”

“I hear you,” said Maggie. “But how does what you just said explain why the cowgirls would shut you down if you weren’t holding my hand? It’s not like you give off creepy or dangerous vibes.”

“You haven’t seen me dressed as a clown yet,” he laughed. “As I said before, it’s not about me, per se,” he continued, turning his gaze toward Maggie’s hands, which were fumbling around inside her purse. “It doesn’t matter if I’m freshly

showered, dressed nicely, neatly groomed, and radiating nice-guy energy—I have no chance against propaganda machines fine-tuned to do two things: divide and conquer. Do you think it's working? I think so. It's 2026, and intolerance is at what feels like an all-time high over racial, cultural, political, religious, economic, sexual, and even gender differences—the very same social ills that rotted and eventually destroyed the ancient empires of Egypt, Greece, and Rome thousands of years ago. Now, 2500 years later, I live in that same late-stage society, where everyone distrusts everyone else, especially women when some random guy approaches them unvetted and uninvited."

Maggie pulled out a miniature bottle of Noxzema hand lotion from her purse and set it on the console between them. "You know I love how your mind works, Cam," she interjected. "You're a deep thinker, but sometimes your awareness of the big picture causes you to lose sight of the question—like that time I asked you if you wanted a gift card for Starbucks for your birthday and you launched into a lecture about how gift cards allow corporations to replace traditional bank loans with *interest-free* loans from their very own customers. Do you remember that?"

Cameron laughed and repositioned himself so he could face his well-intentioned friend. “Yes, I do,” he chuckled. “As I recall, that *was* an epic lecture, but you’re right—I do tend to drift into lecturing-professor mode when I’m excited about a particular subject. Now let’s get back to your question about why the cowgirls would turn me away if I wasn’t approaching them while holding your hand. The short answer is that women don’t need men anymore—so much so that they’re at war with them. When they see that I’m by myself, they don’t see a man with standards, ethics, and purpose—a high-value man who’s confident enough to walk the earth alone until he meets a high-value woman. Instead, they simply see a societal reject lacking alpha male presence. But if I’m holding your hand, making the cowgirls believe you’re my wife or girlfriend, I can imagine them whispering something like, ‘Hmm, maybe he isn’t such a pathetic loser after all. He must have some redeeming value if he’s managed to attract a female.’”

“I’m not going to lie,” said Maggie as she squirted a white dollop of hand lotion into her palm. “You sound a little bitter, Cam. Your problem is that you just haven’t met the right woman yet.”

“Have you?” he pried.

Maggie rubbed her hands together with a mischievous grin on her face. Cameron knew what was coming. “No, I’m still waiting for her to show up,” she quipped.

“You know what I mean,” he pushed.

Now it was Maggie’s turn to solemnly stare out the windshield at something far beyond the parking lot. She continued working the lotion into her hands and wrists. After a brief pause, she looked at her friend, meeting his eyes. “Maybe I have, maybe I haven’t,” she offered coyly.

## “I Almost Forgot to Tell You”

Two hours had passed before Cameron and Maggie saw the first of the sated concertgoers trickling out of the still-pulsating arena, most of whom were led by boyfriends or husbands hellbent on avoiding the impending crush of parking lot traffic. When they weren’t lamenting the deplorable state of the world, the two long-term employees of Gen-Core were talking about how the start-up-turned-Wall Street darling was

morphing into a soulless, corporatized version of its biggest competitors. However, as was the case when they had time to enjoy a long lunch off site, company gossip tended to permeate their natural discourse. But at work, it was a different story; there, they avoided hearsay and off-color jokes like the plague—unless they were dishing them to each other.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you about NASCAR Dean," said Maggie, who was feeling energized despite having spent the last four hours with Cameron.

"Who's NASCAR Dean?" he asked, noticing the time and the increase in the number of people leaving the concert.

"He's that senior director from marketing who seems to always have a reason to come down to my department so he can flirt with the accounts payable ladies," she replied. "You know who he is. He always wears those aviator sunglasses and races around in that bright red Mazda convertible."

