

It's Not  
Your Fault



But It Could Be  
**Chuck Trunks**

It's Not Your Fault

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Nampa, Idaho

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If you've seen what I've seen inside and outside mainstream society, then you will love this book because you will have found a like-minded brother in me. If what I'm revealing in *It's Not Your Fault: But It Could Be* is eye-opening to you, then you will also love this book because it demonstrates that there's more to work than the daily grind, more to happiness than material wealth, and more to relationships than pet-centric lives.

There's no doubt we live in a duplicitous society in which we are instructed to follow our dreams and be our authentic selves. But at the same time, this confusing culture offers a narrow definition of success with only one way to get there. This book is based on real-life experiences that will remind you of the freedoms you still have so you, too, can avoid the false promises of the American Dream.

While writing this book, a dear friend, who truly understands the intention and connectivity behind everything I write, made me aware of this wonderful quote from Mother Teresa:

“I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone  
across the waters to create many ripples.”

This book is dedicated to those who continue to cast their stones despite little to no fanfare. To you I say, take heart, knowing that the ripples you’ve created have reached me and countless others.

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

—Chuck Trunks

# CONTENTS

	Preface	1
	Introduction	4
<b>Part I</b>	<b>Blinded by The Lights</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>Oh, the Humanity</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Failure Is Not an Option</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Win Some, Lose Some</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Part II</b>	<b>Into the Ocean</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Lions, Tigers, and Bears</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>School's OUT</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>The Game of Life</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Part III</b>	<b>Imagine the Freedom</b>	<b>147</b>
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>On Your Own Terms</b>	<b>150</b>
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>What's Your Bag?</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Separately Together</b>	<b>184</b>
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>203</b>
	About the Author	215
	Additional Books	216

## Preface

The purpose of any preface is to answer the question, "Why did the author write this book?" But in my case, I need to explain to the reader why I felt I had to give up everything in order to write this book and the three that preceded it. If this story had been a science fiction thriller or a romantic comedy, I might not have had to resort to such drastic measures. Instead, it's a thought-provoking book that dives headfirst into social commentary that challenges the unlikely promises of the American Dream. It's a deep read for sure, but my style of writing hasn't changed. *It's Not Your Fault: But It Could Be* is a collection of nonfiction essays that are woven together to tell an engaging, relatable, and entertaining story of one man's attempt to make sense of the world we live in.

In some ways, I feel like Noah from the Biblical story of Noah's ark. Before you roll your eyes and say, "This guy needs to get over himself," let me explain why I've likened my intentions to those of a canonized nun and why I'm about to compare myself to a Biblical legend. When I think of Noah, I don't envision a massive boat. Heck, I don't even see animals. I see a guy saying goodbye to health insurance and 401k

contributions by quitting his day job to work on something nobody wants or cares about. Here he is, slaving away for years with more passion and purpose than he's ever had in his entire life. Soon, his wife, family, and friends all drift away as his life savings and everything he owns are transformed into a wooden seafaring albatross that looks woefully out of place and useless. Next, his daily grind elicits widespread gossip among the townspeople that change from concern to accusations of being a blasphemous heretic for having the audacity to speak of an approaching apocalypse without any proof other than personal conviction.

I didn't write *It's Not Your Fault: But It Could Be* because I had a dream-induced epiphany or heard the voice of God in my ear. I wrote this book simply because I must offer my best contribution, regardless of whether the world chooses to acknowledge it. I'm moved to share the fundamental truths I've discovered after spending as much time outside the societal construct as I have inside.

If you were hopelessly lost under the canopy of a dense forest, who would you listen to? Would you ask for directions from the person standing next to you or from the one who decided

to climb a tree to see above the branches? I am not Noah telling you that a great flood is coming. I'm a humble author, casting a stone to remind you of what's already written on the wall. Now it's my turn to take heart, knowing that the ripples I create with this book will find you, engage you, edify you, and enrich your life.

# Introduction

The entirety of what you're about to read takes place in a civic auditorium located on the campus of Boise State University in Idaho. Although the circumstances that put me on stage are fictitious, the insights and stories within the two-hour lecture stem from real-life experiences. As you read the book, imagine yourself in the audience at the Morrison Center. You may have read the book *It's Not Your Fault: But It Could Be*. Maybe you haven't. In either case, you came to listen to the author talk about his latest New York Times best seller. And like the other nineteen hundred people in attendance, you've been living in quiet desperation, secretly wanting something more fulfilling and satisfying than what's been fed to you through your television and phone.

As you read *It's Not Your Fault*, keep in mind that communication differs between spoken and written words. Whereas the transcript of my two-hour lecture at the Morrison Center doesn't include phrases like "he said" and "she said" within excerpts of expressed dialogue, the written manuscript *does* include all the journalistic conveyances one would expect from a book. I simply ask that you indulge my

fantasy while remaining open-minded to the rationale behind why I think we live in a society that serves so few and crushes so many. As always, my cardinal rule for writing is to entertain first and edify second. The book is divided into three sections that support the key takeaways offered in the conclusion.

In Part I of *It's Not Your Fault*, I touch upon circumstances in my childhood that fueled a tenacious, early commitment toward preparing myself for success within a societal construct I didn't vote for or help create. Beginning with the early years of middle school, high school, and college, Part I continues onward to show the reader that I not only acquired most of the top-shelf accolades society has to offer, but I was truly successful. How else would the reader know that my conclusions include observational and experiential data gathered from *within* the societal construct? Then, at the end of Part I, at the age of forty-two, I reveal new circumstances that left me standing on the *outside* of a society I had worked so hard to belong to.

This unplanned deviation sets the stage for a fifteen-year midlife tour of self-discovery and social awareness that's explored in Part II of *It's Not Your Fault*. By combining nearly

equal parts of observational and experiential data gathered from the inside *and* outside of the societal construct, I'm able to offer the reader unique perspectives on a number of institutions considered by many to be pillars of a civilized society. In my opinion, I feel like I live in a society whose concern for its citizens begins with incessant, unrealistic messaging that touts the virtues of living the American Dream and ends when the drone runs out of time, attention, and money. I hope the reader will consider my unfiltered takes to be eye-opening and entertaining. In some ways, they're somewhat reminiscent of the insightful monologues of the late George Carlin.

In Part III, I'll ask you to join me in revisiting the same subset of societal pillars that I voted against in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. But this time around, I'll pique your imagination by reminding you of the possibilities that can materialize if you choose to utilize the freedoms you still have. And when I say possibilities, I mean options that will allow you to acquire everything you could possibly want but in ways you might not have considered.

In the conclusion of *It's Not Your Fault*, I'll present the bigger

picture that depicts the inside and outside of the societal construct so I can show you who has and hasn't found success, happiness, and fulfillment. Knowing that there are unacceptable costs that come from living in any extreme, my final thoughts go to those who still desire success, happiness, and fulfillment, but at a price that doesn't demand your freedom, flexibility, or humanity. Ironically, you'll come to know these final thoughts while standing in a buffet line with me at a casino hotel in Las Vegas.

## Part I: Blinded by The Lights

“And little Early-Pearly came by in his curly-wurly and asked me if I needed a ride.”

- “Blinded by The Light,” Manfred Mann’s Earth Band  
(1976)

Like you, I’ve probably listened to “Blinded by the Light” about a million times without knowing the meaning behind the song’s catchy chorus and insane lyrics. Written by Bruce Springsteen, the 1976 chart topper is about the thrill and invincibility of youth, making the iconic song even more perfect as the music choice to represent Part I of *It’s Not Your Fault: But It Could Be*. How could it *not* be the right song when the book opens with me walking onto the Morrison Center stage under blinding spotlights to confess to the audience that most of my adolescence was spent fantasizing about the big city lights of the American Dream?

If I were sitting in the audience listening to me, I’d be thinking, *How is this guy even qualified to be on stage? Maybe he’s just a sore loser for having flunked out of adulthood? Or maybe*

*it's sour grapes for coming up short on his hopes and dreams? Please tell me I didn't just waste thirty bucks to attend some guy's self-pity party where he blames everyone but himself for his mistakes.* But I'm not just *any* old guy. While deep inside the societal construct, I acquired enough sensational highs and lows to put me somewhere between Michael J. Fox's character, Brantley Foster, in *The Secret of My Success* and Charlie Sheen's Bud Fox in *Wall Street*.

Although Part I focuses on the observational and experiential data I collected while inside the societal construct, its purpose is to convey to audience members and readers that I, too, was brainwashed into believing that there is only one way to live your life, only one definition for success, and only one way to get there. I'll take you to a college football game and the best concert I ever attended to give you a sense of the good people of Boise. Then, to give you an idea of what motivated me to begin pursuing my aspirations at an early age, I'll invite you to split logs with me in the backyard of my childhood home, sit beside me in a church pew during a Sunday service, and wait with me inside an inner-city bus terminal. Next, I'll bring you to two restaurants so you can listen in on two table conversations spanning nearly twenty years and three

thousand miles. It is through the exchanges I have with Joe and Gabby that you will gain an appreciation for what I accomplished during my time within mainstream society. And I'll do it without you thinking of me as a braggadocious blowhard.

I can imagine the audience and readers collectively breathing a sigh of relief soon after discovering that my seemingly perfect and enviable world came crashing down while I was still in my early forties. These wouldn't be the sighs of voyeuristic haters. They'd be the sighs coming from people realizing that I live in the same world that they do, in a realistic world where bad things can happen to good people. I can imagine them nodding their heads and saying things like, "Hmm . . . I can actually relate to this guy," and "Maybe I didn't waste thirty bucks after all."

At the end of Part I, you'll notice that I circle back to a bench situated on a bike path that runs alongside the Neuse River in Raleigh, North Carolina. But it's no ordinary bench. It marks the spot where three decades' worth of data collected from *within* the societal construct coalesced with fifteen years' worth of information gathered from *outside* the walls of that

same hierarchical and duplicitous society. It's where I realized that most of us live inside pod-like cocoons while believing that we're truly winning the game of life.

# Chapter 1: Oh, the Humanity

## What Goes Around

*I can't believe it's been a year already*, I thought to myself while getting up from the squeaky makeup chair that had strips of duct tape on both arms. "How do I look?" I asked.

"Fabulous," replied Amy while producing an emphatic thumbs-up. "Break a leg, Chuck."

It started out as a humble and entertaining narrative to explain to family and friends how a fundamental shift in my philosophical outlook brought me a renewed sense of peace and happiness, yet somehow turned into a year-long, national lecture tour six months after *It's Not Your Fault: But It Could Be* was published on Amazon. As it turned out, lots of people were asking themselves the same questions, wanting more from this precious gift of life than what the prevailing societal construct and its current regime could offer. When the initial, tepid comments on Facebook and Instagram went from "Congrats!" and "Good Job!" to "It's nice to know I'm not alone" and "I'm reevaluating everything in my life," I knew I

had accomplished something I thought was only possible in my wildest dreams: I had reached my readers on an existential level.

"Sixty seconds, Mr. Trunks!" yelled Steve while remembering to put his hand over the headset's microphone so he wouldn't get an earful from the sound guys in the booth.

*Another full house*, I thought to myself after taking a quick peek from behind the huge maroon curtain in the Morrison Center, but I wasn't surprised. I knew why every seat was taken here and at the last forty-five lectures in thirty-one different venues across the country. People were starving for an alternative vision that could not only deliver happiness and fulfillment with or without the cooperation of others but also influence positive change within the current societal structure by gently altering it through an enlightened, passive means. I recalled writing, "There's no need to attend violence-inducing protest rallies, sign meaningless petitions, or write compromised representatives." The simple act of pursuing what truly interests you, makes you feel satisfied, and allows you to contribute your very best is more than enough to bring

incremental change to a society that at times feels fractured beyond repair.

"Five, four, three, two, one . . . YOU'RE ON!" Steve announced while using the fingers of his left hand for emphasis.

"Thanks, Steve," I replied before putting the back of my right hand against the slit in the heavy curtain.

*What a ride, I thought to myself. Two years earlier, I was putting the final touches on this wildly successful book in Boise, Idaho, and now I'm about to do my last lecture here to put a cap on over three hundred days out on the road. After two deep breaths and a last-second nod to Steve to cue the music, I stepped away from the darkness and into the light, the intense spotlight no longer making me want to scurry away and hide in the corner. Why would I? I was about to give my very best gift to people who deserve nothing less from me.*

## Touchdown, Broncos!

As soon as I walked out on stage and saw the crowd, I was immediately transported back in time to 2015, when I first saw the iconic blue Astroturf in Albertsons Stadium. It couldn't have been a more glorious autumn day in the City of Trees, a near-perfect afternoon to witness what I had only read about and watched on ESPN. Not only were the Boise State Broncos a perennial football powerhouse, they were the envy of the Mountain West Conference. I remember standing at the concession counter, nervously watching the suspended television monitor, waiting for my two Double R Ranch burgers and a large Pepsi. *Dang it. They're already lining up to start the game. I can't miss the freaking kickoff!*

By the time I exchanged eighteen dollars for eighteen hundred calories, I could hear and feel the surging crowd come to life as I skedaddled down the near-empty concourse toward the closest entrance to the field. While still hustling toward my seating area, the crowd made that sound everybody recognizes: that building, high-pitched cheer that reaches its crescendo just as the ball is kicked off to start the game. *Crap! I missed it!* As soon as I popped through the entrance adjacent

to the south end zone, my well-trained and practically bionic football eye immediately found Boise State's kickoff returner sprinting down the sideline with a slew of blockers in front of him. *No way . . . He's not going all the way on the opening kickoff? Is he?*

The scene was so overwhelming that my brain accidentally recorded the event over most of my memories of little league baseball, middle school, and that time in high school when my dad punched the guy in the car behind us for honking his horn when I let out the clutch too fast, stalling our Plymouth Volare station wagon in the middle of a busy intersection. From my standing position in the upper-level entrance, while still holding my soon-to-be-devoured lunch, I could see the golden foothills that served as the perfect backdrop to Boise's downtown skyline and majestic Capitol Building. The cerulean blue sky with evenly-spaced, puffy white clouds complimented the stubborn orange, yellow, and red leaves that refused to vacate their summer homes, making the trees look full and wildly colorful.

"Touchdown, Broncos!" boomed the stadium announcer, putting a kibosh on my trance-like state. If you were watching

me from one of the nearby seats, you would've seen a grown man slowly rotate, taking it all in like an old-timer who had spent sixty years watching his beloved Green Bay Packers on a black-and-white television before seeing Lambeau Field in person for the first time. But despite the unabashed pandemonium, the best part of the entire scene was the crowd.

No curse words were spewed. No beverages were spilled. No food was thrown. No fans made it about themselves. Yet, the rowdy jubilation exceeded anything I had experienced in the Los Angeles Coliseum when the LA Raiders would score touchdowns against their most despised rivals. Instead of anticipating fights erupting from schoolyard-quality taunts between man-boys, I found myself soaring on a shared magic carpet ride through a miracle, making me want to offer one of my Double R Ranch burgers to the next person who made eye contact with me.

If you were still watching me when I completed my rotation, you would've been momentarily confused by half of what you saw on my face. You would've recognized the same goofy smile that's typically found stretched across the faces of people stepping off roller coaster rides, but the single tear

slowly rolling down my cheek would've reminded you of the Native American Indian in that famous commercial from 1971. Of course, you would've seen it as a joyful tear, but what you wouldn't have known was that it stemmed from a deep appreciation for the fans of Boise State.

## **Who Are You?**

*This never gets old*, I thought to myself while scanning the younger faces to see if they were mouthing the words to a song that was popular decades before they were born. It always amazes me how certain songs can transcend generations, cultures, and time.

"It's way too old of a song, bro," said one friend after hearing me say I liked it as my entrance music.

"It's like you're telling everyone you're an old guy," said another.

"But everyone knows this song; plus, it's the perfect lead-in for my opening comments. And don't forget . . . they were the halftime show at the Super Bowl in 2010," I countered.

"Yeah... and panned for being TOO OLD," the first friend responded.

The Who's "Who Are You?" from their 1978 album of the same name boomed from speakers on either side of the stage and mezzanine. Pete Townsend's guitar perfectly punctuated the voice of Roger Daltrey singing, "Tell me, who are you?" followed by a chorus of, "Who, who, who, who." Then Daltrey's emphatic, "Cause I really wanna know," was followed by the same chorus. It was *the* perfect music, and it was *the* perfect place in the song to have the sound guys start bringing the volume down.

Hello everyone. And thanks for that gracious, warm welcome. It's true. I really do want to know, but better yet, YOU need to know who you are, right? Can I get an amen? Just kidding. Right now, I'm looking at over nineteen hundred unique individuals, beings so distinctively different from one another that no other past or present human was or is anything like you. And no future human will ever be like you either. More than one hundred billion human beings have lived and died on this planet, and I'm guessing that every one of them wanted to be happy. I'm also guessing that a lot of them weren't because

they were too busy running away from hungry animals and fighting off foreign invaders. Most of us in this beautiful venue tonight, including me, haven't had to worry about growing or killing our own food, building our own shelters, producing our own energy sources, making our own clothes, or defending the country we live in yet with all the conveniences our modern civilization has to offer, most of us remain as unhappy and unfulfilled as the ones who came before us.

Why do you think that is? If you read my book, *It's Not Your Fault: But It Could Be*, then you have a good idea of what the reasons are. And since you're sitting in the audience, I'm pretty sure you think I know what I'm talking about. Whereas my last book, *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*, focused on finding happiness by controlling emotions, investing in the current moment, and having a meaningful purpose, *It's Not Your Fault* is about finding that *same* happiness despite living in a societal construct that literally works against the enriched and enlightened inner life you've worked so hard to create within yourself. And in an earlier book, *Must Love Dogs: A Tragedy of Sorts*, I proposed a theory that attempted to answer the question, "How did America become so obsessed with

dogs?" To me, the phenomenon of rampant dog ownership resulting in more and more people living dog-centric lives is just one of many manifestations of a society that no longer brings people together.

I know that sounds grim, but don't worry. My plan is to have you leave here tonight feeling as good as I did about the world we live in when I walked out of this very place in the fall of 2016. I had just seen a two-hour concert featuring a band I would watch while lying on my stomach with my head propped up on my eleven-year-old hands in front of our twenty-five-inch television console on Saturday mornings. I'll give you a hint. They had a song that started like this: "Here we come, walkin' down the street. We get the funniest looks from ev'ry one we meet . . ."

## **Hey, Hey, We're the Monkeys!**

Even though this lecture will shed light on aspects of our society that'll make you want to take your chances moving to Switzerland, I believe all of us have had experiences that moved us to a point where we thought all was right with the world, where our brain chemistry and sense of nostalgia had

us convinced that it was possible to sing "Kumbaya" arm-in-arm with each other (and woodland creatures) around the campfire. Such was the case as I left the Morrison Center in 2016 with damp eyes, still spinning like pinwheels when my face met the cool October night. Despite being a fully grown man brought up to believe that joy, delight, thrill, and love were icky emotions, I didn't feel bad for laughing out loud, grinning like a dork, dancing in front of my seat, or getting misty-eyed more than a few times.

There they were—well, two of the original four. Lead singer Mickey Dolenz was behind the drums, and Peter Tork was on the keyboard while another musician filled in for Michael Nesmith on the guitar. And since Davy Jones had died in 2012, they had set up a simple yet touching tribute by placing a large photograph of the band's heartthrob on an easel behind a microphone stand. High above their heads, a large screen accompanied the band's music selections and showed clips from their popular television show from the late 1960s. As the evening's emcee, Mickey was in his element, peppering the audience with all kinds of fascinating band facts, anecdotal stories, and surprises in between songs that sounded EXACTLY like the vinyl they recorded on fifty years

earlier—and these guys were in their seventies! *Un-freaking-believable!*

Between the innocent music of my generation, video clips from a cherished television show from my childhood, and Mickey's heartfelt memorial to the memory of Davy, what emanated from the Morrison Center stage that night felt less like a show and more like pure love. As corny as it sounds, I sensed that The Monkeys were more like a loving family of brothers and sisters than a rock band. And when Mickey told the audience that one of the backup singers was his sister, I half expected to learn that one or two Monkeys shared DNA with members of the Partridge Family. My ears may have been listening to perfect performances of "Take the Last Train to Clarksville," "I'm a Believer," and "Pleasant Valley Sunday," but my heart was reeling from an iconic band who seemed to only want to take us back to simpler times, when radios, hairbrushes, and mirrors were the only things we needed to be happy in our middle-school bedrooms.

If pure love was being pumped out into the audience from speakers in front of the stage, it was being amplified within an audience of graying fans who not only knew all the words to

every song like me, but they too clutched tissues while displaying adolescent dance moves last seen in darkened school gymnasiums. Everyone around me, including my date, who was from the other side of the world and considerably younger than me, had the same look on their faces: unabashed smiles with glassy eyes and shiny cheeks from a mixture of tears and perspiration. Love was in the air that night, as well as a palpable sense of community that made me high enough to believe we could do better outside the Morrison Center. Even as people were filing into the aisles at the end of the concert, making their way toward the exits in the lobby, the love fest continued:

"Oh, my god. That was such a great concert," said a complete stranger who, by the way he was holding her hand and caressing her arm, appeared to have a renewed interest in his wife.

"Absolutely. I did NOT see that coming," I replied in reference to my red eyes. "By far the best concert I've ever seen, and I saw U2 in Ireland."

"How about you? Pretty amazing, huh?" he said to my date, who was in front of me, as we inched closer to the lobby doors.

"She doesn't speak much English. She's from China," I replied.

"Do you speak Mandarin?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Do you think she liked it, too?" he continued.

"Just look at her face," I answered.

