

Heart Appreciation



Stories of Gratitude

Chuck Trunks

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I found out early in life that good people bring you happiness while not-so-good people teach you lessons, but this book focuses on the great ones who give you memories.

In this collection of personal and lyrical short stories, you will learn how a nine-year-old girl, a pro football legend, a Fortune 500 CEO, a feisty old man, a country boy, a Puerto Rican logistics manager, a new hire from Santa Barbara, a college buddy, and a high school gym teacher taught me about dignity, compassion, loyalty, charisma, humility, selflessness, and so much more.

These nonfiction reflections combine elements of humor, poetry, essay, and memoir and serve as reminders that we are truly a result of what we learn from others. I extend my deepest appreciation and gratitude to everyone mentioned in this book as well as to those who will be honored in subsequent compilations.

This book is dedicated to those who chose to be my mother,
father, brother, sister, friend, and teacher.

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

—Chuck Trunks

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Preface

Webster defines gratitude as a feeling of appreciation or thanks while theoretical physicists have defined me as nothing more than 99.9999999% empty space with charged subatomic particles making up the infinitesimal remainder. Even more mind-blowing is that when I pass, nothing will die in my body at the nuclear level – it's just recycled to become part of a ladybug's wing, the peel of an orange, or a drop of rain from a storm cloud. Everything in my body can be accounted for and tethered to an atomic construct; yet, where is gratitude? And while we're contemplating this, where are loyalty, dignity, selflessness, compassion, and love?

From my early days of adulthood to today, I'm constantly shocked at what gets through my suspicious and sometimes callous exterior to move me to tears and soften my heart. These ten true stories are just a small fraction of those precious moments that humbled and enlightened me. The individuals written about and mentioned in this book may be quite diverse, but their lessons are timeless and pure, in all their forms, no matter who they emanate from.

I'm pretty sure it won't happen in my lifetime, but I'd like to think that science will discover a whole new set of subatomic particles – starting with the 'gratitron.' How else would any of this make sense?

Chapter 1: Sofia

This is a story about a 9-year-old who, in 2012, gave me an unforgettable lesson in finding dignity within a situation where most adults – including me – wouldn't know the first place to look for it. Sofia holds a special place in my heart for this cherished memory plus many others that made me a better person.

I had to smile and shake my head when I saw her come out of the downstairs storage closet that secured the bikes belonging to her and her younger brother from the sketchy souls that shuffled up and down the alley behind their house. Sofia was pushing hers across the parking lot toward me as I waited to check the tires and add air if they needed it.

Unbelievable, I thought to myself, that even 9-year-old girls know they MUST be color coordinated before leaving the house! Her bike was a total girl bike that looked like it was assembled by Malibu Barbie at the My Little Pony factory just as a pink and white glitter bomb went off. Her outfit, complete with a new jacket that her dad bought for her, matched not only her bike but her helmet and leggings as well. Were we

going for a Sunday morning ride through beachfront neighborhoods in Ventura or to a photoshoot for the Good and Plenty candy company down in Hollywood? Even her 7-year-old brother, Cole, who normally is focused on everything except the here and now, couldn't ignore THAT much pink.

Once their bikes were ready for the morning ride to find adventure and discovery in the still-asleep seaside community, the kids waved goodbye to their mother who watched us from the upstairs deck while we took off down the alley toward the bridge that led to the beach. Still holding her coffee cup in two hands to stave off the morning chill, little did she know that her daughter was pedaling toward the biggest humiliation of her young life.

On Our Way

The bridge, being just wide enough for our bikes, was the quickest and safest route since railroad tracks and the 101 Freeway stood between the house and the beach. Greeting us on the other side was the city's number one landmark – the Ventura Pier. Originally built in 1872, it's best known for being one of the oldest and longest piers in the state, providing

a terrific fishing venue for local anglers and, most importantly, for serving as the starting point for most of our riding escapades.

After exiting the bridge and crossing the road that parallels the beach, we picked up the near-vacant bike path which took us under the pier. While Sofia and Cole basked in the sensation of riding through a darkened tunnel, I got the heebie-jeebies from spotting strung-out homeless dudes with questionable intentions in the shadows of the numerous pilings. Once we emerged from under the pier together, I could feel my anxiety downgrade to a more manageable nervousness brought on by not being able to distinguish between those who were surfers, addicts, or homeless.

With the pier behind us and the foggy marine layer hiding the calmness of the ocean from us, Sofia and Cole assumed a riding arrangement that fit their personalities perfectly. She liked to be in front calling the shots while the little ‘safety first’ guy preferred to be behind me. Sometimes, when I looked back, I’d see him riding like a crazy person, almost like he was fantasizing that he was sprinting to the finish line in a Tour de France stage race – yet he wasn’t going any faster than normal.

I later learned that it meant he was in his happy place. From then on, I liked seeing his flailing gyrations on the bike – it put me in MY happy place, too.

His sister, on the other hand, was bold and intentional in the way she led our little caravan of bikes along the path that marked the boundary between the rising sand dunes and the day-use area of San Buenaventura State Park. She was good at circumventing the sparse and sporadic joggers and dog walkers, judiciously calling out, “On your left!” when necessary.

Pierpont

As the bike path ended and transitioned onto Pierpont Boulevard, I called out to Sofia, “You know what to do, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know,” she replied.

She knew this was in reference to what I had taught her in regards to riding safely amongst cars and looking out for those who followed her. Even though the street had little traffic –

especially on Sunday mornings – I still felt overly protective and vigilant to return these two to their mother in the same condition they were in when we rode off earlier.

If you didn't notice the fresh-faced, pink and white captain of our bike parade or the 7-year-old having what looked to be an epileptic seizure pulling up the rear, you certainly would hear us. Since the two-mile-long road has so many cross streets, I allowed Sofia to roll through the stop signs if she didn't see any cars coming and to call out, "Clear!" to let the next rider know it was safe to follow her. Then, in proper rider etiquette, I did the same thing to let her brother know it was safe to follow me through the intersection. So, if you happened to be out for a walk on Pierpont Boulevard on one of those Sunday mornings, your thoughts would've been rudely interrupted with shouts of "Clear!" from not just two riders – but all three. Yes, Cole, too, had to call out, "Clear!" to feel included in the safety procedure – or, perhaps it was to warn the imaginary bikers that were neck and neck with him as they wildly approached the finish line under the Arc de Triomphe.

I'm certainly not qualified to label much of anything, let alone what is or isn't an iconic surf town; but this section of Ventura,

known as ‘The Pierpont,’ looked and felt like the old stomping grounds of generational wave riders. While continuing down Pierpont Boulevard toward Marina Park, which I assumed was Sofia’s destination for us, we passed bungalow after bungalow – some cute and tidy, others dilapidated and ramshackle.

It wasn’t long before we arrived at the main cross street, Seaward Avenue, which meant that the kids would, of course, automatically point out and remind me of the frozen yogurt place on the right. “Look! It’s the frozen yogurt place, and I LOVE frozen yogurt!” shouted Sofia. Seeing people inside the shop at this hour of the morning, I wasn’t surprised; as the only dispensary of frozen yogurt near the beach of a destination town, the place seemed to be open 24/7 during the summer months.

With only about a mile to go along the palm tree lined street, I watched Sofia directing us to the park. She was tall for her age with shoulder length brown hair that framed a pretty olive complected face that could communicate the simple and complex with just her brown eyes. I often thought she’d grow up to look like actress, Mariska Hargitay of *Law & Order* fame.

Sofia was the type of kid whose mood could affect whoever was around her. If she laughed, it would make you laugh. If she laughed harder, *you* would laugh harder. And, if she cried, it made your heart ache for her. She'd show flashes of brilliance, depth, and maturity along with an equal number of reminders that she was still a fourth grader. All in all, she was a pretty cool little kid – *way* cooler than I was at that tender age.

Marina Park

Upon reaching Marina Park, I was disappointed to see the parking lot already full of cars because I figured Sofia wanted to stop and ride the mini zip line in the adjacent playground without having to wait in line. As we approached the playground, I was surprised to see that it was empty. Yet, instead of making a beeline toward the pirate ship structure that served as the zip line launch pad, Sofia kept riding, opting instead for the foot path that separated the park from the sandy bluffs and terminated at the mouth of the Ventura Harbor. From our higher vantage point, we could see the ocean since the marine layer was beginning to lift; and as suspected, it was calm.

It wasn't until after Sofia retraced our route back to the playground and rode toward the main park area that I realized why there were so many cars in the parking lot. A local 5K race had just wrapped up, leaving a large crowd of about 100 finishers congregating on the south side of the bike path. As we approached the crowd, I could see most were chatting with one another while clutching a banana or bagel in one hand and a paper coffee cup in the other. I could also see that the section of bike path nearest the crowd was submerged under water making me call out to Sofia, "You see that?"

"Yeah. I'll go around it," she replied back. And with that, our bike leader picked up her pace.

Disaster

It made sense. The extra speed would carry her through the heavy, wet grass on the north side of the bike path as well as allow her to return to it once safely past the flooded section. Her brother and I continued to follow but her sudden burst of acceleration put a little more distance between us. Just as I was turning around to see where Cole was, IT happened. Sofia went down midway through the planned detour; her bike fell

to the left while she fell to the right. For a split second, both looked to have disappeared into the soggy ground. As I got closer, I quickly realized that the puddle on the grass that Sofia was trying to ride through was actually a disguise for a rather large and surprisingly deep mud hole – she had no chance.

My instinct was to go to her, but her expression made me stop, straddle my bike, and survey the situation. She was kneeling in deep mud that had the consistency of watery pea soup. She was literally covered from head to toe in the stuff. The happy bubblegum shades of her bike and outfit were immediately replaced with the color of dirt.

While she began to stand up, I saw that she was soaking wet. I remember muttering to myself, “Oh my god!” when mud oozed out of her helmet and down her face. Adding to the already chaotic scene were five or so runners from the crowd extending their hands and calling to her. When she lifted her head, I saw her searching for me amidst the pandemonium. Her face was wet with mud but there were no tears, and from what I could tell, she looked unhurt.

When her eyes met mine, they spoke to me loud and clear,

“What do I do now?” Right away, I knew I needed to get her away from the crowd of gawking onlookers. As I turned to find a place for us, I noticed that Cole was right beside me, straddling his little bike like me and assessing the carnage with noticeable concern for his sister. I quickly spotted a bench about 30 yards away and turned back to Sofia and pointed to it. Following an almost imperceptible nod from her, I watched her stand up, retrieve her bike, and turn it around toward the direction of the bench.

Then, she shocked me. While pushing her bike out of the mud pit, she straightened her back, lifted her chin and ignored more than a dozen adults saying things like, “Are you all right?” “Take my hand,” and “You poor thing!” She looked more like an elegant, unflappable gymnast walking to her starting position on the floor exercise than a kid exiting a hole of muddy goop.

As Cole and I turned our bikes around, I kept watching Sofia. She never once looked at anyone or anything while pushing her bike. Her resolute expression and determined eyes focused only on the bench as if there was a mantra playing over and over again in her mind that repeated, “Get to the bench. Get to

the bench.” Cole and I arrived first and quickly leaned our bikes on the back side of it before taking a seat to wait for Sofia to reach us.

Reaction

Sofia wasn't too far behind us; yet I still felt like she needed the space. Upon approaching, she gently laid her muddy bike down in the grass and turned toward me and her brother. Within seconds, I watched the carefully assigned look of stoic indifference melt from her face, washed away by tears that trickled at first – then burst from her after having been held back for far too long. She sat next to me and immediately pressed her face into my side and sobbed in a way that I will never, ever forget.

For the next five minutes or so, she cried and cried, her body shaking and heaving as she let it all out. With my arm around her, holding her close, I could feel the shock, the shame, the humiliation, the disbelief that she felt in those agonizing seconds in the mud hole, making my heart explode into a thousand pieces for her. All I could think to myself was, *She waited until she got to the bench to let it out. Un-freaking-*

believable.

When her convulsing slowed to a more manageable whimper, she sat up and wiped her face with her jacket sleeve which only made things worse. I got up, opened my backpack, and fished out my red bandana. While removing the tear-streaked dirt from her face, I looked at her and then her brother and asked, “Do you think it’s too early for frozen yogurt?” And just like that, you would’ve thought nothing had happened.

Cole’s quiet concern and Sofia’s waning state of incredulousness quickly vaporized under shouts of, “Yesss!” and the busyness of getting back on their bikes.

Surf N’ Yogurt

As we transitioned back onto Pierpont Boulevard from Marina Park to ride to Surf N’ Yogurt, the kids automatically positioned themselves like they always did; but this time I asked Cole to ride in front of me, alongside his sister. This was a big no-no on any other Sunday but given the circumstances and the fact that there was virtually no traffic, I wasn’t worried. Besides, I needed a private moment – like Sofia, I

had held back my tears for far too long.

The waterworks came easy as I watched the two of them riding side by side – Cole looking like he was again suffering from uncontrollable muscle spasms while his sister, mud stains and all, looked serene and happy. More tears came as I recalled how this 9-year-old could put her devastation on hold until she was away from the horde of strangers that bore witness to the most humiliating moment of her young life.

Lost in my own thoughts, I didn't notice that Sofia had slowed down to ride next to me. When I turned to her, she was already looking up at me when she said, "What's wrong?"

In that moment, that sweet moment, I remember telling her the truth. "You made my heart explode," I said. It must've been the right thing to say because her eyes and smile softened into an expression that told me she understood what I meant by that.

And with that, I watched her pedal ahead, past her brother, and just before making the left into the parking lot of Surf N' Yogurt, she shouted, "Clear!"

Sofia will turn 18 this summer. I lost touch with her when she was 11. I can only hope that she will come across this deserved tribute and know that she made a long-lasting impact on my life that still pays dividends to this very day.

Chapter 2: Vince

How does a person get Mark Wahlberg to play the lead role in a Disney-made football movie about their life in the NFL when it lasted less than three years? How does that person become a beloved Philadelphian sports legend in a city where even Santa is regularly booed at Eagles games? And, how does that person get me to include them in my ‘Stories of Gratitude’ lineup? The answer to those questions is why I decided to write this story about Vincent Papale – a man who, in 2005, taught me the difference between charm and charisma.

“Oh god,” I groaned as I made my way down the concourse toward my gate, “What was I thinking?” Normally, I wouldn’t leave the well-heeled and calming tranquility of United’s Red Carpet Club until the oversized monitor above the complimentary newspapers, organic coffee, and fresh-cut fruit flashed, *NOW BOARDING*. Yet, there I was – walking straight toward the only gate in this section of Terminal B where a standing-room-only crowd of early morning travelers anxiously gathered. They were busy collecting their personal belongings mere seconds after seeing the doors open to the

jetway by gate attendants who moved and spoke half as fast as the mob of overcaffeinated ticket holders bound for Philadelphia.

By finding a seat in the adjacent gate area that faced where Flight 1509 would depart LAX at 7:05, I was far enough to avoid eye contact with my fellow travelers but close enough to hear when first-class passengers could board. “Damn. Full flight,” I muttered to myself while involuntarily rubbing the worn buffalo leather of my messenger bag which was resting on my lap – a nervous habit when my anxiety would flare up. Besides the satisfying feel of it, the weight of my bag was comforting as well since it was stocked with work and a couple of books: *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell and Will Shortz’s *50 New York Times Thursday Crossword Puzzles*. *PLENTY to keep me busy throughout the six-hour non-stop from Los Angeles to Philadelphia*, I reminded myself just as raucous laughter erupted from the middle of the crowd waiting to board Flight 1509. *What the hell?* Little did I know then that the cause of all that ruckus would be the reason I’d get none of my work done, no chapters read in my book, and no headway on puzzle no. 17 – in fact, I wouldn’t even open my bag until I got to my hotel room later that afternoon in Center

City, Philadelphia.

Center of Attention

From my vantage point, I could see that I overlooked the crowd within the crowd. Twenty or so people had gathered around something or someone. The laughter and energy emanating from the group annoyed me because it was too happy and enthusiastic for this time of day, and it contrasted heavily with what I was seeing on the other side of the 10-foot reinforced plate glass windows directly behind the spirited cluster. Morning mist was still hovering over the tarmac, and the long arms of the sun's first rays were just beginning to crest the horizon.

With daybreak illuminating the gate area and jittery people needing to move constantly, I was able to catch glimpses of the center of their attention. From the way-too-dark tan, way-too-white teeth, and longish dark hair that Scott Baio would've rocked in the early '90s, I pegged this guy as a former soap opera actor killed off for showing signs of aging. By the way these suck ups were hanging on every word of this perpetually smiling Hollywood type, I swore to myself that if he extended

his hand with anything resembling food – they would’ve eaten out of it.

“Big deal,” I huffed under my breath. Having lived in Southern California for over fifteen years, I was bored with celebrity sightings; plus, I had already encountered enough heavyweights to last a lifetime. I was propositioned by Johnny Mathis at the Beverly Center Mall, watched a Dodger game with Jamie Lee Curtis, exchanged pleasantries with Ringo Starr in Santa Monica and nervously chatted with Farrah Fawcett before getting LASIK eye surgery on the same day in West Hollywood. At that point I would’ve snapped, “Get your own damn newspaper!” if Tom Hanks asked for the sports section from my *USA Today*.

“Finally,” I sighed to myself when the gate attendant announced that first-class passengers were welcome to board. Normally, I liked strutting up to the jetway as if I was some corporate big shot, fantasizing that those destined for the coach cabin couldn’t detect my lower-middle-class upbringing in a West Philadelphia suburb, praying my anxiety was just as invisible. But I changed my mind when I saw the Mediterranean version of Fabio get up to board the plane. “Oh,

that's just perfect," I griped while remaining seated and making up my mind to board as late as possible to avoid the hubbub that surrounded this guy like the cloud of dust that followed Charles Shultz's Pig Pen.

By the time the last passengers had gulped down the remaining sips of their tepid, venti-sized Starbucks coffees and began heading down the jetway, I made my way to the gate and followed them after a less than enthused gate attendant scanned my ticket. *What are the chances?* I asked myself when thinking about the odds of finding an empty seat next to a dude who could've been Sylvester Stallone's stunt double in the last Rocky movie. *It's a big plane so the first-class cabin has to be big, too, right?* But as soon as I made that right turn into the cabin, I remembered that the curvature of space-time hated me and was hellbent on being as uncooperative as possible because, OF COURSE, there was an empty window seat right next to Mr. Tanning Bed himself. "Un-freaking-believable," I sighed while waiting for the flight attendant to refill mimosa glasses before I could get to my seat.

The momentary delay gave me a chance to look at this guy more closely. He was on the phone and looked to be talking to

someone he cared about because his smile was different than the smile I saw out in the gate. It was warmer and made his eyes look kinder. There was something oddly familiar about him, but I couldn't put my finger on it. When he saw me approach, he was quick to say, "Hold on a sec, honey," into the phone so he could get up and let me get to my seat.

"How you doin'?" he asked as I scooted by.

"Good morning. Thanks," I replied while thinking, *That's a pretty thick Philly accent.*

And when he added, "Hi. I'm Vince," before going back to his phone conversation just as I was noticing a folder tucked into his seatback pocket that had the Philadelphia Eagles' logo on it, I felt my whole body go numb for a few seconds. Maybe I passed out. In either case, in that killer moment, I forgot that the curvature of space-time throws me a bone every once in a while, because it just put me next to Vince-freaking-Papale!

Football

Like a lot of boys growing up in the 1970s, sports not only served as a way to establish the pecking order in the recess yard, it doubled as a safe enough topic through which actual dialog could happen between you and your dad. Instead of one-sided directives that typically resulted in yardwork assignments, easy exchanges about pitch selection and play calls allowed fathers and sons to get to know one another. But in my case, it also gave me a chance to get on his good side before the dozen or so Budweiser beers kicked in, changing him into somebody I no longer recognized – and feared.

It was anyone's guess as to which Saturday college football games were on our 21-inch color Zenith in the den, but a given that it was tuned into Eagles games every Sunday. As an 11-year-old, I remember watching the games with my dad; however, those were afternoons spent in relative silence since he stopped talking to me after I decided to quit playing football for St. Katherine's a month earlier. Even at that age, I knew he'd never forgive me since there was no way of convincing a guy who played the game in the army and tried out for the Los Angeles Rams that I didn't have it in me. It wasn't a hard

decision since I feared further head trauma, lacked any semblance of a killer instinct, and accepted my place as an unsolvable enigma to a father who didn't like puzzles.

Although the extra free time allowed me to draw more and go on longer walks to think, I still loved watching the Eagles play every Sunday. And if you were watching the game with us in our den back in the fall of 1975, you would've noticed that I wasn't trying to talk to my dad either – if I did, I would've told him, “I hate the Rams.”

Bruce Jenner

Could there be a better place to be living in the summer of 1976? I don't think so – not during a Bicentennial year in our nation's first capital. For this 12-year-old, it was nothing less than a magical summer that began with Bruce Jenner rewriting the ultimate ‘hometown boy makes good’ story by winning the decathlon at the Montreal Summer Olympics after finishing tenth four years earlier in Munich. He was my hero back then; but not because of the gold medal or his coronation as a national treasure through cereal box sales – he was relatable. Having learned that he sold insurance at night while

training on his own, without a coach, for six to eight hours every single day for four years after the 1972 Summer Olympic Games, I felt tremendously inspired and less lonely for sharing the same mindset as this 26-year-old American sports legend. Like Bruce, I already knew that I couldn't rely on anyone but myself.

I remember clambering toward the Zenith in the den and the 13-inch black and white TV in the kitchen whenever Bruce was being interviewed. He had movie star good looks, used self-deprecating humor to extend his appeal to those who didn't even like sports, and made toothpaste advertising execs drool every time he flashed that million-dollar smile. And he appeared to lack the unseemly opportunistic behavior that typically emerged from those who knew how to capitalize when the spotlight shines brightest. He was the quintessential 'aww shucks' kind of guy, and I wanted to be just like him – that is – up until first-year Eagles' coach, Dick Vermeil, finalized the team roster two months later.

Coach Vermeil

I'm pretty sure I spit out some of my Wheaties when I heard

the announcement on the kitchen radio that the Eagles would have a new head coach to open the 1976 NFL season. Normally, that wouldn't be news worth wasting perfectly good cereal over since the Eagles were like a rudderless boat having not made the playoffs since 1960, but this latest bum was a rookie coach straight off the beach from Southern California with no experience working with pros. And he was *still* in his 30s! *C'mon Eagles!* I remember thinking, *Grizzled, feisty old men make the best coaches – NOT surfer dudes who smell like Coppertone!*

Although Dick Vermeil's coaching experience at a preeminent football school like UCLA lasted only two seasons, he made the best of it by upsetting the undisputed number one college football team in the nation, Ohio State University, at the 1976 Rose Bowl. It was, without a doubt, a Cinderella story; but did it warrant a one-way ticket to "The City of Brotherly Love?" "I'm not worried," I assured myself between mouthfuls of crunchy wheat flakes. That's because the Eagles' fanbase, already legendary in its own right for calling out frauds and anything less than a hundred and ten percent effort, would set things right should Coach Vermeil be another NFL charlatan. But by the time he arrived at Veterans Stadium in South

Philadelphia, it was clear the new coach did his homework.

Open Tryouts

Fans, poised to shred the first-year coach like the beef that went into their world-famous cheesesteaks, didn't know what hit them when Coach Vermeil turned out to be a marketing genius. Welcoming all comers to a citywide open tryout for the Eagles' training camp that summer was so brilliant, I'd put it up there with the guy who started selling soft-serve ice cream in plastic mini-Eagles' helmets out of the stadium's concession stands a few years earlier. What better way to get the fans off your back than by saying, "Okay, big mouths – let's see what YOU got!"

A marketing gimmick that put fans out on the AstroTurf under bright sunlight at Veterans Stadium to sprint, throw, catch, and kick footballs in front of team coaches was nothing short of a cavalcade of early Christmas presents for local television and radio broadcasters since Vermeil's ploy oozed a plethora of human-interest stories. Of course, guys showing up in homemade uniforms that did little to hide years of beer and pizza inhalation made for lighthearted ways to end sports

report segments, but there were those who were stone cold bent on getting an invitation to the team's training camp.

Receiving personal invites to try out in front of Coach Vermeil were a few local players from the recently disbanded Philadelphia Bell franchise from the World Football League. One of those players was an athletic 30-year-old wide receiver, Vince Papale, who, without the benefit of ever playing college football, impressed the first-year coach so much with his enthusiasm and 4.5 time in the 40-yard dash that he received the one *and only* coveted walk-on invitation to the Eagles' training camp that summer.

Papale Mania

Local radio and television broadcasts shifted to reporting on the Eagles' training camp which not only fueled anticipation for opening day, it created an ever-increasing fascination with a six foot two, two-hundred-pound local athlete who grew up just twelve miles away from Veterans Stadium. Reporters were, of course, gushing about Vince Papale.

As was the case in my Bruce Jenner addiction, my 12-year-old

eyes and ears soon became junkies for camp updates about the former school teacher who used to pour drinks in Prospect Park. Besides anyone with half decent eyesight and a beating heart, television cameras LOVED Papale. When he was wasn't smiling, he looked like the muscle of an organized crime family who you'd never want to do business with on the streets of South Philly. But when he did smile, you wouldn't hesitate asking him to watch your things while you skedaddled to the restroom. I may have been a few weeks shy of officially being a seventh grader, but I recognized that his unfolding story was a blueprint on how to get anywhere in life – and I wanted to be just like him.

When the news of Vince Papale making the Eagles' team roster was announced, I have to admit that I was a little skeptical. What team owner *wouldn't* want this guy on their team? Heck, his smile and local roots alone would sell game tickets. But when I heard that his own teammates embraced him *and* voted him in as their special-teams captain, I not only knew he was the REAL DEAL, it was only a matter of time before he showed up on my Wheaties box.

Rocky

Like the laughable lightsaber duel between Luke and Darth Vader in the first *Star Wars*, every time I come across old scenes from the first *Rocky* movie, I cringe at the overacting, the lame stereotypes, and the formulaic predictability. But before I'm unceremoniously tossed into a dumpster fire like a wet bag of laundry for saying anything blasphemous against the Oscar-winning picture that romanticized the city's skyline and culture, keep in mind that I watched the last twenty minutes of the film *standing* on my seat like everybody else in the sold-out theater, all of us innocently cheering on Rocky Balboa during the final boxing sequence. And, because it debuted midway through the Eagles' first regular season under Vermeil in 1976, it was like being handed a stick of freshly-spun cotton candy when you're already hopped up on a sugar high that began six months earlier.

Feeling safe from ridicule within the shroud of darkness in the crowded theater, I allowed my mouth to hang open for most of the movie. I can still remember thinking, *Umm, like am I the only one here noticing the elephant in the room?* The movie reeks of similarity between the film's iconic character

and the Eagles' most popular player, Vince Papale. When the movie portrays Rocky as a down-on-his-luck Italian-American from a South Philly neighborhood whose anything-but-lucrative boxing career forces him to be a collector for the local loan shark, I was like, *Umm, hello? Anybody home?* And when Rocky is given an unlikely golden opportunity to stun the world in his hometown of Philadelphia, I was practically walking up and down the aisle looking for anybody else who was putting two and two together.

Confirming that it's possible for fiction and reality to coalesce into déjà vu, scenes of television reporters interviewing the humble hometown hero on the streets of South Philly while local fans shouted, "Go Rocky!" only solidified my conspiracy theory that Vince Papale *was* Rocky Balboa – BEFORE Rocky Balboa!

Varsity Banquets

Who knew that my high school's athletic department had enough pull to have Eagles icons, Dick Vermeil AND Vince Papale, come speak at its annual varsity banquets in 1979 and 1981, respectively? Since I was only a freshman on the boys'

gymnastics team, I had no idea that receiving a varsity letter meant I'd be invited to the year-end banquet, the Oscars of sports recognition for high school boys in the '70s. Even back then, I needed something to feel in my hands to soothe the intimidation I felt being honored amongst classmates and upperclassmen who found more recognizable success without wearing tights on the football field, basketball court, and baseball diamond.

C'mon, Charlie, I remember thinking to myself while unknowingly rubbing the textured front cover of the banquet's program, *You can do it!* Having vainly tucked away my Coke-bottle glasses earlier, I almost missed seeing Coach Vermeil break away from who looked to be the school's athletic director and head football coach, George Corner. "Now's my chance!" I whispered. It was perfect timing because everybody was starting to take their seats and the Eagles' coach looked to be heading to the restroom.

Being shy *and* good at math, I used algebra for the first and last time in my life to mentally calculate the most private interception point along the coach's anticipated trajectory. Swift action had me standing toe to toe with the famous coach

at the back of the school's cafeteria with nobody around. I desperately wanted his autograph on my program and to ask him about Vince Papale.

“Umm, excuse me Coach Vermeil?” I said, “Would you please sign my program?”

“Sure. Do you have a pen?” replied the affable coach.