Cameron shifted in his seat and grabbed two chilled water bottles out of a small cooler on the floor board behind the console. "Oh, *that* guy," he recalled brightly. "I've mapped

out at least a half dozen business processes in and around sales and marketing, but none of them required me to work with Dean. Let me guess: he's married and having an affair with one of your young staff members, yes?"

"Close," she replied playfully. "But I'll give you a B-plus, anyway. He's definitely married, but he's having an affair with one of the trainers at the company gym."

"I bet I can guess who it is," he teased. "Is it that tall blonde, Denise?"

"Bingo!" affirmed Maggie. She, too, took notice of the people walking toward their cars. "Shouldn't we get out and stand under the light pole?" she urged. "We wouldn't want to miss any of our cowgirls."

Cameron offered Maggie one of the water bottles. As she took it, he said, while looking out through the windshield, "We still have a little time left. The people you see out there now use the encore as their cue to leave and beat the traffic. I can't imagine any of the cowgirls skipping an encore performance, especially since most of the acts these days save their most

popular songs for that part of the show." Leaning toward his friend, Cameron gave her a conspiratorial look, asking, "Do you remember that potbelly jerk, Mark Matthews?"

"Of course," she replied. "Didn't he retire last year as the senior vice president of operations?"

Cameron opened his water bottle and took two quick sips. "Yeah, you know who I'm talking about. Anyway, I saw the jerk a few weeks ago digging through a bin of loose paperbacks at Costco. Since he never passed up an opportunity to berate me in front of others, I couldn't walk away; I *had* to say something to him. So I practically tiptoed to the other side of the bin while he focused on the books. I leaned forward and surprised him, saying, 'Well, look who's rooting around for discounts. Find any bargains, Mark? See that? You're nobody special—you're just like everybody else, shopping for deals at Costco.'"

"Oh my god, Cam, that doesn't sound like you at all," said Maggie. "What did he say?"

“It took him a second to recognize who was talking to him—then he just snorted at me. For emphasis, I reached into the bin and tossed a book toward him and said, ‘You know what, dude? Behind the big job title, you got away with being a colossal bully, but without it, you’re just a retired guy with a Gen-Core legacy I wouldn’t be proud of.’”

“You *really* said that?”

“I did,” replied Cameron, while checking the time on his iPhone.

“That wasn’t a smart move,” cautioned Maggie, setting her water bottle down on the center console. “He probably keeps in touch with some of the current big wigs. He hasn’t been gone for very long, you know.”

Cameron began gathering everything he needed to exchange contact information with the cowgirls who were able to resist the use of their phones. Deep down, his gut was telling him the chances were slim that any of them would show up, but he didn’t tell Maggie that. “You’re right; I might be screwed, but it felt so satisfying telling the little tyrant what I thought of

him. I might've gotten away with it because nothing has happened to me so far—and it's been almost a month."

"I don't know if I like this side of you, Cam," admitted Maggie. "What did he do to you to make you behave so aggressively?"

"You'll be shocked when I tell you," he promised, pulling the handle to open the driver door, "but tonight's not the night. Right now, we have some cowgirls to rope."

## "Yes, For Me, It *Is* a Losing Battle"

Although they were parked underneath the designated light pole, Cameron and Maggie knew they had to get out of the truck so the cowgirls could see them. It didn't take long for Maggie to retrieve a white cardigan from the passenger seat. As was typical for high desert climes, the warm afternoon had quickly retreated into a pleasantly cool evening as soon as the sun vacated the western sky. By late evening, it was simply too chilly for Maggie's bare shoulders.

“Now all you need are some sturdy white shoes to make it look like I’m traveling with my personal nurse,” teased Cameron.