Okay . . . Well, maybe you won't be leaving here feeling exactly like I did that night, but you *will* feel hopeful and convinced that it's possible for you, and for all of us, to do better. When you wake up tomorrow morning, I promise you'll start your day knowing how to live in the moment as opposed to living for the moment, how to create an enriched inner life, and how to find your meaningful purpose. Not only will you be able to see our American way of life in a more honest and sobering light, you'll also know how to navigate it

in a much more intelligent and satisfying way. Starting tomorrow, you'll be able to recognize the many obvious counterproductive manifestations of a society that touts "We the people" yet displays an "I the person" mentality. But the best takeaway from tonight will be your awareness that you'll be doing your part toward healing a country that lost sight of its humanity by discovering and cultivating the happiness and fulfillment that's already inside of you.

To get you there in the same amount of time that The Monkeys restored my faith in humankind more than six years ago, I plan to talk about my personal experience within a societal construct I didn't help create or vote for, what awaits you outside these doors, and how best to utilize the freedoms you still have in a nation that seems to have learned nothing from the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, or Romans.

## **Chapter 2: Failure Is Not an Option**

### **Keep Off the Grass**

Like every one of you in the audience tonight, I was raised to follow both the written and unwritten rules of a societal structure that was presented to me as the one and only choice. And like many of you, I didn't complain or feel the need to create an alternative mindset since the prevailing, ready-made life plan came with a way to build and measure self-esteem and self-worth. Plus, based on what my eyes and ears were telling me, I didn't think a competing construct was needed or even possible. We've all heard that kids are happier and calmer in structured environments than in free-for-all spaces. And from what I've read and experienced firsthand, I believe this is a fundamental truth. What makes an environment structured are clear rules that govern how a child navigates through it. Beginning early in life, children have an innate drive to build self-esteem and self-worth—primal urges passed down from early humans who learned that these qualities contributed to their very survival since a show of confidence and belonging translated into acceptance by the tribe.

As we mature, thumb-sucking, tantrums in the candy aisle, and a distaste for anything that doesn't come out of a Kraft Mac & Cheese box will dissipate, while our need for structure and rules will remain as lifelong necessities, or for however long you want to continue building and measuring your self-esteem and self-worth. Sadly, many of us, including me, chose to accept what we were led to believe was our only option: a fixed life plan of institutionalized education, legalized matrimony, 30-year mortgages, defined nuclear family units, organized religion, corporate employment, and retirement plans that promised to put you and your spouse on cruise ships by the time social security kicked in. And, while chasing the American Dream—which is only available to the well-connected and well-heeled, as well as those willing to win at any cost—cell phones, social media, and agenda-driven news outlets tell us what to think when our bosses, spouses, children, and calendars don't.

As you can readily see, a lot of people accept this pre-mixed 'add water and stir' life plan, especially since deep self-awareness, independent thought, and radical risk-taking aren't necessary requirements. If you don't believe me, just look at any of your social media feeds to see how far people will go

to convince you that the mundane is both sensational and announcement-worthy. Even conventional milestones like graduations, marriage proposals, weddings, anniversaries, births, and home purchases are reduced to in-your-face imagery to prove that they're truly winning in the game of life, turning Meta's flagship apps into Faceboast and Instabrag. However, the societal construct's unadvertised price of admission, whether realized or not, is debt, obligation, and responsibility before you're ready for them.

I don't know about you, but I see the people of this country being sold a bill of goods in which the advertisers of the societal construct will have you believe that your freedom and flexibility are worth trading in for the highly unlikely chance of finding fame and fortune by doing exactly what everybody else is doing. From my vantage point, I see most people living lives that are analogous to the predictable swing of a clock's pendulum, a back-and-forth between toiling and pleasuring. Pleasuring and toiling. Toiling and pleasuring. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Is that what it's come down to? Living for the weekends? Working nine-to-five grinds to pay down school, home, car, boat, RV, and credit card loans? We're so over-obligated and responsible that learning more about oneself is

reduced to occasional minutes of me-time. What's the prize for competing against families, friends, coworkers, and neighbors? And do people even look like the retired couples on cruise ships depicted on glossy brochures and unrealistic television ads?

Make no mistake, the powers that be also know that you and I need structure and rules in order to gauge our levels of self-esteem and self-worth, but instead of telling us that it's possible to craft our own rule-based structure, they offer an insidious self-serving construct that keeps our eyes on the prize and our noses to the grindstone. And since there aren't any laws forcing us to accept this life plan, the puppet masters use visions of grandeur to distract and entice before handcuffing most of us with student loans, early marriages, mortgages, consumer debt, newborns, and yardwork—lots and lots of yardwork. We're convinced that earning a college degree, working for corporate America, getting married, owning a home, maintaining an excellent credit rating, raising a family, having a dog, and going to Sunday services constitute a life well-lived. For some, it truly is a life well lived. And if it's unquestionably the right life plan for you, I'd

be glad to call you my neighbor. Who wouldn't like to be surrounded by manicured lawns and impeccable flower beds?

## **I Need to Share This**

Seeing our society in the most honest and sobering light didn't take shape over a span of years, and it didn't happen overnight either. It occurred during a bike ride along the Neuse River Trail in Wake County, North Carolina, last summer, where I kept telling the good people of Raleigh that the local flora and fauna were lush and more exotic than what I had experienced in my two years on the island of Puerto Rico. I can still remember needing to find a bench to process the feeling that I had just seen the entire world from atop Mount Everest after the clouds inexplicably parted for only a few seconds. The chosen bench had a view of the slow-moving muddy river, but upon sitting down, I quickly saw that the abundant crepe myrtle, sweetgum, river birch, hickory, and poplar trees overruled the view like nature's version of the board game, Stratego.

While watching several Yellow-throated Warblers flutter in and out of the tree line in front of me, I couldn't make up my

mind between feeling like Keanu Reeves' Neo from the 1999 movie, *The Matrix*, or more like Matt Damon's Jason Bourne from the 2002 movie, *The Bourne Identity*. I also remember thinking I should watch more movies from this millennium. On one hand, I felt like I had just crawled out of an egg-shaped pod after having awakened from a deep sleep, the wiped-off embryonic goop and yanked-out electrodes at my feet serving as evidence that I had been used for something. And on the other hand, I felt like Jason Bourne, but instead of scratching my head and wondering how I could race a Mini Cooper through the streets of Paris and kill bad guys in a dozen different ways, I was curious as to how I could put almost forty thousand miles on a single bicycle and keep people at arm's length in a dozen different ways.

With my helmet, headband, sunglasses, and the contents of my backpack scattered to the left of me on the bench, I let my eyes roam what reminded me of El Yunque National Forest in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico. Not only was the humidity holding steady at a Caribbean-approved 90 percent, the whole place looked like ground zero if a bomb of Miracle-Gro had been detonated three weeks earlier. And even though every available square inch of earth was spoken for by something

green and succulent, new plants didn't seem to be deterred by the signs of no vacancy. They simply grew on top of something else, making my immediate surroundings feel less like a county greenbelt and more like a prehistoric swamp-jungle.

It wasn't earthshaking vibrations from distant dinosaurs or the sound of crocodiles thrashing their prey to death at the river's edge that disrupted my meditative state. It was the song of the Warblers, who suddenly had something to sing about when a group of Eastern Meadowlarks and Acadian Flycatchers joined them in the tangle of leafy branches high above my head. Their staccato chirps and tweets rained down from the trees like rapid-fire exclamation points, emphatically punctuating each of my cathartic revelations, the last one being, "I need to share this!" Suddenly, I understood why I had been biking around the fringes of society for the past fifteen years, stopping occasionally to see if I could find a way back in like a blind man groping for a doorknob. Not only did I see a way back, but I could see myself helping others who felt as invisible and forgotten as me.

## **All Work and No Play**

By the time I was having to dodge the three-headed monster of my third-grade class at St. Paul Parish School in Eugene, Oregon, I realized that bullies didn't like it when I'd brush the hair of the girls who sat in front of me while Sister Mary Ellen read to us from one of our kid-sized chairs in the corner of the classroom. I can still remember sitting on a carpet square like all the other children gathered around her and hearing whispers of, "You're so dead at recess," coming from behind me while being handed hairbrushes from girls who'd say, "I'm next." It was then that I learned there was a distinct pecking order among boys and that there was a distinct hierarchy to life. If they liked each other enough, girls and boys would get married, find jobs, buy a house, and have babies soon after finishing school, transforming them into responsible adults like the ones I lived with at home. Roles were crystal-clear back then, too. Daddies went to work, mommies stayed home, and kids went to school. Other than being interested in understanding the nuances between the written and unwritten rules of the world so I could safely navigate the uncertainty that awaited me at school and at home, I was like any other eight-year-old who survived by successfully predicting the

behaviors of others through keen observation and carefully measured interaction.

Less than two years later, while getting acquainted with a new set of tie-wearing thugs in my fifth-grade class at St. Katharine of Siena in Wayne, Pennsylvania, I concluded that my parents were simply miserable, making me believe they weren't living the lives they had dreamed of and questioning if they were even capable of dreaming. "Didn't they start out like me?" I'd ask myself while riding around the neighborhood on my best friend in the whole world at the time, an orange five-speed Schwinn Stingray that made both my legs and my mind churn wildly. Even though much of my young life was rife with anxiety, distrust, and fear, I still found unabashed joy riding a bike that sported a chrome sissy bar, a banana seat, monkey handlebars, and a nifty looking eight-ball the size of a golf ball that served as the bike's gear shifter. "What did they hope for when they were my age?" I'd surmise while pedaling fast enough to blur my peripheral vision and feel only the wind, so I could trick my mind for a few seconds into thinking that I was leaving and never coming back.

Under my father's roof, I lived the life of a soldier, dutifully executing a continuous list of assigned chores to keep the peace while never knowing if I had accidentally stepped on one of his hidden landmines, triggering his anger and the start of another senseless skirmish in a never-ending war I wanted no part of. Many of my evenings were spent in the breakfast room, a small, informal dining area where my family would eat most meals except for the two or three holiday dinners that required the electric carving knife. The narrow room, with a bank of windows filling up two of the walls, offered an almost one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view, giving me a vantage point that would make surveillance cops jealous. If I adjusted my position in the breakfast room, I could see the corner of South Wayne and Pembroke Avenues, the driveway in front of the detached garage, the gate of the chain-link fence that opened to a sidewalk that led to the house, and the backdoor. The course of the evening would hinge on the quality of observational data I could feed into an algorithm that predicted which of his many moods would be the unwanted guest star of a family episode that nobody wanted to watch.

## Oh, What a Lonely Boy

Data gathering began as soon as I saw my father's red Datsun pickup or his silver Plymouth Volare turn onto Pembroke, a mostly empty, tree-lined side street that gave him a sweeping view of our corner property and an opportunity to take his time assessing what I had accomplished that day. Except for the diabolical coldness of his lifeless stare, I was like a pre-teen Mark Zuckerberg, taking in and utilizing every conceivable shred of data to predict future behavior. But instead of using it as a commodity to sell to companies for insane profit, I was using it to get through another night at home. Whereas Facebook engineers quantify every upload, click, like, swipe, and comment, I was collecting his driving speed, what he looked at, how long he sat in the driveway before getting out of his vehicle, how he walked through the gate, the expression on his face, and whether he was carrying an open forty-ounce bottle of Budweiser or a case of it.

To most, I probably looked like the stereotypical son who couldn't wait for his dad to get home so the two of them could shoot baskets or throw the football around. But I'm sure my mother knew what I was doing since her expression would

change from indifference to nervousness as soon as the backdoor would swing open. Sometimes it would slam against the washing machine, as if the sound of his heavy boots holding up two hundred and twenty-five pounds on a six-foot-four frame wasn't enough of a stomach-tightening decree of his return from work or the bar. Each evening, an unacknowledged race to greet my father would ensue between my mother and I since the other three didn't often find themselves in the crosshairs of his drunken contempt for what life had handed him. If they weren't in the middle of a passive-aggressive Cold War where they'd ignore each other for weeks on end, she'd greet him with a hug and a kiss while saying, "How was your day?" Then it would be *my* turn to perform. I'd press my face into his filthy white t-shirt that smelled of sweat, cigarettes, beer, and resentment and lie that I was glad to see him.

Although my mother and I shared the same affliction of having to stroke the insecurities of an almost-forty-year-old married father-of-four man-boy, I felt no allegiance toward her or the others since it was every man for himself. Plus, she didn't protect me from his alcohol-infused tirades or his sickening need to belittle me throughout my entire childhood. What

protected me from him were the yard tools in the garage. If they were in my hands, my status would elevate from unwanted son to indentured servant, giving me a way to stay off his radar when it was impossible to remain invisible. In my father's house, I didn't gain self-esteem from splitting wood for the winter with an axe, wedge, and sledgehammer or self-worth from turning over and tilling the vegetable garden with a shovel and hoe. And instead of accruing self-confidence from raking leaves, weeding flowerbeds, and shoveling snow to avoid being the brunt of another man's self-loathing, I gained self-reliance and a distrust of anyone but myself.

I let my father weigh me against the height of the stacked woodpile, the garden's soil condition, the number of bagged leaves on the curb, the number of pulled weeds in the trash, and the speed with which snow and ice were removed from the driveway and sidewalks. Since my budding self-esteem and self-worth didn't come from pleasing a middle-aged bully who needed to lord over the defenseless, I did the chores to keep him thinking that he had me under his thumb like Tim Robbins' character, Andy Dufresne, did to the warden in the 1994 movie, *The Shawshank Redemption*. But instead of planning an escape to somewhere specific like Zihuatanejo on

the Mexican Riviera, I was laying the groundwork for a new lease on life that could begin as soon as I graduated from high school. And if the destination adhered to my mantra of "anywhere but here," I wasn't too concerned with where I'd end up.

"Hey, Charlie!" shouted a neighbor from the other side of the chain-link fence. "Tell your dad to get a log splitter!"

"What's that?" I asked.

"He'll know what it is," he replied. "Don't hurt yourself, Charlie."

"I won't."

"You're still coming over to help my wife pull weeds on Saturday?" he asked.

"I'll be there."

"Great. I'll let her know."

I watched Mr. Dupree walk toward his house, an expansive property full of maple, cherry, hemlock, and aspen trees. When he disappeared behind the tall evergreen shrubs, I went back to thinking about my dreams and working on the woodpile. "I'll be seventeen by the time I'm out of high school," I said to myself while tapping the iron wedge into the log with the flat side of the axe. "Only five more years to go."

## **Hurry Up and Wait**

There were so many familiarities, yet the place did nothing to calm my nerves or to make me loosen the kung-fu grip I had on my only piece of luggage, a 28-year-old duffle bag I had pilfered from my father's closet two days earlier. The army-issued bag had my last name stenciled on it in black letters that were partially lost against the military green of the canvas, matching how I was feeling while waiting for the bus to take me to North Carolina. In it was everything I needed to start my new life in Raleigh as a college student: some clothes, two pairs of shoes, a lot fewer toiletries than I require now, a boom box, cassette tapes, and four thousand dollars in cash. Seeing five years' worth of wages from odd and part-time jobs slide across the bank's polished granite a day earlier was bittersweet

in that I would no longer be able to enjoy the momentary highs I'd get from seeing and smelling the fresh ink in my bank book after it was stamped with what I had just deposited, and more importantly, the resulting new balance.

Other than having a waiting area, a bathroom, and a guy behind a ticket booth, the Greyhound bus station stood in stark contrast to the quaint train stations I was accustomed to along Philadelphia's Main Line. Instead of businessmen with fresh haircuts, groups of schoolchildren wearing matching uniforms, and college students fiddling with their Sony Walkman music players, I was surrounded by sketchy people who looked as if the bus station, located smack dab in the middle of South Philly's red-light district, was their last stop in life. And despite already having years of observation and analysis under my belt from tracking and predicting the actions of sadistic classmates, neighborhood bullies, and my joyless father, I still needed to sit within earshot and in full view of the ticket booth guy in case someone was thinking about separating me from my duffle bag. By seventeen, I had experienced the ugliness that lurked in suburban Philadelphia but not the gritty nature of its inner-city counterpart.

"Oh, my god! Three hours? Okay . . . Calm down. Pull yourself together. You can *do* this," I mumbled to myself while noting the time after being told that my bus wouldn't leave until twelve-thirty in the morning. Oddly, while feeling like a pork chop amongst ravenous wolves, I remember noticing that the station's wall clock looked exactly like the ones that had loomed over me throughout high school. "This isn't quite how I pictured it," I sighed, returning to the plastic chair that was bolted to a row of identical chairs in front of the ticket booth. I didn't picture myself leaving home in a fire-spewing chariot being pulled by a team of gleaming white horses, but I also didn't imagine my grand finale taking place alongside prostitutes and drug addicts on a grimy bus in the middle of the night either.

Back then, waiting meant you had time to think since blaring televisions tuned into 24-hour newscast weren't suspended from ceilings or hung on walls in most public spaces. Speakers were used for announcing useful information instead of amplifying looped playlists that always seem to include something from Bruno Mars. And, of course, there were no cell phones to turn necessary temporary escapes into habitual avoidance, isolating us from our inner thoughts and from one

another. With so many scary-looking people shuffling in and out of the poorly lit station, I knew I needed more safety precautions than just my proximity to the ticket booth. I remember transferring my pocket knife from the duffle bag to my pocket, vowing not to add more to my bladder so I wouldn't have to see what was going on in the men's room, and mapping out two escape routes that led either to a row of idling buses through a side door or to the Burger King down the main corridor in the opposite direction of the bathrooms.

Three hours is a long time to wait for anything, but what's another few hours on top of five years? Besides, I had a lot to think about since returning the yard and woodpile tools to the junky garage for the last time. The frightening characters around the Greyhound station may have given me the heebie-jeebies and put my head on a swivel, but I was already used to living on the edge of my seat. Inside, I felt prepared, capable, and eager to execute my plan for acquiring my share of the American Dream. However, unlike my parents, I was not only going to be successful; I was going to find sustained happiness. How could I lose when my plan took into account all the mistakes they had made?

## Let Us Pray

*Sweet! It'll take the whole sermon to read this bad boy, I thought while feeling the surprising weight and bulk of the Sunday bulletin from behind my back. I always made sure I was the last one in our family to walk into church so I could snatch a copy off the ornate oak stand at the entrance without being noticed. Then, once I was situated in a pew, I'd slip the bulletin in between the pages of either a hymnal or a missalette so nobody could tell that I was getting caught up on upcoming school fundraisers, church social events, and parishioner announcements. Outside of church, none of this information would've held my attention, but as a bored and captive member of the congregation with no other entertainment options, I was grateful for any distraction. Looking back on it now, my interest in the Sunday church bulletin was no different from how I feel about the back of a cereal box. It offers the perfect amount of forgettable information to occupy the three minutes it takes for me to eat a bowl of cornflakes.*

I can remember being particularly interested in the mid-January 1978 bulletin because it had almost twice the number of stapled pages, causing me to pray for a longer-than-normal

sermon. After thirty or so minutes of standing, kneeling, and reciting, actions that felt more perfunctory than spiritual, the celebrant put his hands out, indicating that it was time to sit and listen to his prepared talk. "Thank God!" I mumbled to myself as the theme song to the *Mission Impossible* TV series began resonating in my head. I quickly flipped past briefings regarding bake sales, car washes, and birth announcements to get to the pages in question. When I got there and after reading the title of the addendum, all I could do was mouth the words, "You've got to be kidding me."

The extra pages were nothing more than a long list of the parish's family names stacked by the amount of money they donated to the church the previous year. In my warped imagination, I could hear myself shouting, "What the hell?" in the middle of the priest's lecture about humility. My family and others would be blown away by my sudden outburst, prompting them to shush me by saying, "Stop it. You're embarrassing us." Then, from the pew behind me, Mr. McMillan would say, "That's enough out of you, Charlie!" "Gee, Mr. McMillan, according to the church bulletin, I don't think the diocese got enough out of you!" I'd say sarcastically. Then I'd make a big show of flipping the pages, indicating his

family's abysmal position on the list. "It says here that you only gave fifty bucks last year, Mr. McMillan. Congratulations! Your family is tied for last place with mine!"

I couldn't believe what I was looking at. I was already on the fence about the belief that there was a bearded old man in the sky watching my every move, and this latest revelation made me want to do a cannonball into a Roman bath full of unwashed heathens. At thirteen years old, I already understood what hypocrisy meant since it was a daily occurrence at my school and at home. *But still, how would they even know?* When the money collectors would extend the wicker baskets under our noses using handles long enough to retrieve golf balls from ponds, I never gave the little white envelopes that were mixed with cash a second thought. But after a few seconds of deductive reasoning, I put two and two together. People wrote their names on the envelopes so the tabulators in the church office could give them credit and a running total for their annual contributions. It was a mind-blowing moment for me because the accounting process seemed to be in direct violation of at least half of the spiritual lessons taught to me through moralistic Bible stories.

*It should be over three hundred dollars*, I thought after adding all the five-dollar bills I saw my father put in the basket each Sunday to the fifty-dollar check he gave them at Christmas. Even if the accounting was fair, the additional two hundred and fifty dollars wouldn't have removed my family's name from being near the bottom of the list, but at least we wouldn't have been tied for last. I remember thinking that once my father sees this list, he's going to regret writing that check. In hindsight, he should've donated the extra fifty dollars as cash. If he did, his name would not have been included, giving us the option to shrug our shoulders and say, "I guess they forgot to add our name," if pressed by those who correlated donation dollars with superiority and piety. Because I had already seen my name on plenty of roster cut lists plastered on the office doors of coaches who had no use for third-string backups, all was not lost by this latest humiliation. Not only did it give me a bitter-tasting dose of reality, it played an integral role in shaping my plan for garnering success and happiness.