Oh my god! You idiot! No pen! Good at math yet zero common sense! I thought while imagining myself walking face first into a pole. “Oh, gosh. I don't,” I stammered.

“Find me later and bring a pen,” he said while most likely imagining me as a special needs student who backed into a varsity letter for being a co-manager of the tennis team.

By the time Vince Papale came to the varsity banquet a couple of years later, I not only had a pen, I had a backup pen. Failure to get his signature on my program was simply not an option. After all, I was a junior going to my third consecutive “big show.” I felt savvier about the ways of the world; plus, I still had that bitter taste in my mouth when I went home without

Coach Vermeil's signature *or* his take on what it was like coaching the "Italian Stallion."

From my sniper position in the back of the school cafeteria, he looked bigger than life amongst the small group of adults from the athletic department who had gathered around him before the introductions were to begin. Unlike me, he seemed comfortable with being the center of attention and appeared to be doing most of the listening. But when he did address them, I noticed that he smiled while he spoke and needed to use his hands and arms as if he was adding exclamation points in midair. *Sweet*, I thought as I watched him disengage from the cluster of grown men whose collective body language betrayed their inner boys. As predicted over nights of tossing and turning, he was headed toward where I was standing. "Yep. You called it, Charlie," I whispered as I readied my pens and program.

Watching him stride toward me made me feel sorry for the unfortunate Dallas Cowboy or New York Giant who had virtually no chance of gaining yardage after catching an Eagles punt or kickoff. He looked exactly like he did on TV but was wider than I thought which made me wonder what our

refrigerator at home would look like if we put a sport coat around it. As he got closer, I could feel my nerve draining out of me as if I was the one who needed the restroom.

“Hi,” I said while doing that little pathetic wave you do when you don’t know what else to do.

“How you doin’?” he asked as he cruised by me and walked into the restroom.

“Oh my god! Not again!” I lamented while being reminded of my genetic flaw that caused me to freeze up in pressure situations like approaching pretty girls or speaking in front of the class. “Oh no! *Not* this time,” I said to myself and headed in after him.

Not in my wildest, therapy-inducing nightmares could I have imagined asking the posterior of Vince Papale for his autograph while he was relieving himself in the boys’ restroom around the corner from the cafeteria where I ate lunch most days.

“Huh? What? Okay. Hold on a sec,” he said with only a hint

of annoyance.

“I couldn’t top this worst-case scenario even if I tried,” I groaned to myself while deciding it would be best to wait for him outside.

“Okay, what’s your name?” he asked while leaving the restroom and stepping into the corridor.

“Charlie,” I told him.

“What did you get your varsity letter in?”

“Gymnastics,” I answered.

“That’s a tough sport,” he said while signing my program and handing it back to me along with my pen. “Next time, wait until someone comes out of the restroom to ask for an autograph.”

“Sorry. I can’t believe I did that. Thanks, Mr. Papale!”

For a few awesome seconds, we walked side by side down the

corridor back toward the cafeteria where the lunch tables masqueraded as dinner tables under the maroon tablecloths. Before he headed up to the dais to join the rest of the illuminati to begin the banquet's agenda, he turned to me and said, "Enjoy the evening."

I just beamed and fantasized about having the guts to tell him that I had watched, read, and reread every story about him that appeared on Channel 6's Action News and in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ever since he stunned the city, the NFL, the entire sports world, and anyone who ever dared to follow their dream. Instead, I managed a polite, "You too!" and took my seat in the back with my coach and gymnastics teammates.

As the introductions began in earnest with half of the lights turned off to aid the illusion that we were all sitting in a real banquet hall and not a high school cafeteria, I could barely see my signed program that rested on my lap. And when the guest of honor was being introduced, I remember focusing on every word, not realizing that two of my fingers were rubbing the program cover. Under them, it read, "To Charlie . . .Vince Papale."

Takeoff

“I know. I can’t wait to see you, too,” he cooed into the phone. “Let me talk to the kids.” I felt guilty listening in on Vince Papale’s private conversation but, in my defense, it wasn’t like I could just get up and give him space; plus, I didn’t want to miss out on the much-needed mimosa that was headed my way.

“Mimosa, sir?” asked the 30-something flight attendant while fighting the urge to look at my seatmate instead of me.

After answering, “Yes, I would,” we almost fumbled the drink in Vince’s lap since she wasn’t the only one having a hard time maintaining eye contact.

My guess was that she didn’t even know who he was, but it didn’t matter. Vince Papale is one of those rare people who will make you ask your friend, “Who’s that guy? Is he famous?” when you see him coming down the escalator to baggage claim or pushing a shopping cart in the dog food aisle at Costco in flipflops. Listening to him talk to his family and tell his wife, “Okay, hon. We’re about to take off. I can’t wait

to see you and the kids. I love you,” I learned that Vince Papale is a decent guy and that I needed to make an addition to the blueprint of success he unfolded for me and others almost thirty years earlier. I needed to drop a great big heart into the middle of it.

“Flight attendants prepare for takeoff,” announced the captain in *that* voice that could only emanate from an airbus pilot or meditation guru. Despite it being as smooth as a rich cup of coffee, it still made me jump and raise my seatback to the upright position like a well-trained Pavlovian dog. Vince lifted and secured his tray table while we both waited for the flight attendant to retrieve our empty glasses.

“We met before,” I blurted out like I was suffering from Tourette syndrome.

“No kidding. Really? What’s your name?” he asked.

“Chuck. It was at my high school varsity banquet in Philadelphia like twenty-five years ago, and I asked for your autograph while you were still in the restroom,” I told him as if I was admitting my sins to the monsignor in a confessional

back at St. Katherine's.

He just laughed and replied, "Don't worry about it. I've been asked in worse places."

I wanted to say, "Really? Like where?" but the engines were too loud as the plane picked up speed down the runway. Soon, we'd be above the clouds – the only place that could possibly match how I was feeling inside.

Cloud Nine

"So, do you still live in Philly?" he asked once the plane started leveling off.

"No, I live in Los Angeles. Just heading back to attend a conference in Center City. How about you?"

"Yeah, I still live there," he replied.

I wanted to say, "Of course, you do! Aren't you the unofficial lifetime mayor? The patron saint of Eagles football?" but I would've needed something stronger than champagne cut with

orange juice to have that kind of bravado. Instead, I reclined back in my seat and took note of all the folders and loose papers in the seatback in front of him and on his lap. “What brought you to LA?” I pried.

From the long pause and broadening smile on his face, I could tell that Vince Papale’s life stayed on a path that continued to surprise him more than anyone else. He squirmed in his seat for just a moment before telling me, “I spent the weekend with Mark Wahlberg and his family and close friends. Disney is going to make a movie about my story with the Eagles and Mark is going to play me. It comes out sometime next year.”

Rather than saying something cool like, “What took ‘em so long?” or something funny like pretending to spit out my coffee mid sip into the seatback in front of me, I ended up blurting out, “Cool! What’s Mark like?”

“Super nice guy. Totally down to earth,” replied Vince while overlooking the gyrating pinwheels that were once my eyes. Then, he started opening up about the whole weekend, giving me the impression that he had been waiting for someone equally enamored as he was with Hollywood A-listers. As I

listened, I felt tremendous gratitude toward Vince for sharing his experience with me, but I also worried that the universe had cashed me out of whatever luck I had accumulated up to that point because the conversation between seat A5 and A6 was beyond surreal.

Cruising Altitude

Little did Vince know that he was talking with a professional interviewer who parleyed his genetic engineering education into a full-time business analyst position in the biotech industry. Like the punt returners who had no chance of padding their stats when the former Eagle came barreling down on them, Vince couldn't escape my incessant questions about the movie, the Wahlbergs, his time with the Eagles, and his life now.

Normally, such inquiries would be met with pretend napping, sudden engrossment in holiday gift ideas from *Sky Mall* magazine or the not-so-subtle headphone escape. But Vince and I found our groove at 36,000 feet because we had more than just the Eagles in common – we were both reeling from being smashed in the face with a megastar pie. He was still

dazzled from meeting Mark and I was whirling from meeting *him*.

Had I met Vince a year or more earlier, I would've sounded as lame as the late Chris Farley when he'd interview famous celebrities in those hilarious *Saturday Night Live* skits. I could see myself asking him, "Umm . . . remember when you forced that fumble in your first home game with the Eagles?" and follow it with an awkward, "Yeah, that was cool," after he silently nods. But that wasn't the case because the soon-to-be-released movie, *Invincible*, served as *the* perfect excuse to talk about ourselves and discover more about each other. If you were the flight attendant occasionally interrupting us with coffee refills and snacks or one of the other first-class passengers making their way past us to the lavatory, my guess is that you'd think we were old friends. In a way, we were since we had a history – it's just that Vince wasn't aware of it yet.

Landing

With the ride of a lifetime coming to a close, I remember feeling remarkably satisfied for having had the chance to

explain to Vince, without the benefit of log paper or a protractor, how his birth into this world was the astrological equivalent of winning the lottery since the perfect timing sandwiched him between two iconic characters, Bruce Jenner and Rocky Balboa. I thanked him for being an inspiration when I needed it the most and for making me feel that my own story mattered to him. And just before the rising decibels made it too hard to hear as the plane descended toward Philadelphia International Airport, Vince leaned over and said, “I’m glad I met you, Chuck. That was great.”

Thank goodness the cabin lights were switched off; otherwise, my face would’ve reminded Vince of the young fan’s expression in the memorable 1979 Coke commercial after he catches Mean Joe Greene’s football jersey. Sure, I was beaming from his comment but more so from the unmistakable passion in which Vince shared his story. It seemed to emanate from deep within him, from a nuclear reactor that converts his love of life into inspiring and motivating others through a natural charisma that could toast marshmallows if they got too close to him. “Back to reality,” I sighed to myself when the wheels rudely bit into the runway at 160 mph, jolting me from my private thoughts of gratitude

and appreciation to wondering if the hotel had an airport shuttle.

As the plane was taxiing to the scheduled gate at United, I noticed Vince was unbuckling his seatbelt and before I knew it, he was standing at the front of the plane, facing everyone in the first-class cabin. “Hi, everyone. Just a quick announcement. I have to apologize for talking the *entire* time, but if you had sat next to this guy, Chuck, you would’ve told him your whole life story, too!” he confessed while smiling and gesturing toward me. When he sat back down in his seat, he was still smiling when he looked at me and said, “I never talked so much. Wait ‘til I tell my wife!”

“It was awesome meeting you, Vince.” I laughed while pulling my messenger bag out from under my seat.

And just as we did nearly a quarter century ago in the corridor that led to the high school cafeteria, Vince and I walked beside each other through the terminal’s concourse toward the rest of our lives. He gave me one last smile before turning right and taking the escalator down to baggage claim. I figured no one would be asking their friend, “Who’s that guy? Is he famous?”

Why would they? He was home.

I never saw or spoke to Vince Papale again after that flight, but he continues to electrify and thrill audiences with his ultimate underdog story and is regarded as one of the top motivational speakers in the country.

I met Bruce Jenner in 1992 as he was pulling his mountain bike out of his SUV in the Santa Monica Mountains. As expected, he was warm, friendly, and interested in knowing how far I had just run on the trails. Today, we all know about the shocking turn he made six years ago. Instead of hiding to avoid tarnishing his 'national treasure' status, he unselfishly became a hero to a whole new demographic.

Chapter 3: John

The inspiration to write this came from recent Facebook exchanges with Jennifer, John's younger sister, who I last saw as a perpetually smiling middle schooler who fed calves behind their farmhouse with what looked to be an oversized baby bottle. Sadly, it came to my attention that John's mother, Barbara, and his other sister, Kristin, passed away. This story is about how I came to know John and his family and how they've stayed with me after almost 40 years.

The sweltering midday heat of the Carolina summer made my army-green duffle bag seem twice as heavy, so I was relieved to see the front entrance to my new home for the next two semesters. Secretively, I was glad that freshmen were required to live on campus during their first year at N.C. State University. My excitement to get started on a quest to conquer the world, make friends, and meet girls was tempered by a feeling of impending doom because waiting on the fourth floor, in a cramped dorm room, was the one named John Harris from Mooresville – at least that's what the dorm assignment read in my bright red 'Go Wolfpack' folder.

As I got closer to the 13-story brick building in the center of campus, I could see kids were everywhere, and normally I would've been overwhelmed by all the frenetic energy but I was just as excited as they were. The whole scene was just as I had imagined back in Philadelphia – organized pandemonium with lots of cute girls. And, staying true to my high school form, I quickly avoided the cute girls, opting instead to use the side entrance to the stairwell. Just as my hand reached for the handle, the door suddenly burst open with more cute girls spilling out toward me in the afternoon sun. But before the entire bevy disappeared, I asked the last one if I had the wrong building, and her answer was just about the best thing a 17-year-old boy could possibly hear, “You got it right. It’s coed.”

My goofy grin was short-lived because the stairwell felt like I had stepped into an oven that was warming dinner rolls. Trudging up each flight, I kept reminding myself that I was meeting my freshman roommate and *not* being led to the gallows. After all, I was going to be sleeping six feet from a perfect stranger! What if I spill something on his bed? What if I accidentally use his toothpaste? Would he kill me? You know what I mean. Pushing open the door to the fourth-floor

lobby, I could instantly feel that the air temperature was cooler but only by about two degrees. And things weren't much better as I walked down the hallway toward my room. Apparently, air conditioning was not part of the deal.

My room was the last one on the left in a suite of five rooms plus a bathroom. Random boys, who were soon to become my brothers, were busy putting their things away while dads looked annoyed and moms fought to hold back tears. The blinds from my room must have been open since sunlight cascaded through the doorway, lighting up the hallway. The moment of truth was literally a few steps away so it wasn't the best time to imagine John wearing bib overalls without a shirt or shoes. When I came in, John was sitting on his bed; and when he jumped up to say, "Hi, I'm John Harris," I quickly noted that not only was he wearing shorts and a t-shirt like me – he was just as sweaty! John's side of the room was noticeably neat and tidy, and he seemed to care about his hygiene and appearance, too. Jackpot.

While I put away my clothes and searched for the perfect place to put my boom box, I listened to John tell me about himself. He had a deep southern drawl so it wasn't a shocker to learn

that he grew up on the family farm in a small rural community in the western part of the state. When John started to talk about his family, I stopped what I was doing because he spoke so highly of them and the success of their dairy and farming enterprise. After I told John a little bit about my background, we both laughed because we couldn't have been more different from each other. Country mouse, meet city mouse.

Friendship

When it came time to go to the dining hall for dinner, John was the one who got everyone from our suite to go together. Little did he know how those evening walks across campus made us all closer and appreciative of one another.

Everyone liked John. How could you not? He smiled a lot, laughed a lot, and was downright hilarious. And he was the only person I knew who could say, "I appreciate that," instead of saying, "Thank you," and make it sound gentlemanly and NOT like Aunt Bea from *The Andy Griffith Show*. What can I say? John was a class act through and through; but could he handle the ultimate compliment from someone who grew up in the northeast part of the country? I knew I was taking a big

chance when I started making fun of him; after all, this was a kid who could've been the fifth Walton brother from the series we all watched in the '70s. Not only did this God-fearing, tractor-driving, cow-milking, farm boy handle it – he dished it right back with enough zing to make any hardcore Philadelphian give him a thumbs up. And just like that, John was in.

And with both of us still buzzing from the pace of the day after the lights went out, the dark reminded me of sleepovers with childhood friends; but instead of giggling over fart jokes and such, John and I used the shroud of night to open up more about ourselves, our worries, and our dreams. For John to reveal his innermost thoughts and feelings, I figured this was high praise coming from a tough 18-year-old kid who could bale and stack hay, operate heavy machinery, and milk more than 100 cows twice a day. I felt like I knew more about him than anyone else in our suite and that he trusted me with his secrets – and with that, 'I was in.'

Family

Later that school year, John invited me to come home with

him and meet his family. The drive alone was memorable as we traveled farther and farther into farm country. When we turned into the driveway, I watched his family come out of a house that was warm, welcoming, and as neat and tidy as John's side of the room. Hugs were distributed equally and whole-heartedly from Mrs. Harris and his two younger sisters who beamed with the same pride as their mother. Walking up the porch steps to greet Mr. Harris, I distinctly remember a quiet gentleness about him, so much so that it didn't feel awkward stopping in mid handshake to get a closer look at hands that were the size of catcher's mitts and stained on either side. Graciously overlooking my lack of manners and the fact that I was still gawking at his hands as if they were a display at the state fair, he drawled, "That's what happens when you grow up milking cows by hand and gettin' iodine on 'em."

As more and more empty plates were pushed to the center of the table and with dinner conversation winding down, I was informed that I would be expected to 'pull my weight' during my stay. Little did they know that I secretly relished the opportunity to show them that I could handle farm life; after all, my dad kept me busy with yard work throughout my childhood, right? I remember thinking, *I totally got this*. But

by 4:30 the next morning, while I ran around the predawn pasture urging lumbering bovine stragglers to the milking barn, I pretty much understood in that moment that farm work eats yard work for breakfast.

The drive back to Raleigh was quiet, so I had time to reflect on my extended stay with John and his family. Even in deep thought, my eyes tried to scan the horizon to find farmers working the land. I guess I felt a certain newfound kinship and appreciation for what they dedicated themselves to after getting my own hands dirty with it. Maybe it was wishful thinking but I sort of felt like I was bigger and stronger for having worked alongside John . . . well, definitely bigger since Mrs. Harris took great pride in preparing meals that featured assortments that I wouldn't see again until I was in my mid-thirties at the Bellagio Hotel Buffet in Las Vegas. Whereas the buffet set me back a cool sixty bucks, Mrs. Harris only needed you to acknowledge that everything came from her family's farm and that you weren't shy about wanting seconds or thirds.

Looking over at John as we careened past fields of soybean, okra, and corn, I thought about all the things we did together – much of which would be told over and over again to country

girls that awaited us back on campus. We fed, milked, and cleaned up after cows. We went hunting for raccoons. We stacked hay bales. We went to a farming community social event called a ‘fish camp.’ I even helped John’s dad artificially inseminate one of the cows. Although this last activity was fascinating and memorable, I wisely kept it off the list of what the girls heard about. No need to go down that path. By the time we got back to the dorm, I learned something from John that I never forgot. He didn’t need to tell you everything about himself; instead, he made you want to lean in and discover what made him so personable, approachable, and decent. As we settled back into college life, little did we know that our freshman year was heading full steam toward events that would be both tragic and epic.

Tragedy On the Track

I was starving for dinner when I ran up the stairs in my running shorts and tank top. I always liked to run before joining my suitemates on the walk across campus to the dining hall. Even in my haste to get in the shower, I still found time to poke my head into each dorm room to start a lame joke war that would typically extend into our walk because it was always at their

expense. When I didn't hear the expected customary comebacks, I remember thinking, *What a bunch of uptight girls*. But when I made the sharp left into my room and saw John's face as he sat on his bed, I knew something was wrong. One of our brothers from our corner of Metcalf dorm had collapsed and died on the university track during his PE 100 class. John was the one who told me; and it was John, I, and Dane's roommate, Mike, who met with Dane's family when they came to collect his belongings.

After the funeral in Dane's hometown, dorm life slowly found a new normal. Returning from the library late in the evenings, I often found Mike using John's desk to study while John did the same on his bed. Apparently, John didn't want Mike to be left alone in the room he once shared with Dane.

Do You Believe in Miracles?

You could have heard a pin drop despite there being a dozen college kids stuffed into one dorm room. In the dark, every face transfixed and illuminated by the tiny black and white TV that sat on top of a dark brown minifridge. When the final score flashed across the screen, crowning the Cinderella-

hopeful, N.C. State Wolfpack as the 1983's NCAA Men's Basketball Champions over the heavily favored University of Houston, John and I, and everyone else on our floor, joined the revelry that had assembled on the campus brickyard.

By the time the bonfires were left to smolder and the temporary delirium immortalized in our mental rearview mirrors, John and I, along with Mike, felt a bond that made us shake our heads in disbelief. First, Dane; and now this. Collectively, it felt like the three of us had come to the realization that we weren't just suitemates anymore – we were brothers.

Now

As I put the final touches on this labor of love, I can't help but wonder about my dear friend from all those years ago. After that year, like every kid who's chomping at the bit to get their share of the American dream, John and I went our separate ways – me toward microbiology and John toward crop sciences. Believe it or not, John and I have not spoken or seen each other since that wonderfully impactful year in Metcalf dorm. While I contemplate my next move here in Idaho, my

freshmen roommate lives in North Carolina with his wife and has undoubtedly been a great example to the four boys in his life. His sister, Jennifer, will be the one to deliver this deserved tribute to her brother who I imagine will humbly say, “I appreciate that.”

Chapter 4: Keith

This is a story about Keith Jordan who, in 2017, not only reminded me, literally and figuratively, not to judge a book by its cover, he showed me that creative brilliance can shockingly spring up from where you'd least expect it. Ironically, he did this while I was creating the artwork for his ACTUAL book cover!

After tuning out to what Keith was complaining about, I finally figured out who this guy looked like as he prattled on and on about the numerous illustrators and editors who were screwing him at the publishing company in New York. While needing to prove his case from the middle of an oversized fabric couch in his dimly lit living room with each New Balance sneaker firmly wedged on the side of a heavy coffee table, his voice edging closer and closer to mimicking Charlie Brown's teacher, I suddenly realized that he didn't really look like anyone at all. And then it dawned on me. His face looked surprisingly similar to that crumpled sofa pillow you pull out from between the cushions after you stopped looking for it months ago.

With the mystery of Keith's likeness solved, I felt like I should be listening to what he was saying; after all, this was an interview of sorts where the outcome would decide whether or not I'd be providing the cover art for his soon-to-be published novel, *One White Whisker*. But it wasn't until he angrily recounted the unceremonious firings of the illustrators before me that I actually started paying attention. *Now* this was getting interesting.

As he ranted about his frustrations, I could only marvel at my innate ability in finding the worst people to accept an art commission from. But there was some-thing about Keith that made me welcome the ridiculously low offer which was guaranteed to come with lots of headaches and resentment. As I was standing and shaking the hand of this diminutive, feisty old man, I felt like we weren't agreeing on the same thing. Whereas Keith was securing the services of a freelance illustrator at a discount, I was making an absurd promise to myself to be one of the very few to actually satisfy him. Little did I know that the paltry \$300 earned over three excruciating months would end up being the best commission I ever received.

Second Impressions

How cool is this? I remember asking myself as I rolled past the half-occupied tennis courts on my bike along the treelined greenbelt that paralleled Parkcenter Drive. It was our first day to begin work on his book cover, and Keith's house was less than two miles away, situated in an exclusive, older neighborhood known as River Run in Southeast Boise, Idaho. As I made the left onto his street, passing cozy houses with landscaping that made each property look like its own version of Storybook Land, I had no idea that 'bike-friendly proximity' would be the one *and only* perk that I'd enjoy.

Compared to the other houses, Keith's place lacked the contradictive 'organized whimsy' ubiquitous throughout the neighborhood, opting instead for a look that begged for long overdue yardwork and fresh paint. As I waited for Keith to come to the door, I looked over at my bike and thought to myself that I didn't need to hide it behind the garage in a community that promoted the same kind of idyllic friendliness rarely seen outside the bubble from the movie, *The Truman Show*.

When he opened the door, Keith was wearing the same jeans and New Balance sneakers I'd seen him in earlier in the week, except he was sporting a different t-shirt – this one showing his longtime allegiance to Boise State Football by its stretched-out neckline and faded lettering. His expression was the same as before, a kind of crumpled resignation that could only come from a toxic mixture of staunch self-righteousness and perpetual indigestion. “Come on in,” he said. Although I had already been at his house days earlier, Keith decided I needed to be given a complete tour of the place prompting me to glance at my watch and ignite the fuse of worry since I had an upcoming tennis match at the courts I just passed.

Like most older folks, Keith had that same sequence of DNA that seems to activate once you're eligible for Medicare. By the end of the tour, I had listened to a handful of stories about events I didn't inquire about and knew WAY too much about each and every physical ailment he was dealing with. To this day, every time I hear the word ‘ablation,’ I'm automatically transported back in time to one of several dozen one-sided conversations I had with Keith about how the hospital's incompetent doctors screwed up his heart surgery.

In between the unwanted details about his life and medical history, I was quietly taking in the lay of the land in Keith's house. There were things you'd expect to see from a perennial bachelor pushing 80 who never had any children. Functionality overruled décor. The kitchen looked tidy but rarely used. A dilapidated fence and overgrowth in the back yard almost made the absence of seating or shade go unnoticed. And, a humongous flatscreen TV loomed large over the cramped living room from its perch above the fireplace where it not only delivered Keith's beloved Mariners baseball games in high definition – it served as both the witness and reminder of the promise I made to myself just days earlier.

Book Cover

By the time the tour was over, the early afternoon sun was already lighting up the massive oak desk that dominated Keith's office area. Since it was an open-floor plan, the skylight within the vaulted ceiling above provided much needed natural light to the adjacent kitchen and living room as well. Piles of scattered papers, handwritten notes, and open mail covered most of the desk with framed family photos

acting as paperweights should the breeze pick up from the open slider that led to the back yard. He sat on one side of the desk with what looked to be the manuscript of *One White Whisker* and copies of previously vetoed cover art while I sat on the other side looking at the clock behind him wondering if I'd have time to buy a can of tennis balls before the match that afternoon.

Soon after Keith told me that his novel was based on an alley cat and a black trumpet player in a Deep South jazz club during the 1930s, I quickly started hearing the voice of Charlie Brown's teacher again because the story involved the perfect combination of what doesn't interest me: cats and jazz music. Plus, aren't there about a million books about cats? Another 10 million about jazz clubs set in the Deep South?

I remember thinking, *No offense, bro, but if this book isn't a sleep aid or a confusing mess, it's probably more recycled material of what's already been written countless times before.*

When Keith explained that his cover art *must* be comprised of a cat and trumpet player in silhouette with flowing music

notes, I couldn't believe my ears. *This is going to be a piece of cake*, I thought to myself. But my relief was short lived after he showed me the submitted artwork from his reject pile. I was shocked. Each one was astonishingly good, great in fact and *way* better than what I had in mind. By the time I got up to retrieve my bike to ride home and hurry to the tennis match, I knew I was in over my head and that my promise was already delivering its first headache.

Version 1.0

“I'm sorry. What did you say?” I asked while Keith was leaning in toward his oversized Apple monitor looking at my first crack at his cover art as if he was trying to see it through something gross that had splattered and dried on the screen.

“Totally wrong,” he repeated. In the seconds before I felt the harpoon impale and deflate my belief that all was good in the world, I had to give him credit for the incredibly efficient way in which he dismissed my work. He didn't even waste time by looking at me while he said it.

Now THAT'S talent, I thought. Strangely, I took pride in

knowing that my spurned attempt joined the ranks of some beautiful submissions by better artists in Keith's reject pile.

As he repeated the lengthy list of twenty or so changes that ranged from 'redo cat head' to 'find another font for the title,' I escaped by looking more closely at the framed pictures on Keith's desk. To avoid snatching and dramatically throwing the list out through the open slider if I were to hear it read to me for a third time, I asked him about the people in them. It was a risky move, but I was desperate. Watching him push the list away, sit back, and take a deep breath felt like I was watching the roulette wheel spin after betting it all on black – but instead of money, I was wagering what I had planned later that afternoon.

Listening to Keith talk so glowingly about his mother, father, and brother came as a shock since I had only known him to describe others as being either aggravating, incompetent, or out to eventually screw him over. By the number of needed cover modifications, I felt pretty sure that I had graduated from being just aggravating to being both aggravating *and* incompetent. I could live with that since I knew in my heart that my promise was going to keep me from completing the

trifecta.

What stood out most was the adoration he felt for his late mother. When I heard him say that he moved into this house to take care of her after his father died because his brother had a family and lived too far away, I felt ashamed for having pegged him as a momma's boy who probably lived in her basement through his thirties and forties.

I liked knowing that Keith's personality transcended an uncompromising exterior and that he had a heart. Although I no longer had time to run all of my afternoon errands, it was more satisfying to feel the little roulette ball in my mind land on black.

Version 5.0

About a month had gone by and there I was, back at Keith's desk about to be given a fifth set of changes that included some modifications that were recycled from earlier versions. "Make the cat's eye look more menacing," he'd say while I bit my tongue from replying sarcastically, "Oh, you mean like three versions ago, Your Highness?" The promise I made to myself

was becoming more threadbare like many of the t-shirts that Keith wore, but it still held me back from wanting to act out my fantasy of leaping through the open slider without the list of changes and crashing through the backyard fence like the Kool-Aid Man yelling, “Oh, yeah!”

Working with Keith was like being in my own rendition of the movie, *Groundhog Day*. I’d ride my bike past the tennis courts, see the same two older guys returning baseline shots, nod hello to the same lady out walking her dog, hide my bike in the same spot behind the garage, and obediently follow Keith to the office where I automatically knew what was coming next. But just like Bill Murray’s character in the movie, I was grateful when something unexpected happened.