“Yeah, you mean more like your *psychiatric* nurse,” she laughed. This was the Cam that Maggie grew fond of—the quick-witted guy who made her laugh and think at the same time, a best friend who made her feel seen and understood like no one else. “While we wait,” she continued, “let’s revisit a question I asked you before we went searching for cowgirls. You said the offenders—the ones posting personal stories, pictures, and videos on social media—are literally harming themselves, even more so than those *viewing* their posts. What other costs do the offenders incur besides losing the richness of the present moment and the boundary that separates private information from public disclosure?”

“Succinctly put,” gushed Cameron. “It sounds like you were actually listening to me.” He leaned against the light pole and positioned his yellow legal pad in front of him. The lifelong notetaker flipped the creased and dog-eared pages until he spied what he was searching for. “Found it,” he announced.

“Found what?” she asked while slipping her arm into the thin, button-up sweater.

“My list of the true costs of engaging social media,” he replied. “And by the way, I was only kidding about what I said. I know you listen to me, and I appreciate that about you.”

Maggie put her other arm into the sweater and wrapped it around herself. “Thanks for saying that. You’re the one person in my life who I believe sees the world accurately—and you talk about it with such conviction. I learn a lot from you, Cam.”

“Thank you, Maggie,” he said. “I wouldn’t share it with you if I didn’t think you could handle it. Seeing the world accurately is another way of saying someone is enlightened, which, believe it or not, is less of an advantage and more like a cross to bear. Basically, I’m deeply troubled by what I know about our supposed civilized society. The *only* way I can unburden my heavy heart is by helping others avoid the insidious traps set by big government and corporate America, whose sole purposes are to indoctrinate, enlist, and enslave.”

Maggie leaned against the front of Cameron's truck and folded her arms across her chest. Even in the dim light, he could see she wore a look of both concern and admiration. "You realize you're fighting a losing battle, don't you?" she cautioned.

"Yes, for me, it *is* a losing battle, but for some, it was a *deadly* battle," quipped Cameron. "History is loaded with enlightened men and women who wrote and vocalized their knowledge of the truth only to be persecuted by the status quo for shedding a sobering light on society's most inane fallacies—machinations that serve only a powerful few. Even the famous Galileo Galilei, widely considered the father of modern science for his groundbreaking contributions to astronomy and physics, was silenced by the Roman Catholic Church for publishing scientific facts about our solar system that were contrary to scripture. He spent the last years of his life under house arrest, forced to recant his discoveries or suffer the consequences of living out his remaining days in a jail cell."

"Really? I didn't know that," admitted Maggie. "I'm glad stuff like that doesn't happen in today's world."

Cameron removed his student ID from his pocket and draped it around his neck. “There’s where you’re wrong, Maggie. Look around. Where are the sharp minds, voices of reason, benevolent visionaries, humanitarians, and altruistic leaders, not to mention consumer protection agencies? It’s like they no longer exist, right? Wrong! Of course, they exist; they’re either snuffed out, bought out, threatened, extorted, or falsely accused of possessing child pornography or worse—or they’re maintaining a low profile, keeping quiet to avoid ruining their lives by appearing on the evil empire’s radar screen as a disruptive nonconformist. But what about me? With everything I’ve written and published about our corruption-led society, you’d think I’d be on the government’s Most Troublesome Slaves List, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, Cam! What’s the deal with that? You should’ve been hauled off by a bunch of FBI goons and thrown into a windowless van a long time ago,” goaded Maggie. She knew when not to stand between her friend and his fact-filled rants. Plus, she found his overall passion attractive, especially since it was directed toward trying to make the world a better place.

Cameron regained his momentum and continued to disclose more about the motivations behind his thesis, which aimed to discredit the use of social media. “I’m not claiming to be as aware or prophetic as George Orwell or Aldous Huxley, but I share a similar perspective with these and other authors. I can feel it in my bones, Maggie. The only difference between them and me is that I’m not famous, nor will I ever be—not since my only hope of being heard relies on people reading, an activity I rarely witness anymore. So, of course, I opened up a bunch of social media accounts and started a blog to reach people through their phones. That’s when I discovered the truth behind the big internet and social media machines. I had almost 10,000 followers across six platforms, yet I watched my momentum come to a screeching halt. The powers that be don’t have to threaten me with jail time or a date with the firing squad; they simply stopped sharing my content. Now, my cautionary warnings languish underneath billions of posts promoting things like dog birthday parties, in-progress tattoo etchings, celebrity gossip, political lies, date night dinner tables, and fake wars.”

