



BETTER OFF

(Without Social Media)



Chuck Trunks

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 scooped 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.

The End