It startled me when a large gray longhaired cat came into the office through the open slider. At first, I thought it was a bobcat due to the size of its paws and because I actually saw one by the Boise River with a squirrel in its mouth about a month earlier. Instead of jumping up and shooing the creature back into the wild, Keith picked it up and said, “There you are!” What was more shocking was seeing how gentle and loving he was with it – as if he were a completely different

person. Apparently, pets hide if they detect fear or evil in strangers, so I was going to have to tread lightly and respect this feline for its spot-on intuition going forward.

As I rode back home that day, things felt different despite having yet another long list of cover art changes in my pocket. I was glad to see another side to Keith, but my mind kept going back to a new obsessive thought – was the Lucifer incarnate that lived inside of me *that* obvious?

Version 9.0

As a voracious reader, it wasn't like me to keep turning down Keith when he asked me to read his novel. Besides sounding about as attractive as standing twenty-deep behind window number five at the DMV, *One White Whisker* was nearly 600 pages and deemed a dystopian tale by its author. *No thanks.* Instead, I used it as leverage to try and accelerate to the conclusion of this two-month-and-counting merry-go-round by telling him I would after it was published. And without being given a shred of creative license to influence the cover art, it might as well have been a book about diesel engine repair – in French.

When Keith asked me to join him and his friend, Frank, for a late morning breakfast that day while handing me the ninth list of cover art changes, I didn't know what to say first. Before I could rudely blurt out, "This list makes no sense!" or "*You* have a friend?" I felt the merry-go-round unhinge from its motorized foundation and careen wildly toward the hordes of unsuspecting people, making them drop their funnel cakes and six-dollar beers and scatter in every direction. *Awesome . . . something different*, I remember thinking and cautiously accepted the invitation.

Like everything with Keith, it was his way or no way. That's why we *had* to take his 'other' car to pick up Frank and drive thirty miles on I-84 to a truck stop diner that sat in the middle of nowhere between Boise and Mountain Home. While we waited in the car for Frank to come out of his house, I asked Keith, "What's so great about this breakfast place?" When he told me it was the perfect distance to keep his seldom-used late-model Sedan tuned up, I thought to myself, *Nice sales pitch, dude!* and quickly flirted with the idea of making a run for it to avoid a wasted afternoon fueled by tasteless eggs and weak coffee.

When Frank finally sauntered down the driveway toward the car, I could see that he was a little younger than his friend of half a century but not by much. Whereas Keith looked like he was ready for an impromptu game of kickball, Frank dressed like he was on his way to judge a rodeo in his dark blue jeans and tucked in long-sleeved button-down plaid shirt. Besides their contrasting clothing choices, Keith and Frank also wore vastly different facial expressions. Keith reminded me of a guy who can't make up his mind whether or not he'll be sick from the gas station rotisserie hot dog he ate an hour ago while Frank had an impish grin that made you think he had just heard a dirty joke. As soon as he got in the car, my morning significantly improved.

The Stage Stop

From the passenger seat, the long strip of highway looked endless yet inviting since vehicles were sparse along this stretch of I-84. To my left, Keith looked oddly content – probably because he was keeping one eye on the odometer. To my right, the harsh flatlands of Southeast Idaho stretched far and wide and made me think of the early pioneers who braved this section of the Oregon Trail less than 200 years earlier.

From the back seat, Frank provided the entertainment by serving up eclectic anecdotes ranging from his new girlfriend and his days as a high school football referee in Montana to how he came to know Keith when they worked at the Department of Transportation.

There was no need to ask Keith, “How soon until we get there?” because I swear, I could see the tall, electronic sign from 10 miles away, only losing sight of it momentarily when the road occasionally dipped. When we finally arrived, I quickly deduced that the Stage Stop wasn’t your typical, run-of-the-mill truck stop. No, indeed. It was the Taj Mahal of truck stops. *This is so freaking cool*, I thought to myself as the three of us had to walk through a huge and well-stocked gift shop in order to get to the restaurant. I remember telling Frank, “This is like that rack of impulse-buy items at every grocery store checkout line, only a lot bigger,” and then secretly making a mental note to come back here to do my Christmas shopping.

We slid into the only open booth next to the counter where a few, evenly spaced truckers were perfectly slumped over their meals as if they were directed to do so for the imaginary

antacid commercial that was being shot. I sat across from Keith and Frank and noticed signs behind them directing weary truckers to the lockers and showers. While my restless cohorts grabbed menus from behind the half-empty salt and pepper shakers and rearranged their silverware, I romanticized how refreshed these truckers must feel as they climbed back into their topped-off rigs with fresh faces, sated appetites, and plastic bags full of souvenirs for the wives and kids back home.

When Keith handed his menu to me saying, “I don’t need this. Maria *already* knows what I’ll be having,” I resisted taking the bait and asking him who the hell Maria was. Instead, I commented on the surprisingly elaborate Oregon Trail exhibits behind heavy ropes in a sectioned-off area of the restaurant.

From behind me, I heard a warm and melodious, “Hola, Mr. Keith!” Since I was looking straight ahead, I literally had a front row seat to watch Keith’s face morph from a tired and misshapen catcher’s mitt to an expression so innocently smitten that it took me back to when the best girl athlete in my eighth-grade class, Alex Zuchowsky, agreed to go with me to

the center of the darkened and decorated gymnasium to join the rest of the courageous at the Shake Your Booty Dance back in middle school. When Maria spun around to take our breakfast orders, the little breeze that followed her smelled like bacon sandwiched between dried rose petals. I also noticed that she couldn't have been older than 30; but then again, Hispanic women always seem to look younger than they really are. She was wearing the same blue and maroon plaid uniform as all the other waitresses but flashed a smile that told you she enjoyed her job more than the others. I could see why Keith was sweet on her.

After Frank ordered, Keith was practically mouthing the words as Maria carefully recited his breakfast order from memory as if her tip lived or died by the accuracy. Most interesting was seeing his index and middle finger of his right hand almost imperceptibly move upward as Maria nailed the part about including not one, but two, bags of Lemon Lift tea with his breakfast. And just like that, his fingers relaxed, he sat back and beamed with that all too familiar expression, "I told you so."

When it was my turn to order, I could only stammer, "I'll have

exactly what Keith is having except with coffee.” That’s because I was still reeling over the fact that I, too, always get the same breakfast of corned beef hash, eggs over medium, sausage links as opposed to patties, and light butter on sourdough toast. Then the realization washed over me like a glass of ice water being poured down the back of my t-shirt, making me jump even though I was ready for it. Like an M. Night Shyamalan movie where the audience gasps after putting two and two together for the shocking revelation, I realized that I didn’t merely share a breakfast preference with Keith, I’m also a childless grump who likes to write and dress like I’m on the same kickball team.

The ride home was quiet, but it was that comfortable kind of quiet that comes after having easy conversation over a satisfying meal. To my left, Keith focused on the road with the toothpick he picked up off the restaurant counter still in his mouth. In the back seat, Frank was checking his messages while I stared deep into the flatlands for an answer to a much bigger quandary than a cat that could see inside of me. I was convinced the universe was introducing me to my future self.

Completed Cover

In the movie, *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray's character knows that his run of repeated days is over when he awakens to something other than Sony and Cher's, "I Got You Babe." For me, that moment came when Keith pushed his chair back from his computer monitor and the thirteenth version of the cover art and mumbled, "Okay, I guess that's it."

Whereas Keith acted like a guy whose table became available at Outback Steakhouse 10 minutes before the projected wait time of 30 minutes, I wanted to join the Munchkins of *The Wizard of Oz* in singing, "The Wicked Witch is Dead" after envisioning a portion of *One White Whisker's* approved cover art sticking out from under Dorothy's house. "Come on! It's been almost three months! Aren't you happy?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess, but now I have to deal with those idiots at the publishing company again," he replied. Leave it to Keith to treat unabashed joy like an unwanted bat that somehow found its way into the house, making him wildly swat at the disease-carrying intruder with a broom until it goes back to where it came from.

A part of me wanted to get on my bike as soon as possible to tell my tennis buddies that my indentured servitude to Keith was finally over; yet, I found myself wanting to find out why he seemed so resigned, slumped in his desk chair like a boxer with too little fight left in him to get off his stool to answer the bell for the final round. I had to ask, “How long did it take you to write this book?”

“Fourteen years,” he replied.

“So, you finished it last year?” I continued.

“1982,” he shot back.

“And you’re just *now* getting it published? In 2017? Why?” I inquired while removing the shoulder bag that I had slipped on while doing my version of the Snoopy dance just moments ago.

“It’s a long story,” he sighed while looking out through the slider.

It didn’t surprise me when he told me that he couldn’t find

agreement with various publishing companies over the years, saying no to most edits and certainly not finding one that would print trailing cat paw prints and human footprints to give the reader a visual cue when the fictional tale transitioned between the two intertwined story lines. “Sounds complicated,” I said.

“You’ll get it once you read it,” he said assuredly.

Ugh. That’s right, I remember thinking to myself, I’m still on the hook for that. But by the time I was riding my bike past the tennis courts to my place, I felt bad for dreading having to read Keith’s novel because I realized why he acquiesced in the moment of approving the cover art – after almost 50 years, *One White Whisker* was on the precipice of no longer being his secret, his refuge.

My Copy

I had to admit it. I was riding a little bit faster to Keith’s house after getting the greenlight that the books had arrived. I had only seen him once in the last month when I bumped into him walking along the greenbelt beside the Boise River. We found

shade under a grove of shedding cottonwood trees and talked briefly about the book and more about the increased flow of the river since the Army Corps of Engineers had recently released snowmelt water from Lucky Peak Reservoir ten miles away.

Keith was in good spirits when I arrived and quickly led me to the office where a large cardboard box sat on the once white, now off-white, carpet. It was opened and illuminated by unimpeded spring sunshine through the generous skylight. “Here you go,” he said while proudly handing me a copy of *One White Whisker*. “Open it up.”

“Hold on. Let me look at it,” I replied. The cover was exactly how he had designed it through me – an abomination of epic proportions, a collection of at least a half dozen broken cardinal rules of illustration. To go along with three different fonts, it appeared flat, pedestrian, unbalanced, and begged for embellishment. Nothing about this cover art looked like something I’d create.

“Go ahead. Open it,” Keith repeated. Even before I could get the glossy front cover fully opened, ‘Cover Art by Chuck

Trunks’ was right underneath ‘Keith Duffield Jordan’ in slightly smaller letters. And there was an inscription scrawled between his name and the book title reminding me of a lesson you learn on day one of marketing class – cover art sells books. I thought about putting my free hand over my heart and sarcastically saying, “Dude, you got me right here,” but I didn’t think he’d appreciate my untimely sense of humor in that moment. Having just found out my name was now forever linked to the ‘Frankenstein of cover art’ and that I was looking at 569 pages of dull cats and depressing jazz clubs in racist America, I wasn’t exactly sure how to react. So, while estimating the weight of the beefy tome at between five and six pounds, I shamelessly said, “Gosh Keith. Thanks. You’re going to sell a million of these!”

One White Whisker

All right. Time to put a dent in this book, I said to myself while turning off the TV right in the middle of a *Frazier* rerun. *I’ve already seen that one anyway.* It was late and I figured Keith’s novel would lull me toward a peaceful night’s rest since my brain was preoccupied with everything in the observable universe *except* sleep. *One White Whisker* made it to my night

table beside my bed a few days earlier but I began to feel the weight of procrastination.

The first chapter immediately opened with a description of a feral cat, simply known as The Black Cat, a visceral alpha tomcat who leads with both instinct and intellect. Within three amazing sentences, I was hooked. And by the middle of page twelve, where the story transitions to the second story line of Cyrus P. Holloway's prospective jazz club, I freaking cared about this cat! But it doesn't stop there. Within the next fifteen pages, Keith sets the tone and direction of the jazz club by teaching a master class on character introduction. The descriptions and exchanges between Mr. Holloway, Llewellyn Sue, Leroy Sykes and Mister Blanchard in this first chapter left me not only relishing these complex relationships but believing in their authenticity.

Transitioning back to the perspective of The Black Cat, the opening chapter concludes within eleven compelling pages that made me feel both voyeuristic and convinced that Keith was a gritty and brutish alley cat in a previous life. It is within these first thirty-eight pages, along with the indicative paw-to-foot and foot-to-paw prints that made me realize that the word

‘astonished’ isn’t big enough for what I was feeling in my bed, under the shroud of that quiet night. Keith was a literary genius; and when I closed my eyes to sleep, I thought of the Kool-Aid Man again. This time, he wasn’t spilling his sweet concoction while crashing through the fence – he was drinking it.

New Light

Unlike the day when I brought the book home, *One White Whisker’s* bulky weight felt more like depth as it swayed my shoulder bag back and forth while I biked excitedly to Keith’s house. I had read two more chapters the following morning before calling and asking him if I could stop by to offer some feedback on his novel.

“Sure. I’ll be around,” he said before abruptly hanging up like a lot of old people sometimes do as if they’re late for a shareholders meeting.

As I pushed my bike up the cement driveway toward its usual hiding place, I noticed Keith was already standing in the doorway with both hands jammed in the pockets of his cargo

shorts giving him the posture of a man humbly emanating, “Aww shucks.”

I thought it was perfect because it made me tip my hand by saying, “Un-freaking-believable,” while yanking the half-filled bottle of lemon-lime Gatorade from its cage on my bike frame.

“What’s unbelievable?” he said.

Before I could sarcastically say, “Are you kidding me?” I had to admit to myself that in his defense, I tended to begin my own negative rants with ‘un-freaking-believable,’ many of which were lectured to Keith, making us more like peas in a pod than not. “Your book, dude!” I answered.

Before hanging a left into the living room to sit down, I could see that the box was still in the same spot next to Keith’s desk and looked to have the same number of books in it. When the office and living room strobed in slow-motion between bright and dim, it made me think of the numerous small, cotton ball clouds I had seen crowding the sky while I rode to Keith’s place earlier. Now they were making the sun play an unwanted

game of hide-and-seek.

“So, what do you think?” he asked from the dark brown rocking recliner that I sat in when we first met.

“It’s incredible, and you know it is,” I replied over the coffee table from the center of the adjacent couch. “I’m literally blown away by the imagery, the attention to the smallest of details, the story, the complexity, the sheer brilliance . . . everything!” I gushed. I felt as if I had won a backstage pass to a U2 concert from the local morning zoo radio show and had one chance to say something intelligent and inspiring to Bono but ended up sounding like an overexcited schoolgirl who just got asked to the junior prom by the boy she was secretly hoping would ask her. Still, I forged ahead saying, “You’re a master storyteller, and I can’t believe I know someone as talented as . . .”

“All right, all right, enough of that. You’re going to hate the ending. Didn’t I tell you it’s a dystopian story?” interrupted Keith.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe like a hundred times?” I replied

with building acrimony since he was denying me what I had been fantasizing about since breakfast – lavishing him with unadulterated appreciation and reveling in *his* success as an incredible writer.

I remember thinking to myself, *This is just like last month's Oscars all over again.* Having predicted Casey Affleck's Best Actor nomination and win at the Oscars for his gut-wrenching and heartbreaking portrayal of a New England family man who no longer had his family in *Manchester by The Sea*, I situated myself comfortably in my living room to reap the reward of watching Casey accept the honor in front of his older brother, Ben. After all, I had successfully predicted the Oscars' last three winners of this award. My fist pumping and impromptu victory shimmy were unceremoniously cut short as Casey gave an acceptance speech as if he was still playing the soul-crushed husband and father from the movie. "No freaking way! Your brother is crying like a baby in front of you, dude!" I yelled at the TV, "C'mon man. I need the waterworks *now!*" It was not to be, and to this day, I still feel shortchanged as it should've been one of those endearing Oscar moments that you secretly revisit from time to time on YouTube just to make yourself get misty eyed and remind

yourself that you still have a heart.

Collecting myself by remembering that I was sitting in front of someone who possessed a gift I could only dream of having a fraction of, I pulled out my copy of *One White Whisker* and asked, “Would you mind if I read a few passages to you?”

“Sure, whatever,” he replied from the recliner that now looked like it was swallowing him.

Earlier, I had marked those portions of the story with magenta colored Post-it Notes, so it was pretty easy to start reading them to Keith. Instead of a pleasant response, I remember him squirming around the recliner, looking uncomfortable as if he was being forced to listen to his parents audibly express their attraction to one another from the next room. “Dude! What is your problem?” I asked.

“I don’t understand why you have to do this,” he replied.

“Because I never met anyone who could paint a picture with words like you,” I said sternly. “Because I dove into your novel *wanting* to hate it, and you turned me around in three

sentences. Because I'm sitting in front of a freaking literary genius. *That's why!*"

Keith stared at me for a moment, but something in his gaze said he was sorry and for me to continue. So, for the next few minutes, I carefully read the passages to him as if I was reciting poetry.

Even though Keith pulled a 'Casey Affleck' on me, I was grateful that at least he knew I saw him in a new light. As I rode home that afternoon, I remember the puffy clouds being replaced by an overcast sky with even darker clouds brewing in the direction of Lucky Peak Reservoir. The wind against my face was picking up so I knew a spring shower was imminent. I didn't rush to beat the rain. I didn't want to since the heaviness in my pendulous shoulder bag reminded me that it's good to savor the best things in life.

Underestimated

"Hey, it's me," I said to Keith over the phone, "I finished it last night. Can I stop by later this morning to talk about it?"

“Sure, I’ll be around,” he replied.

By eleven o’clock, the temperature had climbed well over eighty degrees signaling that summer was fast approaching. As I rode to Keith’s house, I noticed fewer people were out and about on the asphalt bike path; but then again it was a Tuesday where, for most, bike riding and book clubbing take a back seat to nine-to-five grinds.

“Brutal,” I said while taking a seat in Keith’s office.

“What is? The weather?” he asked innocently enough from his desk chair that looked more befitting to a tax attorney than a gifted novelist.

“Yeah, the weather,” I said dryly, “No, dude. The freaking ending!”

“See? I told you you’d hate the ending. It’s a dystopian story!” Keith shot back as if he caught me expecting all the characters from *One White Whisker* to sail off into the sunset singing “Kumbaya.”

“Would you stop?” I said, “As tough as that was to read, it was the perfect ending. It was the right ending. I loved it.”

“Yeah, well most people will hate it,” he said.

“Then they’re not your audience, dude,” I replied.

“Dystopia is real life to me. Sometimes the hero saves the day and gets the girl; most times he’s shot in the face, stuffed into the trunk of his own car, and driven to the desert to be buried by the girl and her new boyfriend.”

And with that, I sat back in my chair and waited for a response. When it didn’t come, I knew by then that silence from Keith meant there was a seventy percent chance that he was in agreement. The pause also gave me a chance to ask him about the two copies of *One White Whisker* on his desk with notes tucked in the middle of each.

Who is this old geezer? I remember thinking to myself when Keith told me that one of the copies was going to a woman in Austria with whom he’d had a love affair with while living in Europe and the other to an old friend in Canada who

accompanied him on a self-guided tour of Africa on motorcycles. “Dude, I constantly underestimate you,” I said while shaking my head.

“Story of my life,” he replied.

As I got up to leave, I asked him two more questions, “Where were you when you finished *One White Whisker*, and how did it make you feel?”

He told me it was five-thirty in the morning when he finished it in Jacksonville, Florida. He said he walked down to the beach from where he was staying, sat down in the sand, gazed out into the ocean and, with tears in his eyes, said goodbye to something that had been a part of him for so long.

“Un-freaking-believable. That’s awesome,” I said.

Keith followed me outside while I got my bike ready to ride home. “Want to get breakfast again at the Stage Stop sometime next week?” he asked.

“Sure, I’d like that,” I replied.

And just before taking off down a street that should've been named Story Book Lane, I thankfully remembered the question I had forgotten to ask Keith earlier, "What was the hardest thing about writing *One White Whisker*?"

And without hesitation he replied, "Editing out what I thought was my best writing. See you next week."

"See you then . . ." I stammered while trying not to tip over on my bike and ruin this astonishing revelation from this Picasso of prose, this Monet of manuscripts, who successfully disguises himself as the neighborhood's quintessential get-off-my-lawn guy.

WWIII

God, I wish Frank was here, I said to myself while Keith and I polished off our identical breakfast entrées at the Stage Stop. It just wasn't the same without him since Keith and I were like an unstirred cocktail – either too flat or too strong at times. Frank, as they say, was the 'straw that stirred the drink,' and he was sorely missed when Keith and I attempted to extend our friendship beyond the realm of *One White Whisker*.

Just as we were settling up with Maria, one of the other waitresses walked up to the counter and turned around to face the bulk of the oblivious customers. She was accompanied by an older Hispanic gentleman, probably a few years younger than Keith. From our booth, I could see him clearly. He was probably six feet tall and had a thick salt and pepper mustache. He dressed in old clothes but looked dignified; his long-sleeved shirt was tucked in and buttoned all the way up. By the way he was holding his weathered cowboy hat in both hands in front of him, I could tell he was nervous.

“Hey, everybody. Listen up,” the waitress shouted, “Mr. Perez here accidently hit a Mercury Grand Marquis in the parking lot and would like to . . .”

“Aww, *shit!*” yelled Keith as he quickly grabbed his Mariners baseball hat, sunglasses, and keys and slid out of the booth as if an air raid siren went off that I couldn’t hear. I watched him blow by the waitress and Mr. Perez without acknowledgment, making a beeline to the parking lot.

“Hi. I’m Chuck,” I said while extending my hand to Mr. Perez.

“Nice to meet you. I’m very sorry about your friend’s car,” he replied in decent English.

As we walked across the parking lot, I could see a fist-sized hole near the back of a brand-new travel trailer that Mr. Perez was towing behind his Ford 250 truck. And there was Keith, lamenting inaudibly complete with jerky arm gestures beside his Grand Marquis.

As soon as Mr. Perez and I arrived, I noticed that the damage to Keith’s car was minimal. “Hey, it’s just a broken side mirror and a dent in the quarter panel,” I said.

“What were you thinking?” shouted Keith toward Mr. Perez as if a parking lot fender-bender was an all-out act of war.

“I’m very sorry about your car, and I will take care of this. I have my license and insurance information for you right here,” replied Mr. Perez.

“I’m calling the cops!” shot back Keith while pulling out his cell phone.

“But, Keith, that’ll take an hour or two since we’re out in the middle of nowhere; *plus*, he already admitted to it,” I pleaded.

“I don’t care,” Keith said, “I need to file a police report!”

At that point, I looked at Mr. Perez and sighed, “Would you like to go back into the restaurant to wait with me? Let me buy you breakfast?”

“A coffee would be nice,” replied Mr. Perez.

And with that, we left Keith at his self-appointed command post, walked back into the diner, and ordered a couple of coffees at the counter from the waitress who announced the incident just ten minutes earlier.

Mr. Perez

“I’m really sorry for the way my friend is acting,” I said to Mr. Perez who didn’t need the cream and sugar like I did. “It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s okay,” he replied while looking into his coffee cup and

smiling. “He’s doing what he thinks is right.”

After telling Mr. Perez how I came to know Keith and about his book, I asked Mr. Perez about himself and learned that he’s a family man and pastor from Arizona who makes extra money on the side hauling travel trailers for dealerships. He was soft spoken, calm, and looked twenty years younger than the seventy-seven that his license claimed. Our easy conversation ended after about an hour when Keith’s number flashed on my cell phone. “Well, the state trooper is here,” I told Mr. Perez.

This time, when we walked across the parking lot, we could see Keith bent over the hood filling out paperwork with the state trooper standing next to him. As we approached, Keith stopped what he was doing; but before he could say anything, Mr. Perez said, “Congratulations on getting your book published. Chuck said you’re an amazing writer.”

“Oh, okay. Thanks,” stammered Keith before gesturing to the officer that Mr. Perez was the offending party.

With the state of Idaho now having a record of this egregious

act of carelessness and personal assault, Keith felt satisfied enough to allow me, Mr. Perez, and the officer to resume our lives once again. As we left the parking lot to head back to Boise, I saw Mr. Perez talking on his phone, standing next to the damaged trailer. I was glad I had a business card on me to give to him in case his employers needed anything from me. If they did, I would've told them that I could only hope to act as honorable and decent as Mr. Perez did in a situation that typically brings out the worst in people.

The absence of conversation during the ride home would've normally bothered me, but it didn't this time. It gave me space to stare out into the comfort of the flatlands and realize that I really wasn't like Keith after all. His assessment and reaction to one of life's predictable moments told me that he stopped growing a long time ago. As a writer, I could only hope to be half as talented as Keith; but as a man, I aspired to be more like Mr. Perez. And when Keith's wounded Grand Marquis crested the next hill on I-84, I could see the colossal Stage Stop sign in the only functional side mirror on the car. The other dangled precariously from twisted plastic and electrical cords on Keith's side.

Conclusion

As I rode my bike along the greenbelt, shaded from the blistering summer sun by the cottonwood trees that lined this section of the Boise River, I almost didn't see Keith up ahead. He was walking in the same direction as me and looking down, probably noticing the same thing I was – cottonwood seeds so plentiful that they lined the side of the path closest to the swiftly flowing river like misplaced sea foam.

I hadn't seen Keith for a couple of months and thought about stopping to talk about these fascinating trees with him. But just as I was about to come up beside him, I thought better of it and kept going. I'm not even sure if he recognized me as I didn't look back. *How freaking ironic*, I remember thinking to myself. *Just like Keith's novel, our relationship was its own dystopian story with an ending nobody would like.* And when the path veered away from the river, away from the shade, I also remember thinking, *That's real life.*

I never spoke to Keith again after our last breakfast at the Stage Stop but his incredible novel remains as one of the best books I've ever read.

Chapter 5: Abby

This is a story about Abby who not only gave me the perfect opportunity to ‘pay it forward,’ she taught me that true humility is without a trace of defensiveness, accusation, or excuses.

From inside the cramped lobby that could barely accommodate the receptionist let alone a small couch and a glass trophy case displaying several years of manufacturing awards for excellence, I watched Abby leave the building and head toward her white sedan and wondered if she’d return to work on Monday. Although it was a cloudless Friday morning in Southern California, Abby walked as if she was caught in an unexpected rain shower as her gait was brisk and efficient. With her head bent down and her gaze focused on the pavement in front of her, I couldn’t see her face; but when she opened her car door and turned to sit behind the wheel, I could see she was still crying. My heart went out to her but I remained behind the tinted windows wondering to myself, *Would this work for Abby like it did with me?*

Woolworths

Despite having walked down South Wayne Avenue toward the center of town many times to play arcade games at the local pizza place and to the Wayne train station to secretly take the 25-minute ride into Philadelphia's Center City, I remember feeling extra chipper and excited on that particular Saturday morning in the summer of 1980. I was on my way to the first day of my second real job since having been unceremoniously fired from the first for eating too much. In my defense, who puts an always-ravenous fifteen-year-old kid behind the deli counter at a meat market and *not* expect him to stuff roast beef slices into soft, fresh baguettes and wash them down with chocolate milk when no one was looking?

It took some doing, but I managed to get another job at Woolworths, a two-story midsized department store that included a lunch counter on the street level and a pet center in the basement. Thankfully, the store was about four blocks from the meat market so it was unlikely for me to run into the understandably miffed Italian-speaking owners who might be seeking street justice for all the pilfered cold cuts. Mrs. Gross, the no-nonsense micromanager of Woolworths who looked

like Shelley Long of *Cheers*, was only giving me this chance because my older sister had successfully worked at the store before opting for a better paying job at Bloomingdale's in nearby King of Prussia Mall.

As I walked past the empty storefronts on Lancaster Avenue, I could see my reflection in the darkened windows of places like Harrison's where I turned my yardwork and caddying money into school clothes; and Wayne Sporting Goods where the smell of new sneakers and leather baseball gloves would excite my nose and intoxicate my mind with fantasies of shooting a buzzer beater, hitting a walk-off homerun, or kicking the game-winning goal on a wild breakaway. But the self-conscious fifteen-year-old with bad posture walking beside me in the glass knew that wasn't going to happen since boys like me understood that imagination and hard work would be our ticket to hoisting accolades and commandeering the limelight. In my case, the road to glory would begin with me cleaning animal cages and stocking shelves for Mrs. Gross. With Woolworths being the next storefront, I stopped and took one last look at myself in the stationery store window. I brushed the hair from my eyes, stood up straight and walked the rest of the way thinking about my future acceptance

speeches and hall of fame inductions.