“I totally agree with what you’re saying,” interjected Maggie. “I’ve noticed the same things on my social media, too. 99% of

the posts are centered around hate, sex, violence, intolerance, and the never-ending parade of ads!"

Cameron stepped away from the light pole and resisted the urge to high five Maggie. "You absolutely get it; social media is bad for *everyone*, but I still need to address why it's even worse for the posting offender."

## "Listen to This"

Cameron gathered his clipboard in front of him, angling it to capture the light emanating from the top of the lamp post. With his free hand, he ran a finger down a list of costs associated with social media engagement, humming to himself. Maggie stood next to Cameron, keeping her sweater wrapped tightly around her. She looked at his bare arms and asked, "Aren't you cold?" "A little," he replied, without looking away from the yellow legal pad. "Do you want me to get your hoodie from the backseat?" she offered, taking a step toward the truck. "No, but thanks anyway. It isn't the same color as my shirt. I want the cowgirls to be able to recognize us, even from a distance."

Maggie repositioned herself next to Cameron and scanned the well-lit parking lot. “A lot of people are coming out now,” she announced. “Should we just stand here and wait?”

“That’s all we *can* do,” confirmed Cameron. “If we go looking for the cowgirls we spoke to, it’ll skew my data; they have to actively seek us out.”

“What if *none* of the cowgirls show up?” she asked. “Does that mean your experiment is a bust?”

Cameron turned his gaze to Maggie. He noticed how cute she looked standing next to him and how dedicated she was to helping him this evening. Like him, she hadn’t checked her phone since the restaurant, choosing to be locked in and present—a rarity in a society where inane multitasking is normalized and expected. “Not at all,” he replied. “No matter the outcome—five, two, or even zero cowgirls—I’ll still collect usable data from the experiment.”

“That makes sense,” she said, stepping away from Cameron to lean against the truck so she could look at him directly. “So, what are you reading on your clipboard? Is it your list of all

the costs associated with social media interaction?" At that moment, she could easily picture him as a college professor. Despite his age, Maggie felt he possessed a youthful energy—one that was based upon a belief that, if given the chance, he could make a real difference in the world around him.

"Listen to this," he began, glancing at his notes. "Besides abandoning the present moment and losing the ability to discern between what could and should not be disclosed publicly, offenders quickly become obedient to an algorithm that mathematically decides whether or not their posts will be seen by others, which entails creating and sharing content several times a day and interacting with other users via likes and comments. In other words, offenders must surrender much of their time, satisfying an equation in exchange for a fleeting moment of imagined significance."

"I don't doubt that for a second," chimed Maggie. "Based on what I've seen lately on social media, it's not difficult to imagine how much time and effort go into these elaborate photos and videos."

Cameron leaned forward, momentarily dropping the clipboard to his side. “Basically, the algorithm, created and finetuned by thousands of software engineers, preys upon the offender’s need for relevance, collecting and archiving every posted word, photo, video, like, comment, keystroke, and a litany of other seemingly innocuous minutiae from both the offenders and the viewers—all for the purpose of characterizing each and every user on the platform. The more the algorithm knows about you, the more predictable you become. It’s the user’s predictability that creates value for Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc., allowing them to sell access to you to any company willing to pay for it. Essentially, if you’re a regular user of social media, you’re accepting the same fate as a pair of bowling shoes at the local Bowl-a-Rama—anyone can rent you for a little while.”