## A First-Class Idea

"Let us stand," said the priest while motioning his hands in a way that made it look like he was drawing the letter W in midair. As I stood up with everybody else to begin reciting the "profession of faith" following the homily, I began reconciling donation amounts with the families that also made it a habit to attend the eight-thirty mass on Sunday morning. *Hey look! It's the Peterson family. For \$1,500, you're in the middle of the pack. Not too shabby. You can't hide from me, Mancini family. I see you over there by the display of votive candles. Four thousand! Not quite good enough for a first page showing, but you're high on page two. Woo-hoo! Now where's Kathleen's family? Hmm . . . Did they go to an earlier service? Oh, there they are. Only a hundred bucks? Ouch! Welcome to the donation basement!*

Looking back on my ninth-grade self in the church that day reminds me of that hilarious *Seinfeld* episode where Jerry and Elaine are flying back to New York. Due to a glitch in their seat assignments, Jerry ends up sitting in first class while Elaine must remain in coach seating. Every time we see Jerry, he's drinking champagne and laughing it up with a

supermodel while ordering "more of everything" from an at-your-service flight attendant. Elaine, on the other hand, can't even get the flight attendant's attention for "something to drink" from a middle seat that has her squashed between two oversized passengers. As Renée Zellweger's character, Dorothy, famously said to her son while sitting behind the first-class section in a scene from the 1996 movie, *Jerry Maguire*: "First class is what's wrong. It used to be a better meal; now it's a better life." Despite those memorable television and cinematic moments being nearly twenty years away from making me laugh out loud or think, they captured how I was feeling on that cold and overcast morning.

Up to that point in my life, it seemed like my view of the world was always from a seat in coach. I listened to my teachers from the back of the class, watched sports from the bench, and followed my parents into church pews that were steps away from the rear exit doors. But from that vantage point, I could take my time observing and analyzing what separated the mediocre from those who were killing it. What was it about the McMurphy, Gallagher, and Anderson families? What allowed them to be at the top of the donation list, live in better neighborhoods, and produce offspring that routinely crowded

me out of making the team? The answer was obvious because I wasn't just standing and reciting memorized prayers in any old church. I was in St. Katharine of Siena, a church within a town that was one of the blue-chip stops along Philadelphia's Main Line. I was surrounded by doctors, lawyers, professors, and corporate officers—professional people who had something that my parents didn't have and what I was going to focus every cell in my body on—a college education.

### **Middle of The Night**

"Why do I even listen to you?" said a man with such palpable frustration, walking steps ahead of a woman who appeared to be his significant other.

"Will you stop walking away so we can talk about it?" she pleaded while doing double time but still losing ground to his longer strides.

"Why? It's so simple. If I want to have anything done right, I'd better do it myself," he replied as the couple continued walking past me toward the Burger King in the bus station.

*I won't miss that*, I thought to myself as I listened to the voices of the bickering duo trail off into the distance. Other than a smattering of old men slumped in various stages of sleep with the sounds of idling buses and heated arguments between young men coming from outside each time the automatic doors slid open, the bus station felt more disquieting than life-threatening. "Yeah, I *definitely* won't miss the stomach-churning sound of two people trying to verbally eviscerate each other," I sighed. After having logged too many late-night hours listening to my miserable parents arguing in the kitchen, I was more than ready to exchange the sounds of unhappiness for the laughter of college classmates.

"Bus number fifty-three-eleven to Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, and Raleigh is now boarding in bay number four," said the ticket booth guy over the loudspeaker in a way that made me think he was directing convicts. As soon as I stood up, biology forced me to face my second big decision. Do I void my bladder in the terminal or use the phonebooth-sized restroom in the back of the bus? *Oh, what the heck, Monty? Since I have no idea what's behind any of them, I'll go with door number two!* What could go wrong? After having spent the last three hours watching the comings and goings of both

the ladies' and men's restrooms, I felt confident that I could use the urinal in the waiting area bathroom and board the bus under my own power with my lumpy duffle bag still in my possession.

"Strike two" wasn't my first thought after entering the men's room. It was, "Oh, my god," followed by an exit so fast that it could only be matched by the speed of someone *entering* the bathroom after having ridden a bus for six hours with a gas station burrito still in their digestive system. Whereas my first bad decision since leaving home was choosing to take a bus to North Carolina instead of taking my chances hitchhiking along the interstate, my second strike came from not opting to urinate in the bushes behind the prostitutes and drug dealers loitering behind the bus terminal. Nothing could've prepared me for what I saw squatting on the bathroom countertop that night. A grown man, probably around my father's age, was naked from the waist down with his back against the mirror, washing himself by splashing water from one of the three basins as if he were at home—at the zoo. At that point, I learned that a human being, if alarmed enough, can void the contents of his or her bladder through instantaneous vaporization rather than the more traditional method.

"Ticket, please," said the bus driver when I approached him in front of the open cargo door.

"Here you go," I replied while handing him the still-folded ticket from my front pocket.

"No. I'm going to keep this with me," I continued when he reached out to take my duffle bag and add it to the luggage area underneath the seats of the bus.

"Suit yourself," he said without looking at me.

Any trepidation that remained in my system after enduring three anxious hours in a Greyhound bus station dissipated as quickly as my urge to use the bathroom when I saw who I'd be sitting next to for the next twelve hours or so. I remember thinking that I must've been murdered in the men's room, and because of my Catholic upbringing along with the number of hours I logged as a yard worker and wood chopper, I had boarded a bus bound for heaven. While facing the back of the bus from my standing position next to the driver's seat, I could see that every seat was taken except for one remaining aisle seat. It was illuminated by an overhead light above an angelic-

looking African American girl who was reading in the adjacent window seat.

"Hi. Do you mind if I sit next to you?" I whispered, since everyone appeared to be sleeping in the darkened bus.

"Of course not. Just let me get this stuff out of your way," she replied while moving her sweater and purse to her lap.

"Thanks. Sorry to crowd you," I said while taking a seat.

"Oh, it's not a problem at all. You know you don't have to keep that between your legs, right?"

"Huh?" I stammered.

"Your bag," she continued. "You can put it up there on the rack."

"Oh, okay. I'll just keep it here, thanks," I replied.

After quietly exchanging more pleasantries, I learned that she was traveling to Macon, Georgia, from New York City to visit

her family before her last college semester began in September. I told her that I was on my way to Raleigh to study biology at North Carolina State University, but left out any mention of my family and what I had just witnessed in the men's room five minutes earlier. When the bus started heading south on Interstate 95, she closed her book, turned off the light, and looked to be getting some shuteye. For the time being, our conversation was over, leaving me to contemplate what was to come in my new life with only the hum of the bus engine to keep me company. After all, it *was* the middle of the night.

## Chapter 3: Win Some, Lose Some

### Joe

“Jesus!” I huffed when I saw the white Volkswagen Cabriolet careen around the corner and into the parking lot before coming to an abrupt stop in an assigned parking spot not too far away from the car I was leaning against. Since the top was down, I could see that the driver did everything quickly. In what looked to be a single motion, he replaced his sunglasses with regular glasses, checked his look in the rearview mirror, switched off Howard Jones’ “Things Can Only Get Better” in mid-song, and stepped out of his convertible carrying a soft leather briefcase. Even though I looked away when he noticed me watching him while he was locking his car door, he began walking in my direction, forcing me to unfold my arms and stand up straight.

“Can I help you with something?” he asked.

“No. I’m just waiting for my friend.”

“Oh, okay. Does he work in that building?” he inquired while motioning toward the building closest to his car.

“No. The other one,” I said.

“Oh, I see. What does he do for them? I might know him.”

“He’s a chemist. John and I recently graduated from State. I’m waiting for him to give me the keys to his car so I can go to a job interview this morning,” I replied.

“Dressed like that?”

“It’s for a fitness trainer position at Gold’s Gym here in Cary,” I said in reference to my skimpy pink and blue running shorts and matching tank top.

“Well . . . You certainly look the part. What’s your degree in?”

“Biology.”

“Really? We’re looking to hire a water toxicologist. Would you be interested?” he asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Great. I’m Joe, by the way. I’m the lab manager for IEA. How about meeting me at the Rathskeller on Hillsborough Street at seven this evening? You know where that is, right?” he continued.

“I do. Sure. I’ll be there. I’m Chuck.”

“Terrific, Chuck. See you then. Bring your resumé, too,” he said.

*Oh my God. John is going to flip when he hears this,* I thought to myself while watching Joe disappear into the building across the parking lot from where my friend worked. I was having a hard time keeping still, so as soon as I saw John emerge from the front entrance, I had to start walking toward him.

“You’re not going to believe what just happened,” I announced.

After practically reenacting the whole encounter with Joe, my friend starts to smile and says, “You have a date tonight.”

“What?”

“Tall, skinny, thirty-something guy with thinning hair? Big glasses? Does he wear a tie? Who drives that white convertible over there?” he asked.

“Yes, yes, and yes,” I sighed while feeling the blood drain from my face.

“Sorry, Chuck. I know who that guy is. You were just asked out, buddy. What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I’ll think of something. Can I have the keys now?”

## **Two Sweet Teas**

With the hand that wasn’t holding the one-page resumé, I pulled open the door of the Rathskeller at exactly five minutes after seven. I wasn’t late for my first-ever real job interview;

it was all part of the plan. My bicycle was locked across the street to a railing behind the library on NC State's campus, about a four- or five-minute walk from the popular bar and restaurant on Hillsborough Street. I had also given myself enough time to stop sweating and to clean any grease that got on my pants from the three-mile ride from the apartment I shared with John and four others on Avent Ferry Road.

As soon as I stepped inside, I saw Joe sitting in one of the six booths that served as the dividing line between the bar and restaurant sections. He was wearing what looked to be the same white shirt, except the tie was missing. Since he was facing me, it didn't take him long to start waving me over while using the index finger of his other hand to push his oversized glasses up the bridge of his nose, a habit I watched him execute numerous times when we spoke earlier that morning.

"Glad you could make it," he said with a smile that showed more of his teeth.

“Me too. I’m so sorry I’m late. My *girlfriend* gave me a ride over here, and she took the Wade Avenue exit instead of Hillsborough Street,” I said with practiced perfection.

Unbelievably, Joe made no attempt to conceal his disappointment that we wouldn’t be sharing an appetizer from the same side of the booth that evening. Only John Ritter’s character on *Three’s Company* could compete with Joe’s over-the-top slumped shoulders and pouty expression upon learning that I played for the other team.

“Is that your resumé?” he asked while pushing up his glasses and collecting himself.

“Yes,” I replied as I handed it over to him.

“Did you bring a transcript with you?” he added.

“No, but I have one.”

“How well did you do in school? Oh, it says so right here on your resumé. Top of your class . . . Honor societies . . . Dean’s

List every semester. Excellent,” he said while flipping over the single sheet of paper as if there should be more to it.

“Thanks.”

“Did you belong to any clubs? Teams? Fraternities?” he asked.

“ROTC for a couple of semesters, but that was it. I was too busy working part-time jobs while carrying full class loads so I could graduate in four years,” I replied.

“Why the rush?”

“My partial academic scholarship didn’t extend past four years,” I explained.

“Oh, I see. So, where do you see yourself . . .”

“Hi! What can I get for you to drink besides water?” interrupted the server, whose blonde hair was pulled back so tight that it made her look disturbingly too eager to be of service.

“Can you bring us a couple of menus?” Joe asked.

“Of course!” she replied in a way that made me think she would’ve given the same answer if Joe had asked for one of her kidneys.

“You could eat something, right?” he asked apologetically.  
“I’m starving.”

“I could. Thanks.”

“Sounds like you don’t have a car. How would you get to work? It’s like ten miles,” he asked.

“Eleven,” I said. “I measured it with my friend’s car after we talked.”

“And?” he pried.

“It won’t be a problem for me,” I replied. “I have a bike.”

“A job would help you put a down payment on a car. Could you start on Monday? It pays fifteen thousand.”

"Really? That's great. Yes, I'll be there," I said, picturing myself telling John and my other homophobic roommates that I had gotten a real job and that Joe was a perfect gentleman.

"Welcome aboard, Chuck. I think you're going to fit in perfectly," he said while pushing his glasses up.

Suddenly, as if cued by a secret button that Joe had access to underneath the table, the waitress reappeared holding two menus. After I asked her for a sweet tea, Joe added, "Make that two sweet teas."

## **Gabby**

It was almost impossible not to flat-out stare at the statuesque woman who was walking toward me on the cement footpath that meandered through a landscaped greenbelt that looked both whimsical and engineered. Despite her form-fitting red dress, four-inch heels, and hair that matched the color and style of Billy Idol's iconic locks, I still managed to notice that she was wearing a company ID badge like mine, making me realize that she, too, was employed by the same corporate giant I had worked for over the last sixteen years. As we

approached one another, I remember thinking there was something familiar about her big brown eyes and angular face, both tastefully accented with barely noticeable makeup. Because I was already accustomed to being ignored by important-looking staffers soon after the biotech start-up became a Wall Street darling in the early 90s, I didn't bristle when she passed by without looking at me.

“HOLY CRAP! That’s freaking, Gabby!” I mumbled to myself as she sailed by, leaving me with a smell that made me think of the Sephora store in the nearby mall. At the time, I not only had a reputation for being able to recognize incognito celebrities, but I also prided myself on only needing to see a cheekbone to do so. And sometimes, I’d bet on it:

“I’m telling you . . . that’s Johnny Mathis,” I said to my girlfriend while sitting in an open coffee shop in the middle of the ground floor inside the Beverly Center Mall in Beverly Hills.

“No way. I’m pretty sure he died a while back,” she deadpanned.

“What? Are you crazy? He’s not dead,” I continued.

“Then go over there and say hello to him,” she challenged.

“That’s SO uncool to do that, plus nobody wants to be bothered while they’re busy adding cream and sugar to their coffee at the coffee station,” I replied.

“Go! Do it . . . before he goes!” she urged.

“The loser buys the winner a sushi lunch?” I asked while getting up from the table.

“You’re on,” she replied.

“So? Was it him?” she asked when I returned after having been gone for less than a minute.

“Yes. Let’s go.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you when we start walking.”

“So, what happened?” she asked as we headed in the direction of Macy’s.

“He asked me out.”

“Wow. Really?”

“He wiggled one of his fingers when we shook hands and asked if I wanted to get something to eat with him.”

“What did you say?”

“I panicked and started babbling about his Christmas album.”

“Why didn’t you just point at me and tell him you have a girlfriend?”

“Once again, I panicked. I was totally caught off guard.”

“Ha-ha . . . You’re such a spazz,” she laughed.

At the risk of looking like an unapologetic womanizer at my place of employment, I stopped and watched her walk away to

make sure it was Gabby, a skill I had acquired and mastered before my eleventh birthday:

While hunched over his plate of meatloaf, my father grouched, “Who the hell knocks on the front door at six o’clock when people are eating dinner for Christ’s sake?”

“Who was that?” he continued when my mother returned.

“It was Charlie’s fifth grade math teacher. She says he has terrible eyesight and needs glasses.”

“I do?” I said while most likely displaying several facial welts from poorly timed catches.

“Jesus Christ . . . Just what I need . . . *another* expense,” my father grumbled.

Prior to wearing glasses with Coke-bottle lenses, I was able to tell who was who by the way their fuzzy forms moved, and Gabby’s gait was just as I remembered when we both worked for Joe at IEA in Cary, North Carolina, almost twenty years earlier:

“Gabby?”

“Yes? . . . Oh, my goodness! Chuck!” she beamed while turning as if she had reached the end of a fashion show runway.

The woman looking back at me looked nothing like the nerdy girl who analyzed water samples from behind an intimidating, SUV-sized gas chromatography mass spectrometer. Like a sandcastle reclaimed by an advancing tide, there was no traceable evidence connecting her to ever having had long brown hair, poor posture, or glasses that stayed up on the bridge of her nose despite being larger than the pair worn by Joe. As we walked toward each other to gush over such a serendipitous reunion, I suddenly understood why Gabby-the-lab-rat hid behind baggy jeans, extra-large sweatshirts, and oversized flannel shirts:

“So, it really *is* you!” I replied while thinking, *You can run, but you can't hide from this guy's eye!*

“Wow. You sure look different,” I continued.

“Umm . . . Yeah, you could say that. You work here, too?” she asked.

“Sixteen years and counting. I joined the company a couple years after leaving IEA. How ’bout you?”

“Just six months,” she answered.

“That’s great! I have, like, a million questions. Are you still in touch with Joe? How is he?”

“He died of AIDS about ten years ago.”

“Oh no! Really? I can’t believe it. He was my first boss. Nice guy . . .”

“He was . . . It was tough to watch him wither away . . . Chuck, can we pick this up tomorrow over lunch? I have to get to this meeting.”

“Of course. And, yes. I’d love to get caught up over lunch. Is one o’clock too late for you?” I asked.

“No. That’s perfect. I’ll pick you up in front of Building Twenty-Four, near the flagpoles,” she instructed.

“Great! See you tomorrow, Gabby!”

I was still facing the building that she was walking toward after we waved goodbye, but I wasn’t watching her. I was looking at the Santa Monica Mountains in the distance and thinking about Joe. By the time I turned around to start heading back to my office, I couldn’t help but smile at the movie montage that my mind was playing for me as a tribute to my old boss. In it, he was making me laugh with his over-the-top Jack Tripper antics while at the same time using an index finger to push up his glasses.

### **Boccaccio’s**

I was surprised and not surprised when Gabby pulled up in a candy apple red Mercedes-Benz convertible with the top down, her shimmering green dress and Jackie O-style sunglasses contrasting nicely against the all-white interior. *Am I going to lunch with a coworker or the lead singer of No Doubt?* Even before her car came to a complete stop, I was

already hoping she'd take the long way and drive us through the corporate campus so my personal reputation could hitch a ride to the stratosphere since it appeared like I was cruising around with Gwen-freaking-Stefani or some other famous Hollywood A-lister.

“Hi, Gabby!” I said while praying that I was being seen by some of the corporate shlubs who didn't like that I was successful and called my own shots despite not having the word “director” on my business card.

“Hey, Chuck!” she said from behind her oversized sunglasses while keeping her hands on the steering wheel.

“I was thinking we could go to Westlake for lunch. My treat, okay?” she continued.

“Okay. That's nice of you, Gabby. I don't have any afternoon meetings, so I'm not in any rush to get back.”

“I wish I could say the same. I have a meeting I can't miss at three thirty,” she replied.

For the next twenty minutes, most of it spent on the southbound 101 Freeway, we pretended to hear each other over the rushing wind and a cacophony of traffic noise. I remember nodding a lot while thinking we couldn't get more attention even if we had the whole cast of *Friends* inside Gabby's convertible eyeball grabber. On the inside, I was gushing from the thrill of looking like we were on our way to hobnob with Hollywood insiders over a white tablecloth crowded with wineglasses, fancy lunches, and movie scripts. On the outside, I was playing it cool. And by playing it cool, I mean looking as bored as possible, as if the eighty-thousand-dollar car and the sultry, man-eating chauffeur were just everyday occurrences for *this* studio executive.

"Good call, dude," I mumbled to myself in reference to making a last-minute wardrobe upgrade before leaving the house that morning.

"Follow me, please," said the snooty thirty-something hostess, who was so stunning I wouldn't have made a peep if she seated me in the parking lot.

But all eyes were on Gabby, who was still wearing her sunglasses as we were being led to our table in the dining room of Boccaccio's, an upscale lakeside restaurant with views of luxury homes, sailboats, and the occasional celebrity. I wasn't just walking behind a friend toward an elegant four-top by the window; I was following a wake of swiveled heads and craned necks from lecherous men and venomous women. If Gabby's shimmering green dress had a train, I'd be carrying it.

"Your server will be with you shortly. Enjoy your lunch," said the hostess without looking at either of us.

"Wow. Nice table. The only thing missing is a stack of movie scripts," I quipped while taking a seat.

"Huh?" said Gabby as she took off her enormous sunglasses with both hands.

"You know . . . the white tablecloth, the wineglasses . . . umm . . . never mind," I replied.

"That was fast," I said to the suddenly-present server with a pixie cut that framed her face perfectly.

“Hi. I’m Brittany, and I’ll be your server today. What can I get started for you two?”

I thought about saying, *My usual, of course, Brittany*, but thought better of it and said, “Ladies first.”

“I’ll have a mineral water,” replied Gabby.

“Is Pellegrino okay?”

"That's fine," Gabby huffed, as if the conversation should have ended there.

“And for you, sir?”

Sensing that there were some personality changes accompanying Gabby’s obvious physical transformation, I tried diffusing the caustic remark by replying, “That’s perfect. Make that two Pellegrinos.”

## Gabriella

“Just so you’re aware . . . I looked you up on the company directory after we bumped into each other yesterday. Senior Director of Product Globalization? . . . Not too shabby. Great job title, too, but it’s missing the word ‘chief.’ Just kidding. So, how did you find your way to the company?” I asked.

“They recruited me. How about you?”

“Wow. You must be pretty good at what you do. I had to commute from Fullerton for three months, sleeping in the back of my pickup truck Sunday through Thursday, trying to turn a temporary lab rat job into a full-time gig. It paid off, but I got really sick from all the nights spent inside an uninsulated camper shell.”

“Oh, my God. Three months of that? How sick did you get?” she asked.

“Enough to baffle doctors even after they did a ton of blood work. I thought I was going to die, but I somehow recovered in the most miraculous way. It’s a great story that involves a

stripper named Boom-Boom, a forty-year-old Filipina woman, a Vietnamese restaurant, and the San Diego Padres.”