Not What I Was Expecting

My whole body seemed to jolt when the glass entrance door to Woolworths didn't budge when I pushed against it while in full stride. *There goes my grand entrance*, I thought to myself. I was still rubbing my shoulder when I heard the lock turn and saw Mrs. Gross on the other side of the glass. For an instant, I thought I was in love. Her blonde shoulder length hair was perfectly styled with a tantalizing body wave that shimmered even though the early morning sun was playing hard to get behind the buildings across the street. As she focused on pulling the key out of the lock mechanism, I saw she was wearing a shade of blue eyeshadow that almost matched the color of her cotton dress. When she opened the door, a soft breeze rushed toward me, carrying with it the distinctive scent of rose petals mixed with lavender. *Ahh, yes, I remember thinking, that same pleasant smell from a couple of days earlier when I met with her to talk about the job.*

As soon as she stepped out onto the sidewalk toward me, the violins that were beautifully playing Nino Rota's "Love

Theme” from *Romeo and Juliet* in my mind suddenly came to a screeching halt. In its place, I heard the more sobering sound of a needle scratching across a spinning record when she said, “Good. You’re on time. Here you go.”

Reluctantly, I took the broom from her and remember thinking, *Hey, wait a sec. What about stocking the shelves and checking on the animals? You know . . . the fun stuff?* Mrs. Gross was clearly not sharing the fantasy of us running in slow motion, hand in hand along a warm beach somewhere in the Caribbean since she wasted no time in telling me that she needed the sidewalk and the parking area in front of the store to be swept up before 9:00 a.m.

Attitude

As suddenly as she appeared, Mrs. Gross twirled around, making her bright blue dress briefly cling to her legs as they marched her right back into the dimly lit store that was forty-five minutes away from opening. From outside, I watched her fade to black as she disappeared down the cosmetics aisle toward her office which was reached by a flight of stairs that began behind a locked white door. Her office seemed to lord

over the store since it was an open loft that gave her a view so advantageous it would make machine gunners jealous. You didn't need to see her office to know that her desk chair had wheels on it because she moved around on it like a short-order cook trying to keep up with ticket orders from a hungry lunch crowd anxious about returning to work on time. I remember thinking, *What is she doing up there?*

Left to my own thoughts about having to sweep this enormous area within the retreating shadows of the buildings across the street using a broom that was no bigger than the one I used in the kitchen at home, I thought about how unfair this was. I felt blindsided, like the sucker in the timeless 'bait and switch' con game. *Have I not proven to the world by now that I'm capable of handling assignments with complexities that go beyond gathering trash?* I lamented to myself. As I worked my way from the sidewalk to the parking lot, I kept thinking about all the little critters that I wanted to play around with and the boxes of merchandise sitting on wooden pallets that needed to be brought upstairs and distributed to a staff comprised of older ladies who often reminded you of their tenure with the store.

Just as the nearby church bells began chiming at the top of the hour, I heard that familiar sound of the key turning the lock; but this time, Mrs. Gross was doing the same with the other glass door and making sure both were left wide open. “Great. Time for the fun stuff,” I mumbled to myself while sauntering toward my secret crush.

“Give me the broom,” she said.

Hmm, she’s clearly not feeling the love this morning, I thought to myself as I handed it to her.

“Terrible job, Charlie. I watched you the whole time and not only do I still see cigarette butts here and there, you looked like you were being punished. Why is that?” she asked.

While pretending my face wasn’t crimson red from mortification, I thought about explaining the discrepancy between what I was currently doing and what I had been hired to do but only managed a pathetic, “I’m . . . I’m sorry, Mrs. Gross.”

Normally, my heartfelt apologies were like insider stock tips

from reliable sources – money in the bank on any given day. But on this Saturday morning, my apology didn't seem to be doing the trick as Mrs. Gross, now in a white cardigan that matched her wedge sandals, looked directly into my eyes, through my brain and down my spine and said, "I'm not sure if you really want this job, Charlie. I want you to go home and think about whether or not you want to work here."

Flabbergasted, I stammered, "Am I fired?"

"It's up to you," she said. "Come back on Monday at the same time and show me what it means to you to work here." And with that, she left me in the middle of the sidewalk feeling about as tall as the missed cigarette butts that bore witness to this latest humiliation.

Instead of retracing my steps back home where I'd be forced to explain my brief work day, I started walking eastbound along Lancaster Avenue toward my old elementary school, St. Katherine of Siena, where I could hide and collect myself in the shady, arboretum-like grotto that separated the rectory from the schoolyard. From a small, wooden bench that sat under the heaviest and fullest branches of the canopy above, I

remember looking up and seeing the leaves flutter from the mild breeze. Their sound reminded me of simpler times like when I walked in the ‘Stations of the Cross’ procession through this grotto with my fifth-grade class – the boys in their white short-sleeve shirts and clip-on blue ties and the girls in matching blouses and plaid skirts – all of us with our hands pressed together in front of us, trying to look somber and reflective during the hour-long Catholic observance.

When I started to feel hungry, I left the grotto and took the slightly longer route home so I could look at the big lawns and stately homes along Pembroke Avenue. As I got closer to home, a sigh of relief escaped me when I didn’t see the red pick-up truck in the driveway. *How lucky*, I thought to myself as I hastily ran up the backstairs into the kitchen; but before I could take one bite of my peanut butter sandwich, I heard a suspicious sounding, “Back already?”

“It was only training stuff today. I start for real on Monday,” I replied convincingly to no one in particular.

And with that, I took a bite and made a mental note to add Mrs. Gross’ name to the list of people I’ll need to thank when Bob

Costas eventually asks me, “Charlie, America wants to know how did you do it? How did you win it all?”

Monday

Having learned the hard way last time, I opted to knock on the glass door. After a few minutes, I watched Mrs. Gross slowly emerge into view since Woolworths was still dark without the main lights turned on. She was wearing the same wedges but not the same dress. It was in the same style as the blue one except it was magenta and reminded me of the bright colors worn by Caribbean musicians as they beat their steel drums to the delight of love-struck honeymooners silhouetted against the setting sun. But this tempting and sumptuous thought didn't last long as I needed to show Mrs. Gross that I could hone more than just my infatuation skills. After all, I was the reigning odd-job king in my neighborhood *because* I was hardworking, diligent, and thorough.

While unlocking the door with her right hand, her left was holding the infamous broom. There was a soft smile on her face, too, which when combined with the appearance of the broom, assured me that I was being given another shot at the

job. “Good morning. Glad you’re back, Charlie. Here you go,” she said while handing me a second chance. Despite the sidewalk and parking lot having collected at least twice as much debris over the weekend, I was determined to impress Mrs. Gross. When the church bells starting ringing, I heard the familiar sound of the entrance doors being unlocked and opened. By the time I turned around, I saw that she was already surveying the parking area. She must have had the eyes of an eagle since she didn’t need to leave the sidewalk to pick out a wayward cigarette butt or bottle cap. *You won’t find a single one*, I thought to myself.

Waving me over toward her, I prepared myself for a glowing review but instead heard Mrs. Gross say, “Follow me to the loading dock. I need you to bring some inventory upstairs.” And with that, I followed her downstairs basking in the warmth of redemption while savoring the smell of rose petals mixed with lavender.

The A Team

By the summer of 1989, I exchanged my research position in the genetics laboratory of a small start-up in Southern

California for an open spot within the cell culture department of the company's one and only drug manufacturing facility. One would *have* to think how privileged they were to be given this opportunity. After all, it produced one of the most expensive raw materials in the world – a genetically engineered biotech drug with far reaching health benefits that only 1915's aspirin could rival. The drug *literally* improved the quality of life for tens of thousands virtually overnight while saving the U.S. Federal Government billions of dollars.

Exclusivity to manufacture such a wonder drug for anemia patients around the world was obtained through no small effort. The legal patent that was awarded to the company came with sobering fine print that read, 'Failure to provide the drug material in accordance with demand will result in patent forfeiture.' And making matters even more apprehensive, the facility was designed and built with limited computer processing controls which made it easier for the Food and Drug Administration to license and approve yet exposed the manufacturing process to more potential human errors. To reduce this risk factor, the company needed to hire the cream of the crop who not only had a molecular biology background but who had a work ethic bordering on perfection. As demand

for the drug product steadily increased, the facility kept up by expanding and adding new equipment. Eventually, the manufacturing staff needed to expand along with it, and the cell culture department was no exception.

Abby

I took one last look at myself in the full-length mirror that hung beside the door that separated the CLEAN locker room from the ULTRA clean production area of the manufacturing facility. By now, I was used to wearing a hairnet, facemask, safety glasses, jumpsuit, gloves, and knee-high booties, but I wanted to make sure everything was just right since my boss of three years, Eric, wanted me to come into the plant to meet newly hired Abby since she'd be reporting to me.

From the locker room, I walked into the airlock, a small antechamber with an entrance and exit that prevents unfiltered outside air from entering the production facility. While I waited for the green LED light on the wall to illuminate, signaling that I was clear to proceed into the plant, I remember how annoyed I was at not being part of Abby's interview process. "If she's reporting to me, why wasn't I given a say?"

I mumbled to myself as I left the airlock.

Once inside, I could see the facility was in full swing with manufacturing associates ironically looking like clones of one another. Determining ‘who was who’ was hard for most but not for me thanks to NOT knowing I needed glasses until my fifth-grade math teacher, Mrs. Belisario, knocked on our front door at dinnertime informing my parents that I couldn’t see anything on the chalkboard. *So that explains all the baseballs and frisbees I took to the face*, I had thought to myself as I eavesdropped on the conversation. Because I spent the first 10 years of my life having to identify people from how their particular ‘fuzzy blob’ moved, I was able to pick out Eric almost immediately.

He was standing next to a tallish girl who obviously chose a white Tyvek jumpsuit that was at least a size too large for her frame. Besides her baggy appearance and perpetual, easy smile, I was taken aback by greenish-blue eyes so translucent that they reminded me of sunlit glacier ice that I’d seen up-close during a summer kayaking trip in Alaska. After Eric made the obligatory introductions, he turned to me and said, “You take it from here, Chuck, okay?” And before I could

answer him back, he softly clapped his hands together and was already two to three steps removed from Abby and I as if he had just broken the huddle after calling our next play.

As it turns out, Eric *was* a successful high school quarterback in New Mexico who not only eerily resembled John Elway, he possessed the same kind of leadership skills that made him popular, successful, and legendary given his heroics during challenging times in the plant.

By the time the tour concluded in front of the formula-tion area, the last production step of the facility, Abby and I had established a pleasant, friendly rapport. Besides learning that she had a microbiology degree from the University of California in Santa Barbara, I also found out that she was commuting from that distance as well. Next, we walked back to the Cell Culture area so I could set her up in one of the cramped office vestibules so she could begin the soul-crushing task of reading countless Standard Operating Procedures until her brains oozed out of her ears like runny oatmeal.

As I gathered the ridiculously huge binders for her, several staffers and recent new hires approached and introduced

themselves to Abby. One of them was Robert, a new hire with roughly six months under his belt who also reported to me. Little did Abby know at the time that Robert had set the bar for every new hire. If Robert was a baseball player, he'd be Pete Rose because he was the "Charlie Hustle" of our department; plus, he had a great attitude and likeable demeanor.

Once Abby settled down from the rush of meeting so many new faces and began reading in earnest, I decided it was time for me to get started on other work. From halfway through the heavy door that allowed occupants of this shared office space to see the production floor when shut, I reminded her that training would start the following day. And before the door closed behind me, sealing Abby inside with her gargantuan reading assignment, I suggested to her, "You might want to try going down a size on the jumpsuit."

Training Day

When Abby walked into the Cell Culture production area the next morning almost five minutes late, I opted *not* to make a show of my annoyance at her tardiness by averting my eyes

from the clock on the wall above the heavy maroon double doors and from the fifteen-dollar Timex on my wrist. Instead, I reminded the unyielding drill sergeant inside of me that she's new and said, "Good morning, Abby. Ready to learn how to clean some tanks?" We walked down the main corridor to the Media Batching Room which also housed a monstrosity called the 'Clean in Place (CIP) System.' When this ingenious behemoth was operating, the sheer size of it, along with its thunderous sound, reminded me of something you'd expect to find behind the big red curtain with the great and powerful Wizard of Oz.

With its four, huge stainless-steel tanks, miles of suspended insulated piping going every which way before disappearing into the walls, and an intimidating operator panel that made you think you wandered past your paygrade into mission control, the CIP system cleaned stationary tanks and pipes throughout the building like a remote dishwasher. Just as I finished explaining how this engineering marvel functioned, complete with sound effects and a lot of hand gesturing, I watched Abby yawn and shift her slouch from one side to the other. "Tired today?" I asked.

“No, no. I’m okay,” replied Abby while stifling yet another yawn.

Throughout that first day and for the next two weeks, I watched Abby yawn, slouch, and look more like a disinterested and detached middle-aged woman processing driver license renewal forms behind window five at the local DMV than a manufacturing associate privileged with the honor of producing a human therapeutic that makes anemia patients react like Popeye when he eats his spinach! I also noticed that Abby wasn’t taking any notes or asking many questions during her training. Hints like, “You might want to write this down” or “This is important to remember,” were met with a half-hearted and mumbled, “Okay, I got it.” Several times, Robert would be in the same area when I was training Abby; and from over her shoulder, I could see his patented pantomimed eye-rolls, shoulder shrugs, and head shakes as he heard and sensed my mounting frustration with Abby’s lackadaisical approach toward a job that was on the forefront of both science *and* history.

I guess it’s fair to say that I ‘drank the Kool-Aid’ when it came to the company that discovered and manufactured a synthetic

form of erythropoietin, a hormone that increases the rate of production of red blood cells in response to falling levels of oxygen in the tissues. Hired in 1989, I was fortunate enough to attend all-staff meetings where the company co-founder and legendary pioneer of biotechnology, George Rathmann, openly wept as he spoke about how the drug was improving the quality of people's lives who otherwise suffered the effects of having little to no energy to work, play, or care for their families. Back in those days, there were only about 300 staff members. In later years, when the staff had increased to over 22,000 members, I would often annoy my newer colleagues with comments like, "Could you imagine going to an all-staff meeting where you hugged everyone around you and wiped tears from your eyes when it concluded?" or "Can you imagine working at a company that was grossing over a billion dollars in sales *without* voicemail *or* email?"

Desperate Measures

I was both excited and nervous when I left Eric's office on Thursday afternoon. One of the many reasons that made him such a terrific boss was that he was willing to listen and try new things. There was a lot riding on this tactic since failure

meant I misjudged the situation and unwittingly sullied my boss' stellar reputation in what could end up being played out in Human Resources. But still, I was pretty confident that it would help put an end to Abby's dispassionate and lackluster effort.

On that cloudless Friday morning back in 1992, I waited in the breakroom for Abby to show up for work. I liked sitting in there as the usual early bird characters would sip their coffee from paper cups, occasionally blurting out something noteworthy or ridiculous from the newspaper spread out before them. Through the north-facing oversized windows, I watched Abby park, get out of her car and walk across the main thoroughfare that snaked through the quiet business park; but before she reached the entrance to the breakroom, I went outside.

If you were watching the two of us from inside the breakroom, you would've seen a lot of hand gesturing from me and a perplexed, worrisome look on Abby's face. If you were sitting at the metal picnic table that was adjacent to Abby and I, you would've heard me say, "Hi Abby. Good morning. Do you think we could talk in the lobby conference room?"

Then you would've heard her say, "Am I in trouble?"

"No, Abby. I just want to talk to you privately," I replied. Next, I gestured with my left arm as if I was saying, "Ladies first," when I was actually trying to indicate, "Let's go to the conference room, now."

The conference room was a cozy little space that could seat about 10 people comfortably around the light-colored oak table. It had a south-facing small window and a large perfectly square second window that looked directly into the Cell Culture production area. Abby chose to sit in the chair that was in front of the square window which allowed me to see everyone from our department getting ready for work just over her left shoulder.

As soon as I sat down across from her, Abby asked, "Am I being fired?"

I immediately told her, "No, Abby," and continued with, "I just want to talk to you about your effort since starting here a couple of weeks ago."

“Oh god. I *am* being fired!”

“No, you’re not,” I said. Then came the tears.

I remember noticing that her eye color still had that shimmering, translucent quality despite being embedded in teary-eyed redness.

Channeling what Mrs. Gross had instilled in me when I was fifteen years old, I recounted what I had observed from Abby since the beginning and asked her to return home and think about whether or not she wanted to work here, finishing with, “I’m not sure if you really want this job, Abby.”

Flabbergasted, she stammered, “But I have work to do today.”

“I’ll do your work today,” I said. “I just want you to think about what I told you this morning over the weekend and come back on Monday and show me what working here means to you, okay?”

After several attempts to convince me that she was ready to show me *now*, Abby finally abandoned her resistance and

acquiesced to what I was asking of her.

When she stood up to gather her things from the conference room table, I could see the prying eyes of my masked co-workers stealing glances that reminded me of curious looky-loos trying to appear nonchalant as they slowed down to take in and assess a roadside accident scene. I waited for Abby to exit the room first and followed her to the lobby door. “See you Monday,” I said as I opened the door for her.

And without looking at me, Abby quickly replied, “Okay,” and began her weekend one day earlier than expected.

As soon as I got into the plant, I poked my head into Eric’s office and found him reviewing a manufacturing batch record for discrepancies and deviations as he had a keen eye for finding any before they were sent to Quality Assurance for final review. Before I could say anything, he said, “How did it go?”

“She definitely got the message; but I guess we’ll see on Monday,” I replied. And with that, I closed the door and walked toward the Media Batching Room to fire up the Great

Cleaning Beast as my mind kept replaying everything I said to Abby.

Monday

If you've ever looked at someone who appeared *so* tired that you thought to yourself that they needed to go home and sleep for a week, then you would've thought the exact opposite if you watched Abby walk into the Cell Culture production area through the airlock on that Monday morning. She looked like she had just returned from a weeklong spa vacation at one of those resorts where they offer you peppermint tea, fancy salads and yoga in between face and body treatments. Her smile was bright and her eyes flashed more aqua than blue – even her posture was different. By the time she walked up to me with a notepad in one hand and a pen in the other, I knew I didn't need to say a word about Friday.

As I was showing her how to sanitize production tanks and supply lines in the Harvest Area, home to the last steps of the cell culture process, questions and comments from Abby were coming so fast and so furiously, it seemed she had concocted and drank something similar to a Red Bull or Monster energy

drink. I remember thinking to myself, *Take it easy, Sparky. Don't you think you're pouring it on a tad too thick?* But Abby was really trying and I didn't have the heart to become the wet blanket to her newfound motivation. Part of me wanted to shout, "Slow down! Pace yourself!" as if she was an overzealous marathoner who started out way too fast as soon as the starting gun went off. Would I be salvaging the wreckage on Mile 18? Or becoming the president of her fan club when she crossed the finish line in record time? "We shall see," I said to myself just as Abby was correctly configuring the buffer tank sanitization cycle on her first attempt.

Afterward

For the next several weeks and beyond, Abby's dedication, punctuality, and attention to detail rivaled that of our own Pete Rose. Neither Robert nor I could believe her remarkable turnaround as she left us scratching our heads while she dashed around the plant becoming integral to the department and a friend to all. Whereas my career path drifted toward business management, Abby's trajectory continued to rise with each and every promotion she earned. Was I surprised when she became a manager in the manufacturing facility?

No. What about when she became the director of supplier quality? Not a chance. How about her role as director of global operations? Okay, okay – I might've *briefly* raised my eyebrows!

Sure, I may be the unofficial president of Abby's fan club for having watched her professional ascension and success from the sidelines – but so did a lot of other people. What many didn't know was that Abby tipped her hand way back in 1992. If you were paying attention, you would've seen a humble, hardworking, intelligent, and all-around good person – holding a natural straight flush and, of course, all hearts.

Today, Abby is the Vice President and General Manager of a respected and innovative biotech company on the east coast.

Chapter 6: Samuel

This is NOT a story about how I was able to leverage inside information to gain the cooperation of a logistics warehouse manager; it's a story about an exceptional man named Samuel Diaz who, in 1999, showed me that real loyalty isn't earned by amassing points from a company's rewards program.

Despite the employee parking lot being nearly empty, I chose a path toward my rental car that looked as if it was charted by someone who had enjoyed too many happy-hour mojitos than a guy who had just finished working out. Had I known that afternoon showers on this side of the island were a daily occurrence in Puerto Rico, I wouldn't have packed my good shoes for this business trip. By the time I walked out of the gym, a space more utilitarian than motivating, productivity from the adjacent office area as well as the tropical downpour had ceased leaving me to circumnavigate the numerous puddles that innocently disguised ankle-twisting, shoe-ruining potholes.

Good god! I remember thinking when I opened the car door to

toss my briefcase and gym bag into the back seat. Even after two weeks of making the drive from San Juan to Juncos, the smell inside the compact silver Mazda was like a donkey kick to the face. I was convinced that a gruesome murder had taken place in this car and, despite Hertz's best cleaning efforts, the constant humidity made sure I drove with all the windows down.

I was looking forward to another weekend of bouncing between swims in the Ritz-Carlton pool and runs on the adjoining beach, but my excitement was tempered by the fact that I had only one more week to get this logistics project greenlighted in Puerto Rico or I was headed back to Los Angeles to map out accounting workflows at the company's headquarters. I had gained the support of all but one key manager who was masterful at dodging my meeting requests. I just couldn't figure out why Samuel Diaz was avoiding me.

As I spun around in the driver's seat to fish out a bottle of water from my gym bag to sip on during the 30-minute drive back to San Juan, I couldn't believe what I saw through the rain-washed back window. At first, I didn't think it was him because there were too many tropical bushes obscuring my

view; but when he jogged under the blooming Flamboyant tree that spanned part of the road, I knew it was Samuel. *Oh my god. I still have a chance*, I thought to myself, and proceeded to devise a plan while driving back to the capital city.

Commute

I felt like my head was on a swivel as I made my way through the posh and well-appointed lobby of the Ritz-Carlton. To my right, the mid-morning sunshine poured through a wall of glass panels that showcased a breezy and picturesque pool area that was almost too pretty to disturb. Sunlight was reflecting off the calm Caribbean water and ricocheting off the top of a polished baby grand piano, making me take notice of the coffee and continental breakfast bar that had been set up earlier. To my left, perpetually smiling front desk personnel looked to be assisting either celebrities from this part of the world or really fit hotel guests with exceptional wardrobes. “How freaking sweet is this?” I whispered to myself while making sure the plastic lid on my paper coffee cup was sealed.

It was my first morning of a business trip where I had three weeks to lay the foundation for a workflow analysis project

that would help my boss in Los Angeles with his goal of upgrading the business software for Puerto Rico's logistics organization – and keep me smelling like Coppertone for the next two years. With the coffee in one hand and my briefcase in the other, I walked out of the lobby toward the attached parking garage amidst Ritz-Carlton staffers saying things like, “Have a great day, Mr. Trunks” and “See you this evening, sir.” *Huh? How do they know my name?* I pondered while politely nodding to everyone who looked at me.

The drive to Juncos seemed pretty straight forward once I started heading south on Highway 18 through Santurce. In the rearview mirror, I could still see the tops of the other beachfront hotels that lined the condado between the airport and the colorful, duty-free shops of Old San Juan. *How surreal*, I remember thinking, *Just three days ago, I was crawling in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the 101 Freeway in Southern California, listening to KLOS's Mark and Brian on my way to work, and now my morning commute involved doing sixty toward the interior of a Caribbean island without a single English-speaking radio station to be found.*

The air conditioning was doing nothing to clear the noxious

smell that I began noticing soon after leaving the parking garage, so I had to open the windows despite a morning humidity that reminded me of sweat-soaked bedsheets during sweltering summer nights while growing up in Philadelphia. Other than the stench of my rental car, I began to notice that the posted speed limits were more of a suggestion than law. And, somewhere along the way, the road had become Highway 52; but I didn't panic because the next sign indicated that I was on my way to Caguas where I would transition to eastbound Highway 30 toward Juncos.

I don't remember if it was gratitude or relief when I saw my exit ramp emerge as I approached the modest, working-class town. For the most part, my coffee had become tepid at best since my 'fight or flight' instinct dictated that my need for survival overruled a morning caffeine addiction. Besides noticing that most cars looked indistinguishable from my compact sedan, I realized that there were only two highway speeds in Puerto Rico – either twenty miles an hour OVER the posted speed limit, or twenty miles an hour UNDER it. If I wasn't slaloming between slowpokes, I was getting the hell out of the way and bracing myself for impact.

What the hell? I asked myself as I switched off the right blinker and slowed down on the exit ramp. *No way. It CAN'T be.* On the grass, just a few feet from my driver-side window, a dead horse was on its back with all four legs sticking straight up in a way I had only seen in cartoons. *Wow. Now that's something you don't see every day.* Surprisingly, I had completely forgotten about the horse until I took the same exit the very next day. Although the deceased animal was no longer there, a large dirt mound had taken its place, making me think they buried it right there. *Umm, I guess you're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.*

The road to the drug manufacturing company was a couple of miles long and was either wide open or sporadically congested. Since my windows were down, I was overwhelmed by salsa and merengue music emanating from cars and small businesses that lined the thoroughfare. In the late afternoons, when I was on this road on my way back to San Juan, the same music could be heard; but it was disrupted from time to time by roving pickup trucks loaded with speakers that bellowed what sounded like urgent political messaging into the air. I had no idea what was being said because the words came quick and somewhat garbled; plus, my Spanish was still a work in

progress.

My hands were still on the steering wheel after I pulled into the employee parking lot when I heard someone say through my open passenger-side window, “Hola. You have to back it in.”

Startled, I said, “Huh? What? Back what in?”

“Your car,” said the smiling lady wearing a colorful dress in full makeup, “In case there’s an evacuation. It’s hurricane season, you know.”

I thanked her and proceeded to turn my car around while watching her walk with people she seemed to know well – all of them avoiding the cracks and potholes that were filled with water.

Señor Sanabia

To avoid return hassles with Hertz should there be any interior damage from the rain, I closed the car windows and opted to leave my coffee behind in hopes that it would mask the

Mazda's unmistakable stink by the time I got back in it that afternoon. Once the security officer inside the lobby of the main building confirmed my name on a list secured by a plastic clipboard that never left his hands, he scanned my driver's license and activated my temporary badge. It was still early, so I was free to roam amongst darkened offices, cubicles, and conference rooms. A fresh cup of coffee would've been nice; but there was something else on my mind. I needed to see if numero uno was there.

Hmm, if I was the top banana, I thought to myself, where would my office be? That mystery was solved in two seconds when I noticed artificial light spilling out from a slightly opened door from the corner office. Like a good soldier who heeds the advice of his superiors back in Los Angeles, I walked toward it and steadied myself for what was about to happen. My boss, who had come here several times before, told me that respect goes a long way – especially in the Puerto Rican culture. He suggested that I find and introduce myself to the General Manager, Mr. Sanabia, as soon as possible and that I had to do it in Spanish. *Ugh . . . let's get this over with,* I thought and knocked on his door as if I was trying not to disturb him.

“Con permiso, Señor Sanabia?” I asked.

“Yes. Come in!” he boomed.

His back was still turned to me when I said, “Buenos Dias. Mi nombre es Chuck Trunks.”

He didn’t stay that way for long as he spun around on his chair, leaving behind what was on his laptop. Even though he remained seated, I could tell he was of considerable size. “Buenos Dias,” he shot back.

When he folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, I took that as my cue to ‘get on with it.’ The look on his bespeckled face was a blend of both amusement and appreciation as I continued, in Spanish, telling him where I came from and why I was at his facility. Whereas the four years of high school French did absolutely nothing for me, the practice in my hotel room the night before paid off because Mr. Sanabia stood up, walked around his desk, and while extending his hand, said, “Thank you, Chuck. Welcome to Puerto Rico. Let me know if there’s anything you need.”

Magali

My second week began much differently than the first. Instead of driving with white knuckles at the ten and two o'clock positions, I was cruising to work with one hand at six o'clock and listening to music that was *way* too energetic for *any* Monday morning. When I exited the highway and joined the traffic on the boulevard that led to my job, I noticed that the radio was really loud for a guy who liked keeping a low profile – that's because I had to crank it up while on the highway since the inside of my car morphed into a wind tunnel from all four windows needing to be rolled down as far as they could go. As I crawled along with all the other morning commuters, I left the volume where it was and secretly relished adding to the musical chaos that was already crowding the air.

If there was anything to complain about, it was the windowless storage room that served as a makeshift workstation for me and two others on temporary assignments. The obnoxiously bright fluorescent lights not only made me think I was no longer in paradise but they made me want to wear the nifty beach hat that I bought in the hotel gift shop over the weekend. And since boxes of computer accessories and supplies were

stacked up against the back wall, the white folding table that served as my desk had to be pushed against the opposite wall. On the other side of that wall, about six inches from my desk, a state-of-the-art coffee machine was plugged in between two bulky laser printers.

Each time my car keys or the tray of paperclips started vibrating, I knew someone from the management area was getting a single serving of either a cappuccino, latte, café mocha, or a regular coffee. And like the nosy neighbor, Mrs. Kravitz from the television show *Bewitched*, I'd poke my head out to see who was there and seize the opportunity to introduce myself, ask questions, and schedule meetings.