Maggie laughed out loud and said, “Only you can come up with the weirdest analogies. They’re spot on—but they’re weird, Cam.” She turned to look at the entrance of the Ford Idaho Center. “Okay, they’re pouring out now,” she reported. “I’m seeing a lot of cowgirls, too.”

Cameron peered over her shoulder and noticed the dense crowd flowing away from the mouth of the venue. “Stand next to me, Maggie. That way, they’ll be sure to recognize us; plus, we’re lit up like two Christmas trees under this lamp post.”

They were both startled when a nearby SUV roared to life. “Look at all those people,” sighed Cameron, gesturing toward the vacating masses. “How many of them do you think came to tonight’s show just to acquire some photos and videos to post on their social media pages?”

“I have no idea,” replied Maggie. “You know I don’t like these kinds of questions, Cam. 10% maybe?”

Cameron’s gaze remained fixed on the dispersing crowd. “I think it’s a lot more than that,” he said. “I know because I’m guilty of having had that mindset, especially when I was biking throughout Idaho and the Pacific Northwest before I met you. I felt so motivated by the lure of an epic picture to post, featuring my bike in front of a waterfall, beside a serene river, or perched on a mountaintop. I wanted everyone to know where I traveled and how many miles I rode. Basically, I, too, got caught up in the social media show-and-tell game, feeding

my ego with likes and comments—the empty-calorie equivalent of tasteless rice cakes."

Maggie reached out for Cameron's student ID, which was hanging from his neck. She bent over and looked at it more closely. "Nice picture," she commented before letting go of it. "Oh, I know about your bike adventures, Cam. I remember how amazed and impressed I was seeing all your pictures and reading your trip reports. You rode like 30,000 miles on that one bike, right?"

"More like 50,000 miles—48,800 to be exact," he replied. "I have to admit that at least 25,000 of those miles were ridden solely to capture the perfect photo, aiming to prove to people who couldn't care less that I was living the dream, which shows how much my need for external validation influenced my passion for adventure cycling. That's why I think a lot of these concertgoers are here just for the opportunity to collect visual documentation of a pandering, curated life."

"So, what you're saying is that if the attendees didn't capture a photo or video, it's like the concert didn't even happen, right?" confirmed Maggie.

“Sadly, that’s true,” said Cameron. “You heard what some of the cowgirls said to us earlier tonight. They said something like, ‘I’m at a terrific concert dressed up with my friends—why wouldn’t we want a few pictures to preserve the moment?’ And do you remember what I told them? I said that those seemingly innocent pictures will no doubt end up on social media, making viewers feel worse about their own lives, thus adding to the general misery of a society rife with self-promotion. But, once again, the offending cowgirls hurt themselves more than the just-as-guilty viewers.”

## Conclusion

Cameron glanced at his 15-year-old wristwatch, a stainless steel Tissot he purchased aboard a cruise ship somewhere between Puerto Rico and St. Maarten. It was typical of him to keep anything if it worked and served its purpose reliably. “It’s 10:30,” he announced, knowing the probability of one or two cowgirls showing up was growing more unlikely with each passing minute. “Why don’t we give it another 15 or 20 minutes and call it a night, okay?”

“Okay. Sounds good,” replied Maggie as she reached into the truck. She pulled out Cameron’s dark gray hoodie and offered it to him. “Here, put this on, Cam. There’s no way they won’t recognize us—especially when half the cars are already gone. Plus, we’re the only ones standing around.”

Cameron took the zippered sweatshirt and quickly put it on over his polo shirt. While thanking his thoughtful friend, he adjusted his student ID so it was still visible across his chest. He relished the sudden warmth of the cotton-polyester fabric, noticing that a thin layer of white clouds had moved in, filtering the brightness of the nearly full moon and surrounding stars. The parking lot, once a quiet wasteland of ghosted vehicles in which Cameron and Maggie could hear themselves think, was now a cacophony of idling engines, inching toward exits manned by yellow-vested teenagers waving orange traffic wands like spasmodic conductors. Halogen, HID, and LED headlights flipped on indiscriminately with the same urgency as neighborhood porch lights in response to a disturbing noise.