“Wow. Really? Let’s hear it.”

“Not now. That’s another lunch, preferably with drinks stronger than mineral water,” I teased. “You won’t be disappointed. I promise.”

“All right, all right . . . You’ve definitely piqued my interest, Chuck. What did you do after leaving IEA?”

“I started that landscaping business I was talking about way back when, but I also went back to school to study molecular biology. That’s how I got the temp job working as a genetic engineer.”

“I looked you up, too. You’re a business analyst now. How did you go from the lab to doing that?” she asked while leaning back to allow Brittany to put the grilled salmon salad in front of her.

“And here’s your tri-tip salad,” she chimed while noticing that neither of us touched the basket of bread.

“Looks good. Thank you, Brittany,” I said while congratulating myself for not duplicating *everything* Gabby ordered.

“So . . . I only did the lab work thing for a short time before moving over to manufacturing, where I developed a training documentation system that put me on the company map *and* gave me my big break to work with operations management. As you know, it’s a lot easier for a lab tech to jump the fence to become a business person than it is for a business person to become a lab tech. Having a background in the science and engineering that goes into drug research, development, and manufacturing put me at the conference table with demanding executives who thought it should be possible to cook a frozen turkey in twenty minutes if the oven temperature was cranked up to fifteen hundred degrees. Thanksgiving is served! Umm . . . I hope you like your turkey charred with an ice ball in the middle of it.”

“Ha-ha. Good analogy. I can totally relate. So, what about your personal life? Wife? Kids?” she asked.

“Married. Divorced. No kids. Bought a house in Camarillo about ten years ago, so the commute has been easy.”

“So, you’ve been working here the whole time?” she continued.

“Off and on. Some big initiatives had me traveling back and forth between Puerto Rico, Seattle, and Louisville for years, while other projects took me to Ireland, Colorado, and Rhode Island. So . . . I had a good run.”

“Sounds like my life at the moment. Wait . . . what do you mean by ‘*had* a good run?’” she pried.

“I’ve been around long enough to live through quite a few regime changes, and this last one put the kibosh on my brand of business process reengineering. So, I’m more of a glorified project manager these days.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. The money is good. I’ll wait to see what happens. Enough about me. What’s *your* story?” I asked.

“I’ll have to tell you on the way back. I can’t be late for my meeting since I’m the one running it,” she replied.

“Oh, okay,” I said while quickly finishing my salad.

Being dropped off in front of my building was bittersweet. On one hand, I was able to annoy a few haters with well-practiced, eat-your-heart-out looks that said, “Hate the game, not the player.” But on the other hand, I had a sinking feeling that Gabby and I wouldn’t be spending any more time together. Although I could see Charlize Theron playing the title role in a film about her fascinating life, it was complicated; plus, I already had a history of losing friends to the corporate ladder.

“Thanks again for lunch, Gabby. It was so great seeing you,” I said while closing the convertible’s heavy passenger door.

“Same here, Chuck,” she replied. “Oh, and one more thing.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I go by Gabriella now.”

And with that, she sped away toward her meeting, leaving a wake of swiveled heads and craned necks. Like everyone else, I watched the candy apple red convertible with the platinum-blonde woman disappear around the corner. In the end, I was just another swiveled head and craned neck because Gabby and I never spoke again.

## **Down Goes Trunks**

“Ooh! He takes a punishing blow to the midsection, followed by a devastating uppercut to the chin! THAT’S IT! IT’S OVER!” announces the play-by-play guy, Bob, in the booth.

“Ouch! That’s got to hurt, Bob. I don’t blame the referee for putting a stop to this fight just seconds into the first round,” added Bob’s partner, Bill, from the next seat over.

“It’s like he didn’t see it coming,” said Bob.

“Oh, man. This is hard to watch. Now he’s stumbling around the ring like he doesn’t know where he is.”

When I think back to the moment when I found out I was being laid off from a company I thought I'd be retiring from, it reminds me of being knocked out in the middle of a boxing ring, where I showed up in slacks and a dress shirt thinking about lunch. The shot to the gut was delivered by the company's CEO through an emailed video where he announced that the workforce would be reduced by ten percent in the coming weeks due to a product label change by the Surgeon General's Office.

"That's terrible," I gasped while thinking that my executive-recognized contributions during a nineteen-year-and-counting tenure would easily protect me from receiving one of the twenty-two hundred severance packages. The knockout punch arrived in my interoffice mailbox soon after I finished watching the somber announcement from the former lieutenant commander of a U.S. nuclear submarine during the Cold War. There it was in black and white. *THAT'S IT! IT'S OVER!* And just like that, my battleship was sunk.

Dazed and confused, I stumbled out of my office toward the kitchenette for a Styrofoam cup of hours-old Costco-brand coffee, my mind racing through scenario after scenario in

hopes of answering the question, “What the hell am I going to do now?” before I returned to my desk.

“What the . . . Why is the owner of ‘Charbucks’ pouring a cup of that nasty stuff?” joked Jeff in reference to the coffee machine I kept in my office, a name he coined soon after joining the department.

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just not in the mood to fire up the beast,” I muttered while crossing my fingers and hoping I had answered the last of his questions.

“Oh no. Tell me you’re not one of the ones getting laid off. Are you?” he asked.

“How did you know?”

“Oh, my God! That’s crazy! I’m so sorry to hear that, Chuck.”

“Thanks, Jeff. But how did you know to ask that?”

“I heard all the packages went out today. It’s not like there’s a list or anything. And since you’re not your usual chipper self,

I just put two and two together. I'm really sorry, man. What are you going to do?"

"I'm only forty-two, bro. I'll probably take a break from the shark tank before I start looking for a new job. You know how the saying goes, 'When one door closes, another one opens.' I'll be okay."

## **Drifting, Falling, Floating, Weightless**

"Hi. I'm here to return my ID badge and office key," I said to the older security guy behind the counter.

"Name?"

"Chuck Trunks," I replied while fighting the urge to say, *It's on the freaking badge, Einstein.*

"Okay. You're all set," he announced before going back to whatever was on his computer screen.

*All set for what?* I thought as I turned to exit the security office. *A life without a steady income, health benefits, friends,*

*a social life, or an identity?* As I walked back to my car in the parking garage, I felt like an astronaut whose tether snapped in the middle of a spacewalk just outside the mothership, causing me to recall some of the lyrics in David Bowie’s “Space Oddity” from the same year that NASA put men on the moon: “This is Major Tom to Ground Control. I’m stepping through the door, and I’m floating in a most peculiar way. And the stars look very different today.”

Although I was told that age and years of service were the only factors used to determine who was in and who was out, it still felt humiliating, which is why I chose to exit the building in the most unceremonious way. By taking the back stairs, I was not only avoiding an uncomfortable ‘walk of shame,’ I was sparing my colleagues and friends from seeing it. What do you say to someone who’s leaving the building with a lamp? Besides, I only wanted to visit one place on the corporate campus one last time before driving home.

Despite the almost constant modification and construction work going on since 1989, a small, yet sentimental, portion of Building Two’s parking lot remained unscathed. Every now and then, I’d come to the spot where I’d parked my little

pickup truck almost twenty years earlier. It was the perfect spot since it was next to a cement planter with an eight-foot cinderblock wall behind it, providing the best possible security for someone who needed to sleep there. The procedure was simple. After everyone went home, I'd back my truck into the spot and crawl through the cab's back window into the covered truck bed. Up until I was rudely awakened by a flashlight beam in the middle of the night, I thought I had gotten one over on the world.

"I need to talk to you. Please step out of the truck," said the uniformed man behind the flashlight.

"Huh? What? Okay. I have to crawl through. Give me a minute," I stammered while pushing my pellet air gun deeper into my sleeping bag.

"It's okay. You can stay seated," he said after I opened the driver's side door. "I'm the overnight security guard. Why are you sleeping here?"

"I work in this building as a temp, but I'm staying on a college friend's couch down in Fullerton. It's just too far for a daily

commute, so I only go home on the weekends. I'm basically broke and need to get a full-time job here. I could sleep somewhere else, but I feel safer in this parking lot."

"Can I see your ID badge and license?" he asked.

"Sure. Here you go," I replied.

"Okay, Chuck. I can totally relate to what you're trying to do here. Tell you what . . . when I do my rounds, I'll make sure to keep an eye out for you. It's pretty safe around here, but you never know," he said while turning off his flashlight.

"Really? What's your name?" I asked.

"Hector."

"Thank you, Hector. Hopefully, I won't have to do this for much longer."

*This can't be good*, I thought soon after opening my eyes and realizing that waking up wet each day would most likely start to catch up with me. "It's just condensed water vapor," I'd tell

myself. *How bad could it be?* But after weeks of overnight camping in the parking lot, I began to feel the effects—alarming symptoms of something much bigger than a simple cold or flu bug. Soon, the extreme tiredness and weight loss forced me to hand over my hard-earned money to the local urgent care center, which couldn't figure out what was wrong with me:

“Is it AIDS?” I asked while recalling more than a few regrettable indiscretions.

“No, you don’t have AIDS,” replied the strip mall doctor.

“Is it Epstein-Barr? I worked with someone who had it a few years ago.”

“No, you don’t have Epstein-Barr.”

“Then how long before I die?” I asked without a shred of sarcasm.

“Chuck, we’ll run some more tests. In the meantime, hang in there.”

“Six weeks and counting . . . Down thirty-five pounds . . . I barely have enough energy to do my job. I have to admit that I’m not feeling very optimistic, and I don’t know how much more I can take.”

“Like I said, Chuck. Hang in there. We’re going to figure this out.”

## **Full Circle**

*If they only knew*, I thought as I stepped up on the planter’s curb to drag my fingers along the cinderblock wall, the rough surface sharpening my memory of what took place nearly twenty years earlier. *If they only knew about the incredible coincidence that occurred during the temp job interview that gave me three months to prove that I was worthy of a full-time position, about the twelve weeks of personal suffering endured as well as the divine intervention that saved me from an early grave and helped me become a full-fledged staff member.* Had I told Gabby the story, I would’ve started by saying, "You’re about to hear a tale that begins with the most beautiful sunrise you’ve ever seen followed by the worst day of your life that ends with a sunset so stunning that you go to sleep thinking

about it every night." And if I offered her a scene from a movie that would represent those twelve weeks, I'd pick the one where Richard Gere's character is on his back doing sit-ups in the mud while Lou Gossett Jr.'s drill sergeant character is spraying him with a hose to break his will in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. At the end of that scene, we realize that the soaking wet and exhausted jet pilot wannabe has, as he put it, "nowhere else to go!"

If you didn't have to focus on the car in front of you while driving down the steep Conejo Grade from Thousand Oaks toward Camarillo, you could practically see the entire coastal plain of southern California's Ventura County, a patchwork of commercial farms, expansive ranches, and incorporated cities all interconnected by the 101 Freeway. Such was the case when I drove home for the last time from a company whose meteoric rise on Wall Street allowed me to redefine myself more than a few times over the last two decades. I was feeling grateful for the blue October sky that filled my windshield and for all that had been given to me by a humble biotech startup whose rags-to-riches story could only be eclipsed by Apple or Microsoft.

"There's still time to find another wife and start a family," I told myself over the addictive sound of The Fray's "How to Save a Life" emanating from the car speakers. *But first I'll find another job somewhere far away so I can move there and buy a new place to start over fresh. Maybe the divorce and layoff were blessings in disguise, the not-so-subtle nudges I needed to move forward and stop playing it so safe.* Looking back on that moment now, little did I know that I was setting out on an odyssey that would bring me nothing of what I was originally looking for. Instead, it would lead me to a secluded bench along the Neuse River Trail in Raleigh, North Carolina, fifteen years later.

If you happened to be riding on the same trail that day, you would've noticed an old bike with too many bungee cords leaning against the back side of a bench facing the slow-moving muddy river. In front of it, you would've seen a man sitting with both arms stretched out along the top of the bench while looking up into the trees. If you could hear the Whistling Warblers, too, then you might've thought you knew the purpose of his stop. And, if you took a massive chance by joining him on the bench, you would've learned that the

songbirds were only a backdrop to the thoughts coalescing in his mind at the time.

Because I was in mid-epiphany, I would've confessed that since being laid off fifteen years earlier, I was jobless after two failed business attempts, alone after an equal number of failed relationships, had no family to speak of, had found residence in eleven different places across three states, lived in a house with two vaping gamers in North Raleigh, and could fit everything I owned into the back of my pickup truck.

After the impromptu confession, you may have been tempted to say, "Oh my god! That sounds terrible. Are you okay?"

If you did, I would've replied, "I've never been happier."

## Part II: Into the Ocean

“I want to swim away but don’t know how. Sometimes it feels just like I’m falling in the ocean.”

- “Into the Ocean,” Blue October (2006)

If you hear of someone drowning in the ocean, you wouldn’t think that the ocean killed that person. You’d simply chalk it up to the poor soul being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Even though it’s teeming with life and changes constantly, the ocean isn’t alive. And it isn’t out to get you or anyone else because it lacks motive, intention, or any other signs of consciousness. To me, the societal construct is very much like the ocean. It tantalizes us with the seemingly endless possibilities of fame, fortune, romance, love, happiness, health, and adventure in a way that’s almost impossible to resist. But what if your life capsizes at some point? Would this societal construct come to your rescue? And what if you weathered the storm and saved yourself from almost certain peril? Would society breathe a collective sigh of relief? Of course not. Even though it’s teeming with life and changes

constantly, the societal construct isn't alive. However, it does have a motive.

Although no one is forcing you to take on higher education debt, work fifty-hour work weeks at a corporate job, get married in your early twenties, take on a decades-long mortgage, start a family as soon as possible, open a brokerage account to ensure the solvency of your financial future, or buy the same commodities and services everyone else buys, the societal construct *needs* you to do so in order to maintain the status quo of an insanely bottom-heavy hierarchical structure. But if the societal construct lacks consciousness, how could it *need* you to do anything? The contradiction lies in our collective belief that if we play by society's written and unwritten rules, we'll be safe from the fears it feeds us on a daily basis. I get it. Nobody went out and voted for this kind of society. We indirectly voted for it by agreeing to its narrow definition of success, which, in essence, perpetuates a world where the individual remains faceless, powerless, and expendable.

In the next three chapters, I will show you how society puts you to work as soon as possible so the corporate players

holding all the cards can compete with each other for your time, attention, and most importantly, your money. Consider whether the societal construct is looking out for you or serving its own self-interest by controlling the masses. Having spent almost as much time on the outside of the societal construct as I did living within it, I hope you'll appreciate my unique perspective as I take you to see the doctor, lease an apartment, and borrow money from the bank. After that, we'll go back to school to revisit primary, secondary, and higher education in America, followed by sobering but true aspects of marriage, homeownership, and having a family.

## Chapter 4: Lions, Tigers, and Bears

### Hello, Anybody Home?

"Where's Chuck? WHERE'S CHUCK?" demanded the stage manager, sounding as if he was whispering and shouting at the same time.

"Relax, Steve. I'm right here."

"Jesus! You had me worried. You're on in sixty seconds."

"Okay . . . just a couple more swigs of water, and I'm all set."

"Now?" Steve asked in reference to cueing the music.

"Yes . . . Hit it, Steve," I replied while anticipating the iconic guitar licks of Pink Floyd's "The Wall."

*How insane is this? I asked myself. I was a junior in high school when this song came out, and now it's the bumper music to open the middle section of my lecture in the Morrison Center. Crazy! And now that I've shared some of my history*

with the audience, the warm applause has made me feel like I'm appreciated more as a relatable friend than a detached author. As I approached the front of the stage, the volume started decreasing just as Roger Waters began to sing, "We don't need no education." The perfect timing reminded me to thank the sound guys after the lecture and set the tone for Part II by half-singing the next line in an over-the-top English accent: "We don't need no thought control."

Welcome back, everyone. Are you ready for Part II? Before I get started, I have to ask you a question. By show of hands, how many of you Googled Yellow-throated Warblers during the break? Aww . . . come on. That's all? You know you want to. Just kidding. I concluded Part I by circling back to the bench along the Neuse River in Raleigh for a couple of reasons. Not only is it the place where the idea came to me to write this book, the bench marks the spot where my odyssey came to an end—a fifteen-year tour of observational and experiential data collected from *outside* the societal construct. At this point, you know most of my story—from when I was a middle schooler doing yardwork to standing here in front of you. What's missing are the fifteen years between being laid

off in California and finding a seat in front of a mud-colored river in North Carolina.

Although Part II focuses on what I learned while on the outside of mainstream society, I need to address the obvious question: Other than the Unabomber, who in their right mind chooses to live on the fringes of society after having been so successful on the inside? The short and honest answer is that I didn't plan it that way. I grossly underestimated how difficult it would be to convince employers to give me an opportunity after spending almost seven years trying to get a business consulting practice and a commercial art business off the ground. When an embarrassing number of online job applications went unanswered, the resulting soul-crushing frustration took its toll on personal and romantic relationships. Before I knew it, I was no longer a homeowner in Camarillo. Instead, I was living in a one-bedroom apartment in Boise, Idaho without any friends, family, or job prospects.

This is always a tricky part of the lecture since it looks like I'm steering toward an off-ramp that reads, "Woe is me." Don't worry. I didn't confess to all that so I could waste your time by venting about how the big, bad world turned against

me. The reality is that the divorce, layoff, financial hardships, breakups, and lack of job opportunities were more like the costs of forcing an internal GPS to keep rerouting me toward an exit marked, "I wouldn't have it any other way." Despite my legendary stubbornness, I eventually acquiesced to the notion that I truly didn't belong in mainstream society.

I think all of us can relate to what it feels like when nobody answers your repeated knocks on the door. How long would you stand there before leaving? Better yet, how long would it take before you stopped caring about or wanting what was on the other side of the door? I wish I could take credit for realizing that my place is among those who orbit the societal construct, but the fact of the matter is that I went kicking and screaming. However, I *will* take credit for having headstrong persistence. Since I spent so many years trying to find a way back in, I acquired almost as much observational and experiential data from the outside as I did on the inside, giving me a tremendous data set to better evaluate the world we choose to live in. So, without further ado, let's visit some of the pillars of society and see if they still make sense to you.

## The Insurance Agent Will See You Now

"It's THE freaking Rickster! Long time no see, buddy," I said while getting up to shake hands with my former colleague, who looked to be the same size as me yet somehow outweighed me by at least fifty pounds. Suffice to say, you wouldn't want to insult the Green Bay Packers within earshot of the Rickster after he's had a few Old Milwaukee beers.

"Damn, Chuck! You're making me feel like shit. Still running outside every day?" he asked while setting his iced Americano on the table next to my 12-ounce drip coffee.

"No, just a lot of biking these days. Welcome to my office!" I replied while moving my hands like a model showcasing a brand-new car on *The Price is Right*.

"Ha-ha . . . I think it's been like ten years since we saw each other, right?" he asked just before removing the lid and straw from his cup to drink like a man.

"Twelve."

"Oh, my god! That's too long, Chuck. You said in your text that you've applied for over a hundred jobs. Maybe you should apply for a job at this Starbucks since you're here all the time?" he joked.

"Believe me . . . they wouldn't hire me even if I tried, but I don't want to get into all that right now. I just want to get a job so I can have some health insurance. It ran out years ago, and I'm not sure how long I have before the wheels start falling off the wagon."

"I hear you, Chuck. Having benefits is pretty much why I stay at my job these days."

"God, I hate that word," I said.

"Huh? What word?"

"Benefits. Isn't health insurance just part of the compensation package? Then why is it referred to as a 'benefit?' Is the tomato on my Junior Whopper a benefit? Is the charging cable that came with my iPhone a benefit? What about the *actual* benefits that come from hiring *me*? I take care of

myself, so I practically never need to go to the doctor. I don't need to be told not to reheat fish in the break room microwave. And I have a wicked sense of humor. That's like finding a second flame-broiled patty on your Junior Whopper!"

"Ha-ha . . . You haven't changed a bit, Chuck."

"To me, it's more like the American bankruptcy system than the American health care system. For years, I've been telling people that being sick is the quickest way to go bankrupt in this country. I'm in perfect health, yet I'm *still* expected to pay five hundred dollars a month to insurance companies for the 'privilege' of paying the first seven thousand dollars should one of the wheels start to wobble. And when I find I have no other options around the doctor visit, the answers I receive to my questions leave me feeling like the biggest sucker. "Let me get this straight. You can't tell me what it'll cost, and you've aligned yourself with a for-profit insurance company that tells you what can and cannot be done for me. And you're telling me that I'll be seeing a physician's assistant instead of the doctor today? Wow. That's like my mechanic telling me that he'll have his junior mechanic start the work on my truck as soon as State Farm figures out how to make a profit on the

repair, then adding that I'll find out how much I'm on the hook for in about three weeks when I receive my credit card statement. No thanks, dude. I'm not giving a blank check to anybody."

"Oh my god . . . That's hilarious and sadly true. I've missed you, man."

"Trust me, Rick. The system is so beyond rigged that I'm now a WebMD and YouTube expert. If you ask anybody in Southeast Boise about a sonic boom they heard three years ago, they'd say, 'Oh yeah. I remember that. I think an asteroid slammed into our atmosphere.' No, Rick. That was the sound of my right ankle folding over while playing tennis with my friend, Cathy. I thought for sure I had broken it in half. After biking two-and-a-half miles to the Boise River and soaking my ankle in snow melt for thirty minutes, I biked home and typed 'broken or sprained' in the search bar on YouTube and watched four videos. That afternoon, I went to Walgreens, bought a nineteen-dollar ankle air brace, and rented a pair of crutches for fifteen dollars. After six weeks of rehabbing in the pool, I was back to 100 percent. It was a third-degree high ankle sprain. Thank you, internet."