It was during one of those neck-craning moments when I met the lady who told me I needed to back into the parking space on my first day. Not only was she Samuel's boss, she was a force to be reckoned with – and *not* just because she possesses the coolest sounding name in the history of mankind. Magali Franceschini, pronounced mah-GALL-lee fran-CHESS-cheenee, makes my name sound like what you'd hear if something heavy and waterlogged fell and bounced once in the next room.

She came to work in brightly colored dresses with strappy sandals, styled hair, and sat in a nicely decorated office that smelled as good as she did. Along with an almost constant smile and a readiness to laugh, I could see how she used underestimation to fuel an ability to run circles around anybody deciding to go toe-to-toe with her when it came to logistics.

Having paved an inroad to Magali's support of my project, I felt comfortable tattling on Samuel for not returning any of my emails. Incredibly, she told me, "He'll come around, Chuck. He's just really busy right now."

Just busy right now? I thought to myself. *Why can't you MAKE him meet with me? I can't do this without his help!* Defeated, I said, "I understand. Thanks, Magali," and excused myself to go call Samuel again. But instead of his usual, "Sorry I can't take your call right now. Please leave me a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible," I listened to a computer voice say, "The voice mailbox is full. Goodbye."

Lunchtime

Despite an employee cafeteria that rivaled the aesthetics and selections at most mall food courts, I still preferred to pack and bring my lunch from home when I was back at company headquarters in Los Angeles. Invites to join others for lunch slowly dried up as my responses were always the same, “No thanks. Maybe next time.” Although frugality and convenience played a part in each dismissal, I liked eating by myself during non-peak hours in the spacious and quiet atmosphere of the cafeteria. If you happened to notice me trying to hide way over in the corner, you’d see someone hunched over the spread-out sports section of the *Los Angeles Times*, eating what looked more befitting for a middle schooler than a fully grown man.

Anxiety, coupled with an unwillingness to tempt fate, kept me from getting back into my fetid Mazda to drive across the street to the only recognizable and healthy lunch option – a Subway sandwich shop in a crumbling strip mall with seemingly more loiterers than customers. When my Puerto Rican colleagues *could* shame me into going to Subway with them, I was always amazed at how they wouldn’t flinch at

finding themselves at the back of the line with at least twelve to fifteen customers in front of us. I'd be thinking, *Oh well, I guess we'll be heading back to the employee cafeteria, right? Wait. What? We're actually going to do this? Are you crazy? We'll have two minutes to inhale our food before it's time to get back to the office!* But after reminding myself that I'm a guest on this beautiful island, I thought better of telling my new work friends that I'd do an about-face even if there were only *three* people in front of me. Instead, I spent the next forty minutes in line shifting my weight from one leg to the other and feeling ashamed of my self-importance while watching how patient and polite everyone was to one another.

Having lunch at the employee cafeteria in Puerto Rico was like eating lunch at its counterpart in Los Angeles – if the theme was ‘opposite day.’ The first thing I noticed was that the space was huge and white – blindingly white. Immediately, my eyes took refuge in what was on the other side of a bank of six-foot windows that nearly went the entire length of the east-facing wall. With pupils that could open once again, I saw an explosion of deep green hues, a tropical landscape dominated by plants with leaves larger than the plastic cafeteria tray I was holding in my hands. The natural lushness on the outside

calmed my mind, but it also served to amplify the sterile, industrial feel of this enormous room.

Although I had run my last marathon two years earlier, I still ran each day and put thought into what went into my body. That's pretty much the reason why my tray would slide past most entrées and stop at the same thing every time. It's amazing how finger pointing coupled with facial expressions can replace the need to say anything – especially when your Spanish makes you sound like a five-year-old. But eventually, I started saying, “Hola. Buenas tardes. Me gustaria el pollo, habichuelas y el arroz blanco, por favor,” and successfully receiving a plate of roasted chicken with beans and rice from the grinning lady in the hairnet behind the counter.

Finding an empty table wasn't a problem since the staff, comprised mostly of manufacturing personnel, took their lunch breaks in shifts. I'm sure I looked pretty odd sitting far away from everyone, but it was the price I was willing to pay in order to lose myself inside the sports section of the *USA TODAY*, which was snagged off of the Ritz-Carlton's front desk on my way to work each morning. Even now, looking back on my time spent in the cafeteria in Puerto Rico, I don't

think I ever got the chance to open and spread out my newspaper – let alone read it. That’s because a shadow would fall across my lunch within minutes of sitting down, prompting me to find its source.

“You can sit with us, yes?” asked one of the uniformed production associates.

“Si. Gracias. Me gustasria eso,” I replied.

The next thing I knew, I was having lunch with seven or eight part-time Spanish tutors. When I wasn’t making them laugh at my gringo pronunciations, I was answering their questions, in English, about the company’s headquarters in Los Angeles. It must’ve had quite the reputation because they looked at me as if I was describing the Emerald City in the Land of Oz.

Even though I was sitting in the middle of a full and spirited table, surrounded by other full and spirited tables, I could still take in a good portion of the cafeteria’s comings and goings. In between mouthfuls of rice and conversation, I was struck by the sight of managers, even officers from the senior management team, having lunch with the manufacturing staff.

It wasn't hard to notice since their dresses, pleated pants, and button-down shirts contrasted sharply against the monochromatic uniforms of those who punched a timeclock. It reminded me of earlier times when the company was just a hopeful start-up in Los Angeles, before the executives starting eating in their own cafeteria.

It was during one of those early lunches when I first saw Mr. Sanabia walk into the cafeteria. Compared to the entourage that seemed to always surround him, he was a huge individual who walked with a cachet that made you believe he ate lunch with the Governor of Puerto Rico but still kept his friends from the old neighborhood. Since I was fresh off the first season of HBO's *The Sopranos*, Mr. Sanabia reminded me of James Gandolfini's iconic character, Tony Soprano, because I could see him going out of his way to help you if he liked you or banish you from the island if he didn't.

Not always, but sometimes, I'd see Magali and Samuel amongst the group that accompanied the bigger-than-life general manager. Whereas she looked like the owner of a chain of fashion boutiques in Miami, Samuel reminded me of a high school driver education teacher since he appeared much

more subdued than the others, as if nothing could surprise him. He was taller than most, fit and wore an expression that said he was ‘all in’ if you were talking to him. And each time the collection of company A-listers walked past my lunch table with Samuel leaning in toward what Magali was telling him, I quietly hoped she was saying, “Call Chuck back.”

Pueblo’s

Maybe it was my tendency to be alone since my batteries recharge that way. Or, maybe it was having to shower, smell nice, and put on long pants in order to be served meals in the hushed atmosphere of the Ritz-Carlton dining room. It was the same deal at the other fancy hotels within walking distance along the condado. I didn’t make a fuss since I, too, would’ve said, “Sorry, sir. Please respect the dress code,” to a toweled off guy in running shorts and a tank top.

Although my company’s per diem allowed me to feast like the Sultan of Brunei, there were times that I just wanted to eat something in my hotel room since the built-in mini fridge was more than twice the size as the one I had in my dorm room back in the day. I figured it could easily accommodate an

armload of groceries from the local food mart *and* give me an opportunity to ‘do as the locals do.’ So, after a few back-and-forth exchanges with the hotel concierge, I sauntered out of the Ritz-Carlton lobby with a map to the nearby town of Las Palmas penciled on the back of a spa treatment menu.

The parking lot at Pueblo’s almost made me turn around. Not only were there groups of people just hanging out, some even brought chairs to make the ‘hanging out’ more comfortable! I remember thinking, *What the hell? Are they selling stuff out of the trunk of their cars? Do I just hand over my car keys and wallet peacefully?* A part of me wanted to leave the Mazda unlocked and running in the hopes that I would be forever done with the daily assault of whatever was decomposing inside of it. Instead, I turned the engine off, locked the doors, and took comfort in knowing that the world hadn’t hardened me to the point where I’d subject another human being to the evil stench that seemed to be gaining strength inside what had to be a possessed automobile.

Once inside the supermarket, I realized that, along with the Caribbean dance music, the loitering wasn’t relegated to just the parking lot. Even though the various clusters of locals

congregating in the aisles weren't seated in chairs and only one song could be heard over the store's sound system instead of six emanating simultaneously from random car radios in the parking lot, I still felt an unease with the islanders who seemed to make Pueblo's a destination rather than an errand. A quick survey of the store's offerings and I was immediately reminded of television broadcasts from news reporters showing the picked over and nearly empty shelves inside grocery stores after panicked customers prepared to ride out whatever calamity was headed their way. *Umm, did I miss the state of emergency declaration?* I thought while pushing my cart past a dozen or so cereal choices, *Magali DID say it was hurricane season.*

After managing to find most of what I was looking for, I once again found myself at least ten deep in a slow-moving line – and it didn't look any better at the other two open checkout registers. When the line didn't move an inch for the first ten minutes, I had to see what the hell was going on up there.

Since my Mrs. Kravitz act worked pretty well in the office, I didn't hesitate leaving my cart to walk toward the front of the line to pick up and start flipping through the Spanish version

of a *People* magazine, looking like I actually cared about the relationship between Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony. While my eyes were pretending to be fixated on a picture of them frolicking in the waves while vacationing in Barbados, my peripheral vision was shocked to see that the cashier was ‘catching up’ with her friend at the front of the line, and they were taking their sweet time about it.

On the outside, I looked like a guy who was worried that his ice cream was melting; but on the inside, I was ready to stage an uprising of biblical proportions, complete with pitch forks and lit torches. After all, the cashier’s casual indifference was an act of war! But as I spun around to look at the gentleman next in line, expecting his eyes to say, “Let’s take this store down, bro,” I saw that he and the next eight customers had the same calm and patient look that my work colleagues had at Subway. *I’m either in a Twilight Zone episode or I need to calm the hell down*, I thought while putting the glossy magazine back on the rack. And by the time I reclaimed my cart and hung my head in utter surrender, I noticed a little puddle on the floor. It was directly beneath my ice cream.

With my escapade to Pueblo’s told a few times to my peers at

the office the next day, I was informed that I wasn't in danger of being carjacked or robbed. They laughed as they explained how social interaction is like oxygen to most Puerto Ricans and that the grocery store is the perfect place to catch up with friends and neighbors. "Okay, but what about the near empty shelves?" I asked.

"That's the way it always looks," replied Sammy from the IT support group who had visited the Emerald City a few times before. "Puerto Ricans don't need fifty different brands of anything to choose from. It's too stressful."

Up until I went to the cafeteria for lunch that day, I had forgotten what Sammy had said about choices; yet, it was all I could think about after sitting down to eat. On the table in front of me was my eighth consecutive midday meal of roasted chicken with beans and rice.

Emilio

I didn't officially meet Emilio Rivera until my second week in Puerto Rico because he either didn't like coffee or the coffee machine on the other side of the wall from my desk had a twin

I didn't know about. When we were finally introduced, Emilio and I almost jinxed ourselves by saying the same thing at the same time, "Hi. Nice to meet you. I've seen you around." The awkwardness of that was pretty funny, making us both laugh at the same time.

Emilio looked more like a recently retired major league baseball infielder than the Vice President of Site Operations. At the time, I was a fairly decent driveway basketball player, but this guy looked like he could smoke me while wearing a suit and dress shoes. Most surprising was the sound of his voice. Imagine perpetually sounding like you were recovering from having cheered like crazy in the stands for two to three hours the night before; but in Emilio's case, the raspy quality of it complimented his natural earnestness since he had to commit even more to what he was saying.

A few days later, after a two-hour logistics all-staff meeting where I learned that Magali reported to him, Emilio asked if I wanted to join him and a few other people from the meeting to go see a professional basketball game that evening in San Juan. I immediately wondered, *Are there NBA games in Puerto Rico?* but ended up asking, "Is Samuel going?"

“He might. Not sure yet who can make it,” he replied.

“Sure. That sounds great,” I said.

And as he headed off in the direction of his next appointment, Emilio promised that he’d email the details that afternoon. “Awesome!” I called out just before he disappeared around the corner. *This might be the break I was waiting for, I thought. Nothing like a little male bonding during a sporting event to break the ice, right?*

Jose Miguel Agrelot Coliseum looked nothing like the Forum in Los Angeles where I had seen plenty of Laker games featuring legends, Shaquille O’Neal and Kobe Bryant; yet it was filled with the same thumping energy that was typically earmarked for a deciding game of an NBA playoff series. It was a lot smaller and reminded me of ESPN segments showing raucous, sellout crowds that would fill high school gymnasiums to watch a young Kobe put on a spectacle.

Samuel was nowhere to be seen, but that became more than okay once the game between the Bayamon Cowboys and the Santurce Crabbers tipped off. Besides the deafening crowd

noise, I soon learned that fans were *expected* to join the blatant revelry. My attempts to remain seated and offer mild applause more suitable for golf was not to be tolerated – and not just from Emilio and the others from work. Perfect strangers were urging me to stand up and at least *try* to do the cheers with them. Normally, I wouldn't give in, citing my conservative Catholic upbringing in suburban Philadelphia as a reasonable excuse to stay seated and steadfast inside my comfort zone – but even aloof grumps like me couldn't ignore what felt like a New Year's Eve party raging in the stands.

When the guy next to me decided it was time to sprint up and down the bleacher steps that separated two huge sections of the arena to further incite the crowd into a rabid frenzy, I found myself being transported back in time. Watching this perfectly normal looking Puerto Rican man wildly race up and down the stairs, his face shiny from sweat with an expression that was both joyous and determined, reminded me of the one and only Pentecostal church service I ever attended on the outskirts of Raleigh, North Carolina back in 1986. In the middle of the pastor's fiery sermon, a father of three from across the aisle calmly removed his suit jacket, scooted past his wife and began doing wind sprints up and down the carpeted aisle to

shouts of, “Amen, brother!” and “He’s got the Holy Spirit!”

Even as I walked through the Ritz-Carlton lobby the next morning to get a coffee to take with me on my drive to Juncos, I couldn’t remember who won the game or what the stakes were. “Good morning, Mr. Trunks,” said one of the front desk clerks who was also pouring himself a cup.

“Hi, Jorge. Good morning,” I responded.

“If you don’t mind me asking, where do you work?” he asked.

Although I was slightly shocked by the question, figuring the hotel staff knew everything about me, I went on to tell him where I worked and what I did while masking my caffeine intake with a few drops of cream and an obscene amount of sugar.

“Very nice, sir. Did you enjoy the game last night?” he continued.

What the hell? How would he know that? Are people from this hotel following me? I thought while replying, “I did. Thanks,

Jorge. Have a good one.” By the time I exited the parking garage with my coffee secured in the center console’s cup holder and all four windows rolled down, I was grinning because it had finally dawned on me – I sounded just like Emilio.

Samuel

Most of the plan, at least the surveillance part of it, I learned from my all-time favorite detective show, *Columbo*. With only five days left to win the support of Samuel, a midlevel manager with considerable clout and respect at the company, there was simply no room for rookie mistakes.

Once I saw that his car was still in the parking lot at 5:30 p.m., I decided to forego my treadmill run in the gym to sit in my car and see if the world’s most elusive man could be spotted running along the access road that was lined by a dozen or so gorgeous Flamboyant trees with dark red flowers that reminded me of roses. A breeze had kicked up following the afternoon rain showers, making the trees look like they were waving goodbye. When I saw Samuel on the access road at 5:45 p.m., I allowed myself just a few celebratory fist pumps

while whispering, “Bingo. He runs every day after work.”

If he's not changing and starting his run from the gym, then I need to find out where he'll finish, I thought to myself while driving over to the massive loading dock area that opened up to the warehouse. After positioning the Mazda in a way that would've made Lieutenant Frank Columbo proud, I was far enough from the loading dock to not be conspicuous but still had a clear line of sight. I didn't have to wait long because Samuel reached the loading dock at 6:10 p.m. and quickly vanished through a side door that was accessed from the same platform where pallets of unlabeled drug vials were picked up by refrigerated trucks and transported to the shipyard in Ponce. *Mission accomplished!* I thought while figuring I still had time to get a workout in at the hotel.

This time, after turning the car around toward the access road, I saw that the Flamboyant trees were no longer bent over from the wind. I hadn't notice it, but the breeze had subsided over the last forty-five minutes, making my drive back to San Juan even more splendid.

Tuesday

I couldn't make it look obvious, so I started my run at 5:20 p.m. After measuring the distance of the access road with my rental car earlier in the day, I learned that it was just over a mile long and made a complete loop around the company's Puerto Rican property.

By the time I made it to the other side of the parking lot where the access road began, I was already feeling the effects of the heaviness in the air, making me much more appreciative of the bone-dry coastal desert of Southern California. Although I fancied myself as a runner, this was anything but running. *So, THIS is what jogging must feel like if I was three-hundred-pounds with a heart condition.* I thought while making sure to avoid the cracks and potholes in the crumbling asphalt surface.

Soon, the empty road led me away from the main building which turned out to be a super structure that was once owned by a computer manufacturer. Within a few minutes, I was transported into a tropical jungle setting that made me forget about my racing heart and cement legs. It seemed like everything around me had something lush growing in it or on

it. Impossible-to-see birds rustled in the trees, many of them making a noise that sounded like they were trying to tweet the words, “Bo Peep” over and over again.

Suddenly, my utopian high was cut short and replaced by a more sobering survival instinct when I noticed several large bushes and a palm tree start to thrash back and forth. The dense, leafy jungle was only twenty feet away on my right side so *anything* could spring out of it, grab me, and drag me back into it. *Does Puerto Rico have wild boars? Packs of vicious warthogs? Oh god . . . blood thirsty panthers?* My mind raced with all kinds of grim scenarios, each ending with me being torn apart and eaten by savage beasts that wouldn’t even appreciate the lean, low-fat quality of their meal. As the road curved away from the danger that lurked beneath the thick foliage, a sense of relief began to permeate through me when I saw the loading dock come into view. My pace had increased – but so did my concern for the whereabouts of my fellow runner.

As a lifelong data junkie, I couldn’t help looking at my watch when I finished the first lap. *9:20? How pathetic!* Reassured by seeing Samuel’s car in the parking lot, I began my second

lap and shuffled toward the Flamboyant trees which were evenly spaced on either side of the access road. Their shimmering green leaves and explosive red-colored flowers made them the ultimate Christmas tree as well as the big brother of poinsettia plants. Just seeing them lifted my mood and reminded me that I was truly in another part of the world.

When I reached the section of the loop where the dreaded jungle had crept closest to the road, I kept telling myself that there was nothing to worry about. I focused on the late afternoon sun playing hide and seek behind magnificent clouds, making shadows race along the ground at deceptively high speeds. *Still no sign of Samuel*, I thought just as the rustling in the bushes began again. This time, the shaking and creaking of the heavy branches seemed almost too exaggerated, like in a *Gilligan's Island* episode where the director over emphasizes what's scaring the bejesus out of the Skipper's 'little buddy.'

The burst of speed, fueled by a rational fear of large, invisible creatures, brought me back to the parking lot in just under nine minutes. Immediately, I realized that a third lap wasn't going to be necessary since Samuel's car was gone. Sweat, feeling

more like frustration than perspiration, poured off of me as I stopped to walk the rest of the way back to the gym. “Dang it! He got me again,” I huffed. And just before I reached the door, the breeze suddenly picked up, silencing the ‘Bo Peep’ sounds from birds hidden in the trees.

Wednesday

Despite its lower trajectory in the late afternoon sky, the sun felt hot on my face as I began my first lap on the access road at 5:20 p.m. A gentle breeze made the surrounding vegetation move to a rhythm as their long shadows danced in front of my feet, making me focus even harder on the cracks and loose asphalt that wanted nothing more than to snap my ankles. I was looking down so much that I almost missed seeing Samuel start his run from the loading dock. And in a voice that channeled my inner Tom Cruise, I whispered, “It’s go time.”

My intuition was speaking loud and clear, so I didn’t hesitate reversing my direction, thinking it would look more serendipitous to be running toward Samuel. According to my calculations, I estimated intercepting the target in approximately four minutes at the outdoor basketball court

that was just as battered looking as the access road. When I first saw Samuel in the distance, I quickly deduced that we were actually going to meet where I predicted. *How am I NOT working for NASA in the physics department?* I bragged to myself. He was wearing all-purpose black shorts and a plain white t-shirt that contrasted sharply against the microfiber running shorts and matching singlet that I was wearing. Suddenly, I was embarrassed by the pink and blue striping that made it obvious they were a set.

“Oh my god! Hi, Samuel!” I said while trying hard not to overplay my hand.

“Hey, Chuck,” replied Samuel while waving in a way that didn’t say, *Leave me alone.*

“This is great. Do you mind if I run with you?” I casually asked, as if his answer had no bearing on whether or not I’d be speaking Spanish with new friends on Caribbean beaches for the next two years.

“Sure,” he said.

Yes, yes, yes! Now, don't blow it. Stick with the plan. Don't mention anything about work! I reminded myself. "Awesome. I never get to run with anyone, so this is fun," I gushed.

Our running paces were similar, so the small talk wasn't made more laborious than it already was by having to work to keep up with one another. I didn't think he was even listening to me until I told him about the menacing beasts in the jungle.

"What beasts?" he asked.

"You'll see," I answered, "We're getting close."

I couldn't have said, "Cue the menacing beasts . . . NOW!" into a walkie talkie and seen better timing. As soon as we reached the jungle section of the loop, some of the bushes began rustling and shaking.

"There! Did you see that?" I shouted while pointing.

Samuel stopped running and took a few steps toward the commotion and then looked back at me. "Come, take a look," he said.

“What? Are you crazy?” I replied.

“It’s okay,” he urged.

I followed Samuel into the jungle, up to where a three-foot machete and rescue flares would be necessary to go any farther. “Look right there,” he said while pointing toward a sunlit pocket between two bushes that weren’t completely swallowed up by the jungle.

“Huh? Really?” was all I could say as Samuel tried to hold back from laughing.

Looking back at me, through a tangle of velvety green stems and ridiculously shaped fronds, were three or four cows that looked as perplexed as me. These cows weren’t camouflaged – they weren’t even brown. They were those doe-eyed, black and white, idyllic cows that you see scattered on green hillsides in the background of dairy commercials or smiling cartoonishly from the front of milk cartons. *THESE were the pack of vicious warthogs I was worried about? I’m either watching way too much National Geographic or I need to calm the hell down.*

Now that Samuel knew that most things scared me, the conversation came easier, much more lighthearted. I didn't need to look at him to know that he was enjoying the stories about my commute, the lunch choices in the cafeteria, Pueblo's, and, of course, the basketball game. Surprisingly, he laughed easily and even shared his own observations about Puerto Rican life.

"Hear that?" I blurted out.

"Hear what?" he asked.

"Those 'Bo Peep' chirps from the trees. Do you know what kind of birds they are?"

This time, I looked at Samuel because he chuckled pretty hard while keeping up the pace. "Those aren't birds. They're frogs!" he said.

"No kidding," I replied, "Really?"

"They're little tree frogs called Coqui frogs and they start making that sound when the sun goes down," he added.

I later learned that the Coqui frog is, literally, the national symbol of Puerto Rico which made me even more grateful to Samuel for not making me feel like an ignorant philistine for limiting my pre-trip research to the lowest SPF ratings I could get away with in suntan lotions. As we approached the loading dock, nearing the completion of our third lap, Samuel peeled off toward where I saw him start his run.

“Thanks, Chuck. Have a good one,” he said as his voice trailed off.

“Want to run tomorrow after work?” I asked.

“Sure,” he shouted back at me.

“5:30 from the loading dock?” I yelled after him.

It felt like forever while I watched the back of Samuel, his stride indicating that he was a longtime runner; but I got the sign I was hoping for. He stuck his right hand out and gave me a thumbs up. As soon as I thought he couldn't see me anymore, I stopped running and started walking back to the gym. The success of that moment had to be savored; plus, I wanted to

listen to the little tree frogs singing their mating song for a little bit longer. I whistled my own version of ‘Bo Peep’ over and over, and by the time I was crossing the employee parking lot toward the gym door, I could’ve sworn they were answering me.

Thursday

Samuel was right on time. Why wouldn’t he be? He was the logistics warehouse manager for crying out loud. Whereas Samuel was wearing the same thing as the day before, I had on the same shorts but opted for a gray t-shirt with a Dr. Pepper logo in the middle of it instead of the matching tank top. We exchanged a few pleasantries while stretching and even revisited some of the funnier things that were said just twenty-four hours earlier.

The setting sun was as warm and unimpeded as the prior afternoon; yet, it felt hotter since the breeze was on hiatus. The long shadows had crept back to their normal places for this time of day, falling across the access road and making both Samuel and I keep a watchful eye on the running surface. And, without the sound of the wind rushing through the trees and

bushes, we could hear the intermittent blasts of political announcements booming from unseen sources from beyond the jungle, drowning out the little Coqui frogs, as well as *actual* birds.

I liked Samuel. He had a genuine sincerity about him that made me relax my tendency to suspect and cross-examine. Most interesting was the way he looked while being spoken to. His expression reminded me of a pilot who's mentally trying to guess the weight of his passengers before they board his small twin-engine commuter plane. To me, it seemed like he measured everything that was said to him before applying it to a trusted, internal algorithm that predicted whether or not you were worth his time.

After the usual, "God, it's hot," and "Ugh, I'm so stiff," the conversation became more personal and was only interrupted when we ran past the jungle section. I had to smile at the thought of nearsighted cows bumping into trees and bushes as they tried to find their way back to the herd on the adjacent dairy farm.

"Menacing beasts," he teased.

“I know. I know. What can I say?” I replied, feigning embarrassment.

Like any budding friendship, finding commonality is key, so I was excited when Samuel told me that he was a part-time civilian captain in the Puerto Rico Army National Guard. I later learned that it’s pretty common for Puerto Ricans to volunteer for service since the island has a long history of being a military colony going all the way back to when it was under Spanish rule. Although it wasn’t as dignified as Samuel’s service record in the armed forces, I also had an army background. Besides enrolling in the Army ROTC program in college, I participated in a three-day army reconnaissance course in Fort Bragg, North Carolina where Green Berets taught me how to throw up inside my tucked shirt while airsick in a helicopter and not to pee my pants no matter how many times my life flashed before my eyes.

“Did you go into the army after college?” he asked.

“Not after seeing who was enlisting,” I answered.

I went on to explain to Samuel that I changed my mind about

going into the army while I was getting a six-hour physical at the military entrance processing station in Raleigh. The enlisted guys scared the crap out of me and were nothing like the future second lieutenants I was throwing frisbees with back on campus. I remember thinking, *I'M going to tell THESE guys what to do? Umm, I don't think so*, in between orders to cough twice and walk while holding my ankles.

He laughed at that and told me, “A lot of the guys in the warehouse are from my unit.”

“Really? But remember, you’re talking to someone who’s afraid of cows,” I joked.

By the time we reached the path that led from the access road to the loading dock, Samuel seemed more tired than he did the day before. And when we reached the end of the run and started walking it in, he looked like a guy who was about to unload something heavy he’d been carrying since we started running that afternoon.

“I don’t want to put my guys in a position where they could be laid off,” he said.

I instantly knew where he was coming from – especially since the results of my work opened up that possibility. “That’s not what’s on the table since it’s a software upgrade to support the site expansion project,” I said.

“I’ve been through these before, and I don’t want to be a part of seeing the livelihoods taken away from good, hardworking people,” he replied.

“I hear you, Samuel; but I did the same thing in Seattle and Louisville for my boss, and no one was let go. In fact, the company has never had layoffs in its nineteen-year history.”

Except for his right-hand supervisor, Luis Lopez, I knew that most of the warehouse guys didn’t speak good English. “What if I have everything translated into Spanish so everyone on your staff can be involved?” I asked.

In the moment that followed, I understood why Samuel was entrusted with leadership roles inside and outside of work. I also understood why he was respected in both. While he looked at me, I could feel his algorithm churning on what I just said to him, evaluating the sincerity, conviction, and

truthfulness of it. Even though Samuel and I were conducting post-run stretching regiments in front of the cement stairs that led up to the loading dock platform, my eyes never left his while he quietly decided if this was a go or no go.

“I’ll have Luis call you tomorrow,” he said.

“Thanks, Samuel.”

Conclusion

The car return lane at Hertz was backed up, so I did what everyone else was doing in front of me. Like them, I was standing behind my rental car with all my luggage piled up beside me, waiting to be helped. Up ahead, I could see the attendant getting closer and closer as he made his way down the line of cars, his yellow Hertz vest flapping with each gust of wind.

His job seemed pretty straightforward to me because all he did was walk once around the car, punch the mileage into his handheld computer, and hand the customer a slip of paper. Knowing that he had to sit in the car to get the necessary

information, I deliberately rolled up the windows and barely cracked open the driver-side door since the keys were still in the ignition. *Wait until he gets a whiff of THAT*, I thought.

“Hola,” said the attendant.

“Oh, hi. I’m all set,” I replied while preparing myself to witness a grown man sit in and launch out of a driver’s seat, as if his weight activated an ejection seat mechanism.