“There’s no mystery anymore,” he blurted.

“What do you mean?” asked Maggie.

Cameron sighed with a weariness stemming more from his disdain for phone-centric lives than from the hours he spent waiting inside a parking lot for cowgirls who could resist the heroine-like addiction of social media. “With so many offenders uploading posts about their day-to-day activities, opinions, recommendations, likes, dislikes, jobs, side hustles, meals, workouts, hobbies, schools, family, friends, and significant others, it’s like the entire serendipitous nature of discovering others has been reduced to lazy, half-hearted finger swipes.”

Maggie took a small step away from Cameron; her eyes focused on something or someone in the distance. “I think I see a group of our cowgirls coming this way,” she whispered.

“Really?” said Cameron, trying hard not to act *too* surprised.

Maggie scrunched her face, squinting her eyes in the process. “Oh, wait. We didn’t talk to those girls,” she clarified. “Sorry, Cam.”

“It’s okay,” he offered, setting his clipboard on the hood of his truck. “It really is a lot to ask of these cowgirls, Maggie. Seriously, I’m not expecting any of them to show up. Most have been brainwashed into becoming unwitting foot soldiers for the evil empire, which, of course, seeks to maintain power and control over the masses by stripping them of anything of value—money, time, energy, attention, independent thought, etc.—and keeping them separated from nature, each other, and themselves. Social media, like any other propaganda source, is merely the latest tool through which the current overlords can distract, dumb down, manipulate, and exploit those who are willing to submit. As I mentioned before, it’s the same old scheme played out over the last 10,000 years—ruling classes stay on top by dividing the slaves in every possible way.”

“Do you think we can sit in the truck now?” she asked.

“Sure,” he replied, gathering his clipboard.

“I love listening to you,” she explained, “but my feet are killing me.” She hopped into the passenger seat, leaving the door wide open.

Cameron did the same thing on the other side of the truck and placed his clipboard on the center console. “I’m tired of standing, too,” he admitted. He leaned back in the seat and continued elucidating. “In the big picture, our country has shifted from a constitution that begins with “We the people” to a bastardized version driven by “I the person.” This slight but ominous rewrite is ruinous for 99.9% of the population—and the 0.1% accomplished much of it through social media. I can imagine the taskmasters of the evil empire sitting around a conference table asking themselves how they could better promote lies, make the working-class slaves distrust one another, corrupt their minds, and reduce ambition to pandering for validation from an imaginary audience. ‘I know!’ shouts one of the money-grubbers. ‘We put a phone in their hand and provide them with access to a multitude of addictive social media platforms!’”

Maggie listened intently while continuing to scan the emptying parking lot through the windshield and open doors. “Don’t think I’m not listening to you,” she said. “I’m just keeping an eye out for our cowgirls. I’m really interested in seeing if at least one of them could do what you asked.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” cautioned Cameron. “Remember, I’m not asking them to refrain from uploading a picture of themselves sitting behind the wheel of their car. You know the photo—the frowning face with the caption, ‘Mondays…ugh.’ I’m asking them to forego photos of themselves at an expensive event wearing party girl clothes and looking their best. Come on, Maggie. Do the math!”

“Oh my god. I’m definitely guilty of posting a few of those “Monday morning blues” pictures,” she laughed.

No matter his mood, Cameron always felt better hearing Maggie’s patented giggle. Despite knowing there was a small chance of seeing one of the cowgirls walk up to them, he was still disheartened. He realized his thesis would either prove life without social media was inherently better or that it’s impossible to break free from its powerful addictive grip.

“I think it would be pretty difficult to go cold turkey on social media,” admitted Maggie while picking up her purse and placing it in her lap. “I’m not on it often, but I like to see what’s going on with people I care about and keep up with current events. I used to read the newspaper while I drank my

morning coffee; now I scroll on my phone. It's been my routine for years. You said you don't miss it, but is that really true?"