"Christ, Chuck . . . You really do hate going to the doctor."

"I just can't wrap my head around for-profit health care. When I think of the Hippocratic Oath and the AMA's Code of Medical Ethics, I see them buried underneath a ton of forms that fleece me of personal information, ensure profit, and protect against malpractice claims. When it does become obvious that I need to see a health care professional, I shop around like I would for anything else that has an outrageously high sticker price. It's like trying to find the elusive albino albatross—a medical doctor who's not affiliated with any insurance companies, who's willing to estimate the costs, and whose job satisfaction extends beyond a lucrative compensation package."

"Is Chuck making a bid for president in 2028?"

"Not a bad idea, Rickster. I heard they get insanely good health insurance!"

## Sign Here, Here, and Here

"That was such an excellent ride, Stephanie, but I still have some gas left in the tank. Would you be interested in riding up to Higgins Point with me? It's about six miles away, plus I can show you the apartment building I almost moved into," I said, while eating raisins in the exact same way old guys eat handfuls of mixed nuts.

"That'll add twelve miles to what we've already biked. Sure, let's do it," she said.

"Are you sure? It'll put you over forty miles today," I added.

"I feel great. I'm not worried."

"There's a steep quarter-mile climb in the middle of it."

"Challenge accepted. Let's go!" she beamed.

I was surprised to have made a friend so quickly after moving from Boise to Coeur d'Alene. Even more surprising was the fact that Stephanie, like me, rode her bicycle almost every day.

She looked fit enough to ride a hundred miles, but it was hard to imagine because she was as tall as me, wore bohemian-style clothing straight out of the Free People catalog, and could easily be cast as one of Charles Manson's followers should there be a remake of the movie *Helter Skelter*. As soon as we rode out of McEuen Park on the bike path toward Fernan Lake, we were able to bike side-by-side for about a mile through older neighborhoods dwarfed by the ubiquitous white firs, Ponderosa pines, and western hemlocks that lined the streets and filled back yards.

"So, are you liking your new apartment? You're near Lake City High School, right?" she asked.

"I am. It's a brand-new construction, and my top-floor apartment has a sweet view of the high school track and football field," I replied while keeping my gaze on the road in front of me. "I just couldn't believe that I had to sign a one-year lease that was forty-one pages long."

"What? That's crazy!"

"I was stunned . . . It took me weeks to decipher the cryptic legalese when I bought my house in Southern California in the mid-1990s, despite the fact that the contract was only eight pages."

"Wow. How long did it take you to decipher forty-one pages?" Stephanie asked, staying close behind as we made the right turn from East Mullen Avenue onto Lake Drive.

"Like two seconds. I just signed it in front of the leasing agent without reading it."

"You're kidding, right?" she asked.

"I'm not joking. Hey! It's the apartment complex I was about to move into last week. There's a bakery and coffee shop on the ground floor. How about a quick stop? The house coffee is terrific, and I think we've biked enough miles to justify a bear claw."

"Sounds good to me," she replied. "Plus, I want to hear more about why you didn't read the lease agreement before signing it."

With its dramatically pitched roof and overhanging eaves, the chalet-style apartment building looked more like a structure you'd find at the Whistler Blackcomb Ski Resort in British Columbia, Canada than in North Idaho. But you wouldn't scratch your head over it since the redwood-colored building backs up against the posh and super swanky Coeur d'Alene Resort Golf Course and blends in nicely with nearby trees taller than its five-story profile. I remember telling the leasing agent, Brian, "So, if I heard you correctly, the building is situated along the almost sixty-mile Centennial Bike Trail. Downtown is within walking distance. And there's a year-round coffee shop on the bottom floor that sells pastries and sandwiches? Umm . . . Thank you, biking gods!"

"This is so nice. I can't believe it's not more crowded," she said while setting her chai latte down and joining me at a table that gave me a perfect view of our unlocked bikes.

"And you didn't move into this place because . . .?"

"Because a huge German Shepherd tried to attack me and a friend in the elevator when I came back to take measurements for the movers," I deadpanned.

"That's insane! What happened?"

"Not now, okay? I'm still traumatized by it; plus, I'm still bummed that it put the kibosh on what I thought was a dream situation," I replied.

"Gotcha. So, tell me more about the lease agreement from the other place," she pried while taking a sip of her fashionable tea drink in a way that would've passed muster with the Queen Mother.

"So, I found out that the apartment complex is owned by the same company that owned a similar place I was living at in California about six years ago. In fact, they own a bunch. I'm sure they paid a lot of money to a law firm in Idaho to create a contract where they win in every conceivable situation—even when they're at fault for not holding up their end of the bargain. Reading it would've been an exercise in futility. It's massive, written in a language nobody speaks, and non-negotiable. If I did have something to say about it, I'm sure my objections would've been interpreted as, 'On second thought, since I'm a colossal pain in the ass, why don't you lease the apartment to the guy standing behind me?' All the

big companies are like this now. And since then, small and medium-sized businesses have followed suit."

"Hmm . . . I can't argue with you. We definitely live in a litigious society," added Stephanie.

"I'd say it's more of a 'guilty until proven innocent' society in which contracts are written as one-size-fits-all behemoths that assume the worst of people regardless of their personal histories. Sadly, none of this surprises me. I rarely witness acts of honor, integrity, and ownership anymore; instead, I see rampant knee-jerk blaming that's devoid of anything resembling personal accountability, empathy, or remorse. To me, it's a litigious, intolerant, and combative society that hides behind ridiculously huge and incomprehensible contracts, computer screens, and tinted windows. I used to live among people who tempered their convictions by seeking to understand the opinions of others. Now I'm surrounded by people whose tolerance seems to go no further than the amount of shame they can live with. Why can't people see that the only ones who benefit from a society bereft of honesty and trust are lawyers? Why do we need to hire third-party

interpreters who win no matter the outcome to tell us what is and isn't fair?"

"I can't say you don't make perfect sense, but you're bumming me out," she joked. "That's a pretty dystopian outlook. Maybe you should tell me about the dog attack to lighten the mood?"

"Ha-ha . . . Fair enough. Let's get to Higgins Point first. I need to use my hands and act out most of it to really do the story justice," I replied.

"Okay. I can't wait. You're good at telling stories. Ever thought about writing books?"

"Ha! Funny you should ask . . ."

## **One for You, Seven for Me**

"Dude, are you *still* working on that?" asked Thomas, who was holding the same Chick-fil-A cup I saw him nursing on over an hour ago.

"This is *way* harder than it has to be," I groused while on all fours next to my truck. "You'd think putting on and taking off tire chains would've been made easier within the last hundred years."

"Why are you even messing with that anyway? The snowstorm won't reach Boise until next week, and you've got a four-wheel-drive truck," pressed Thomas, who was a question-asking machine.

"It's only rear-wheel drive. The guys at Les Schwab Tire said I'm screwed if I don't put at least four hundred pounds of weight in the back and drive with chains on."

"THIS is a rear-wheel-drive truck? In Idaho? Oh, man . . . You *are* screwed," added Thomas just as his straw started drawing air from the bottom of the Styrofoam cup, making me laugh at the perfect comedic timing.

What my apartment neighbor didn't know was that I had bought the truck in Southern California mere months before my personal life imploded, requiring me to find solace and a new beginning in Boise, Idaho. My introduction to the world

of Thomas couldn't have started out any worse than it did. When I came up from the parking lot after settling up with the movers, I found the six-foot-three, former junior college basketball player inside my chaotic apartment.

"Man . . . Your place gets way better lighting than ours. Hi, I'm Thomas from across the hall."

My first inclination was to weaponize myself with the tennis racquet that was leaning against a stack of plastic bins near the front door, but because I got the immediate sense that Thomas was harmless, I opted to forgo the implement. "Whoa! You startled me!"

"You're going to love this place," he continued. "There's a terrific microbrewery across the street, and you can access the greenbelt by going . . ."

"Thomas," I interrupted. "I appreciate the welcome, but I *really* need to unpack and get organized. We can continue this another time, okay? By the way, I'm Chuck."

"Oh sure . . . Of course. I totally get that. I'll come by later so you can meet Alice and the kids."

*Holy crap! Is this guy for real?* "Sure, Thomas, but how about after the weekend?"

Within a few short months, I knew more about Thomas's history than I did about people I had known for most of my adult life. But as annoying as Thomas was in the beginning, I came to see him as a good person who had no idea how much of a character he was. It was like living across the hall from a real-life Kramer from *Seinfeld*, except Thomas had a wife and kids. Typically, he'd confront me with one of three scenarios when we bumped into each other at the mailboxes or in the parking lot. He'd either have an inside tip about something I didn't care about, a series of random, unrelated questions, or a dirty joke. The dirty joke was the best of the three because he couldn't contain himself from laughing at his own joke, forcing me to give in and succumb to the sophomoric humor.

"Six minutes!" I announced.

"Huh?" mumbled the fifty-year-old, who could talk for twenty minutes about the virtues of Chick-fil-A.

"Six minutes to put the chains on, dude," I replied. "Two hours ago, it took over forty."

"Practice makes perfect. Say, what did you pay for this truck?"

"Not as much as you think. It was already a year old when I bought it."

"I bet the monthly payments are huge for a truck like this."

"No payments, Thomas. Not after learning the hard way when I financed my first truck in the mid-80s."

"I've heard that it's good to carry consumer debt. Paying it down builds your credit score," said Thomas.

"Yeah? That's what the banks want you to believe. My first truck cost twelve thousand dollars. After putting a thousand dollars down, I financed eleven thousand at twelve percent and ended up paying four thousand more than the truck was worth

after sixty payments. Banks want you to believe that borrowing money is necessary and perfectly natural. Then, after you've done so, they scare the bejesus out of you with the ramifications of having a low credit score, defaulting on a loan, or filing for bankruptcy—intimidating tactics to keep you from realizing that the illusion of wealth and power pales in comparison to real freedom and flexibility."

"Gee, Chuck. Tell me how you *really* feel . . ."

"And banks invented the American Dream of owning your own home. By seducing you into believing that home ownership is one of the sacred embodiments that offers proof to family, friends, and Facebook that you're winning in the game of life, banks are practically given license to print their own money. For instance, if you buy a five-hundred-thousand-dollar house, put twenty percent down, and borrow four hundred thousand dollars at seven and a half percent, you will have paid the bank over a million dollars after thirty years. And you're *still* on the hook for eight thousand dollars annually in property taxes and insurance after the loan is paid off. In a nutshell, the bank pays you about one percent on the money you deposit into a savings account, while you pay the

bank between six and eight percent for the money you borrowed from them. And that, my friend, is how you print your own money."

"I think that's the most you've ever said in the three months that I've known you, Chuck."

"There's plenty more where that came from. Let me tell you about the American health care system."

"Some other time . . . I need to go help my wife with something."

"Ha-ha . . . Okay, Thomas," I laughed to myself. "I'm going to keep practicing with these chains and see if I can break my record."

## **Chapter 5: School's OUT**

### **Staff Meeting in Five, Timmy!**

I still don't know what possessed me to start watching a PBS documentary about the primary education system in Finland at two o'clock in the morning, but I was grateful to have finally found something to lull me back to sleep after thirty minutes of mindless channel surfing. Instead, the program did just the opposite. Within a few minutes, I had become so engrossed with what I was listening to that you would've thought I was watching a documentary about Tom Brady. Emanating from the television were the exact same thoughts that I had been muttering to myself and sharing with friends for years.

Most memorable was the collective response from a panel of Finnish elementary school teachers when an American journalist asked them why their students weren't given any homework. They laughed out loud and looked at each other as if they were seeking consensus that the question was a joke. "Why would we send them home to do more schoolwork after a whole day of it? Plus, when would they have time to play

with their friends? Help around the house? Or find out what makes them happy?" said an English-speaking teacher whose body language communicated that she was explaining something exceedingly obvious.

Not only do I think I'm not alone in my wholehearted agreement with the progressive-thinking Finns, but I believe that the vast majority of Americans would concur as well. Yet, irrespective of technological advances, here we are with the exact same primary and secondary education system that was established before the start of the 20th century. To me, only the tool used to automate math computations has kept up with the times. Whereas I carried around a clunky handheld calculator instead of a book of logarithm tables that my parents were burdened with, today's student simply pulls out a pocket-sized phone that's millions of times faster than the 1960 computers used by NASA to put men on the moon.

From my perspective, I don't think it's a coincidence that the school day mimics a typical workday in corporate America. In the classroom, Timmy and Sasha have a supervisor who loads them up with time-dependent assignments after training them on how to complete the work in a specific way. And just like

any homogenized accounting department across the country, they sit at desks all day, work independently, worry about making mistakes, and compete against one another through incentivized motivation. Even the schedules are similar. Both are about eight hours. Both get the weekends off. And both give you the option of bringing your lunch or buying it in the cafeteria.

In my opinion, most primary and secondary schools in America are nothing more than babysitting services that allow moms and dads to feel less of the guilt that stems from needing other people to parent their children while they're at work. After all, they *are* dropping them off at *school*—and not at Chuck E. Cheese or the mall. From the get-go, these captive, impressionable children are no match for early indoctrination into a societal structure that teaches them how to link their self-esteem and self-worth to hierarchical superiority over others. They're taught what to believe and what to want. They're told things like: "keep your nose to the grindstone and your eyes on the prize," "work hard and play hard," and "only the early bird gets the worm." They're conditioned to strive for positions of power and material wealth through endless toil

and sacrifice along a singular path where only a few will obtain such a narrow and pointless definition of success.

Where are the lessons of love, gratitude, understanding, acceptance, cooperation, generosity, and forgiveness? Duh. How could I forget so quickly? They're in Finland, where enlightened, progressive ideology teaches children that real success comes from the relationships they have with themselves and each other.

### **A Ticket to The Show**

"Hmm . . . North Carolina, eh? That's pretty cool. What was it like watching Michael Jordan play in college?" asked the Process Validation Manager while holding my resumé in one hand and squeezing a blue racquet ball in the other.

"Different school. I went to North Carolina *State*. "You know . . . The Wolfpack . . . Coach Jimmy V . . . National Champs in '83," I sighed after what seemed like the hundredth time I had to remind people that UNC wasn't the only school in North Carolina, and the Tar Heels weren't the only team associated with college basketball royalty.

"Oh, right. My bad," he said while dropping the ball into the near-empty pencil cup in front of him.

"Two points!" I joked.

"Excuse me?"

More and more, after each interview, I was questioning why I had focused so hard on graduating with academic honors. In hindsight, I would've fared much better in those interviews had I exchanged some of the time I spent in the library for seats in the student sections at Carter-Finley Stadium and Reynolds Coliseum. No one seemed interested in listening to things like how I received one of only three A-grades in an insanely difficult organic chemistry class of over three hundred students, or that I made the Dean's List every single semester, or that I was a member of two academic honor societies. Instead, I found a much more enraptured audience when I started telling stories about what it was like to be living on campus when N.C. State's basketball team upset heavily favored Houston to win the 1983 NCAA Championship, or about how one of my roommates died on the track from heart failure during my freshman year, or about how I was awarded

a free dorm room after witnessing a violent crime off campus. And as time went on, I was able to add that I ran into Coach Jim Valvano at a craps table in Las Vegas and met Michael Jordan at his steakhouse in Chicago.

In less time than it took for me to learn how the Krebs Cycle harnesses chemical energy for cellular respiration, I figured out that the degree I acquired from a higher education was less of a testament to my understanding of the life sciences and more like a ticket to ‘the show.’ But just like any performance venue, some seats are better than others. To me, it seems like the issuers of degrees have more influence on your seat location than the coursework and grade-point average it took to earn it. In a way, it reminds me of the unwritten dress codes that kids impose on one another in high school, where the emblem on your preppy polo shirt determines your position in the pecking order. *A polo player? Right this way, sir. An alligator? Come with me. A tiger from the boys' department at Sears? Sit over there.*

Had I been asked about the laboratory methods I used to create recombinant DNA molecules in school, I’m sure the interviewer would’ve been listening to grossly outdated

procedures since most would agree that there's a gap between what's offered in present-day college curricula and the latest leading-edge advancements. So, not only was my degree integral in giving me access to a show called 'Corporate America,' it served as proof to prospective employers that I was compliant and worth training. It's as if Human Resources followed the lead of the NBA by allowing colleges and universities to serve as the vetting process that separates players from non-players. It's a game we're all too familiar with, in which the deck is stacked with diplomas, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, doctoral degrees, certifications, and continuing education units. Knowing that we live in a society that puts more faith in awarded distinctions than practical experience, academic institutions can shamelessly attach insane price tags to higher education. It's big business that turns public education into a private commodity with commercial advantages.

According to *U.S. News & World Report's* September 2022 online article, "What You Need to Know About College Tuition Costs," the average cost of a school year at a private college is \$40,000, while the averages for out-of-state students and in-state residents at public schools are \$23,000 and

\$11,000, respectively. If I were to return to a public university as an out-of-state student, I would be paying almost 700% more than I did in the mid-80s. To make that percentage increase sound even more staggering, overall inflation has *only* gone up 200% in that same timeframe. At this point, higher education is out of reach for most Americans. But that doesn't stop tuition costs from rising even higher since colleges and universities realize that students are willing to borrow from their future to pay any amount of money for a 'ticket to the show.'

## **C'est La Vie**

At sixteen, I wanted to be an oceanographer like Jacques Cousteau. I even took two years of high school French just in case I found myself on his famous boat, the Calypso, or some other cool-sounding French vessel destined for scientific adventure. The plan was simple. I'd collect an undergraduate degree that entailed a broad exposure to the life sciences from N.C. State University before moving farther south to Florida to earn a master's degree in marine biology. After that, it was just a matter of time before my oceanic discoveries started

showing up on the glossy pages of *National Geographic*.  
What could go wrong?

It wasn't until years later that I finally understood what John Lennon meant when he famously said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." I never did become an oceanographer or a marine biologist; instead, I worked as a chemist, a water toxicologist, a genetic engineer, a manufacturing associate, a software developer, a training manager, a business analyst, a consultant, an artist, and a writer. In hindsight, I should've been studying fine art and journalism within the intimate setting of a small liberal arts college rather than genetics at a university teeming with a student body of over fifty thousand. But what did I know at sixteen years of age? I wasn't exactly sure who I was, let alone what career I should pin my hopes and dreams to; yet, there I was, enrolled in a crowded, frenetic circus, eager to check the first box of my two-point plan to be a scientist of the seas.

At first, I felt the guilt and shame one would expect after veering from the original plan, but I wouldn't have had it any other way since life has a way of delivering surprising new trajectories packaged within unexpected opportunities. In my

case, the personal self-loathing didn't last very long and was tempered by the fact that I didn't owe a single dollar to the U.S. government upon graduation. Knowing what I know now, it was pretty risky of me to put all my eggs in *one* degree program basket at seventeen. In the end, my Bachelor of Science in Biological Life Sciences only served me for three years before I grew tired of spending my days inside windowless laboratory spaces. Perhaps I wouldn't have been so bold as to quit my first professional job to go cut grass if I had an outstanding student loan debt of \$150,000?

So, did my freedom to explore other fields make me the winner? Because my misguided choice to pursue a higher education in science didn't leave me drowning in debt? I hardly think so. Although my life has been adventurous and colorful, I still live in a society that sees work diversity and a plethora of soft skills as flighty, capricious, and risky. If I'm basically unemployable, then where does that leave other graduates who made the same mistake as me but have the additional burden of having to pay back a school loan obligation larger than my first mortgage?

I think corporate America is full of people who don't want to be there but are stuck. Having allowed themselves to be shackled by debt, responsibility, and obligation before they were ready for it, corporate slaves only need to look in the mirror to see who is to blame. So, besides the captains of industry, who are the real winners here? It would have to be those who truly knew what they wanted to dedicate their lives to before applying for college admission. Even if these fortunate few incur huge debt, they're in a much better place in that they're 'where they're supposed to be.' Perhaps it's a calling for them? A labor of love? An extension of themselves? I know what mine is now, but I didn't realize what it was until I was well into my fifties. I don't doubt that it's possible for non-Finnish teenagers to figure out what makes them happy. Knowing that it took me over forty years to figure it out for myself, the pragmatist inside me doubts the authenticity of such a personal revelation at an age where peer pressure is at its highest.

Of course, I realize I'm making higher education sound like a colossal waste of time, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Some of my most memorable and prized lessons in life occurred while I was studying to become a deckhand on

Jacques Cousteau's boat; it's just that they all took place outside the classroom and I didn't have to leverage my future to experience them.

## Chapter 6: The Game of Life

### Game Show

"I promise . . . you're going to love it," she said.

"How do you know? I thought you said you've never done this before," I replied, while instantly wishing those words had never left my mouth.

"God . . . Is that all you do? Bitch about everything?"

"You're right. I'm sorry. I agree. It does look fun," I replied, reminding myself that it was only the first morning of a three-day weekend in San Diego.

After a torturous twenty-minute paddle boarding lesson where we practiced standing and moving our arms at the same time with fourteen other couples, the instructor mercifully allowed everyone to get on the water to begin a half-mile course through Shelter Island's marina. By the time we got back inside the car ninety minutes later, I had to admit she was right.

I did have a great time. The only problem was that she stopped speaking to me.

"What is your problem? Everyone hates you back there!" she finally blurted, putting an end to twenty minutes of chilly silent treatment.

"What else was I supposed to do? You can't tell me you weren't bored to death after five minutes of paddle boarding, right?" I replied while taking the exit back to our hotel in the Gaslamp District.