Either the guy was immune to the smell of decaying flesh mixed with rancid butter or I’m cut from the same cloth as Felix Unger from *The Odd Couple* and *Frazier*’s Niles Crane. Instead of seeing this car roped off with police tape, I was simply handed a slip of paper while being asked, “How was everything?”

“Perfect,” I lied, and thankfully put distance between me and the Mazda, pulling my wheeled suitcase toward United’s ticket counter.

With an hour to sit quietly before the first boarding calls would start, I was finally able to relax in the gate area. I thought it

would help to push my return flight to the afternoon on Saturday so I could enjoy the Ritz-Carlton pool one more time since I'd be staying in a condo in Humacao when I returned to Puerto Rico in two weeks, but my mind was elsewhere.

Outside the west-facing reinforced glass, the sun was beginning to make a run for the horizon. The typical late afternoon breeze had returned, causing the palm trees at Luis Munoz International Airport to sway back and forth, reminding me of the wind-swept Flamboyant trees back in Juncos. I could see them waving in my mind, the jungle serving as the perfect backdrop; but instead of looking like they were bidding me farewell, I imagined them saying, "Welcome back."

My stint in Puerto Rico was one of the best times of my corporate career. No one was laid off as a result of the software upgrade; however, after nineteen years with the company, I was laid off in 2007.

Chapter 7: Coach V

Samuel Virgilio was my ninth-grade gym teacher who became my gymnastics coach and one of the first role models I had the honor and privilege to look up to. Coach V taught me countless life lessons that I still draw upon today but none more powerful and memorable than showing me the value of personal ethics.

Gym Class

This is nuts, I remember thinking to myself as I rushed to peel off clothes that I had put on only hours earlier. But then again, nothing made sense to me during the first weeks of high school. Up was down and black was white, so why not schedule freshman gym class for 8:30 in the morning? Who doesn't want to look sweaty and feel gross all day amongst classmates who can find immediate fault in the slightest imperfection, right? As I spilled out of the boys' locker room and onto the basketball court in the main gym with the rest of the awkward teenagers in their ill-fitting, school-issued shorts and t-shirts, I saw Mr. Virgilio, our gym teacher, for the first time.

He stood in the middle of the court looking down at his clipboard and pretty much resembled every high school gym teacher ever portrayed in a John Hughes film. Whistle around the neck? Check. Tight shirt to show off years of weightlifting? Check. Well-groomed and looking like he had a military background? Check and check. But when he looked up to start taking attendance, I noticed that his face was chiseled, tan and clearly Mediterranean, like he had a reoccurring role on an Italian soap opera. What he lacked in height and stature, he made up for with bulging biceps, big shoulders, and an even broader smile. Did I say ‘Italian soap opera star?’ I meant, ‘retired soccer player from the Italian national team now hawking toothpaste on TV commercials.’

He introduced himself as Mr. Virgilio but we referred to him as Mr. “V” since he possessed a bigness inside of him that made you think he could actually pull off owning a letter of the alphabet; and before September came to a close, you realized he was more than worthy of such a distinction. Mr. V was a celebrity amongst us kids. Whereas most would see him as a real-life superhero who could do astonishing things like grab a pole with two hands and make his body extend outward like a flag, I saw him as a softhearted man who laughed and

smiled easily while making you feel safe to be yourself. Most astonishing about my wonderful freshman gym teacher was that he could make you laugh at yourself at a time in your life when teenage expectation and angst demanded flawlessness.

Gymnastics

As winter approached, Mr. V announced to us that he was the boys' gymnastics coach and that we were welcome to join the team. I remember making a mental note to check it out because I was too scrawny for wrestling and too slow for basketball. Besides, I could spend more time with Mr. V after school and maybe learn how to replicate some of his feats of strength like the 'human flag' so I could impress my friends and, most importantly, my crushes.

I was pretty anxious going to the introductory meeting; but then again, everything made me anxious back in those days. As a natural born nervous wreck, who was known to bail at the slightest expectation, I was just as surprised with myself as everyone else was when I walked through the heavy double doors into the boys' and girls' gymnastics area – a smaller dedicated gym that was full of stuff that I had only seen on TV

while watching ABC's *Wide World of Sports*. The place was buzzing with activity as nearly every apparatus was occupied by perfectly sculpted bodies doing things I could never see myself doing in a million years. I remember mouthing the words, "What the heck am I doing here?" while deciding it was time to walk across the street and comfort myself with a quarter pound of Swedish Fish from the candy counter at Sears. Just before I could make a clean getaway, I heard my name called by a familiar voice. "Charlie! CHARLIE! Over here!" shouted Mr. V.

He was standing in front of about a dozen boys from my freshman class who were seated on bleachers that were built into the wall that ran the length of the gym. Back then, it wasn't beyond me to bail right in front of people to escape the crushing panic, but there was no way I could do that with Mr. V excitedly waving me over as if he was expecting me. He was just the kind of adult you didn't want to disappoint.

As I got closer to the group, I noticed several similarities between me and the rest of the 14-year-olds. Like me, they were middle-of-the-road types, not popular but not invisible, not gifted athletes but not picked last when choosing sides in

neighborhood pickup games. Several of them shared the same disappointment as me when not finding their names on the final rosters after trying out for the freshman soccer and basketball teams earlier in the year. After finding a seat amongst the spindly boys to listen to Mr. V talk about the virtues of his sport, I couldn't help glancing past him at what looked to be a training facility for future Olympians or future performers for the many Cirques du Soleil shows that I would 'ooh and ahh' over while comfortably seated in various Las Vegas venues decades later.

Bringing my attention back to Mr. V was him saying that there would be NO roster cuts and that anyone can be on the team as long as they came to every practice and worked hard to become better at whatever events interested them.

What? Really? Is he serious? I remember thinking to myself since this kind of inclusiveness was virtually unheard of within a scholastic culture that was accustomed to dividing boys into groups of 'us' and 'them.' But this simply wasn't Mr. V's style; and with that, I started calling him "Coach V."

First Practice

As instructed, the other freshmen boys and I arrived at the gymnasium after school wearing the same ill-fitting shorts and t-shirts from gym class. We removed our sneakers and gathered on the floor exercise mat to wait for Coach V and the rest of the team. I remember noticing how springy the floor was and automatically started jumping up and down to see how high I could get. This only made the other pale-faced nerds do the same thing, making us look like bouncing 8-year-olds hopped-up on birthday cake in an inflatable castle to our new coach and upperclassmen teammates as they suddenly appeared through a side entrance.

After brief introductions, Coach V began practice by leading everyone through a stretching regiment that made me long for the candy counter at Sears because the established team seemed to be made up of two types: Mikhail Baryshnikov understudies who flipped through the air during death-defying trapeze acts and the muscle-bound gorillas that caught them. Suffice to say, I was neither – considering that going past the second step of a ladder gave me the vapors while my scrawny arms struggled to eke out a single pullup. Even the stretches

were hard for me. By the time it was over, I felt even more demoralized knowing that I was more equipped to be on a debate team than a gymnastics team since my flexibility was similar to that of a fencepost.

Before the wide-open double doors could suck me through them like a swirling black hole to rescue me from further public humiliation, Coach V had us gather around him after the team veterans set off to fine-tune their practiced routines on apparatuses that were intermingled amongst the girls' event pieces. I knew what was coming from Coach V, and I already had an answer.

“So, which events interest you?” he asked.

I was surprised that only a few of us replied, “Pommel Horse,” because it's the only event that doesn't require you to be upside down; plus, you're never too high up in the air – perfect for scaredy cats like me!

Pommel Horse

The pommel horse looked harmless enough at five feet long

and only four feet off the ground. It reminded me of a heavy punching bag lying on its side with two wooden handles in the middle sitting atop two saw horses. How hard could *this* be, right? But after watching some of the upperclassmen do ‘leg circles,’ ‘scissor cuts,’ and ‘travel downs,’ I sadly realized that the squirrely moves and hand-eye coordination gained from years of driveway basketball and street wiffleball would not serve me on this simple yet daunting contraption.

By the time Coach V made his way over to us, we had once again regressed back to being hyperactive 8-year-olds as we busied ourselves with trying to knock each other off of the thing instead of trying to replicate some of the moves we saw earlier.

“Okay, guys, let’s get a sense of your strength,” he told us.

At first, I thought he was joking since there wasn’t much muscle definition to speak of between me or the other two freshmen boys standing around the pommel horse. The first thing he had us do was jump up while holding the handles and then rest our chests on top of the horse before pushing ourselves back up using just our arm strength. Between the

three of us, only one was able to do it – and it sure wasn't me. Instead of walking away in disgust which is what I had been accustomed to seeing in my young life up to that point, Coach V chuckled and took us over to the weight room in the main gym to show us exercises that would improve our upper body strength. After he left, I remember doing arm curls with 5-pound weights and smiling, knowing I was one step closer to wowing the girls with the 'human flag' trick.

Routine

Already an expert in the art of observation and distrust due to bullies and surly types frequently encountered in the neighborhood and at home, I felt myself relax into the routine of Coach V's practices because he was so predictable and consistent. He always began with announcements about upcoming competitions, known as 'meets,' and school business followed by words of affirmation and encouragement. Next, he would lead us through a dozen or so stretches while we talked and joked easily with one another. Of course, they would target my inability to touch my toes as a source of amusement but it was all in good fun; plus, I'd feed the fire by saying things like, "Only ten inches to go!" or

“When I grow up, I wanna be just like Gumby!”

After stretching, Coach V had us go to our respective event pieces to practice and further develop the short performances or ‘routines’ that included compulsory moves as well as individual flare that would be displayed in front of judges and spectators. *Individual flare?* I remember thinking to myself when Coach V first mentioned this to me. I had already perfected the art of being invisible, so this business of ‘individual flare’ was going to take some doing for a kid who abhorred attention and who preferred blending into the background.

Coach V would divide his time as needed between the six events and the fifteen or so boys that now comprised our small team since many had quietly disappeared over the many weeks leading up to the first meet. I couldn’t say I blamed them. Not only was the sport so foreign to all of us newbies, gymnastics is demanding and tedious; and to make matters worse, you had to wear tights in the competitions. That alone is enough to overwhelm the Sears candy counter with hyperventilating boys seeking anxiety medication in the form of chocolate covered raisins! When Coach V eventually made his way over

to the pommel horse group, he'd further divide his time between watching the all-around gymnasts, boys who perform on all six apparatuses; the specialists, boys who performed on one or two apparatuses; and the freshmen boys hoping to hear his patented, "Good Job!" after showing him the slightest improvement.

When Coach V and the upperclassmen gave you pointers to work on at the next practice, you knew it was time to hit the weight room in the main gym before showering and heading home. For me, that meant a three and a half mile walk that was reduced to three if I went through the parking lot of Sears and took my chances cutting across the big lawns of corner houses. I didn't mind the walk, even if it was raining or snowing. It gave me time to visualize and practice my routine in my mind while feeling new muscles slowly coming to my rescue.

First Meet

After closing my locker and spinning the combination lock dial to fool even the most gifted safecracker, I stepped in front of the mirror that was built into the painted cinderblock wall above the sink in the near empty boys' locker room. There

wasn't a single wrinkle in the all-white, polyester tank top that didn't even sport the lettering of my high school's name. And that wasn't the only thing that was skintight as the matching stirrup pants didn't leave much to the imagination either.

It's confirmed, I remember thinking while looking at my outfit in the mirror, *I look like a ballerina*. I quickly imagined stripping out of this billboard that screamed, "Punch me in the face!" and replacing it with my normal corduroy pants and long-sleeve polo shirt before making a clean getaway. But instead, I was surprised to find myself continuing onward to the gymnastics gym to join the rest of the team in preparing for our first home meet against Ridley High School. Even at 14 years old, I was already accustomed to disappointing people. Yet, I didn't have the stomach to bail on Coach V.

High school gymnastics meets are not like what you see on TV during the Olympics. Whereas the television broadcast shows multiple events going on simultaneously, our meets would feature ONE performance on ONE event at any given moment. That's right. The kid who would rather walk to school than ride the bus to avoid being seen would have to do his routine on the pommel horse in front of his team, judges,

and a surprising number of his peers since it started soon after school let out.

By the time my event came around, I understood the rituals and pageantry that accompanied organized gymnastics; so, when Coach V gave me ‘the look’ after my name was called, I knew what to do. As I fearfully walked toward the magnesium powder station that had been rolled near the two judges who sat on folding chairs in front of the pommel horse, I suddenly felt like a kid who forgot every musical note as he walked up on stage to perform a piano recital in front of the world. I must have been looking at my feet because I remember how gray and dirty my tube socks looked against the stark white stirrup pants that were covering my legs yet somehow letting the crowd see far too much.

Finally, after what felt like a never-ending shuffle along the gangplank, I made it to the powder station and allowed it to hold me up like a welcomed buoy while I busied myself with the white chalk dust as onlookers bore holes into my very being. But, before I could faint and gratefully check out of this nightmare on a stretcher, I saw Coach V who moved into my line of sight so he could give me a last-second thumbs up with

a smile so big that you'd believe he really did have a side hustle of selling toothpaste. And with that, I accepted my death sentence and even went as far as imagining the next day newspaper headlines exclaiming things like, "Boy explodes in front of horrified crowd!" or "Boy suffers from amnesia. No memory whatsoever!"

Prior to mounting and beginning any routine, gymnasts are required to face and salute the judges. I understood this but it seemed odd that the act resembled something out of Nazi Germany whenever a high-ranking officer entered the room. Nonetheless, I 'saluted' the two unsmiling judges and proceeded to let my subconscious mind take over since my brain had left the building as soon as I heard my name called. Going through the compulsory movements practiced hundreds of times, I felt as if I was having an out-of-body experience. I could see myself, terrible form and all, performing a routine that was pedestrian at best and devoid of anything resembling 'individual flare.' Yet, I was actually pulling this thing off.

When my feet hit the mat after a forgettable dismount, I could hardly contain my relief as I turned to salute the bored and unimpressed judges who quickly awarded me last place on the

apparatus. But I was so happy it was over, and Coach V was the first to congratulate me along with my supportive teammates. By the time I took my seat back on the bench, I felt my brain return from its untimely hiatus; and when it did, I felt a little bit better about myself thanks to a coach who believed in me when I didn't know how.

First Season

The gymnastics season spanned five months with team competitions making up the first four months while the last month focused on individual recognition through league, district, and state championships. We had a winning record during the 1978 winter season, going four and three against other schools in suburban Philadelphia that made up the Central League.

As the season progressed, I continued to improve on the pommel horse and even started contributing to our team point totals during meets. Although confidence was building, flashes of self-doubt, like an unwanted friend who couldn't take a hint, kept showing up unannounced to remind me I wasn't supposed to succeed – but what my emotional 'ball and

chain' didn't know was that I had a coach who was teaching me that I could erase and rewrite the self-defeating narrative into more of a feel-good story about redemption.

Team Dinner

At the start of the season, the team veterans informed me and the other freshmen that Coach V hosted an annual celebratory dinner at his home during the week that separated the conclusion of the team meets from the start of the individual competitions. So, when Coach V announced that we were invited to his home on Saturday during Monday's practice, I was more excited than surprised. Later that week, the upperclassmen arranged a carpool of three or four cars to take the fifteen of us to Coach V's house since some of them had already exchanged their learner permits for the more coveted driver's licenses.

On the way there, while sitting in the back seat of a teammate's borrowed Buick, I remember looking outside and noticing all the lights emanating from the homes we passed, making them look warm and inviting in the evening twilight. I was eager to find out who would be awarded the various accolades that

Coach V talked about earlier in the week; but most importantly, I was curious to learn more about this man who didn't talk much about himself, especially about his personal life. Seeing him in his own home, surrounded by his family, would offer great insight and allow a highly observant kid like me to further decipher why I wanted to be just like him.

As suspected, Coach V's modest home was welcoming and mirrored the same tidiness of his daily appearance at school. Table lamps in the living room and den, which opened up to the dining room, gave the house a warm ambience with their amber glow. The light was quickly absorbed by a motif dominated by hardwood furniture, dark colors, and heavy drapes. It was definitely masculine in décor but inviting and comfortable at the same time. While my eyes took in the scene, my nose was happily detecting the thick aroma of lasagna mixed with fresh baked bread. Although a house crammed with people would normally have me reaching for an inhaler that I didn't have, I felt oddly calm and appreciative to be part of such a cheerful and fun gathering.

After we sat down, Coach V, a religious man, gave a prayer of thanks before trays of lasagna, bread, and salad made their

way around the extended dining room table. The atmosphere was just like our practices – relaxed, enjoyable and mindful. At least five or six different spirited conversations were going on all at once, but I wasn't engaged in any of them.

I was too busy watching Coach V, who sat at the end of the table. Next to him, on his right, was his son, Samuel, whom he called “Sammy.” What was more shocking than finding out that Coach V had a son was that Sammy was around my age. Even more shocking was seeing Coach V rub the neck and shoulders of his son while he ate. Both seemed oblivious to the act as if it was standard practice in this household. My eyes darted around the room trying to catch other eyes that had noticed the same thing I did. When our eyes did meet, they didn't have that telltale look of, “Are you seeing what I'm seeing?” Instead, they were asking, “What gives?” Either they weren't noticing the obvious public display of affection going on at the end of the table or they were unfazed by it. As for me, I was definitely fazed by it. What initially looked odd and unseemly ended up making me feel ashamed for thinking that way and strangely envious of their demonstrative nature. I, too, was named after my dad, but scenes like that didn't happen at our dinner table – or away from it for that matter.

Remembering my manners, I turned my eyes back to the barely touched food on my plate, taking solace in knowing that Coach V, in his way, had his hand on our necks and shoulders, too.

Boys Will Be Boys

By the time I sank into the Buick's cushy back seat for the ride home, I was still reeling from the after-dinner announcement that I'd be receiving a varsity letter for my contributions to the team. Not only did this mean I'd be sporting a legit lettermen's jacket around school like a boss, it was a golden ticket to the Annual Varsity Banquet, the Oscars of sports recognition for high school boys in the '70s. This was 'street cred' *before* there was such a thing called 'street cred.' While still spun around in my seat watching Coach V and his family waving goodbye to everyone from their front door, the driver of the Buick informed me that we were headed to another teammate's house.

"What for?" I asked.

"You'll see," snickered the driver and the other two

upperclassmen, almost in unison.

As the Buick quietly rolled into the gated circular driveway, I noticed that it was outlined with a generous number of those little lights along the outer edge, separating the sealed asphalt from the manicured lawn. When I got out, I could see that my teammate's house wasn't the only one with an impressive entrance as this neighborhood was in the heart of Philadelphia's Main Line, a posh and well-heeled region thirty miles west of the city. Walking into the home, I was surprised that it had an ambiance similar to Coach V's house; but instead of feeling warm and inviting, it reminded me of a place where conversations were secretive and whispered. After everyone had arrived, we were ushered toward a door that led down to the basement. If it was like the unfinished basement at my house, I was expecting to encounter a poorly lit labyrinth of cold cement walls and dank passageways that led to oddly shaped rooms that seemed to have accumulated the junk from families that had lived there before. If it wasn't for my dad putting a full-sized ping pong table into one of the basement rooms, I might have never ventured down those steep, creaky steps that began from behind a door in the kitchen.

Before I reached the bottom of the stairs in my teammate's house, I was confused as to why anyone would call this a basement when it was clearly a full-fledged floor, equal in standing to the other four within this prodigious mansion. The basement featured a well-appointed main room with several couches and matching chairs that were on either side of a movie projector that pointed to a white screen that had been set up earlier.

I remember thinking, *How cool! A room just for watching home movies.*

Just as I was noticing the bar area to the left, I heard one of my teammates say, "Grab a beer and have a seat," while he and another fiddled with the projector. I opted for a can of Schweppes Ginger Ale that I spotted on the refrigerator door and was still standing behind the counter in the bar when the lights were turned off, leaving me to stand there waiting for what was to come on the screen.

For the next three or four minutes, my soda went untouched as I watched men and women do what I had only heard about since being brought up to speed on such things by my best

friend, Jay-Jay, only a year earlier. Because my only preparation for this moment consisted of peeking at ladies wearing bras in the J.C. Penny circular that came with the Sunday newspaper, I found myself eyeing the door that led to the backyard patio since Mrs. V's lasagna wasn't prepared for this either.

The cold winter air on my face was exactly what I needed because I was able to keep my dinner from landing on the potted plants that flanked the door that I had just burst through. Not much snow was visible on the moonlit ground, yet the temperature was biting so I jammed my hands into my pockets, determined to wait it out.

I wasn't out on the patio by myself for very long before two or three of my teammates joined me. No words were really spoken – not even during the car ride home as my thoughts were focused on the now darkened houses rushing past my backseat window. Like me, they stood in stark contrast to what they emanated earlier in the evening when we drove to Coach V's house – their inviting warmth from lights within that spilled out onto frozen lawns and naked bushes, now replaced by icy silhouettes and shadows made grotesque by the rising

moon.

Monday

For the most part, practice began as usual and was without any commentary about what took place down in our teammate's basement. Back then, kids seemed to possess a 'spirit of agreeability' when it came to avoiding things that made them uncomfortable. When the typical, good-natured teasing and self-deprecating humor began in earnest, I took that as a sign that all was well and that, collectively, we silently decided to let it go and move on. However, my sigh of relief was short-lived when I saw Coach V come in through the gym's heavy double doors.

Gone was the patented smile and chipper gait; instead, I was looking at someone who appeared angry and disgusted – familiar expressions that I expected to see at home, not from Coach V. Even before he got to the high bar set-up, which was the apparatus in front of the floor exercise mat where we did our stretching, I knew why he was upset with us. Guilt has a way of never being too far away – especially when you're deluding yourself. He stood just off the mat and made sure he

met each one of us, eye to eye, before saying how disappointed he was.

I don't remember exactly what he said in those torturous few minutes because the look on his face was enough for me to feel a level of shame that I hadn't experienced before. It must've been the same for the senior who orchestrated the evening in his parents' basement while they were away because he burst into tears and apologized to the man who had coached him all through high school. Coach V only looked at him before turning around and heading for the exit.

"I can't look at any of you today," he said.

Before he reached the doors, someone shouted, "What about tomorrow's practice?"

From somewhere down the hallway where Coach V couldn't be seen, we heard a faint, "I don't know."

In the moments that followed, I discovered that there's a fine print disclaimer at the bottom of the timeless adage that tells us not to care about what others think of us. From the looks on

my teammates' faces, I knew I wasn't alone in my quiet admiration of Coach V. They, too, felt the gut-wrenching heartache that comes from disappointing those whose opinions *do* matter.

Afterward

I was relieved to find Coach V in the gym when I arrived early for practice on Tuesday. He was adjusting the height of the parallel bars when I immediately approached and told him I was sorry.

He paused briefly to say, "Okay," before moving on to prepare the rings for practice. Coach V wasn't a verbose kind of guy, so I was left to sift through and analyze all the non-verbal cues garnered in those brief seconds and hoped they could solve the mystery of his forgiveness.

By the time he began to address the team like he always did prior to starting practice, I could tell, just by his mannerisms, that we were going to be okay. While he told us that he expected more from us and that it mattered how we grew into young men, I imagined that this was how he mentored his son,

Sammy, at home. It wasn't until years later that I understood why Coach V didn't punish us. If he was seeing the same grim faces and feeling the same collective angst that I was while he spoke, he knew we had learned a valuable lesson – we didn't just disappoint our coach, we disappointed ourselves.

My freshmen gymnastics season ended after the Central League Individual Championship Meet the following week as I didn't place in the top 5 on the pommel horse, but I wasn't disappointed. Even though I didn't qualify for the district meet, or get strong enough to do the 'human flag' trick, or touch my toes, I gained something much more important. I learned that self-worth begins with someone who truly believes in you – but not just anyone. It must come from someone who you admire, look up to, want to emulate and trust. In my case, that person was Samuel Virgilio, my teacher and coach from more than forty years ago whose hand was felt on my neck and shoulders when I needed it the most.

Coach V was my gymnastics coach all through high school. In my senior year, I was captain of the team and eventually went as far as the District Individual Championship Meet. In that

meet, I was expected to reach the State Individual Championship Meet on the pommel horse, but I messed up my routine which included an Olympic level mount (Kehr). I can't wait to share this heartfelt and deserving tribute with Samuel Virgilio, his family and the Radnor High School Athletic Department.

Chapter 8: Mike

This is a story about my college friend, Mike Ferg, who did the most selfless and thoughtful act that anyone ever did for me up to that point in my young life. Not only did it come at great expense to him, it's something I've always been grateful for, even after all these years.

Hillsborough Street was louder than usual when I opened the only window in my stuffy room so I'd hear when Mike pulled up. Having recently been taught how to drive a stick shift by my friend of more than a year, I was pretty familiar with the sound of his 1964 baby blue VW bug.

The fall morning couldn't have been more picture-perfect in Raleigh as students were out in full force across the street on the main campus of N.C. State University. As I turned around to go back to the only chair in my cramped rented room, I felt a certain sadness knowing that I wouldn't be graduating with them. All I could think about was Ruthie.

Ruthie

Having made the Dean's List after my freshman year, a stipulation necessary for me to retain my academic scholarship, I went back to Philadelphia to a landscaping job that was going to pay me ten dollars an hour – big bucks back then for a college student with one year under his belt. Being accustomed to getting only four to five hours of sleep a night back at school, it was no big deal to head into the city with friends from high school after work. On one of those muggy weeknights early in the summer of 1983, I met Ruthie at an 'under 21' club in South Philly. She was statuesque, blonde, blue-eyed, tan, and stood slightly taller than me so you could imagine my surprise when she agreed to dance with me to the Romantics' "What I Like About You." When the sweat-filled, nonstop gyrations ended at midnight, we exchanged numbers and ended up seeing each other for the rest of the summer with "Every Breath You Take" by The Police and "I Melt with You" by Modern English providing the perfect background music to what I believed was going to be the greatest love story in the history of mankind.

After a school year that played out like a Shakespearian drama

on high speed, I was grateful for a summer that simply consisted of pulling weeds, spending time with Ruthie, and ignoring the inevitable, cataclysmic aftermath that was approaching like a steam engine due to arrive in mid-August when I had to return to Raleigh. But instead of slowing down as it neared the station, this love train was accelerating toward a brick wall that had captured and imprisoned my heart. Before I knew it, I was in the passenger seat of a friend's Chevy Cavalier that was rolling southbound on Interstate 95 toward the Wolfpack State – my only solace coming from the boombox at my feet that contained a meticulously prepared mixtape of our favorite songs from a summer we'd be telling our grandkids about.

Fall Semester

The new residence where I'd start my sophomore year couldn't have been more opposite of the dorm I had lived in the year before. It was a dilapidated four-story walk-up that served as a rooming house for students since the 1920s. If you didn't notice this eyesore for its lean to one side, you certainly would for its faded Pepto Bismol color. In some ways, the building fit right in because it was situated amongst an

abandoned building, a fraternity house, a convenience store and a Blimpie sandwich shop.

My room was one of eight on the second floor – first door on your left at the top of the steep staircase. At the end of the long corridor was the bathroom that I thought I'd be sharing with other students; instead, it was with strung-out pizza delivery guys who made it easy for me to conduct all lavatory duties on campus. For \$110 per month, my room came with a sink that surprisingly provided clear water; a squeaky metal-frame bed; a battered, wooden dresser with an attached mirror; a desk fashioned out of plywood and a chair that belonged to a dining room somewhere far, far away.

Classes began in late August and, for the first time in my life, I started missing classes. When I did go, my feet shuffled forward as if they were stuffed into weighted cinder blocks. Was I going to my organic chemistry class or the electric chair? When I wasn't listening to the mixtape in my room back at 'chez dump,' it was playing non-stop in my head and making it difficult to listen to professors who looked and sounded as if they were speaking from the opposite end of a football field. Evenings spent trying to study at the library only

resulted in handwritten love letters that were signed, sealed, and ready to be mailed first thing in the morning. I was spinning out of control.

Drop Out

A month had gone by, and my class attendance record looked like a sad bingo card that only hit on two squares when the last ping pong ball was called. I just couldn't focus on anything else other than checking the mailbox to see if Ruthie wrote me back. When she did, it was like being nine years old on Christmas morning after all the presents were opened and hearing my grandpa say, "Oh boy. What do we have here? Looks like there's one more present, and it's for Charlie!" I don't know why but I always liked to read her letters while eating a plate of chow mein at the Chinese restaurant just two doors down from the sandwich shop. Besides the attractive price of 99 cents for a big plate of noodles, I liked the shroud of secrecy that I felt from the subdued atmosphere while I satisfied my ravenous appetite and starving heart.

