



COLUMBIA BOUND

A True Story



Chuck Trunks

Miss Linda

Who hasn't, at some point in their life, seriously wondered if they were born into the wrong family? But what if your mother, father, and siblings asked themselves the same question, looking at you and wondering how this alien creature from another planet came to share their last name? In my case, this shared quandary began in front of a Magnavox Odyssey in the early 1970s. I can still remember lying on my stomach, head in my hands, and thinking the answer was "me" to *Sesame Street's* iconic singalong, "One of these things is not like the others." They say loneliness feels much worse when surrounded by peripheral friends and family members who aren't equipped to see the person inside you or simply choose not to. At 17, I left a family and a community that failed to teach me how to find and embrace my authentic self. They raised me to live autonomously, compete with others, and win instead of showing me how to give and receive love through interdependent relationships.

For most of the next 40 years, despite much personal and professional success, I experienced a new kind of loneliness. Of course, I still felt the always-present void from never having had a connection with my family of origin. But unbeknownst to me, I found out that familial detachment was only one of many crosses I'd have to bear. In the middle of what I thought were banner career and life years, I became more and more aware of the burden of empty relationships, meaningless acclaim, pathetic validation, and unsatisfying achievement. Over time, I slowly began to realize that what was missing in my life was the very thing I failed to learn as a child. Important-sounding job titles weren't going to fill the void, nor were promotions, bonuses, material wealth, world travel, or better-looking romantic partners. I needed someone I could trust enough to show my true self to. Then, if I was lucky, they'd love me despite my flaws, self-sabotaging, and overall brokenness. And then, if I was still lucky enough to win the lottery a second time, they'd show me how to love them in return.

It wasn't Ed MacMahon and his film crew from the Publisher's Clearing House who knocked on my door to announce that I'd won the grand prize. There were no camera flashes, slaphappy grins, or oversized million-dollar checks to speak of; instead, it came in the form of an understated email from a recently widowed retiree from Columbia, South Carolina. In it, Linda described how she came to read my first book, *Heart Appreciation: Stories of Gratitude*, and expressed how it made her feel after having lost her husband of nearly 60 years. After learning more about the native South Carolinian's family- and community-centered life through a series of email and phone conversations, I asked her if she'd meet me for lunch in Lumberton, North Carolina—the halfway point between where I lived in Raleigh and her home in Columbia. “Sure,” she told me, her answer sounding lively and high-spirited, excitedly adding, “I'll bring my book so you can sign it for me.”

I watched her step out of a sporty-looking silver sedan wearing a colorful print dress with matching sandals and wondered if she confused my lunch invitation at Panera Bread with a three-day cruise out of Miami. She was quick to remove her aviator-style sunglasses as I approached her in the parking lot. And although she's close to securing the respectable title of octogenarian, Linda has the same hair color and eyes as Malibu Barbie, which prompted me to immediately think of her as a living doll. A fluffy bob frames her face like two blonde curtains, revealing a perpetually warm smile and piercing blue eyes the color of glacial ice—the kind of eyes that made me want to be truthful and decent to her. Soon after we sat down to eat our exact same order of a spicy chicken sandwich, Caesar salad, and lemonade, I felt comfortable enough with Linda to want to go beyond the safety and boredom of measured and polite discourse.

For the first time in more years than I care to admit, I wanted to disclose my real story—the one not found on resumes, in social media posts, or in brokerage accounts. Everyone—and I mean everyone—is suffering. It's simply a non-negotiable fact that comes with being human in a world that seems hellbent on

eradicating anything that can actually nourish a sense of community, cooperation, and compassion. When it comes to heartache and tragedy, I've experienced more than my fair share, and so has Linda. But in her case, after learning more about her story, she, without question, has lived through a myriad of losses that no decent person would wish on their worst enemy. Yet, despite carrying a set of crosses that make mine seem like trivial inconveniences, Linda maintains a humble air of positivity and gratitude—an attitude anyone would want to aspire to, including me.

The 95-mile drive back to Raleigh allowed me the pleasure of replaying most of our two-and-a-half-hour conversation—some exchanges more than a few times. She was thoughtful, kind, and put others first—selfless qualities as rare as witnessing positive boldness amongst strangers in a public space. She listened intently, withheld judgment, and radiated compassion wrapped in heartfelt empathy. By the time I finished my salad, I realized that it only took two things to get on her good side: be kind and make her laugh. I turned my attention back to the road and noticed the countless tall, leafy trees on either side of the interstate whizzing by. They reminded me of all the people in my life who came and went. But there was something different about Linda—that she wouldn't be just another green blur flashing past the driver's side window. I could tell she was here to stay.

Hello, My Name is Chuck

Most people think that I'm joking when I ask them if they have made any friends since seventh grade. I get it. It's a weird-sounding question. But for me, it's a serious one. And yet, as expected, their levity quickly begins to diminish when I ask them if they made any friends after high school, college, or marriage. What was once lighthearted amusement at my line of questioning soon dissolves into dismissive chuckles when I continue to push: "How about after 30? 40? or 50?" Over the last several years, since befriending Linda, I've had to resort to posing these same questions to those who simply cannot wrap their minds around how

two totally different people could become such good friends so late in life, let alone best friends. *Are you 'boyfriend and girlfriend?' Is she your sugar momma? Are you her home healthcare aide? Will I see you on a future episode of NBC's Dateline as Columbia's first-ever serial swindler who targets lonely older ladies with suspected deep pockets?*

Fortunately for me, I never felt the need to present any of these questions to Linda's surviving family members and closest friends. From the beginning, they wholeheartedly welcomed and accepted me into their inner circle based on what one would expect from God-fearing salt-of-the-earth types: I just had to be good to her. In a way, I enjoyed the teaching moments with nosy outsiders, meeting their terrible assumptions about me with questions about their own ability to make friends that didn't have the same algebra teacher. It's a line of questioning that seeks to enlighten rather than shame, showing them how jaded one must be if they're willing to assume the worst in someone they don't even know over the possibility that miracles can still happen. And making a real friend, a platonic bestie, later in life in a society that self-servingly promotes independence over relationships *is* nothing short of a miracle.