"Splashing the other people and trying to make them fall in the water was . . . was . . . You're such a jerk sometimes!" she said, as if she wasn't already aware of my impish tendencies.

"What are you talking about? They liked it. Thanks to a little boldness on my part, they'll actually remember taking a paddle boarding lesson!"

I think marriage is a lot like paddle boarding. At first, everyone sees it as the thing to do, but in the end, only half of the twenty-five percent who are successful at it actually relish

being married. Yet, despite odds as grim as that, I'm still pelted with a daily onslaught of social media posts from twenty-somethings proclaiming, "She said yes!" And when I'm not being bombarded with Instagram updates detailing every nuance of the 'marriage play,' I'm having to stomach the gut-wrenching affirmations of love that husbands and wives give each other through Facebook on wedding anniversaries. When I see what should be private declarations being put on public display, I can't help but imagine there's a motive behind it. Psychology 101 tells me it's because they're seeking validation and reassurance from others that they're truly living a successful life, but I like to be more creative than that. To me, it's like he's secretly saying, "Sorry, I got sloppy drunk and hit on your sister at the party last summer." Or, like she's secretly saying, "I feel really bad about sexting with my coworker while you took the kids camping." It's like they're really saying, "See how sorry I am? See how much I really love you? See how I'm willing to drag our marriage on stage to publicly perpetuate this charade?" But before you cast me as a Scrooge-like perennial bachelor who drops opinion bombs based on conjecture, please hear me out.

I was married briefly many years ago. Thankfully, before there were any children, assets to speak of, or enough time to resent each other, we figured out that we weren't suited for one another. The decision to dissolve the marriage was mutually agreed upon, amicable, and free of any entanglements with parasitic divorce attorneys. Although my wedding vows were said aboard a catamaran off the coast of Santa Barbara in front of a justice of the peace who looked like a member of ZZ Top, it was still hard to accept that my failed union was another statistic bolstering the National Center for Health Statistics' claim that fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce. But what about the fifty percent that don't get divorced? I'm thinking that half of them would leave their spouses if they didn't have issues like financial hardships, health problems, religious beliefs, or the inability to accept less than a hundred percent custody of the children.

But what about the remaining twenty-five percent who don't have those issues yet choose to stay married? From what I've seen, I believe half of them have created comfortable, static situations in which complacency overrules personal growth, leaving only twelve-and-a-half percent of all marriages to aspire to. I don't like those odds, but I think I've figured out

why marital success is so unlikely. Of course, I'd be remiss if I didn't begin by saying there are a litany of parameters that influence the success or demise of a marriage. However, I believe biological and societal pressures are the biggest reasons behind troubled marriages.

To me, anything that drives you toward a lifelong commitment before you know who you are or what you want is reason enough to step back and reconsider the motivations behind what's pushing you to tie the knot before you're ready. For some like me, it's the sound of the biological clock's proverbial alarm. For others, it's pressure from family, friends, and social media. Because marriage is one of the first steps in a preordained life plan that's been pounded into our heads since we could walk and talk as the one true, respectable way to lead a productive life, everyone knows the rules and what comes next. With such overcrowding on the same game board, is it any wonder their lives have turned into a competition? But in this game, there are no dice since nothing's left to chance. The players know when to move their game pieces, and when they do, you'll be sure to see it on Facebook and Instagram as proof that they're truly winning in the game of life.

## Game On

Even if I slowed down, the houses would still be a blur. In neighborhood after neighborhood, oversized SUVs are being hosed off in driveways. Patches of grass are being mowed by machines too big and too loud for the job. Dirt and lawn trimmings are being redistributed into the air by even louder machines. Invisible chainsaws, table saws, and wet saws create even more noise, scattering my thoughts along with any semblance of tranquility. Twelve to fourteen miles-per-hour anywhere else would feel like a walk in the park, but as I careen through the narrow, car-lined streets, I get the sensation that I'm driving an IndyCar at the Long Beach Grand Prix in Southern California. My bicycle travels quickly, but not so quickly that I miss the RVs, boats, four-wheelers, and jet skis peeking out from behind fences, signs of homeowners who prefer to believe they work hard to play hard rather than vacillating between toiling and pleasuring, pleasuring and toiling.

Open garage doors tell me even more about America. What used to be a space to park the family station wagon is now an overflow storage facility where the only thing separating

homeowners from the poor souls on A&E's *Hoarders* are the organized plastic bins and floor-to-ceiling shelving units. From my bike, I can see that most houses have three or four cars, many of which are too large to fit into the architecture committed to the archaic belief that people still drive low-profile sedans. Many of the items seen in one garage can be readily spotted inside most other garages. And it's always the same stuff. Lawn mowers, leaf blowers, weed whackers, edgers, and other yard maintenance tools typically commandeer the garage's front area. Behind them, ladders are usually secured to walls above rows of stacked cardboard boxes crammed with things like holiday decorations, ski jackets, or pool items. Rarely used bicycles hang from oversized ceiling hooks, while overflow refrigerator-freezers are flanked by a year's worth of staples from Costco. *Hmm . . . If having enough stockpiled pickles, mayonnaise, and toilet paper allows you to survive the apocalypse, then these shoppers will be responsible for repopulating the earth.*

I also see numerous boxed and unboxed odds and ends overloading the sagging shelves. Bags of old clothes, decades-old luggage, decaying furniture, and forgotten toys pile up on the floor behind the landscaping machines. The cluttered

workbenches, maintenance tools, and do-it-yourself equipment make the two-car spaces appear even smaller. My heart sinks as I sail past the houses because I can't help but think about the needless emotional burden that results from carrying too much stuff through life. *Are they keeping the broken beach chair because they think the aluminum frame could be repurposed some day? Or is it because they have the space for it? Or, like everything else, does it have sentimental value?*

The rich in America keep getting richer by lending you eighty percent or more of the money needed to buy a house. Shockingly, despite knowing that they'll be paying the bank more than twice the borrowed amount over the next thirty years, homebuyers are more than happy to ink the deal. To me, it's twenty-first century slavery, in which the slaves are brainwashed early on into believing that home ownership is the pinnacle of the American Dream. I never thought of myself as having made it to the big time when I bought my house in the mid-90s. I thought of myself as a slave. I worked hard at my high-pressure corporate job so I could pay the bank for the house I was living in, the county for the land that my house was on top of, utility companies for the services my house

required, insurance companies to protect it from everything, and creditors for the consumer goods that made my house a home. It was a never-ending cycle of paying, paying, and paying some more. But like everyone else, I was enticed by the lure of rising home prices, home equity, an enviable credit score, and keeping up with the Joneses. And like other first-time homebuyers, I was glad to have stopped doing what was hammered into me as one of the cardinal sins against wealth building—renting.

If the twenty-something slaves are playing the game correctly, they'll be married before they shackle themselves to a thirty-year mortgage on a house that's an hour away from their corporate jobs because it was the closest community they could afford to buy into. This puts into motion the truly soul-crushing, health-eroding, and energy-sapping aspects of the game that nobody warned you about. To me, nothing corrodes the mind and body faster than routine stress brought on by long commutes along crumbling, traffic-choked roads designed for two-thirds fewer cars; high-pressure workloads that demand fifty or more hours a week just to keep up; and a newly purchased house that requires more upkeep than you have time for. Five years earlier, you were sharing your hopes

and dreams with your college roommate under the shroud of late-night darkness. Today, you're up to your eyeballs in school loans, a mortgage, and a dozen monthly bills. And just when you find a moment to catch your breath in between washing the cars and mowing the grass, your wife says to you, "Guess what, babe? We're pregnant!"

## **Game Changer**

Having ridden more than 40,000 miles on my current bicycle, I've seen just about everything you can imagine. There was that time when some random vagrant shot the guy he was arguing with just as I was passing them on the bike path between Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington. Years later, I was shot at while riding from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, to Spokane, Washington. I remember the sound of the bullet whizzing by my helmet to this day. I've had everything from a 32-ounce Big Gulp to lit fireworks to tennis balls thrown at me while riding. I've been chased by a pack of ferocious dogs, an agitated moose, a curious bear, a territorial badger, and sadistic teenagers. I've mistakenly ridden through a women's prison, a drug deal, a marriage proposal, two weddings, and people doing what honeymooners do.

However, since replacing odysseys that crossed state lines, crested mountains, and hugged coastlines with less adventurous urban rides, I've been able to detect patterns among the people I share the bike paths with.

Besides noticing the obvious increase in people with dogs, people zipping past me on motorcycles cleverly marketed as electric bikes, and people needing input from their phones to literally get through a walk in the park, I find myself mumbling under my breath, "What's the rush?" when I see young, fledgling couples pushing baby strollers or a pair of twenty-something ladies each with swaddled newborns in baby slings. Of course, there's the initial thought that their babies are the result of unplanned pregnancies, but the majority of my observations tell me otherwise. From what I've learned in life, I can imagine having the following conversation if I were to sidle up to a pair of these kid-like parents:

"Cute baby you have there," I'd say.

"Oh . . . Thanks a lot, mister," they'd say, as if we were all from Mayberry.

"Gosh. You both look so young to have a baby. I assume you're married, yes?" I'd ask, knowing full well that they would tell me to "get lost," pepper spray me, or report me to the authorities if this wasn't a fantasy conversation going on in my mind.

"Yes, we are. We met in high school, dated through college, but waited until we graduated to get married."

"I see. But why start a family so soon?" I'd continue, already knowing what they'd say.

Before answering, they'd probably look at each other with glowing faces to see who should be the one to tell me the obvious answer that they both knew. "We want to be young enough to do things with our kids and grandkids when they get older," she'd reply.

"You know, like tossing the old pigskin around or shooting hoops," he'd add.

"Sure, I get that. I bet you've already bought a house, too?"

"As a matter of fact, we did. As a wedding gift, our parents gave us enough money to meet the minimum down payment requirement of five percent," she'd answer.

"Seems like you're judging us," he'd say, taking offense to my line of questioning.

"No, not really," I'd admit. "But why wouldn't you take some time to explore yourselves and the world before getting married, buying a house, and starting a family?"

"Doing what?" they'd say in unison.

"I don't know . . . Use your imagination. How about wearing bathing suits 24/7 while making jewelry and selling it out of an old RV on Miami Beach? Or sharing a place with two other couples in New York City so you could spend a year exploring it? Or hike the two-thousand-mile Appalachian Trail from Maine to Georgia? Or backpacking across Europe to see treasured artwork, architecture, and . . ."

"All right, okay . . . We get it already," they'd interrupt.

"Look . . . I'm not trying to make you feel bad. What's done is done. It's just that it would've been better if you had waited since it takes time, investment, and risk to figure out who you are and what you really want. With all this debt, obligation, and responsibility so early in life, your personal development gets put on hold."

"So, you're saying that as a husband and a father, I won't develop as a person? You're a lunatic."

"Relax . . . I'm totally not saying that. Since a lot of your time has shifted away from the relationship you have with yourself to the roles you have as a husband, father, and homeowner, you simply won't evolve as an individual as quickly as you could have. That's what I'm saying."

"C'mon, honey. Don't listen to this psycho. Let's go," she'd say, with building acrimony.

"What about you? What's your story, old timer?" he'd ask.

"I'm not married, I don't have children, and I don't own a home."

"See that, babe? Just like I thought. Who are you to give us any words of wisdom?" she'd ask.

"I see where you're coming from," I'd reply. "You can't tell me knowing more about yourself wouldn't make you a better spouse and parent. If I had done what you did early in my life, I know I would've been seeing my kids at the IHOP across the street from my one-bedroom apartment every other Sunday. Now that I know who I am, where I belong, and what I'm supposed to do, it's probably too late for me."

"That's the first smart thing you said this whole time," she'd say as the last word. "C'mon, honey. Let's go. We still need to stop at the grocery store, get gas for the lawnmower, and pick up that stuff for her rash."

"Okay . . . But I still have some work to do for the office," he'd say to his wife as they walked away.

"It's Saturday, Kevin. I thought you were going to cut the grass and wash the cars this afternoon?" she'd reply.

"Umm . . . Okay. I guess we're done here. Bye, folks. It was nice talking to you!"

Had this not been an imagined encounter, I'm sure the conversation would've ended as soon as I offered my unsolicited opinion of the baby's looks. But a guy can dream, can't he? The bottom line is that I understand that sometimes it's necessary to go with the flow when life happens. But what if you could wait to find out more about who you are and what you want before going all in on Marvin Gardens when you haven't even seen the other properties on the Monopoly game board? I don't think there's anything wrong with getting married, buying a house, and having a family. However, it's a game changer if those boxes are checked too early in life. Who knows? Maybe you're a lot like me in that you thought your destiny was on Park Place but found that your heart belonged on Baltic Avenue?

## **Part IV: Imagine the Freedom**

“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.”

- “Imagine,” John Lennon (1971)

To me, imagination is not only the precursor to creativity; it is also the first step toward any semblance of leadership. I also think that having an imagination is synonymous with having a vision. Without vision, how can you sell your ideas to loved ones, colleagues, or even yourself? Without vision, how can you navigate around obstacles, pitfalls, and traps? Without vision, how can you discern between the lies of the societal construct and the direction of your own inner compass that intuitively knows the way? Vision alone can’t guarantee you won’t get hung up in situations that drain you of your precious life energy, put a stop to your personal growth, or send you on a trajectory that serves everyone but you. Of course, knowing what makes you happy is a huge step toward living a satisfying and rewarding life. But being aware of the freedoms you still have in this country can be the difference between living your truth and becoming yet another corporate slave.

In the next three chapters, I'll revisit the same subset of societal pillars that I railed against in the previous three to show you that it *is* possible to have the best things in life without trading your humanity to attain them. You'll meet Mr. Dupree again while I'm on my way to school, be introduced to Mr. King, Mr. Talone, Ms. De Mazia, and Dr. Sachs, and I'll share my soft spot for Joe, the Realtor. I'll take your hand and whisk you to the future like the third ghost in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Instead of watching your Christmas future from the shadows, we'll stand at the finish line of your future retirement party. And in the last chapter of Part III, you'll see how clueless I can be on a date, what suffices as entertainment for me while eating lunch on the steps of a state capitol, what goes through my mind while riding my bike through countless neighborhoods, and how it feels to be neck-high in 105-degree spring water and be the brunt of confrontational boldness fueled by assuming the worst in strangers.

There's a reason why John Lennon's "Imagine" always shows up on websites ranking the world's greatest songs of all time. And it's not just because it's easy to sing along with and play on a piano. It's because the song's calming tempo and wishful

sentiments remind us that until we come together, the worst of society will continue to overrule the best of humanity.

## **Chapter 7: On Your Own Terms**

### **Two Tickets, Please**

"Hey, Amy. Can you tell me where . . . "

"Need a touch up on the face powder, Chuck?" interrupted the make-up artist, who was also studying graphic art at Boise State.

"No, I'm good. Have you seen, Steve? I'm back on in about six minutes, and I need to go over some stuff with him."

"He's with the sound guys. I'll tell him you're looking for him," she said, fixing the collar on my shirt.

"Thanks, Amy."

"Yeah, Chuck. What's up?" said the stage manager, who for the first time seemed calm and collected.

"How possible is it for the sound guys to swap out the Guns N' Roses song for Eddie Money's 'Two Tickets to Paradise?'"

I asked, doing my best not to sound like a diva who found the wrong color of M&Ms in her dressing room's candy bowl.

"It's a big ask this late in the game, Chuck."

"Can you go see if they can do it, please?"

A few minutes later, I watched Steve walk toward me while looking at his watch the whole time. He was still looking at his watch when he said, "They can do it, and it starts in thirty seconds."

"That's great! You're the best, Steve."

When he saw that I was still behind the curtain a full fifteen seconds after the music started, Steve began waving his arms at me. Without saying anything, I made that universal gesture that conveys, "Calm down, dude," by making my hands look like they were dribbling two basketballs in slow motion. What he didn't know was that I wanted the iconic guitar riff and drum sequence to lighten the mood and reenergize the cavernous venue. Like everyone else within earshot of Eddie Money's smokey voice, I was quietly singing the words: "I'm

gonna take you on a trip so far from here. I've got two tickets in my pocket. Now baby, we're gonna disappear. We've waited so long, waited so long." After a quick glance at Steve, I went back out on stage for the last time to talk about the third and final part of *It's Not Your Fault: But It Could Be*.

Hello again! Welcome back! That's it for the intermission breaks. We're in the homestretch now. Gosh, don't you just love that song? It never fails to brighten my mood and remind me that it's good to be alive. Am I right? At this point, you're probably feeling a tinge of mental whiplash, having gone from hearing about the inspiring Yellow-throated Warblers to being told that you basically live on the Death Star of the Evil Empire. Obviously, our culture isn't the worst. If you consider what the Chinese population must endure on a daily basis from their own government, we don't really have it that bad. But from my perspective, we're headed in that direction if we don't do something to change the current trajectory. And I'm not the only one who's suggesting that there are better ways to live our lives than what's been hammered into us by our government, corporate America, television, and the internet. In fact, I think some of these people are right here in the audience. Am I wrong in thinking that a lot of you launch into

your own versions of George Carlin rants whenever you're left with your mouth hanging open after yet another societal outrage?

We all know it's easy to point out what's wrong. And we all know how hard it is to fix something that's ballooned into a systemic beast of a problem. But what if I told you that it's possible to indirectly improve the bigger picture while navigating this mess of a society with the freedoms that you still have? By using these freedoms to make both subtle and drastic lifestyle adjustments, you'll find that your change in attitude can have a positive effect on the world around you. And now that you know I'm a lot like you, allow me to share how I was able to circumvent most of the unnecessary hardships and pitfalls that await each and every one of us in this very room. It only takes self-discipline, self-control, and the steadfast belief that it's better to live life on your own terms.

## **Namaste**

"Morning, Charlie," said my neighbor with a crisp, folded newspaper tucked under his arm.

"Oh . . . Good morning, Mr. Dupree," I replied, presuming him to be walking back from the convenience store across the street from the train station.

"Where are you off to so early on a school day? Wait. Let me guess. You've expanded your odd job hours, and you're going to feed a neighbor's dog or pull weeds out of someone else's garden?"

"No . . . I do that kind of stuff after school and on the weekends. Right now, I'm headed to school."

"Isn't it a little early? You go to the middle school in town, right?" he pressed.

"I do. I'm just going to run some laps around the track. Then, I'll walk back home and get ready for school."

While using his newspaper to emphasize his words, Mr. Dupree said, "Let me get this straight. You get up at the crack of dawn, walk to school, run laps on the track, walk back home, get ready for school, and then walk back for the school day?"

"Yes," I replied.

"How often do you do this?" he asked.

"Almost every day."

"Unbelievable, Charlie. Did your dad ever buy a wood splitter?"

"Nope."

When I think back to those early morning jogs around the empty cinder track at my middle school, I have a hard time pinpointing what inspired me to start an exercise regimen at eleven years old. I wasn't on the track team. I wasn't training for anything particular. And as a solid third-stringer, I didn't have that next gear like my soccer teammates did. Yet, I was motivated to stretch, run, and exercise with weights every day simply because I liked the way it made me feel.

As a fifty-eight-year-old, I can honestly say that I've never stopped this practice, missing only ten to twenty days annually since our nation's bicentennial year. As the years rolled by, I

noticed that this longstanding habit had become integral to my emotional, mental, and spiritual health as well. And when I compared myself to friends and colleagues, I realized that I shared none of the physical ailments and only some of the anxieties that they had. I wanted to brag and say that I only needed to see the doctor for antibiotics once every five years for a stubborn upper respiratory infection, but I thought better of it. And I'm sure they wouldn't like it if I told them that I hadn't been back to the hospital since being born in one.

I've found that the benefits of committing to an intentional health and fitness lifestyle are enormous, going far beyond just making you look and feel better. It gives you options so few have. Personally, I was able to say *adios* to ridiculously high insurance premiums that would've done nothing for me, opting instead to become self-insured by paying *myself* the hefty five hundred dollars each month. Believe me, six thousand dollars year after year adds up. I'm also able to discuss and negotiate the cost of medical procedures with doctors who don't align themselves with wellness strategies approved by the accounting departments of for-profit insurance companies for the same reasons I pointed out in Chapter 4.

I implore you to exercise your freedom to say no to jobs, promotions, education programs, home purchases, consumer goods, and relationships that can upset the all-important balance between your purpose, your life, and your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. I'm sure there isn't a reasonable person out there who would disagree with me on this notion. Who wouldn't want to live a balanced, less stressful life while feeling and looking fabulous? However, wishing for this kind of life and actually living it on a daily basis are worlds apart, but only by two simple mindsets. When people ask me, "What's your secret?" the conversation usually goes something like this:

"You mean the secret behind keeping my physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health at the top of my list?"

And they'll say, "Yeah, *that* secret. Would you mind telling me what it is?"

"Sure. But you won't like the answer. It comes down to two things. First, you have to truly enjoy exercising, being active, meditating, being open to learning new things, taking risks, not knowing what the future holds, experiencing most things

in moderation, eating sensibly, and getting enough rest. If you don't enjoy doing those things, you'll have to learn how," I'll say.

"Okay. But what about the second thing?"

"Oh, right. The second thing is that you have to be comfortable saying "no" quite often to everyone around you, including yourself. I hope you're okay with disappointing people and becoming wildly unpopular."

The truth is, no one cares about your physical and psychological wellbeing more than you do. So, it's up to you to protect, nurture, and relish the quality time you have with yourself. Keep in mind that everything has a price tag. In my case, I've missed out on jobs, promotions, and other business opportunities because they worked against the balance that I needed to maintain a peaceful, purposeful life. I've had to say goodbye to family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances who couldn't understand that my commitment to health and fitness was how I made sense of the world.