By late September, I had reached my breaking point. Instead of taking the circular ramp through Harrelson Hall where my

statistics class was about to begin, I headed straight to the student admin building to rescind my scholarship and officially drop out of school. When the concerned admissions lady behind the counter wearing a ‘Go Pack’ pin on her red sweater asked, “Now why would you do that, dear?” I tried coming up with a rational excuse but ended up telling her the truth. Surprisingly, it felt good to tell her about Ruthie – something I did very little of with my college friends, including Mike. Afterward, when I walked back to that pink abomination to gather the rest of my textbooks to sell back to the library bookstore, I knew there would be no shouts of “Bingo!” for what I had just done – only the rattling of the last ping pong ball in my mind, bouncing between excitement and despair.

Mike

The unmistakable rumble of the VW made me jump up and turn off my boombox right in the middle of Duran Duran’s “Hungry Like the Wolf.” Peeking out the window, I could see Mike, always in shorts and shirts sporting the Ocean Pacific surf wear label and black Ray Ban sunglasses that matched the color of his hair and completed the look of someone who grew

up in Southern California alongside those who brought skateboarding to the masses as a legitimate sub-culture. On the outside, he looked like a younger version of Clark Kent trying NOT to look like Clark Kent by disguising himself as a wannabe surfer dude amongst college kids from small towns in rural North Carolina. On the inside, he was a tremendous friend to those who could appreciate his sharp wit, hilarious antics, compassionate heart, and drive to become an engineer like his father.

I met Mike a year earlier during my freshman year at N.C. State. He was one of nine suitemates that I lived with in Metcalf, a 13-story coed dormitory on central campus. A few trips to the dining hall with him and you soon found out that he was a one-man variety show who could play the roles of host *and* all the guest performers. He could play anything on a violin, eat or drink anything on a dare, beat anyone at racquetball while hungover and make you laugh no matter how hard you tried not to.

In no time, we were buddies because we had so much in common. Besides being comedic nerds, we both liked to run – and did so without shirts to the nearby all-girls school,

Meredith College, to shamelessly pander for feminine attention. And when we weren't trying to show off with our legs, we'd use our arms. Within the many courtyards on campus, Mike and I would throw, catch, and perform tricks with frisbees to the delight of girls who were easily entertained and who could look past our pathetic, not-so-subtle game plan to garner dates for the many upcoming freshmen dances back at the dorm. Afterward, as we hustled back to Metcalf to join our suitemates on the walk to the dining hall for dinner, little did we know that our new friendship was heading full steam toward events that would run the gamut between heartbreaking and mind blowing.

Dane

Like me, Mike had a freshman roommate that couldn't have been more opposite of him; yet, they, too, became fast friends like John and I. Dane was as easygoing and country as they come, so he didn't mind me asking him inane questions just so I could listen to his Southern drawl turn most one-syllable words into two. And, like many interesting characters, he was a walking contradiction. For a slight, nonathletic, fair-skinned 18-year-old kid from a rural town close to the Carolina Coast,

Dane refused to wear shoes or shirts while in our suite – just gym shorts. He’d walk around waiting for you to look at or comment on his belly which was nearly impossible to ignore because it protruded like the midsection of a slender woman who’s exiting her second trimester – plus he’d always rub it as if a genie was going to materialize and grant him wishes. And, when you eventually succumbed to taking the bait, his blue eyes widened and his grin got bigger while proudly saying, “Y’all like that?”

Although Dane prided himself on his partying and beer-drinking skills, he was a straight-A student studying nuclear engineering who had designs on achieving a 4.0. Standing in the way of that lofty goal was N.C. State’s PE 100, a mandatory freshmen gym class which resulted in a letter grade that counted toward your overall GPA.

Being the patient, good guy that he is, Mike began running with Dane to get him ready for the ‘mile run’ test. He was more tolerant of Dane’s slow pace, so I only joined them once in a while. When the day came for Dane to be timed while running the mile in his class, I had totally forgotten about it until I got back to the dorm later that afternoon. Instead of the

lively, rambunctious group that normally made fun of my running shorts (remember, it was the '80s), I was greeted by a dour pall that hung heavy in the air. My roommate, John, was sitting on his bed when he asked me to sit down. That's when he told me that Dane had collapsed and died on the track.

It was John, myself, and Mike who met with Dane's family when they came to collect his belongings. Although those moments with Dane's parents and sister will never be forgotten, it isn't something I need to elaborate on in this story. Suffice to say, we all got a little bit older, wiser, and closer during that time.

March Madness

It was the 1983 NCAA Men's Basketball Championship Game pitting the improbable N.C. State Wolfpack against the top-seeded University of Houston that featured two future NBA Hall of Famers: Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler. But when I think about those two NBA greats, I remember them standing like statues under the basket as Lorenzo Charles leaped up to catch – and dunk – Dereck Whittenburg's last second airball to add the final exclamation point to the

Wolfpack's Cinderella Story. I thought I knew what pandemonium felt like after moving into the freshmen dorm on the exact same day and at the exact same time as Mike and every other kid residing in Metcalf – but this was different, much different.

Seconds after the game-winning buzzer beater was witnessed on the 13-inch black and white TV that was propped up on a mini fridge so all of us could see it in the crowded dorm room, my suitemates, Mike, and I knew exactly what to do. It was as if we all had the same embedded genetic code that activated *only* when the university that you attend and reside at wins a collegiate National Championship in epic, dramatic fashion while wearing anything that sported the school's mascot. As slaves to this newly triggered primal DNA, we immediately spilled out of the dormitory like sprinters reacting to the sound of the starter's gun. The surge of college kids streaming out of Metcalf was met with an even bigger moblike current of students that were headed to the famous brickyard, an enormous open area that connected the east and south campuses to main campus.

After a couch was tossed on the already raging bonfire, I got

caught up in a riptide of revelers and lost sight of Mike until the next day while at Reynolds Coliseum where the official pep rally only fueled the frenzied debauchery into a second night. It wasn't until days later, when the circus atmosphere settled down to a constant joyful background buzz that Mike, John, and I could reflect on what just happened – each of us taking turns rehashing the play-by-play of those last few seconds of the game, acting out the greatest alley-oop in the history of sports, and relishing the fact that we just shared a magic carpet ride through a miracle.

Road Trip

My door was open so I heard the front door unlatch and Mike taking three steps at a time while coming up to my room. He was a happy sort made happier at the end of our freshmen year when he ended up on the winning side of a lottery system that awarded dorm room assignments to second-year students. Although Mike had been to my place before, he seemed to always be taken aback by it – as if this is where you ended up after giving life your best shot, and it still chewed you up and spit you out. I can't say I blamed him.

The premise of his visit was to have me come along while he drove out to an auto parts store and then to a Mexican restaurant because, according to Mike, he was an expert of such cuisine having grown up in SoCal. As we rambled down Hillsborough Street to the sound of the engine coming from what should've been the trunk, I could see much of the campus since it bordered the university for more than a mile. I remember only noticing the students weighted down by backpacks while they walked with purpose along trimmed thoroughfares to stately-looking brick buildings that were flanked by trees just beginning to turn gold. It seemed almost surreal to think that I had just thrown all that away, hours earlier. By the time we made it to the beltway, Mike knew something was up and immediately asked me about Ruthie. Apparently, I didn't conceal my aching heart as well as I thought I did.

At first, I tried deflecting his questions with generic, softball answers like, "We're figuring things out" and "We'll be fine." But, after the red-sweater lady at the admin building got me to open up earlier that morning, it was easier to just tell Mike the truth about things. As I recounted what had transpired since school started, including what I had done instead of going to

my statistics class, Mike just listened while staring straight ahead.

When I was finished, a noticeable long silence ensued until he said, “I have only one question. Does Ruthie know what you did?”

I told Mike, “No,” and the silence returned and stayed with us for a few more exits along the tree-lined beltway. More exits passed, and it seemed we were getting farther and farther from Raleigh.

Pretty soon, I saw signs for Zebulon which made me ask, “So how far away IS this place?”

Mike, in his deadpan sort of way, without taking his gaze from the road, replied, “We’re not going there anymore. We’re going to Philadelphia.”

Of course, I didn’t believe him, thinking he was just launching into one of his many characters. Was this the ‘wise guy?’ Or the ‘serial killer?’ But it wasn’t a shtick – he was serious!

Mike continued, “You need to see her and tell her you’re coming back for her.”

“Are you crazy?” I said, “We don’t even have toothbrushes, and you’ll be missing classes!”

This time, Mike turned toward me while answering, “We’ll be fine.”

“We could be there by 7:00 p.m.!” I announced after performing mental calculations from Zebulon until we merged onto northbound Interstate 95 from state highway 64. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I was actually going to see Ruthie today, and I was a mere six hours away from being Richard Gere in the closing scenes of *Officer and a Gentleman*, which had exploded at the box office a year earlier. Little did I know, while the four-lane interstate widened into eight as it bordered the Delaware River into Philadelphia, I was going to experience a scene from that movie, but it wasn’t going to be played by Richard Gere.

And . . . ACTION!

I knew Ruthie would be home, so I asked Mike to let me out a few doors down so I didn't cause too much commotion and spoil the surprise. My heart was beating so hard that I saw my hand shaking as I pushed open the wooden gate to walk toward the front door of the modest home in a working-class neighborhood close to the city. Too bad Bon Jovi's self-titled first album wasn't due to come out for another six months because that would've been the perfect soundtrack to what was racing through my mind while I crept up the cement porch steps in the waning twilight in South Philly. I could see Ruthie's car on the side of the house and figured she was eating dinner with her mom like she always did in the evenings.

As my shaky finger found and pressed the doorbell, I suddenly realized I had no script. Do I just scoop her up and walk out? Do I wait for her mom to pull out the Polaroid instamatic to capture the moment before I disappeared into the night with her only daughter? Before I could get everything straight in my mind, the door opened, and there she was – still tan and pretty but missing the smile that I dreamed about every night

for the past six weeks.

With her hand still on the inside doorknob while standing in the doorway and looking both surprised and disappointed, she asked, “What are you doing here?”

In that very instant, I knew I had made a gargantuan miscalculation of epic proportions. If you happened to be outside and noticed the young man on the porch steps talking to someone who’s half hidden behind the front door, you would’ve seen a lot of hand gesturing followed by an about-face toward the street. If you were close enough, you would’ve heard his rambling answer to her question start off with, “A friend of mine from school needed to drive up here, so I thought I’d hitch a ride and come say hello,” and end with, “Okay, well, I know you’re busy, so I’ll check in with you tomorrow sometime.”

God. How horrible was that? I remember thinking as I turned to descend the steps while giving Ruthie a brief pathetic wave goodnight. I couldn’t feel my body, only a burning desire to reach the darkening street upright where I could hide and collect myself before retracing my steps back to where Mike

had parked. As I approached, I could see him outside, leaning against his precious VW with his arms folded.

When he heard me emerge from the shadows, his head spun around in surprise; and while pretending to check the time on his watch, he said, “That was quick.”

Despite the unexpected implosion of my young heart in that moment, I had to acknowledge the sheer irony of it all. Instead of carrying the girl of my dreams out of the factory as Richard Gere’s character did to end that iconic film, I ended up mirroring David Keith’s role when ‘Lynette’ rebuffed his marriage proposal for having dropped out of the officer training program to be with her. *Unbelievable*, I thought to myself. But by the time I reached the car, I knew I wasn’t going to hang myself after downing the ring with a bottle of whiskey like Keith’s character sadly did in the movie. All I knew, as I slid into the driver’s seat of Mike’s car, was that I needed to drive and that Ruthie and I were no more.

Reality

After a fitful night of nearly zero sleep on the couch of a

landscaping coworker who I worked with over the past summer, I sat up and saw Mike still sleeping on the other couch. Back then, I wasn't a coffee drinker, so there wasn't an urgency to get up right away. Strangely, I felt better than ever, like my old self again; but of course, that feeling was fleeting. Many of the hours spent staring at the ceiling and listening to the ticking of the nearby wall clock during the night were dedicated to replaying every minute I had spent with Ruthie; yet, there was enough mental bandwidth to simulate every conceivable scenario that resulted in me getting back on track at N.C. State.

Mike and I said goodbye to the Delaware River as Interstate 95 veered south toward the Carolinas, but my heart wasn't into it. I felt like a post-op patient who just received an impromptu brain *and* heart transplant on the same day and who was crossing his fingers and hoping that his body wouldn't reject them.

Mike was great. Remember how awful it is sometimes to be ambushed by a crestfallen and emotionally unstable friend who just got their heart ripped out of their chest? Yeah? Well, imagine being stuck in a car with someone like that for almost

eight hours! Poor guy; but he listened and helped me get a plan together for the next day to revisit the student admin building to see if I could unwind what I had done earlier in the week. If that didn't work, I was going to have to ask Clark Kent, here, to put on his Superman cape and do his 'reverse time' thing.

When I woke up the next morning in my squeaky steel-frame bed, I didn't immediately think about Ruthie; but that changed as soon as I saw our mixtape sitting beside my silent boombox on the dresser that looked to be from the Civil War era. With a heavy heart, I climbed out of bed to splash some water on my face, brush my teeth and get ready to meet Mike at the student admin building at eight o'clock.

Years later, I would recall how I felt that morning when I'd be close to arriving home from a weekend trip where I spent much of the time wondering if I had left the stove on. Would I see my house intact or as a pile of smoldering rubble surrounded by fire trucks? But back then, on that breezy autumn morning, I was less than an hour from finding out if I could cry, "Do over!" or accept my fate of becoming a strung-out pizza delivery guy like all the other residents that called the faded, pink embarrassment, 'home.'

Moment of Truth

It was Mike's idea to come along with me in case I needed someone to vouch for me or to support my claim of temporary insanity due to acute lovesickness should I become desperate enough to play that card. Upon arriving at the student admin building, Mike took the stairs three at a time while I trudged up what felt like the Temple of Kukulcan, the 100-foot Mayan pyramid in the Mexican Yucatan where young people were routinely sacrificed at its apex. And if that wasn't dramatic enough, when I pulled on the door to the entrance, it felt as heavy and foreboding as Rodin's massive 20-foot door sculpture, *The Gates of Hell*. Before I knew it, I was inside, and Mike was waving me over since one of the admin ladies was standing at the counter.

At first glance, my hopes sank because it wasn't the same lady from earlier in the week. As I approached, I described the woman who knew about my situation and asked, "Is she here?"

Given the current streak of bad luck that I was experiencing, I couldn't believe when she replied, "Hold on, hon. I'll get her

for you.” Suddenly, the odds at the sports book in Caesar’s Palace in Las Vegas went from 20:1 to 5:1 when she emerged from the back wearing a red cardigan instead of the red sweater yet still sported the school mascot pin. As Mike looked on, I explained what happened and that I had a change of heart and could only hope that the paperwork I put into motion just days earlier could be stopped or intercepted before any real damage could be done. When her smile continued to broaden as I spoke, I could feel the weight leaving my shoulders while imagining Caesar’s giving me 3:2 odds, making the bleary-eyed gamblers audibly gasp.

“Your paperwork hasn’t been processed, and it’s still here,” she replied while rifling through papers in a wire basket next to an industrial-looking typewriter. When she found what she was looking for, she handed the unprocessed forms to me, smiled, and said, “Good decision, dear.”

With the forms rolled up in my hand like a telescope through which my future could be seen and charted once again, Mike and I barreled past the entrance and down steps that felt more like a slide. At the bottom of the stairs, where yellow and gold leaves were beginning to collect in the crisp autumn morning,

I thanked my friend for all that he'd done for me.

And, as usual, Mike cut my sappy appreciation short by saying, "Not a problem. I'm late for class."

"Me too," I replied sarcastically. And, while I watched him walk away, I thought to myself, *There goes Superman.*

Then and Now

Because of Mike's spur of the moment act of genuine selflessness, I was able to mount an academic come-back that could only be described as winning the championship despite having been one strike away from being swept. But instead of an ostentatious hunk of trophy as my prize, I not only retained my scholarship – I gained a keen awareness of the difference between love and infatuation. Although subsequent letters from Ruthie went unanswered, I still thought of her fondly from time to time during the remainder of the school year – especially when I heard a song from our mixtape. And when Bon Jovi's debut album dropped the following semester, I had to add one more song from the Jersey band that captured every emotion I felt on Ruthie's front steps just months earlier. Once

again, I had to laugh at the irony because “Shot Through the Heart” comes right after Loverboy’s “Hot Girls in Love.”

As for Mike and I, we reunited a few years after graduation in Huntington Beach, California where degrees from N.C. State, professional jobs, and real-world responsibilities didn’t stop us from continuing our tried-and-true frisbee ‘operation’ to shamelessly turn unsuspecting cute sunbathers into our girlfriends. Success in this area back in Raleigh meant we had dance partners for the many social events held on campus; success at this stage of our lives meant we had new best friends – and soon Mike and I drifted apart.

Almost 30 years have passed since Mike and I have seen or spoken to one another. Life has a way of carrying you away toward whatever you’re meant to do. All I can hope for is that my old pal reads this deserved tribute and knows how much his friendship meant to me all those years ago and that whenever I get the chance to tell someone, “We’ll be fine,” I try to do it with as much confidence and sincerity as him.

Chapter 9: Kevin

I think we all understand that, 'with great power, comes great responsibility;' yet many of us, including me, make the mistake of assuming those in positions of power don't know that. This is a story about Kevin Sharer, a man with many of the stereotypical traits of a driven Fortune 500 CEO, who impressed the hell out of me with his compassion during our one-on-one meeting back in 2004.

Normally, I wouldn't have picked up the phone while talking to someone in my office; but when I saw the liquid-crystal display flash the name of the Vice President of Process Development, I had to say, "I'm sorry. I have to take this."

"Hey, Jeff. What's up?"

"Can you talk?" he asked.

After covering up the mouthpiece and whispering to my visitor, "I'll come by later," I told Jeff, "Sure, I can talk."

"You're not going to believe who was outside my office

looking at your master cell bank map for the last half hour. It was Kevin, and he wants to meet you.”

“Kevin who?” I asked while secretly praying it wasn’t who I thought it was.

“*The* Kevin. That’s who!” he answered, and added, “You’ll probably get a call this week from his executive assistant to set up a meeting.”

“No kidding. Well, don’t worry, Jeff. I won’t forget about the little people when I’m going to shareholder meetings on the corporate jet,” I joked, hoping the levity would mask the utter dread that was closing in on me like the lid of a coffin.

And just before we were about to end the conversation, Jeff advised, “Oh, and Chuck . . . keep your answers to less than six seconds.”

“What does *that* mean?” I asked, as if I needed to hear the answer.

“C’mon, Chuck. You know what I mean. We both know

you're not one for brevity," he said.

After thanking Jeff and hanging up the phone, I pushed my chair back hard enough so I'd roll close to the window. When I looked out, I could see the white shuttle bus, its doors wide open. I didn't recognize any of the staff getting on or off of it since the company had been expanding its workforce and corporate campus every year for the last ten years.

Jeff was right, I thought to myself. He was right about a lot of things. He was also keenly perceptive and could tell I was a little freaked out. "Don't worry, Chuck. You'll do fine," he had assured me. But what Jeff didn't know was that I wasn't worried about failing. I was scared to death of succeeding, and my worst nightmare was one phone call away.

On the Agenda

I almost launched out of my chair when the phone started ringing. I was still looking out through the window, but the shuttle bus was no longer there. *How long have I been sitting here?* I wondered. *Four minutes? Forty minutes? No clue.* When I spun around to look at the tiny digital screen on the

hulking desk phone, I immediately realized that my conversation with Jeff wasn't a figment of my imagination.

What I knew about the chief executive officer of my company came from seeing him once or twice a year during all-staff meetings, watching his prerecorded messages in video clips that were attached to emails with important sounding subject lines, and from rumors. But in that surreal moment back in 2004, his name was lit up on my phone. Even the ringing sounded different, making me feel like I should sit up straighter before answering.

“Hello. This is Chuck.”

“Hi, Chuck. This is Catherine calling from Kevin Sharer's office. How are you?”

“Great. What can I do for you?” I said, while trying to sound like everything bored me.

“Kevin would like to meet with you tomorrow. I can do 10:30 a.m. or 1:30 p.m. Which time works best for you?” she asked.

“Ten-thirty!” I answered, realizing I said that way too loud and way too quickly, but thankful I didn’t add, “Let’s get this over with as soon as possible because I won’t be eating, sleeping, or acting normal until then.”

“That’s great, Chuck. Just check in with security on the first floor by 10:15 a.m. See you tomorrow!”

“Okay. Thanks, Catherine,” I said. And when I put the receiver back into its cradle, I noticed it was wet from my hand.

Career Change

The meeting was twenty-four hours away, and I was already feeling like my mind had been hijacked. Instead of the familiar stream of consciousness that came from basking within the safety of a carefree comfort zone, my brain was busy refereeing an internal wrestling match between rational and irrational thought. On one hand, I was happy to get the recognition, and truly believed I was deserving of it. But on the other hand, I sought to avoid it since popularity is the price tag of such earthly desires. Although I knew I needed to focus on what to wear, what to give him, and what to bring, I

couldn't stop imagining the director of fate telling stage technicians to reposition the spotlights on the guy trying to lose himself in the curtains.

Ten years earlier, I had walked away from a management position in drug manufacturing to pursue becoming a business analyst for the same company. And five years before that, I walked away from a genetic engineering lab to learn about drug manufacturing – again, all at the same company. Despite not having the natural scientific or engineering notions that my more successful colleagues had, I managed to stay gainfully employed in both positions. What I lacked in talent, I made up for it by having a knack for breaking down and repackaging the complex so that anybody could understand it. In September of 1994, everything changed for me after I attended a three-day process mapping class in Seattle, Washington. By the time I was flying back to Los Angeles, I knew I had to risk parlaying my ‘knack’ into a full-time job.

As expected, hopping the proverbial fence that separated careers in research and drug manufacturing from business management brought legitimate skepticism ranging from, “Chuck, you literally have no business training,” to “You’re

committing career suicide, dude.” Even the ones who actually understood what I was proposing cautioned me against the change, citing, “It’s a ‘nice to have’ service, not a ‘needs to have’ function.” Admittedly, it was a rough start but after a few homeruns, I was able to get a foot in the door; and after a walk-off grand slam, I began hearing knocks on it. Soon, the stakes increased – and so did the stature of those seeking my help.

I was particularly proud of the master cell bank map – but not because the three-foot-wide, six-foot-long, high profile graphic was displayed outside of a vice president’s office. It really was a work of art that resulted from over thirty interviews of more than a dozen scientists from places like Taiwan, Poland, and India. It felt good to see people take the time to read through it. While doing so, most would be eating something or sipping on a coffee from the Starbucks on the ground floor, their expressions reminding me of how I must look when captivated by the back of a cereal box while munching on cornflakes. I just never imagined that the details of clone selection would catch and hold the eye of the company’s jet-setting CEO. And worse yet, I never thought I’d be meeting with him to talk about it.

Kevin

When I saw Kevin Sharer being introduced as the company's new chief in 2000, I was sitting in the same venue where I had watched productions like *Les Misérables*, *Rent*, and *Our Town*. The 1,800-seat theater in the Civic Arts Plaza was only a few miles from the company's headquarters and provided the perfect backdrop for the outgoing CEO, Gordon Binder, to hand over the keys to the corner office. The setting was opulent, classy, and befitting for both men. Whereas Gordon looked like a distinguished elder statesman you could see yourself having coffee with, Kevin looked like a guy who started going places soon after being voted 'most likely *not* to take no for an answer' in high school.

I had met Gordon on three occasions – once when he came by the manufacturing plant to personally thank everyone for coming to work on the morning of the 1994 Northridge earthquake, and another time when he gave former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, a tour of the facility. But it wasn't until I had my five-year anniversary lunch with him that allowed me to see the man behind the executive title. What I remember most about that catered lunch with the CEO, and

five others who were hired around the same time as me, was that the food was more like something you'd have for dinner and how surprisingly reserved and soft-spoken Gordon was. And before the roasted chicken breast on my plate was half eaten, I could tell that he was decent, likeable, and approachable. Most ironic was that I found myself trying to make *him* feel comfortable – and we were eating in *his* boardroom!

From my seat in the darkened mezzanine, I could see Gordon had aged exponentially since jokingly asking him if he was going to eat his dessert. As I listened to him talk about Kevin's background from behind the lectern that featured the company's logo, I looked at the incoming CEO and created my own highlight reel. In it, I imagined him making a name for himself at the highly respected management consulting firm, McKinsey and Company; turning down a promotion from GE's legendary CEO, Jack Welch, to take an executive position with MCI Telecommunications; and serving as a lieutenant commander on a nuclear submarine during the Cold War. *Wait. What? Nuclear submarine? Commander? Umm, I don't think this guy celebrates work anniversaries over lunch – I think he eats slackers for lunch!*

So many analogies came to mind as I watched Kevin speak from a stage that had showcased singers and dancers the night before – yet he was no actor. His tall frame, silver hair, and tanned face made him *look* the part but it was his command of the moment that made me think, *This guy's the real deal*. To me, Kevin eased into his industry-leading role like a guy slipping into a jacuzzi that was at the perfect temperature. And his message of excellence and aura of confidence didn't end in the theater that day.

Seeing Kevin on the corporate campus always made me feel like I just spotted a celebrity even though Hollywood was forty miles away; and like any true A-lister, he had his entourage. His seemed to be made up of executives desperately looking to please their new boss and assistants charged with capturing everything he said, all of them looking like they were doing double-time just to keep up with him. I remember thinking I should go over and introduce myself at some point, but I couldn't think of anything to ask him except what he'd like on his sandwich.

I remember the moment when I saw him step out onto his office balcony that wrapped around the corner of the building,

a two-hundred-and-seventy-degree panoramic view from the top floor of the sparkling new executive building that was the crown jewel of a highly touted master plan. A glint of light from the setting sun had ricocheted off the glass door and found my eye as he opened it. I stopped to look up from the other side of a terraced garden of newly planted trees and shrubbery, only the sound of splashing water from the adjacent fountain filling the air. He was leaning against the railing, facing west, and looking toward the Santa Monica Mountains. Behind them, the Pacific Ocean was most likely reflecting another dramatic Southern California sunset. *Was he enjoying the view or trying to figure out how to move mountains?* It was something to ponder as I continued on toward the parking garage. And by the time I finished patting myself on the back for such a clever thought, I knew, deep down, he was doing both.

Bullpen

I was ten minutes early when I stepped off the elevator and onto the fifth floor. I was prepared and had all the right things with me; yet, I still felt out of place. If the goal of the décor and ambience was to intimidate, “Mission accomplished,” I

muttered to myself while trying hard not to gawk. Although the top floor had the same square footage as the others below it, there were far less offices, giving the space a bigness that matched the engraved titles on solid wood doors. And if exclusivity had a scent, it had to be what I was breathing in, a mixture of eucalyptus, lavender, and money.

“Catherine? Hi, I’m Chuck. Good morning,” I said.

“Good morning. Nice to see you. Just have a seat over there, and Kevin will be with you shortly.”

Oh my god! I thought to myself as soon as I walked around the corner to the waiting area. *It’s huge!* A quick survey of the ample and varied seating arrangements told me that the space could accommodate at least twenty visitors – comfortably. But what I found most shocking was the ’70s retro style furniture that was either fire engine red or alabaster white – including the rugs and lamps. Yet, somehow, it all worked in a ‘feng shui meets groovy chic’ sort of way. Interspersed amongst the chairs and sofas were approximately a dozen or so well-dressed men who looked as if they went to the same place to buy their dark gray suits and blue-striped power ties. Some

were on phones; others were hunched over papers pulled out from briefcases, and a few were talking in hushed tones to one another. *Are all these guys here to see Kevin?* I wondered. *Wow!*

As I figured out where to sit, I noticed that the fluorescent orange tube under my left arm and the black portfolio case in my left hand were attracting attention. At first, I thought they were looking at my clothes since I wasn't wearing a suit *or* a power tie. I had grappled with that quandary three hours earlier and opted for dark trousers and a light-colored dress shirt with pinstriping so I'd avoid the ridiculousness of looking like I was going to a job interview. I had planned to give the plastic tube to Kevin as a gift because it contained a laminated copy of the master cell bank map. And as for the black portfolio case, it was almost comical looking since it was three times the size of a normal briefcase. In it, of course, were my 'greatest hits' should he ask to see more of my work.

The autopilot that lived inside of me since elementary school quickly chose a seat that was far enough away from everyone but close enough to not appear antisocial. From my vantage point, I could see the entire waiting area, including the hallway

that led toward Kevin's office as well as the elevator where I first entered the rarified air of the fifth floor. As soon as I sat down, I knew the answer if Kevin asked me, "What can I give you for doing such a fine job?" *Umm . . . How about that comfy waiting area chair I was sitting in?*

Just as I was practicing the short answers to questions I thought he'd actually ask, Kevin came out through the hallway wearing a red cardigan that was a shade darker than the couch cushions in front of me. My watch was showing 10:32 a.m., but I knew it ran a few minutes fast. Next, I watched him pause to look over the waiting area, expecting him to easily identify me since my fish-out-of-water expression would be a dead giveaway. Instead, he walked over to one of the 'Matrix clones' who was sitting fifteen feet away in a chair like mine. The guy jumped up, eager to shake Kevin's hand while giving him a thin white binder. Surprisingly, the two looked to be having their meeting right then and there. After a couple of minutes and a 'we're done here' handshake, Kevin walked over to another guy; but this time, he escorted him back to his office.