"I missed it for the first three or four weeks," replied Cameron. "But after a while, the void was replaced by activities that enriched my life—without the need for applause or acknowledgment from anyone except those who I actually spend time with. There are many terrible costs associated with the use of social media, but there's also a price to pay for abandoning it, too. Now the world feels like a house party where everyone is high, drunk, or stoned, except I'm the only one who's completely sober—the only one not wearing a mask or self-medicating to avoid feeling the awful truths of a society whose leaders treat their constituents like crops to be harvested. What I *don't* miss are the Instagram posts from misguided young women promoting their OnlyFans page, LinkedIn posts from mid-level managers touting their promotions or job changes beginning with the words, "I'm pleased to announce," TikTok posts from users with cartoon avatars who upload videos of brawls at fast food restaurants like Burger King, and Facebook posts from people who actually believe they're a real-life Truman Burbank character

in their own self-aggrandizing version of the movie, *The Truman Show*."

Maggie burst out laughing. "Everything you said is totally true, and yet, when *you* say it, it sounds so freaking hilarious to me," she chimed. "Your take on life reminds me of comedians like Lewis Black, Jon Stewart, and the late George Carlin. It's almost 11 o'clock, and you can still rant like a champ! You've got to take your act on the road, Cam!"

"That's not the first time I've heard that," teased Cameron while closing the driver door.

"We're leaving?" asked Maggie, pulling her phone from her purse.

"Our work here is done," he decreed. "As I predicted, not a single cowgirl showed up. But that's usable data in and of itself." Cameron turned the key in the ignition, firing up his old truck. He buckled his seatbelt and looked at Maggie, waiting for her to get settled.

Maggie closed the passenger door and pulled her seatbelt across her lap. “Are you bummed?” she asked, doing her best to conceal her disappointment.

“Not at all,” he replied as he released the handbrake. “The data tells the story—not me.” Cameron repositioned the gear shift from PARK to DRIVE and rolled the truck across the near-empty parking lot toward a wide-open exit, where the traffic controllers gathered reflective cones from the street with their illuminated wands by their sides. He thought about how wonderful it was to have spent an entire evening with Maggie, wondering if their relationship would—”

“Seven texts and three missed calls from Monty!” blurted Maggie. “You won’t mind if I text him, will you?”

“No, of course not.”

As Cameron turned left onto Garrity Boulevard toward the interstate, the truck’s headlights scanned across the front of the Idaho Pizza Company, reminding him of their earlier dinner and the spirited conversation that went with it. He brought his right hand up to his face to smell it. It smelled like

Maggie's perfume—a combination of lilac, vanilla, and orange blossom.

"He wants to know when I'll be home," she reported.

"Tell him 20 minutes."

Just then, a light drizzle began to fall, drawing Cameron's eyes to the windshield. He looked at Maggie to see if she noticed the rain as well, thinking she, too, felt the irony of the timing. But she was looking down at her phone as she typed with her thumbs—her face bluish from the screen's glow. By the time they pulled onto the highway, the rain had picked up and began pelting the windshield, making Cameron turn on the wipers. Without a second thought to complicate his boldness, he placed the back of his right hand on the console between them with his palm facing up—the implication obvious and dangerous. Without moving her head, Maggie shifted her eyes to Cameron's waiting invitation. She stopped typing and placed her left hand in his. Automatically, their fingers interlaced. Neither of them said anything; they just listened to the drum of the wipers.

# About the Author

Chuck Trunks is a writer and artist who grew up in suburban Philadelphia. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from North Carolina State University, Chuck had a successful 19-year career in positions ranging from genetic engineer to software developer to business analyst at Amgen, Inc. in Thousand Oaks, California. During his tenure in the biotech industry, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. For inspiration, he bicycles, runs, and reads whatever he can get his hands on. *Mixed Messages* is Chuck's eleventh book.

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*It's Not Your Fault: But it Could Be*

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