Again, I implore you to use your freedom to choose your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health over material wealth, popularity, and having power over others. Surround yourself with people who share your beliefs. Stop chasing after what others tell you to want. Turn off the TV, put down the phone, and start investing in your health and fitness. With the time you'll save by not having to be extorted by the American health care system, you'll avoid certain bankruptcy while evolving as a person. Start as soon as you can, do it every day, and make it your number one priority.

## **There Goes My Hero**

As I was backing out of the garage of my new house, I was almost certain that someone was shouting my name over what the radio was blaring. When I saw that it was Joe, I stopped my truck and rolled the window down.

"Good! I'm glad I caught you. Oh, I love this song, too. Stone Temple Pilots, right?"

"Hey, Joe. Yeah, I think this one is called 'Interstate Love Song.' What's up?" I asked, as I lowered the volume.

"*You* are my new hero, Chuck."

"C'mon, Joe."

"No. Seriously, I just finished reading through your paperwork in the sales office. No closing costs? No back taxes? *And you got a \$5,000 credit for landscaping?* Unbelievable, my friend!"

Before I met Joe in 1996, I didn't think it was remotely possible to give up my dream of speaking with a thick Australian accent, but after listening to him for only a few minutes, I knew I needed to up my game to a cooler-sounding Brazilian accent like his. As a person, he was easy to like. And as a salesman for the builder, his affable, easygoing nature made him the perfect person to sell me my first house. It was a match made in heaven, but it didn't start out that way. After touring a few of the new structures in the small development, Joe asked me what I did for a living. When I told him I was a business analyst, I remember him mumbling something like, "Well, that figures. You must ask *a lot* of questions in your job." Normally, I'd take offense to such snide remarks, but this guy could say "Corinthian leather" better than Ricardo

Montalbán. Even when his impatience got the best of him, his outbursts would come out as smooth as warm cocoa.

For more than two weeks, I'd go to the sales office to meet with Joe to go over questions I had regarding the eight-page sales contract, which was written in microscopic legalese on legal-sized paper. Most of the time, he'd start out by saying, "Chuck, you've got to be kidding me," but he'd always end up responding, "I'll have to check with my sales manager and get back to you." After all my questions were answered, I remember going back to Joe's office and handing him a piece of paper.

"Chuck, you're killing me. More questions?"

"No, Joe. This is a list of nine possible scenarios—likely situations that could occur during the one-year warranty period. I just want to know what to expect from the builder and what the builder expects from me should something happen."

"Nine? Not ten?" asked Joe, in a way that could only make you smile.

"The tenth scenario wasn't a *likely* situation," I said, doing my best to impersonate Mr. Spock.

"God . . . you're one careful guy, Chuck."

Joe was being kind. He and I both knew that I had major trust issues. I was ready to walk away with my twenty percent down payment and eight-hundred-point credit score if they couldn't logically explain the contract's legalese or weren't sure how the warranty would work if something went wrong during the first year. Why would I knowingly go into a business deal with people who didn't want to earn my trust by taking the time to thoughtfully address each of my concerns? Was it my fault that the builder paid a law firm to create a contract that 95 percent of the population wouldn't understand? Was I wrong to be suspicious of a contract that used words and phrases that only a few could decipher? Fortunately for me, I bought a house from a builder who actually wanted to earn my trust. Unfortunately, little did I know then how much of a rarity that would end up being.

Today, as soon as I'm handed a contract that's too lengthy and written in legalese, I immediately push it back and say

something like, "What am I supposed to do with this? It's over forty pages and written in a language I don't understand!" Then, as if they all have the same handbook on how to deal with cautious customers with still-functioning brainstems, I typically get passive-aggressive responses like, "I'm sorry you feel that way," and "Why don't you have your lawyer go through it with you?" *Yeah, like everyone just so happens to have a contract attorney on retainer. I get it. I'm not worth your time since there's a line of people behind me who'll sign it without asking a single question.*

Believe me, I know how good it feels to get what you want. And I know how easy it is to put your signature under all that fine print without doing the necessary due diligence just so you can have what you want sooner rather than later. But I think it's less about people being lazy and more about the impracticality of reviewing a contract line by line alongside company representatives, who are often just as confused as you are. The good news is that you can stop aligning yourself with companies that overwhelm you with stacks of legal documents that literally guarantee they'll come out on top no matter what happens. This all goes away if you exercise your freedom to put down the pen and ask if they'll walk you

through whatever doesn't make sense to you. And then, get it in writing. If they refuse or make you feel like a bumkin, walk away, and find a company that's willing to earn your trust.

"Well, Chuck, I better let you go," said Joe as he stepped back from my idling truck. "Oh, and don't forget, my friend."

"What's that?" I replied, knowing I had just taken the bait.

"You're my new hero."

## **Thank You, Dr. Sachs**

"Remember, Angela, don't deviate from the plan. Just follow my lead, okay? Are you sure you won't crack under pressure? You brought the ring, right?"

"Oh, my god! Calm down, Chuck. I got this. And yes, of course I brought the ring," replied my friend of a few years. "I don't think I've ever seen you like this before."

"I know. I'm sorry, but I only have one shot at this," I admitted. "Could you just go over it with me one more time, please?"

"How hard is it to remember that we're engaged and getting married in a month?" she huffed.

"And . . .?"

"And that we're saving up for a down payment to put on a house near my mother so she'll be able to see her future grandchildren as often as she likes," she continued in a sarcastic, singsong voice.

"Okay, okay, I deserved that," I said, as I took the exit to Monterey Park. "Now let's go fill up on some authentic Chinese food before showtime."

I was determined not to make the same mistakes I made when I bought my first two cars. I had planned to purchase my dream car using everything I had learned in Dr. Leslie R. Sachs' *How to Buy a Car for a Rock-Bottom Price*. This time, I'd be choosing between more than twenty-five brand-new

Nissan Maximas at a subdued dealership in El Monte, California, on a gloomy Sunday afternoon in late January. I had enough money in my pocket and a plan to get it at a fifteen percent discount. The ruse was simple. Angela and I would play the roles of a doe-eyed couple from a small town in Illinois, yet to be jaded by the gritty callousness of East Los Angeles. We'd make sure the salesman knew we were prepared to buy a car that day without needing to finance it or haggle over a trade-in. *Don't mind us*, I thought to myself as we walked into the near-empty showroom. *We're just two juicy porkchops wandering around a den of ravenous wolves.*

To this day, I still don't know where I found the audacity to start the negotiations at twenty-two thousand dollars on a car with a sticker price at nine thousand dollars higher than that. But when the salesman immediately countered at thirty thousand dollars, I knew the game was on and that my investment in Dr. Sachs' book had already paid off. Over the next three-and-a-half hours, I saw numbers floating in front of my face like Russell Crowe's character in *A Beautiful Mind*. Whereas John Forbes Nash, Jr. saw mathematical symbols and equations, I could see the dealer's costs for the car and every option, ranging from the Bose stereo system to the rear spoiler.

When they clumsily jacked up the price of one option, I would respond by effortlessly bundling other options for a discount in the same way Mikhail Baryshnikov glides from one ballet position to another. While some would say that I was in the zone, others would say I was having an out-of-body experience. Angela, however, would say I had cashed in every favor owed to me and that she was ready to leave hours ago.

"We're done, right?" she asked, already putting her jacket on.

"What are you doing? Take that off! Remember, we have to look totally unified. If they smell blood in the water, this deal is toast. Be happy you're witnessing a master class on car buying." I whispered.

"How could it be toast? You got it down to twenty-seven, right?" she said, reluctantly removing her coat.

"Twenty-six-three," I said.

"So, we're done then?"

"Almost. When Jose comes back from the manager's office, it'll go down to twenty-five-seven. You'll see," I said, with mounting anticipation.

*There's a reason why cavewomen stayed home and gathered nuts and berries while cavemen hunted,* I thought to myself while driving back to Camarillo in my new Nissan Maxima. *They just don't have the patience for it. And they can't appreciate seeing a great beast go down after hours of intense battling either.* Was five hours a long time to haggle over the price of a car? Sure. Was it worth it? Absolutely. At twenty-six thousand dollars even, I exceeded my goal of getting a fifteen percent discount while earning more per hour than the top plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills. Did I take it too far by making complimentary floor mats a dealbreaker? Probably. Would I do it the same way if I had to do it all over again? You bet.

In order to cut the lender out of the equation, I drove a little pickup truck for fourteen years while methodically putting away enough money to buy a new car without any financing. As a cash buyer, I finally had the negotiating leverage I needed to avoid being fleeced like I was during my first two trips to

the car lot. I get it. Everyone wants what they want, when they want it. But that's where the trouble begins. I recommend using your existing freedom to say no to becoming beholden to bank loans and credit card debt. Listen to Dr. Sachs, who taught me that there isn't a job that pays more than negotiating. And listen to me. Don't trade your freedom and flexibility for anything, especially for an asset that depreciates more than twenty percent as soon as you drive it off the lot.

## Chapter 8: What's Your Bag?

### Some Things Never Change

*Swoosh . . . THWACK!*

As an eighth grader, there was nothing better than the sound of a one-pound bag of M&Ms being hurled across a classroom and the undeniable satisfaction that followed as it slammed into the palm of my outstretched hand. For the first time in my young life, I had found something at school that truly made me happy. It didn't come from my third-string position on the soccer team. It didn't come from art class, where I could draw rainbows and butterflies better than the girls. And it didn't come from any of the other classes I was acing either. Heck, it wasn't even happening during regular school hours.

When Mr. King wasn't teaching world history with the same vigor as a four-star general preparing his troops for battle, he hosted a cartoon club every Tuesday after the last bell rang. No fewer than thirty boys would assemble in his classroom to learn who won the previous week's contest and get the rundown on the next cartoon challenge. Despite his unique

ability to enrapture thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds with his over-the-top military theatrics, Mr. King was a calming figure in the scholastic world of prepubescent angst. Whether he was re-enacting the events that led to the start of World War II to his history students or breaking down the hilarity of a cartoon to his club members, he always looked like a stereotypical college football coach from the 1950s. Although he must've been in his early sixties, he looked like he had played the game as an outside linebacker or defensive end. He wore short-sleeved, white dress shirts tucked into too-short, tan khakis that exposed his penchant for white socks. His skinny, dark ties and onyx-colored glasses frames emphasized the pepper rather than the salt in his flattop, completing the look of a man calling plays from the sidelines.

The cartoon club agenda was always the same. To begin the thirty-minute gathering, Mr. King would use an overhead projector to reveal the three winning entries. He'd start with third place and work his way up to the top spot. I especially liked that all three winners would receive the same prize in the same airborne manner. Tuesdays were both torturous and wildly exciting in the same way Christmas Eve would make me toss and turn as a young child. I could hardly think straight

or sit still in class on those days. Instead of focusing on what my teachers were telling me, my mind was painting pictures of cartoon glory and a week's worth of candy-coated chocolate.

Prior to skedaddling to Mr. King's classroom for history lessons or for laughs with the other nerds who also saw themselves as clever, misunderstood artists, I really didn't like school. But nobody knew that because I was a good student who could tread lightly enough to remain invisible to the jocks, the rebels, the bullies, the do-gooders, the brains, the dorks, the elites, and most adults. What I had hoped would be an escape from an unpredictable and tumultuous home life ended up becoming a new source of distress and anxiety. Back then, I saw school as something to endure, an unavoidable, necessary evil. To me, the only silver lining was that I could use it as leverage for an early departure from a family that made me feel even more alone than my classmates.

It took three long years of high school for something as interesting as Mr. King's Cartoon Club to come along and awaken the life that was bottled up inside me. But this time, it was a double jackpot, and they both occurred during school

hours. The first was Mr. Talone's creative writing class, where I learned that it was possible to go on 'mind trips' without ingesting something that would make the characters on the back of a cereal box start talking to me. The second was an off-campus art history and appreciation class held at the prestigious Barnes Foundation near Philadelphia, where a Morticia-like art educator would breakdown original works by post-impressionist and modern painters such as Cézanne, Renoir, Degas, Picasso, and Monet. Years later, I would learn that *that* lady was the highly respected and renowned Violette De Mazia.

Yet, even after finding joy in the cartoon club, at the Barnes Foundation, and in the creative writing class, I *still* went to college to study biology. And that, my friends, is another example of the power of early indoctrination. When primary and secondary education programs are aligned with the demands of a societal construct that reduces human life to human machinery, how is it surprising to any of us that there are more unhappy people than happy ones? What's even more ironic is that after mainstream society was finished with me fifteen years ago, I naturally gravitated toward creating original works that blended cartooning, fine art, and creative

writing. *How crazy is that?* It makes me believe that, had I become a marine biologist, I probably would've been kicked off the boat within a year for spending more time sketching and journaling about how the ocean made me feel than tracking the migration patterns of humpback whales.

I think it would be unfair to say that my middle school and high school teachers and coaches didn't care about my happiness. However, I do think it's fair to say that my education was focused more on preparing me for college than helping me figure out my place in the world. Luckily for me, I managed to bump into a few subjects and activities that led me toward discovering my true, natural talents before graduating from high school, which I'm truly grateful for. But the traditional school setting also exposed me to human behaviors that made me realize that all wasn't right with the world and that success would require constant suspicion and careful navigation.

If I had young children today, I would do whatever it took to exercise my freedom to homeschool them. Besides protecting them from early indoctrination into a societal construct that needs brainwashed automatons to maintain the status quo, I'd

be giving them a chance to find their true interests. But the protection doesn't stop there. By not going into a classroom, they wouldn't be counted among those who lost their lives to yet another mass school shooting, since we live in a country that values the Second Amendment more than the lives of innocent children and adults caught in the line of fire. I also wouldn't want them to have access to unfiltered, unsupervised internet material from school computers or from student cell phones. The world is disconcerting enough to children who are learning the difference between what's right and wrong without adding to their confusion by exposing them to inappropriate websites and social media.

The typical arguments against homeschooling are that the kids turn into social misfits, are unprepared for the real world, and have less of a chance of getting into elite colleges than their public and private school counterparts. From what I've read and personally observed, these three stigmas couldn't be further from the truth. In fact, even a half-hearted internet search on the subject of homeschooling will overwhelm you with a tsunami of quantitative and qualitative data that dispels these myths and shows how homeschoolers actually have higher college graduation rates. And as far as socialization

goes, kids outside of the traditional school setting not only typically belong to a family homeschooling network, they have access to the same community-based clubs and activities. But the best part is that homeschoolers are less likely to enter society as square pegs pounded through round holes, making them more likely to know what makes them happy and their place in the world.

"Mr. Trunks, I'd like to talk to you about the cartoon you dropped off this morning," said Mr. King, as I headed to the cafeteria for lunch.

"Okay," I replied excitedly, thinking I was about to be asked to co-sponsor the club or to shed light on how I became a comedic genius so early in life.

"Let's talk in my classroom," he said, while leading the way.

"Can you explain this cartoon to me, please?" he asked without smiling.

"It's two guys building a block wall," I replied, suddenly realizing where this was going.

"And . . .?"

"And one guy is asking the other one if they should refer to themselves as *wall builders*?"

"And . . .?"

"And the other one says, 'No, we're *mortar forkers*!'"

## **Retiring Retirement**

As a kid, I somehow picked up the weird habit of needing to impersonate the most annoying people in television commercials. And they didn't have to have a speaking part or be the center of attention. They just needed to be somewhere in the ad and be annoying enough so that when I acted or sounded like them, people around me would get irritated. Like I said, it's a weird habit. And I still do it today. But instead of hearing, "Would you knock it off, dude?" or "It's not funny anymore," I get strange looks since a thousand cable channels and the internet make sure no one sees the same ads anymore. I mention this unflattering fun fact about myself because I

keep seeing this really annoying ad for a wealth management company in between reruns of *Frasier* and *Roseanne*.

Besides making me wonder about the company's marketing department's decision to advertise wealth management to people whose sophistication in evening entertainment hasn't risen above mothballed sitcoms from the 1990s, the ad features an insufferable thirty-year-old guy whose maniacal smile and expression are as fake as his enthusiasm. What is he *so* excited about? He's pumped by the wealth management company's projection that he'll be able to pay off his house in twelve years *and* retire at age sixty-one. *Whoopie!* In a previous life, I was in the same game as the corporate drone depicted on the television screen. But it would take an upcoming cruise through the Caribbean or a planned cycling tour around the Pacific Northwest to make me gush like I had just won the "Showcase Showdown" on *The Price is Right*.

And what is so thrilling about owning a house these days? Like I mentioned back in Chapter 4, he'll still have to pay around eight thousand dollars annually for property taxes and insurance after the loan is paid off. If that sobering fact were added to the commercial, it would be like surprising the actor

with one of those cream pies to the face just as an off-camera trombone plays those sad, descending ‘wah-wah-wah-wah’ notes in the background. And what about all the time and money that’s poured into a never-ending, year-round cycle of maintenance, repairs, and do-it-yourself projects? *Don’t look up, commercial guy, because a big tub of sticky, green slime is about to be dumped over you. No, not yet, trombone guy. Wait for my signal.* And what about the neighbor with the three barking dogs? Or the other neighbor who does autobody work in his driveway as a side hustle? Or the homeowner association that’s more inclined to deny your requests than approve them? *Sorry, commercial guy. Now it’s time for a big box of feathers to be dropped on top of you. I’m guessing that you’re not feeling all that smug anymore, huh? Okay . . . Hit it, trombone guy!*

I literally bristle when I hear the commercial guy say, “. . . and I’ll be able to retire when I’m sixty-one.” *What does that even mean? To do what?* It certainly isn’t the first time I’ve heard or seen ads from wealth management companies touting the need to save enough money for retirement as if it’s the difference between life and death. Whenever I hear anyone talk about retirement, it seems to infer that they’re just bidding

their time at an unsatisfying job until they can walk away at age sixty-seven with enough financial security to last the remainder of their lives. To me, it seems like their employment is not aligned with a purpose they find meaningful. Otherwise, they wouldn't be counting down the days to when they can say goodbye to soul-crushing commutes, petty coworkers, tyrannical bosses, and monotonous repetition. It reminds me of a conversation I had many years ago, where I likened retirement to crossing a finish line.

"What if you were about to cross the finish line while carrying six bags, and you could only go into retirement carrying five? Which bag would you leave behind?" I asked, while getting another cup of horrible coffee from the office kitchenette and hating myself for it.

"Okay, I'll bite. What's in the bags?" asked Steve, who seemed perfectly happy pouring the tepid sludge into a white mug with black lettering that read, "I don't need Google. My girlfriend knows everything."

"Your physical health is in one bag. Another bag contains your mental health. The next one contains your emotional health.

The fourth bag contains your spiritual health, and the last two hold what you love and enough money to live on for the rest of your life."

"And I have to leave one of them behind, right?" asked Steve.  
"I guess I'd have to leave the money."

"I'd agree with you," I replied. "What do you think is the moral of the story?"

"That money isn't the most important thing?" he guessed.

"Kind of. If all six bags are of equal importance, they'd each contain a little less than seventeen percent of the total weight. But the bag with money isn't equal to the other bags since you would choose to leave it behind. After making some adjustments, the bag of money might contain only ten percent of the total weight, while the other five bags would contain eighteen percent each," I explained.

"Meaning what?"

"It means that all six bags are important for retirement, but we're bombarded with ads from wealth management companies trying to convince us that the bag of money is ninety percent of a successful retirement."

I'm not recommending that you stop saving and investing your money for the future. However, I ask that you do so knowing that having enough money for retirement is only a small fraction of what's needed when careers come to an end. The most important investments are the ones you make in your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual selves, as well as the ones you make in the people you love. What good is retirement if you're alone, loaded with physical problems, disinterested in learning new things, emotionally stunted, and spiritually bankrupt? And would it really be so terrible if you came up short on funds later in life? The financial services industry will tell you it's a death sentence, scaring you into believing that you'll end up living off of cat food in and out of homeless shelters. But how could that even be a possibility when you've invested in yourself and have loved ones by your side?

Besides exercising your freedom to invest in your future in a way that'll have commission-based financial planners pulling

their hair out, consider not saying the word ‘retirement’ anymore. To me, it sounds as depressing as the word ‘cancer,’ because it’s just as deadly. If you can find a way to align your work with a purpose that’s meaningful to you, retirement doesn’t even show up on your radar. Don’t wait until it’s too late to do what you’re meant to do.

## Chapter 9: Separately Together

### She Said Yes

*That's different*, I thought to myself as I watched the young couple cross Fayetteville Street holding hands. I remember thinking they looked as out of place as the cloudless blue sky on that chilly and blustery Sunday afternoon in early November. She was wearing a sheer purple dress that exposed her shoulders and most of her legs. He was wearing dark trousers with a long-sleeved purple shirt that was several shades darker than her dress. While her free hand was keeping the dress from wrapping around her neck, his free hand was losing the battle of protecting his combed locks from the same unpredictable gusts. Both were looking down and walking as if they were late for a garden party that would serve crustless cucumber sandwiches, cranberry coleslaw, lemon cake, and champagne.

I liked riding my bike to the state capitol building in Raleigh on Sundays because there were fewer people to contend with and the route serpented through my alma mater, North Carolina State University. Plus, it was the halfway point of a

hilly 32-miler and the perfect place to eat a packed lunch on one of the sun-drenched benches overlooking Fayetteville Street. As soon as the couple crossed Morgan Street and started up the steps toward where I was sitting, a man who was standing nearby went up to greet them. Although I couldn't hear what they were saying, it was still decent enough entertainment to accompany a turkey sandwich, a package of peanut butter crackers, and an 8-ounce can of Pepsi. Unfortunately, the mystery was solved quicker than I would've liked when the man pulled out a bulky digital camera from his shoulder bag and started directing the couple where to stand.