My watch was showing 10:50 a.m. when Kevin reemerged

with the same man I saw him leave with fifteen minutes earlier. They parted ways in front of me with the clone heading for the elevator while Kevin went back to surveying the remaining group in the waiting area like a big-league baseball manager deciding which bullpen pitcher would be coming into the game. Within seconds, I knew it wasn't me because he passed by me to conduct another 'on the spot' meeting with one of the clones who had the mannerisms of a sales representative. Despite his perpetual, toothy smile and polished two-minute sales pitch that came with a lot of practiced hand gesturing, he couldn't keep Kevin from eyeballing his next meeting. After a quick but cordial dismissal, he proceeded to escort another suited visitor; but instead of heading back to his office, they disappeared behind the door of a small conference room that I had overlooked earlier.

“Would you like something to drink? A water? Coffee?” asked Catherine.

“Oh! Gosh! You startled me. No, I'm good. Thanks for asking,” I replied while temporarily letting go of my fixation on Kevin's curious meeting execution process. *Ha! Always the*

analyst, I thought to myself.

“He’s running a little behind this morning, okay?”

“I totally understand. No problem,” I said while secretly playing with the idea of saying, “I’ve got a lunchtime spin class to get to so could we move it along, dear?” Little did Catherine know that I would’ve been willing to camp in the waiting area overnight if it was necessary. I had told too many of my colleagues about this meeting, and there was no way I could come down from Mount Olympus without being able to answer, “What’s he like?”

When I heard the conference room door open, I automatically looked at my watch to find that it was 11:15 a.m. A chuckle erupted between them as they said their goodbyes. The clone looked pleased with himself as he disengaged and sauntered toward the elevator while Kevin walked through the waiting area to say something to Catherine. Just by her body language alone, I could tell that if her boss had other executive assistants, she’d be the boss of them. Whereas I was effective despite being woefully inefficient, Catherine struck me as someone who didn’t need to sacrifice one for the other.

Moments after breaking the huddle with Catherine, Kevin revealed his last meeting type by walking up to the clone nearest to me, shaking his hand, and saying, “Let’s walk.” From time to time, and from where I was sitting, I could see the two of them strolling along the floor’s perimeter hallways, illuminated by the late morning sunlight that rushed in through exterior walls made of tinted reinforced glass. Since the lap began at the elevator, it seemed logical that Kevin would end it there. I couldn’t be certain but it looked like he pushed the down button as a signal that the meeting was adjourned. If that was true, then that kind of dismissal could *only* be bested by pushing an ejection seat button. *Now that’s a boss move!*

For the next half hour or so, I continued to watch Kevin select his way through the logjam of appointments, conducting meetings in one of four ways. Clones were either getting the floor lap, the conference room, the office, or the ‘on-the-spot’ – the equivalent of getting a bronze, silver, or gold medal or a plastic participation trophy. Secretly, I was hoping for the office so I could find out if he *really* could see the Pacific Ocean from his balcony. Meanwhile, the defeatist that sits next to the autopilot inside of me was laying down a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill inside of a square labeled ‘on-the-spot’ in

the middle of a felt-covered casino table. It wasn't because the odds were against me – I was against me.

Meeting

“And you must be Chuck,” said the looming wall of red cardigan.

“Yes. Nice to meet you, Mr. Sharer,” I said while getting to my feet to shake the hand that was already extended toward me, meeting his blue eyes as the few remaining clones looked on.

“I apologize for making you wait for so long,” he said with what I detected as genuine sincerity. “I'd like to talk to you about a project that's come up.”

“Okay,” I said as I followed Kevin toward the conference room while my mind wrestled between relishing the silver medal and dreading the inescapable spotlight.

He was much taller up close, and I could sense that what emanated from him was more natural charisma than charm.

And, before we sat down at the small rectangular table, I handed him the fluorescent orange tube that was labeled with his name on it. “This is for you, Mr. Sharer. The master cell bank map is inside.”

“Terrific work, Chuck. Thank you,” he said as he took it, holding it in both hands.

When we took our seats, I placed the oversized portfolio case on the table, released the two latches at the top and opened it like any other briefcase. Reaching in, I removed a pen and a small notepad with dimensions no larger than a post card. As I closed it, I noticed that Kevin was watching me the whole time. His perplexed expression allowed me to know exactly what he was thinking, causing me to blurt out, “I swear there’s more stuff in there.” He laughed at that, giving me precious seconds to acknowledge the icebreaker and pull it together.

“How long have you been with the company?” he asked.

“Fifteen years.”

“Why haven’t I heard of you before?” he pressed.

“I guess I fly under the radar,” I exclaimed while mentally chastising myself for answering such an unexpected question so quickly.

“I can see that; but why now? Why am I noticing you now?” he asked.

Wow. I had practiced answering all kinds of questions for the last twenty-four hours, even while swimming laps at the YMCA that morning, and Kevin was schooling me on the subtle art of disarmament.

“Because I have higher-level clients now,” I replied.

“What’s the hardest part of your job?” he continued.

“Determining if someone is lying to me.”

While sitting up straighter in his chair and motioning the fluorescent orange tube for emphasis, Kevin said, “That’s the hardest part of my job, too.”

Within those first few exchanges, I had gone from wanting to

crawl under one of the couches in the waiting area to feeling like Michael J. Fox's character, Brantley Foster, in *The Secret of My Success*. The more I acted on impulse, the better I seemed to look to this no-nonsense CEO who was only a few months away from being on the cover of *Forbes* magazine. I didn't realize it then but Kevin had helped me get out of my own way.

As I listened to Kevin tell me about his project, I had to work hard to keep looking him in the eyes because I was constantly fighting the urge to look at the fluorescent orange tube which he was using to punctuate what he was saying. When it wasn't flipping this way or that way, it was pointing toward the future or back to the past. At that point, I didn't care if he opened it or not since the tube was like NASA's Opportunity rover which functioned on mars for more than fourteen years despite being designed to last only ninety days. Clearly, the fluorescent orange tube wasn't a space age engineering marvel, but it had definitely done its job – and then some.

In between the twirls and spins of the greatest gift ever to have been placed in the hands of a CEO with a military background, I heard him say that one of the company's drug products was

currently under review by the U.S. Surgeon General's Office which could possibly lead to an unfavorable label change. By understanding how this process moved through Washington, D.C., Kevin could put himself and the company in a more proactive position to avoid having to add a warning label to the packaging.

“Do you know anything about Senate subcommittees?” he asked.

“No, but I can map anything,” I replied.

“How so?” he challenged.

“I'm like a camera. Just tell me what you want in the frame and how much detail you'd like the picture to have,” I said while motioning toward the black portfolio case. “I brought examples to show you.”

When he pointed the orange fluorescent tube at my portfolio case, I didn't waste any time opening it and spreading out what I thought was the greatest work of my career. Like any creative type who has a product, I relished having Kevin see a half-

dozen or so workflow diagrams from different organizations across the company.

Now he'll get a sense of my intention, style, and consistency.

It was truly a dream come true because I didn't think there'd be any chance of a 'show and tell,' but there I was, explaining how having little to no experience in these subject areas can be a tremendous advantage.

"I want you to go talk to a few people about this project. They'll be contacting you," he said in a way that told me I had made the team and that the meeting was over.

"Okay. I'll be ready when they are," I replied, thinking that my response sounded like, "Aye, aye, Captain!"

As I quickly gathered my work back into the portfolio case, Kevin stood up and started to make his way toward the door. By the time I caught up to him, I was feeling more elated than relieved since validation at this magnitude had my brain thinking it was doing the backstroke in a pool of dopamine. Then, as I readied myself to follow him through the door, he suddenly stopped in front of it and did an about-face.

While leaning in to look me in the eyes, he said, “Chuck, I want you to know that you impressed the hell out of me today.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sharer. It was great meeting you,” I said as if I was looking at Bono after he invited me on stage to join him in singing, “New Year’s Day” – and we nailed it.

As I sailed by the remaining clones and the ‘always busy’ Catherine on my way to the elevator, I, too, felt like a rover on Mars since two-thirds of my body weight seemed to have vaporized over the last twenty minutes. And I still felt that way when the elevator doors closed and started descending to the ground level. *How ironic*, I thought. *I’m going down but I’m not coming back to Earth.*

Even the sudden reality of the noonday sunlight couldn’t wake me from this dream scenario, an outcome no less astonishing than Kirk Gibson’s improbable homerun to win Game 1 of the 1988 World Series for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Whereas he had to fight through a bum left hamstring, I had to push aside self-defeating thoughts – and get help from Kevin to do so. He could’ve knighted me using the fluorescent orange tube and

not have made me feel more appreciated and respected in that special moment just as we were leaving the conference room to go about the rest of our day.

While crossing the courtyard toward the cafeteria, my portfolio case now in my right hand, I found myself in the same spot where I had seen Kevin on his balcony a few years earlier. Looking up at it again, I still had no idea if he could see the Pacific Ocean. All I knew was that he could definitely see me.

After meeting with some of the team members, I received an email that contained an itinerary that had me listed as one of the passengers slated to take the corporate jet to Washington, D.C. A week later, the trip was postponed. A week after that, I was dropped from the project. Ironically, three years later, I was laid off as a direct result of the U.S. Surgeon General's Office requiring a warning label be placed on the packaging of one of the company's preeminent drug products.

Chapter 10: My Holy Grail

This is a story about recognizing and accepting that the need for artistic expression can be so compelling that any amount of suppression will only make it harder and harder to ignore. Like love, you need to be ALL IN before you can truly experience the feeling. I fought it for as long as I could; but in the end, I had to acknowledge her – as well as those who inspired and motivated me along the way.

The smoke kept blowing into my face, so I asked Cara if she wouldn't mind moving upwind of the backyard fire. The discussion was too good, and I didn't want the distraction. Only a few years past her days at Iowa State and recently engaged, Cara looked more like every girl in a soap commercial than someone with a 9-to-5 job wanting to 'do more' with their art. Photos of her work revealed that she was not only good, she could spread that talent across all kinds of media. But that's not why I decided to answer her question about pursuing her art. I liked her passion; plus, she had an earnestness that made you want to match it.

Looking around to make sure no one could hear me, I leaned in and said, “I found the Holy Grail of art.” She was young, so I wasn’t too frustrated when I had to explain what ‘Holy Grail’ meant. I told her she needed to choose the media that she truly enjoyed working in, to select subjects that spoke to her and, most importantly, to tell us what they’re saying. I promised her that if she kept doing that over and over again, she would develop a recognizable signature style that would make people point at something they’ve never seen before and exclaim, “That’s definitely a Cara!”

She liked that and, while looking at my artwork on her phone, she asked me one of my all-time favorite questions, “How would you describe *your* style?”

Without hesitation, I admitted that my work is what happens when fine art, an infographic, and the back of a cereal box all run into each other.

Cara laughed, “That’s perfect.”

Since that fortuitous backyard chat, I often thought that I should write about how I found the Holy Grail but add

something that I didn't share with Cara on that cool autumn Saturday evening. I didn't mention that I needed to make peace with it first.

The Early Years

At 10 years old, I should've been more focused on improving my little league batting average; instead, I was angling to get a sheet of my mom's oversized and expensive drawing paper because the team strikeout king had big plans for it. But in order to get my hands on it, I had to produce a well thought out and detailed sketch that would, understandably, assure my mom that her professional grade paper wouldn't be wasted. To her, this was fair and just; to me it was the end of the world as I knew it.

I tried explaining by pointing to my head and saying, "It's all up here!" No dice. So, after throwing myself on my bed in a fit of tears lamenting how life isn't fair and how impossible it would be to make a sketch – I started sketching. I remember feeling so proud because I didn't do just one sketch; I did like three or four.

When presented to my mom, instead of immediately being handed the precious sheet of paper, I was shocked to hear, “What’s this?”

Incredulous, I replied, “What do you mean? I did a bunch!”

My mom then went on to explain that scribbles in boxes no bigger than sugar packets wouldn’t cut it. Eventually, the prized paper was flowing my way only because I was buying it with money earned doing odd jobs around the neighborhood. Although my financial picture had changed drastically, my messy miniaturized two-minute sketch work remained – and I *still* do it the same way today.

As I progressed through school, I was quickly gaining the moniker of being artistic; but inside I was struggling in my art classes. The traditional subjects and conventional approaches didn’t interest me. The more emphasis on realism, perspective, and technique, the more I wanted to throw my pencils and brushes in the trash and take more batting practice. My whole life at that time was rife with structure and expectation. The last thing I needed was to take the one thing that freed me from constraint and turn it into more school work. No thanks.

The Barnes Foundation

It wasn't until my senior year of high school when I learned that art could be an expressive outlet and not just an assignment judged by a ribbon or grade. I was given the opportunity to study art history and art appreciation at the renowned Barnes Foundation just outside Philadelphia. My instructor was Violette de Manzia, an 83-year-old woman who always wore black and looked more like an older version of Morticia from the *Addams Family* television show than a famous art historian.

A typical lecture went like this: Ms. De Manzia would instruct gloved docents to bring out one or more original works of Renoir, Cézanne, Matisse, Degas, Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso, or some other impressionist or modern painter; then, while flanked by priceless works of art displayed on heavy wooden easels, she'd carefully explain what was going on in the world at that time and what these masters were trying to say about it. And there it was. The lightbulb went on and, for the first time, I realized that art could be more than just attracting eyeballs and oohs and ahhs – it could be your voice.

Violette de Manzia died in 1988, a mere 6 years after I completed her program as a 17-year-old. Little did I know at that time how legendary she was and how her lectures would influence the purpose and intention of my work to this very day.

Los Angeles

While Ms. De Manzia was ascending to a place reserved for fine art royalty, I was busy speeding along US Interstate 10 somewhere in Texas on my way to Southern California from North Carolina. In the bed of my pickup (where I slept most nights), I had only my most prized possessions: a boom box, a mountain bike, and my artwork. Like most twenty somethings with a degree in their back pocket, I was looking for a job that would bring me my share of the American dream. I actually found that opportunity in the biotech industry where I held a wide variety of positions ranging from genetic engineer to business analyst. With such scientific and managerial focuses, one would think that an art background would've been useless and put on ice; instead, it was omnipresent and clearly one of the secrets to my success. At least that's what I was concluding as I walked out of the

security office after having returned my employee badge and office key as a company-wide layoff ended my 19-year career. Peers of mine who suffered the same fate were quick to send out resumes and fill out online job applications to resume turning their professional skills into paychecks. I remember getting caught up in the frenzied stampede with them – how else would I know that filling out online applications obliterate all hope on Earth?

It was during this time that I noticed a strong correlation between spending hours on third-party job recruitment websites and riding my bike. The mere thought of having to retype my responsibilities of a position I held ten years earlier – despite it being clearly stated on the uploaded resume – would result in an almost knee-jerk reaction to put miles on my bike. Yes, this was pure, unadulterated procrastination, but it gave me time to think about what I truly wanted. Maybe the layoff wasn't so bad after all. Slowly, as the miles came and went, I began thinking about contribution. Some of the contributions I made over my career impacted the very culture of the company I had worked for. What made that so gratifying for me was getting people to see something from a completely different perspective. But isn't that what most artists try to do?

As my bike careened past gated Malibu compounds, my face lit up from the setting sun reflecting off the Pacific, I recalled my time at the Barnes Foundation and decided then and there to immerse myself into art and find out if I really did have something to say.

A New Start

My little drafting table with the clamped swing-arm lamp and desk chair looked pretty pathetic pushed up against the one window in an upstairs bedroom, but at least it looked over the community pool and got plenty of Southern California sunshine. Over shouts of kids splashing in the water and a steady diet of sports talk radio, it was here where I began my journey back to a passion that had never really been extinguished. Over the next 10 years, my little drafting table supported more than 200 art projects ranging from pen and ink to acrylic painting and giclée reproductions. First, there was the black and white period. Then there were the run-of-minimal color compositions that eventually exploded into nothing *but* color. Although the output was diverse, each art piece came with a corresponding abstract that explained the intention of the work and correlated it to popular social

observation and related phenomenon. So, as it turned out – I *did* have a voice!

Jim

As art show requests and sales inquiries started to increase, so did my need for framing and reproductions. Lucky for me, I found an amazing little shop only three and a half bike miles away. Walking into Museum Quality Framing was like walking into a place where you'd want to hang out all day, drink coffee, see what customers brought in, eavesdrop on conversations, and generally distract the staff with your incessant questions and commentary.

Instead of shooing me out with the rest of the riffraff, the owner, Jim Brent, let me hang out and even invited me to go behind the scenes and see his workshop which was on the other side of a swinging door just off of the main showroom of displayed art and countless frame samples. I felt pretty special seeing 'where the magic happened' because Jim had everything you would possibly need to reproduce anything and frame it. This was a world that was very foreign to me and Jim seemed more like a cross between the Mad Hatter and The

Great and Powerful Oz than a store owner. When Jim wasn't sitting behind two giant computer screens, he was tending to an oversized ink jet printer like a diligent drone scurrying around an impatient queen bee or firing up the incredibly loud frame-making machine that seemed everywhere at once. It didn't take long for me to realize that Jim was freaking brilliant, and all I wanted to do was learn from him.

A friendship ensued and I found myself being exposed to new media, new ideas, and new business. Soon, I was a regular at the shop and business was rolling along for the both of us. Besides me, Jim worked with many artists, some local, some far away – some famous, some not so famous. It didn't take long for me to figure out why Jim was so popular. It turns out that the relationship between an artist and the person who reproduces their work is not only critically important – it *will* literally determine if you're miserable or on top of the world that day. I can relate to this because there's nothing more frustrating for an artist than to see that the colors DON'T MATCH between the reproduction and the original. Apparently, getting ink jet colors to match original pigment color *or* computer graphics (color by light) is an art form in and of itself – and Jim was a guru.

When I think back on those five years I spent at Museum Quality Framing, I see Jim as Sam, the bartender from the television show *Cheers*, and me as Norm, the beer-swilling regular who made the bar his ‘home away from home.’ But when I close my eyes and visualize what Jim taught me, Jim’s shoulder always obliterates about a third of the mental picture. That’s because I must’ve logged at least three thousand hours peering over it as he printed, framed, and performed what looked to be sorcery with Adobe’s Photoshop on his ginormous Macintosh.

I had never really understood what computer graphics were all about until I watched Jim do things in seconds that would take me hours and hours to do by hand. I was mesmerized by the possibilities and felt like I had just stumbled upon the greatest secret that had been kept from me my entire life. The lightbulb went on again, and suddenly I knew I needed my own Apple computer. Jim and I used to joke that we had that enviable relationship immortalized by roles played by Tom Cruise and Cuba Gooding Jr. in the sports agent movie, *Jerry Maguire*. We even went as far as imagining other artists complaining to their art reproduction guys by saying, “Dude, why don’t we have that kind of relationship?” So, it’s probably not hard to

fathom that Jim accompanied me to the Apple Store to make sure I bought the right computer.

And just like that, my upstairs spare bedroom started looking less like Grandma's craft room and more like a computer graphics lab. Gone were the cumbersome easels, messy paints, and jars of brushes and pens. In their place, I had my new computer, a drawing tablet, a stylus, a 'Photoshop for Dummies' book (not kidding) and umm . . . that's it! Wow. I could have had guests stay in there and my setup wouldn't be disturbed!

Graphic Art

When I first started creating art on my computer, it felt more like I had been given the keys to a magic carpet that didn't come with instructions on how to fly it. The excitement was there but so was the fear that I had strayed too far away from my art roots. Surprisingly, over time, I realized that my mind was totally wired to create this way. I wasn't just comfortable; I was like a pig that just swan dived into the sloppiest mud puddle ever. Being an ambidextrous circus sideshow freak since middle school, I noticed something interesting: my left

hand was in charge of the fine details using the stylus while my right could make sweeping lines with the track pad while operating the computer at the same time. I know what you're thinking, and I agree – my left hand is such a slacker! In all seriousness, I believe that the use of both hands gave me access to parts of my mind that I hadn't used before. Not only were the creative juices flowing fast and furiously, they were resulting in art work that was even more meaningful and satisfying than before.

Everybody knows that anything cool in life has a price tag, and transitioning from fine art to computer graphic art isn't an exception. Besides seeing gallery and show requests diminish, I noticed an ever-increasing distance between me and the local fine art community in general. I'm going out on a limb by writing this; but as subtle as it was, there's an unmistakable superiority that fine artists can waft over artists who use a computer because 'it's not REAL art.' I know that disclosure reeks of my own insecurity, but I can't deny feeling it back then.

Another adage that comes to mind is that when one door closes, three others open. What? That's not how the saying

goes? Well, it was for me in this case. Digital art gave way to establishing a stronger internet presence, product licensing, and advertising. Before I knew it, my work was landing on liquor bottles, surfboards, iPods, gaming consoles, laptops, cell phones, album covers, and so much more. Commissions weren't only up; some were even coming in from civic institutions like discovery centers and schools. It was as if I had the Midas touch and could do no wrong.

I even went to a swanky, invite-only art show in Los Angeles featuring the iconic Peter Max without an invite and ended up having a quasi-private one-on-one discussion with him about the relationship between art and science! It was a pretty surreal moment because having grown up in Philadelphia, I would see his famous artwork throughout the city. I remember feeling enamored with his bold subjects, loose perspective, bright colors, and creative freedom. Hmmm. Ring a bell? The absolute best is when someone looks at my portfolio and then asks me if I ever heard of Peter Max. Then, in about one second, they ask me why I'm smiling so big.

The Party's Over

If success can be described as ‘the thrill of victory,’ I was on my way to ‘the agony of defeat.’ With several years of wins here and there – some big, some small – I began feeling more and more frustrated. Wins were growing farther and farther apart, and they weren’t building off of each other. It seemed like after each success, I would drop back into the abyss of obscurity, making me feel like I was back at square one. Licensing agreements started becoming more like contract disputes, art show invites seemed more like popularity contests, completed commissions became money collection grinds, and I even started having problems with my good friend, Jim, back at *Cheers*. Nothing was going ‘according to plan,’ and I felt my bitterness morphing into an attitude of ‘me against the world.’

If this art autobiography is giving the impression that my fall from grace was an overnight thing, I’m sorry because it wasn’t. Left in the wake of this slide were once significant relationships, both personal and professional. In their place loomed anger and resentment because never in my life had I tried so hard and *not* had resounding, sustaining success – and

this effort was coming from my heart and soul! I just couldn't wrap my head around it. What was I missing? What was I doing wrong? I had previous success – check. My work was getting better and better – check. I had established a recognizable signature style – check. The messaging behind my art was positive and relatable – check. I had an awesome website, a social media presence, and even a monthly newsletter – check, check, and check! I didn't know it then but I was having one hell of a pity party for myself that culminated into one last temper tantrum – I tossed my computer in a drawer, deleted my social media accounts and blew up my website. I felt like that long-ago middle schooler who wanted to throw his art in the trash and go back to being mediocre on the baseball diamond. This time, some 35 years later, I actually did quit.

Boise

Even though the windows were tightly closed, I could still hear the roar of the crowd from Albertsons Stadium in southeast Boise, Idaho. From the oversized antique walnut desk in my one-bedroom apartment, I could literally see the 'Home of the Broncos' as it towered well above the leafless

trees. Plenty of early winter snow dominated the landscape making it feel warm and cozy in my perch on the top floor. While working on an art piece called, ‘Capitol Chill’ – the first in three years – I remember being mildly amused by how the crowd noise didn’t sync with what my radio was emitting as it was tuned into the same game. *That’s right*, I recall thinking as a new BSU sports homer, *There’s a six-second delay in TV and radio broadcasts*. I was totally engrossed in what was on my computer but my mind was free to wonder about such frivolities – something I hadn’t allowed before.

A lot of things were different and none more evident than in the way I saw my passion for art. Gone were the unrealistic expectations, the need to monetize everything, and the pandering for approval. In their place, I felt lighthearted, centered, and grateful. I realized that if you’re lucky enough to even have a special gift, you should concern yourself with giving that gift – especially if it’s positive, noble in nature, and makes people happy. And there it was – the crystal-clear answer to the question I had asked years before. Now I *knew* what I was doing wrong.

The three-year hiatus of self-loathing and general dislike for

anything other than bike riding had shockingly little effect on my ability to create art. In fact, not only was my signature style back in full force, the work was better! Was it because I took a mental break? Maybe; but I don't think so. I think it stems from something I learned in Victor Frankl's heart-breaking yet monumental book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Sadly, his insightful contributions come from having survived four years in Auschwitz during World War II. In it, I recall two unforgettable quotes: "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves" and "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing – the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Powerful words to say the least; perhaps maybe even a tad melodramatic for a guy who merely lost his art mojo, eh? Overstated or not, Dr. Frankl's words hit home and got me to pull my head out of my 'you know what' and get it focused on making up for lost time. 'Capitol Chill' was the first of twelve art compositions making up my Boise Series, a self-appointed, yearlong art project inspired by a city that inspired me.

Even if I live to be 100, I will forever be astonished at how the universe will start cooperating *if* your heart is in the right

place. Soon after I started uploading my Boise-themed artwork to resurrected social media and a brand-new website, an influx of welcomed commentary began finding its way to me. Before I knew it, I was showing my art portfolio to the mayor, city council members, and other prominent civic leaders. When requests for prints and greeting cards started coming in from local shops – including the gift shop in the State Capitol – I had to start looking for a local art reproduction person to partner with me. Right away, nervousness set in. Clearly, I wasn't in L.A. anymore; plus, the Mad Hatter back at Museum Quality Framing had spoiled me rotten and ruined me for all others.

Bob

The door of the plain gray stucco building on Main Street was locked yet I had an appointment with Bob Pleasure (love the name), owner of Riverworks Imaging on the westside of the city. I heard a voice from inside say, “Hold on!” even though cars were whizzing by me on a busy weekday afternoon. As I waited, I reminded myself that Bob was probably going to be an average guy doing average work despite good reviews on Yelp and Google. After all, what could I expect after working

with The Great and Powerful Oz? Walking into Bob's one-man studio was like smelling fresh cut grass – it took me back to a time and place of sheer nostalgia. He had all the same equipment, tools, and supplies; and, I liked the familiarity. From the layout and tidiness of the place, I could tell Bob was organized. When he saw me notice all the different reproduction orders in various stages on the oversized worktable, Bob set about explaining his craft to me.

I remember thinking, *You've got be kidding me*, as he recounted his days as an early graphic designer for many well-known companies, including an upstart computer company named Apple. Not only was this guy a reproduction maestro like Jim, he understood what it takes to create graphic art. Bingo. I guess lightning *can* strike twice.

Just like my days with Jim, I relished going to Bob's studio. Maybe it's the same for writers who hang around bookstores. Until my work is printed by Bob, it's sort of like when a tree falls in the woods and nobody hears it. Did it really fall? Did I *really* do an art piece about the Boise Zoo? Do I even exist? Umm, sorry; I didn't mean to get all existentialistic on you. One of my greatest joys in life is seeing my work on Bob's

oversized worktable with all the other artists. There's a certain validation that I get from seeing that; plus, the colors are spot on, so the rest of my day is spent on cloud nine.

Now

It wasn't like I ran out of inspiration when it came to the 'City of Trees,' but I needed to spread my wings and see what a rekindled love of art could do beyond a Boise theme. Like an old faucet handle that breaks off after one rusty turn, my artwork was happily flowing with no way to shut it off. There was the 6-piece series for the Conejo Valley Guide in Los Angeles, an online kiosk for Ventura County, then a 6-piece series on Idaho State Parks. After several commercial projects, I spent a year creating a 12-piece series that relates fun facts about astrophysics and quantum theory to the human experience. Right now, at the time of this writing, I'm working on the third of twelve art compositions about nature and dedicating the work to finding the right combination to unlock hope and happiness in a world that suddenly feels like a Rubik's Cube.

Peace

With my story told, my mind wanders back to that long-ago conversation with Cara over the crackling of the fire and the din of friendly backyard conversations, and I wonder if she figured out what I failed to warn her about. Once you're all in, your passion becomes the cross that you bear. I imagine we'll meet again, and when we do, I'll tell her to take solace in a famous quote from Bob Marley, the late great Jamaican singer and song writer, and remind her that the referenced woman is how I see my love of art: "If she's amazing, she won't be easy. If she's easy, she won't be amazing. If she's worth it, you won't give up. If you give up, you're not worthy. Truth is, everybody is going to hurt you; you just gotta find the ones worth suffering for."

And with that, I understood my own suffering and made peace with it – I guess that's why artists are referred to as 'tortured souls.' I offer my story, my Holy Grail, my olive branch, to those who shared their wisdom with me, those who believed in me, and to the rest of the world. Thanks for your patience. It's good to be back.

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.

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