*Oh, okay. Now this makes sense*, I thought, while readjusting myself to get a better view and feeling no shame whatsoever for not minding my own business. *They're just getting some professional pictures made. Maybe they just got engaged or something?* But then the photo shoot took a weird turn. He promptly got on one knee to begin a series of staged, oh-no-he-didn't, "popping the question" pictures. Suddenly, the biking halftime show was turning out to be much more interesting than the stereotypical ho-hum vacation, concert, food, and pet pictures I was rapidly scrolling through on

Facebook and Instagram. I was astonished at how the woman, who moments ago looked stoic and preoccupied, could conjure up expressions of total surprise, tearful joy, and doe-eyed love. *Wow! And the Oscar goes to . . .*

From my ringside seat on the bench, it didn't take long for me to find at least a half dozen social media posts, all with the same stale caption: "She said yes!" "How surreal," I mumbled to myself. *So, this is where the wedding play actually begins—the first of many predictable performances that must be documented for all to see and pretend to like on Facebook and Instagram.* I've never understood this fascination with wanting to play a role in a script that leaves so little to the imagination. To me, it not only undermines the exclusivity and sanctity of committing your life to someone, but it's also big business that results in hangovers, steep bills, and a marriage contract that complicates your relationship by binding it to state government.

But I'm not totally clueless. I think people choose the wedding play for a number of reasons. Perhaps they've never even considered an alternative way of legitimizing their commitment to one another, thinking that the traditional

marriage ceremony is the only path to relationship validation. Maybe they do it because that's what family and friends expect of them. As extras or supporting cast members, maybe family and friends need to see and be part of the wedding play spectacle in order to accept the union's legitimacy. Maybe it's the only means through which the bride and groom will feel truly safe and secure with each other. Or perhaps it's simply the next level in the game of life, where social media separates the winners from the losers. Personally, I think it's easy to get lost in the excitement and busyness of producing a year-or-more-in-the-making wedding performance where picture-perfect photos seem to be the most coveted outcome, but what keeps them together once the likes and comments fade away?

The pessimist in me can make the argument that in the early years of marriage, it's possible that unhappy husbands and wives come home to each other because they'd rather stay in a loveless marriage than face the notion that their wedding drama may have overshadowed underlying issues. And in the later years, maybe it's possible that unhappy husbands and wives come home to each other because they're overwhelmed by the mere thought of hiring divorce attorneys and hesitant to allow a judge to divide their assets since they were the ones

who made the choice to include the state government in their relationship. But the optimist in me can also make the argument that a lifelong commitment is possible without having to make a spectacle out of your relationship or needing the state's blessing.

I don't have to tell you that love is the most satisfying feeling in the vast repertoire of what it means to be a human being. However, I would like to remind you that the moment you choose to begin a committed journey through life together as a couple can be signified in a myriad of ways that may or may not win the approval of family or friends or recognition from state government. I urge you to exercise your freedom to look past tradition, formality, and pageantry when it comes to sharing your life with a worthy partner. And I don't have to tell you that the good times usually turn out to be the best times. But in times of turbulence, bouquet tosses, champagne toasts, marriage certificates, and social media likes won't keep you together. It's the promises you made to each other that will bring you back to calmer waters.

## Beast Mode

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## It Takes a Village

“So, what about you? Do you have kids, too?” she asked, nervously swirling a glass of velvety, blood-red merlot from her stool across the tall bar table.

“No, I don’t.”

“Really?”

“Does that surprise you?”

“It does. You seem like the kind of guy who would have kids.”

I noticed her short red fingernails quietly drumming on both sides of her wineglass as I explained that I was divorced before having children and that I simply didn't meet the right woman to have them with since then. Plus, I wasn't up for playing 'tag, you're it' just so I could have a mini-me or two with someone who I didn't really share a deep connection with. I even went as far as to say that had I had kids before the age of forty, I most likely would've only seen them grow up every other week.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. “Raising my kids was the most rewarding time of my life.”

"What are you sorry about? *Because* I didn't have kids, I was able to travel and work all over the country, including Canada, Europe, Mexico, and the Caribbean. And when the work subsided, I could go after the indulgences of becoming a commercial graphic artist, a published author, a professional photographer, and a cycling adventurer. Basically, the universe knocked on *both* our doors. You got the kids and grew as a parent. I had time to pursue my dreams and mature as a person. So, in the end, we both won."

“That’s a good perspective,” she replied while taking a sip of her wine.

“But there’s still time,” I sighed, giving my subtle joke a little more emphasis.

“Don’t look at me,” she said. “That ship has already sailed.”

“Ha-ha,” I chuckled while thinking, *Is she referring to having more kids or going on a second date with me?*

According to the Consensus Bureau, there are 258 million adults and 73 million children under the age of eighteen living in 128 million households in the United States. Of those homes, 37 million are one-person households, while 31 million, or 23%, are single-parent households. According to a Pew Research Center online article by Stephanie Kramer on December 12, 2019, the U.S. has the world's highest rate of children living in single-parent households, with the world average being more than three times lower at 7%. And in a recent online article published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation on September 26, 2022, entitled "Child Welfare and Foster Care Statistics," over 400,000 children live in foster care, 30% of whom are between the ages of one and five. And if that isn't enough statistics for you, I have one more. According to a Pet Keen online article by Nicole Cosgrove on November 15, 2022, 70%, or 91 million households, reported owning at least one pet, with numerous websites in agreement that there are approximately 90 to 92 million dogs in the U.S.

When it comes to children, I think it's fair to say that most adults would relish the idea of becoming a mentor to one, selflessly guiding and helping them, with the only reward

being that the child discovers how special they are, what their natural talents are, where they belong, and who will always be there for them. And I think it's fair to say that none of those same adults would gush over the thought of paying for them, cleaning up after them, disciplining them, worrying about them, and chauffeuring them to and from school, practices, and play dates. From my perspective, it seems like most people believe that the only way to experience raising a child is by getting married and having your own. For years now, I've felt the silent and not-so-silent judgment from family, friends, coworkers, and strangers for not having kids of my own. Sometimes, I just want to walk up to them and say, "I know what you're thinking. You think I hate kids, that I detest their sticky, Cheetos-stained fingers, that I'm selfish and self-centered, that I'm a control freak, that I can't love anything, or that I don't know *how* to love anything." But that couldn't be further from the truth.

What about helping a spouse or significant other raise their kids? What about helping a sibling, a dear friend, or a neighbor raise their children? What about adoption or getting involved in mentoring programs like the Boys & Girls Club of America and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America? Some people never

get to experience the joy of raising children, but that's not the case for me. I've had the good fortune of being in a position to assist in the day-to-day duties of childrearing for several years with a former girlfriend. To say that experience didn't change me to my core would be a lie. But it also didn't make me wish I had my own kids. They were enough for me. They taught me how glorious it can be to take a break from thinking about myself to see a different world through their eyes and to discover a level of goofiness I didn't think I had.

I tried to recreate that rewarding feeling years later by seeking mentoring roles at the Boys & Girls Club of America and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America in Boise, but the training and vetting processes were more than a month long and made me feel like they assumed that the worst possible human being was hidden inside me. Instead of feeling like one of the good guys, I felt dissected, second-guessed, scrutinized, and guilty until proven innocent. When I walked away before the inch-thick files of legal documentation could exonerate them should I turn out to be a monster in disguise, I didn't take it personally. I get it. It's not the fault of these organizations. Our society has created a fear-based culture that keeps the masses distrusting and segmented so we won't see each other, hear

one another, understand each other, assume the best in one another, or think for ourselves.

I remember being up at Gold Fork Hot Springs in Donnelly, Idaho, in the fall of 2015 when I realized that I truly live in a world that assumes the worst in people, where perception is 99% of reality. It was a weekday, so the six, cascading mineral-rich pools weren't very crowded. Plus, it isn't the easiest place to get to, as the mountain road turns into a six-mile, winding slog on dirt and gravel. Two sisters, aged somewhere between seven and ten, were in the same pool as me. Both looked bored as their grandparents napped under blankets on nearby lounge chairs that were up against boulders which served as a natural windbreak for the rustic setting.

Without saying anything, I picked up a dark, smooth stone and threw it in front of where their legs were dangling in the water. I knew then that they were sisters because they both looked at me with the same expression of surprise mixed with gratitude for the distraction. With only a nod and a head bob from me, they understood that it was their job to retrieve the stone. And just like that, they were competing with each other to be the first to get it, giggling as they came up for air to try again. The

smaller of the two swam over to where I was crouched in the water to put the stone on the deck so I could reach it without having to get up and feel the arctic November chill. Then both girls went back to sitting on the side of the pool. But this time, they looked more like they were in starting positions as their little hands gripped the sides of the pool deck in anticipation.

Our unspoken game gained complexity within just a few rounds, with the stone being thrown closer and closer to a foreboding area of rocks where the hot spring water splashed into the pool. The added modicum of danger only added to their delight, but their squeals of laughter aroused their grandparents as well as a handful of other hot spring soakers. What I thought would be admiring looks at what the girls and I had come up with to pass the time turned out to be cold stares of condemnation. *I think he came here alone. Why is an older guy playing with two young girls? Should we wake up the couple they came here with? Should we alert the staff?* I'm sad to say that I succumbed to the unwarranted negative pressure and tossed the last stone before moving over to another pool without even waving goodbye to the two kids. From my new location, I looked eastward toward the Tamarack Ski Resort

on the other side of Lake Cascade and sighed, “Nice world we live in.”

Although the societal construct makes it hard to experience the joy of helping to raise a child outside of marriage and shared genealogy, I don’t think it’s any easier for husbands, wives, or biological parents. Whereas society attaches ugly stigmas to the childless, parents are stretched beyond their financial, physical, and mental limits by a culture that puts profit and power over doing what’s best for the children of America. Personally, I’m not into living with pets, but I can see why there are more dogs than children in this country. In my recent book, *Must Love Dogs: A Tragedy of Sorts* (2022), I offer a well-thought-out hypothesis that attempts to answer the question, “How did America become so obsessed with dogs?” Now I might have to modify my theory by adding that the societal construct practically drives people toward acquiring dogs because society makes it so difficult for them to spend time with children who are not their own flesh and blood.

Based on the statistics I presented earlier in this section, there are at least 400,000 children in foster care who would benefit tremendously from your love and support. And there are at

least 31 million single-parent households that would welcome a helping hand. In my opinion, the societal construct actually works against the family unit, and despite all the messaging around the importance of family, our American way of life is literally detrimental to children. I urge you to exercise your freedom to stop shutting out the world and to never quit on the children who need us. And instead of wasting your precious compassion, empathy, support, love, time, and money on dogs, embrace the adage that it truly takes a village to raise a child.

## **Chapter 10: Conclusion**

### **Life On the Inside**

After you leave here this evening, I'd like for you to look at your calendars and to-do lists when you get home. I want you to notice how most, if not all, of what's scheduled pertains to all but three of the roles that define who you are. And the three that I'm referring to aren't just any old roles. They're the most important because they complete you as a person and contribute to the success of your other roles. Not only does every person in this audience have these three roles, most of you couldn't even name one of them. Please don't take that as an insult. It's something I've discovered after asking this same question for so many years.

If I asked the audience to blurt out typical roles, I'd most likely hear things like husband, mother, brother, grandma, uncle, best friend, student, teammate, project manager, or plumber. But for every ten of those types of roles, I might hear 'homeowner,' 'neighbor,' 'pet owner,' or 'American' only once. And like I predicted earlier, it would be a rare occurrence if anyone shouted out, 'man,' 'woman,' 'human

being,' or 'being.' When I don't hear those roles mentioned, it doesn't disappoint me anymore because I know it's not anyone's fault. Although there's a lot of lip service paid to these three roles in the form of memes, public service announcements, bullet points, and sound bites, the societal construct does an impressive job of suppressing them since they invariably lead to independent thought, less dependency, enlightenment, and freedom.

Personally, I believe it's hard to evolve as a man, woman, human being, or being in this country. First of all, I don't think many people would disagree with me when I say the roles of men and women have become so blurred and neutralized that we've reached a point in which we no longer need each other. In terms of our humanity, the architects of the current societal construct and its long-standing regime constantly stoke the fires of distrust, intolerance, and fear, leaving us to find happiness and purpose in consumer goods and pets rather than in each other. And when I look up at the stars to remind myself that I live on a rock that orbits one of two hundred billion stars in one of a hundred billion galaxies, I'm also reminded that so few of us realize that we are card-carrying members of this vast and intriguing universe. Instead, I'm surrounded by

overworked and overly obligated people who are too busy with their screens to even look up. While they vacillate between toiling and pleasuring, government agencies scramble to find other inhabitable rocks before we completely destroy our only home.

This is not to say that calendar events and to-do lists are pointless because they're tethered to survival, compliance, and advancement within the societal construct. Besides, it can be argued that our mere existence, whether we live inside or outside mainstream society, is a pointless venture in the grand scheme of things. And just because I found success rather than happiness and fulfillment inside the societal construct doesn't mean that others can't or won't acquire all three. But in my experience, only a small percentage of people find success, happiness, *and* fulfillment by living their lives within the guardrails of the path society expects them to follow. And with that bliss comes a certain amount of ignorance to what's outside the guardrails because success, happiness, and fulfillment cannot be maintained as absolutes in an ideal world. However, the vast majority cannot find this same contentment. I'm sure this doesn't come as a shock since most rational people already know that a one-size-fits-all life plan

isn't for everybody. But the hucksters of this "one and only path to the American Dream" bombard you with endless false promises from every conceivable angle so you don't notice that you're trading your freedom and flexibility for corporate servitude.

So, what about the majority of people still stuck in the societal construct who are in debt and overly obligated? Is there no hope for them to find success, happiness, and fulfillment? Do they need to abandon mainstream society to find a place outside of it to acquire the redemption they so desperately need? To answer these questions fairly, I must shine the same light on those who chose a different path. These people abhor being told what to do, opting to live life on their own terms and in a way that accentuates their most authentic selves. To do so, I need to take you to the fringes of the societal construct to see if life is truly better on the other side of the fence.

## **Life On the Outside**

So, how do the calendars and to-do lists of those living on the outside of the societal construct compare to those who situate themselves within mainstream society? Is every event, task,

and project tethered to their higher roles as men, women, human beings, and beings? And if they are, does that make them superior to those who opted to invest in the more popular roles within a corporate-benefitting life plan that was hammered into their heads before the ninth grade? The mavericks don't have time for things like picking up Timmy from soccer practice or putting up Halloween decorations on the first weekend of October. Instead, they're too busy self-actualizing to check off things like 'prepare the presentation for Monday's staff meeting,' 'fertilize the lawn two weeks before the first mow,' and 'don't eat meat on Fridays during Lent.'

From what I've seen, I believe it's possible to live within the societal construct without ever having to think for oneself. When bosses, spouses, friends, families, kids, and pets aren't telling corporate slaves what to do, their religions, televisions, and phones are. And to make sure there aren't any interruptions, federal and state holidays swoop in to fill gaps in the calendar to ensure the drones stay corralled, obedient, and predictable. So, who's telling the nonconformists on the outside of the societal construct what to do? If they're so busy blazing their own trail, who do they listen to? Or are they

marching to the mantra of inspirational memes that promise recognition, respect, and acclaim for following their hearts?

Just like the inside of the construct, only a small minority of societal fringe dwellers acquire the trifecta of success, happiness, and fulfillment. That's not a prediction. It's something I've personally witnessed and experienced firsthand over my 15-year-and-counting residency outside mainstream society. By transitioning from the inside to the outside of the societal construct, I went from having only success to only being fulfilled. Instead of dreaming about happiness and fulfillment on the inside for all those years, I'm now hoping for success and happiness on the outside. And whereas those who collected all three prizes on the inside paid the price of ignorance that comes from never having deviated from the conveyor belt, their counterparts on the outside of the societal construct paid the price of isolation.

You know what I'm talking about. You've seen the maelstrom of memes that say things like "Confuse them with your silence, shock them with your results." You've heard the countless quotes promoting insightful things like "Care about what other people think, and you will always be their prisoner

(Lao Tzu)." And you've been bombarded with endless affirmations, reminding you to "take the road less traveled" and to "be true to yourself." These are all great messages, for sure, but they don't warn you about the side effects that can result from having the courage to forge your own path toward self-actualization.

Awareness of where one belongs in the world and what one should contribute to humanity can result from such strong work, but so can a feeling of loneliness when one separates himself or herself from the rest of the herd. If you had applied yourself to mathematics, you might have found yourself working on differential equations all by yourself while the rest of your classmates struggled to solve algebra problems. It's the same thing if you seek self-awareness and enlightenment. The more you learn about the world we live in, the more you drift away from those content with the daily grind. I've experienced this phenomenon and liken it to taking the elevator up to the top floor of the pyramid-shaped Luxor Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas. The higher you go, the fewer hotel rooms there are.

So, what about the majority of people who continue to orbit

around the societal construct despite not finding the key to unlock the riches of success, happiness, and fulfillment? Do they need to abandon the fringes of society to find a place inside the societal construct to acquire the redemption they so desperately need? Or is the outside majority just as hopeless as the inside majority? Or should we accept the fact that those who find success, happiness, and fulfillment, either outside or inside mainstream society, will always be the minority? To answer these questions in the final section of this book, we need to take the elevator back down to the ground floor of the Luxor, walk past the glitzy gift shops, breeze through the cavernous casino floor, pick up some warm plates, and take our places in the buffet line.

## **Final Thoughts**

If the Luxor Hotel & Casino was relocated to Egypt in what would have to be the greatest engineering feat of all time, it would be the third largest pyramid in the ancient city of Giza. The hotel's buffet, located on the ground floor of the 30-story glass and steel structure that's only 25% smaller than the Great Pyramid of Giza, is not that different from the other four-star casino hotels in Sin City. Since Las Vegas is a popular world

destination, the buffet offers many exotic international selections alongside traditional American fare. By now, you must be asking yourself, “Does this guy work for TripAdvisor? Why the hell is he telling me this?” All I can say is, “Thanks for hanging in there. I just needed to set up the buffet analogy a bit further.”

As we wait our turn in line, we have time to look around the well-lit Egyptian-themed dining room. The first thing we notice is that the tables are occupied by either an individual or a small group of people. *Hmm . . . Intriguing.* All of them represent the few who’ve found success, happiness, and fulfillment either on the inside or outside of mainstream society. The ones sitting by themselves, with only exotic dishes in front of them, represent those who’ve acquired success, happiness, and fulfillment on the outside of the societal construct but paid the price of isolation. Conversely, those who share their tables with others have also found success, happiness, and fulfillment, but from the inside of the societal construct. As you can see, they’re enjoying lively conversation while they eat from identical plates filled with only non-exotic American food. The cost of their meals is

buried in their ignorance of what they're missing out on in regards to the available exotic selections.

So, where are the ones who represent the majorities from inside and outside the societal construct? Look in front of you. Look behind you. Look into one of the three thousand mirrors that practically serve as wallpaper in this opulent setting. We're the ones who have yet to find our share of success, happiness, and fulfillment. If you're thinking we should organize ourselves into two groups, it's not necessary to know who's a resident of mainstream society and who lives on society's outer fringe since the advice I'm offering applies to both.

As we get closer to the well-presented array of dishes, we notice trays of classrooms that produce workers rather than thinkers and piping hot school loans that are as meaty as home mortgages. Even before we reach for the serving spoons, we can already smell freshly baked corporate career paths, savory home ownership, and sizzling matrimony that usually comes with a side of procreation. Strategically placed placards remind us that the buffet also offers an all-you-can-eat material wealth bar and bottomless retirement planning. Aside

from the standard fare, there are a few exotic options that are far less common. These are slices of homeschooling topped with inquiry-based learning methods to encourage self-discovery, mouth-watering on-the-job training opportunities, and candied employment options wrapped in conscientious capitalism.

Midway through the line, we can almost see clear through to the end of the buffet, where a couple of kitchen staffers are replenishing some of the exotic selections we haven't seen yet. Suddenly, an audible gasp escapes the group as a platter of committed relationships stuffed with honor and loyalty instead of marriage licenses is brought out beneath our widened eyes and dropped jaws. Next, our attention is captured by a three-foot-tall ice sculpture in the shape of a heart that looks eerily similar to the one on the cover of this book. A smattering of communal living wraps, health and wellness low-calorie treats, and bite-sized minimalism can be found at the sculpture's base. And just before reaching the cashier to pay for what we chose to put on our plates, a display of to-go options offering child adoption over pet adoption looms large to pique our selflessness rather than our loneliness.

The dining room is fuller now as we make our way to join others who, like us, served themselves from *both* sides of the buffet. The relaxed, easy talk over plates containing helpings of exotic selections *and* traditional American fare tells us that a combination of pursuits from inside and outside the societal construct is the right choice for most. Of course, we realize that nothing comes for free. However, knowing that we didn't surrender to paying the full price of ignorance or isolation for our choices makes us appreciate where we are even more, while the change in our pockets reminds us that it's not our fault but it could've been.

The End

## **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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## **Additional Books by Chuck Trunks**

(Available on Amazon)

Fiction:

*A Rationale for Being  
Pillars of Society*

Nonfiction:

*Heart Appreciation: Stories of Gratitude*

*Must Love Dogs: A Tragedy of Sorts*

*Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*

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

*Physics from the Heart: A Quantum Story*

*Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love*

*Silver Linings: In a Mad World*

*Spot Me: A Gym Memoir*