From a house in North Raleigh I shared with two vaping, computer-gaming, fast-food-eating manboys, I managed, through mutual interest and reciprocated correspondence, to build inroads and cultivate new relationships with those closest to Linda. Some lived as far as Florida and Virginia; most spent their whole lives in Columbia, Spartanburg, and Inman, midland cities rich with South Carolina charm, Christian faith, and Civil War history. The handful of nametags ranged from sister-in-law to mother; their ages spanned from 74 to an astonishing 99. By the time I moved back to Idaho for a writing project, the unspoken, two-way adoption process was complete without a single signature. It was official; I was a card-carrying member of Linda's tribe.

When I received the news that Linda's 98-year-old mother had passed, I knew it was time to leave Idaho for the last time and move to the Palmetto State—a possibility we had discussed many times before. To improve the chances of finding a landing spot in Columbia sooner than later, I hatched a plan to place housing requests on multiple websites that specialize in connecting potential housemates with on-site homeowners—a skill I had become proficient at since first doing so in 2019. For the first time, my online ad touted a respectable—even admirable—reason for wanting to move to Columbia. Along with a bulleted synopsis of my background, financial status, and rental history, I submitted the following verbiage, thinking I'd need an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of all the incoming offers:

Hello. Thank you for taking the time to read and consider my request. My name is Chuck, and I'm planning to move to Columbia from Nampa, Idaho, this spring to assist aging family members currently residing in the Forest Acres area. In order to make this timeframe feasible, I would like to kindly ask for your assistance in helping me find a temporary housing situation in or close to Forest Acres for a period of 6 to 12 months. After I've settled in and established a new normal centered around people who mean the world to me, I will turn my attention to finding and procuring a permanent residence in the same area of Columbia.

Again, I'm seeking a mutually beneficial situation where the homeowner incurs low risk, similar values, and a stress-free living arrangement—and where you gain satisfaction from having made the connection. Thank you for your valuable time and consideration.

But this isn't where the story ends; rather, it's where it begins. *Huh?* How else are readers to understand my bewilderment and disappointment while fielding ad responses if I didn't convey the reasons behind my decision to move across the country in the first two sections of *Columbia Bound*? Even after uploading housing requests, written in plain English and with the best of intentions, I still

couldn't earn a much-needed reprieve from the macabre mantra of this book: It's a mad, mad world.

Written in the Stars

To me, the best attributes of being human are like stars we can see in the night sky. If you were with me, I'd point at a cluster of stars just above the trees on the other side of the pond and say, "Look over there! You can see cooperation, generosity, and accountability." Then we'd walk for a bit, appreciating the soft breeze and silence, until I'd stop and point upwards again. "Can you believe it?" I'd ask. "If you look between those two clouds, you'll see humility, loyalty, and compassion." As luck would have it, we'd stumble upon an abandoned rowboat that's practically begging us to climb aboard. We'd quietly push away from the bank toward the center of the pond, the only sound coming from the water dripping off the lifted oars. At some point, you couldn't help but notice three bright stars all in a row. "What are those stars over there?" you'd ask, gesturing your arm toward where we left the bank. "Ahh, yes," I'd reply, relaxing the oars as I leaned back. "That's the *Belt of Positive Boldness*. Those are my three favorite stars: friendliness, interest in others, and seeking to understand."

In 1929, astronomers and theoretical physicists, through observation and mathematics, agreed that the universe is expanding faster than the speed of light, meaning that as time progresses, the night sky will have fewer and fewer stars to look at. Eventually, all the stars will be too far away for us to see, leaving an inky blackness of nothingness to greet future moongazers. As my time on Earth passes—six decades and counting—I have become increasingly aware of fading qualities like kindness, empathy, and modesty. What were once the best and brightest traits of good men and women are now dimming exceptions to the rule—a history of fellowship, brotherhood, and community relegated to dusty books, classic movies, and memory. You may not appreciate my nifty expanding

universe analogy or agree with my harsh assessment of the current state of affairs, but the evidence is all around us—even while looking for a place to live.

“Hi Joann. Sorry, I didn’t pick up earlier. I was out on my bike,” I admitted to the elderly lady with whom I’d been texting about a room she was looking to rent out of her home. The place looked decent enough—a ranch-style house in Arcadia Lakes with a private bathroom and off-street parking. “Isn’t it nice not having to type everything out?”

“Oh, I totally agree,” she replied, clearing her throat into the phone as she did so. “You can tell a lot about a person by the way they sound, and I think you have a pleasant voice. Do you ride your bike often?”

“I do. I’m glad you asked, because I was wondering where I could store it. Do you have a—”

“You’ll have to meet my grandson,” interrupted Joann. “He’s a huge bike rider and wins most of the races he enters. Talk about being in shape—Oh, my! If you ask me, he has the body of an adonis. And get this: he’s graduating from law school next month and already has a job lined up!”

My ears perked up hearing the words ‘grandson’ and ‘adonis’ in the same sentence, making me begin to doubt the woman’s credibility as a rational person, let alone a competent landlord. “That’s great,” I lied. “So, is there room in the garage for my bike?”

Joann, who must have thought I was interviewing her for a story I was writing about her grandson, chose to believe that I had asked her about his track record with the ladies and how good he looks in a suit. So, instead of just excusing myself from the one-sided weirdness, I suffered through more of what sounded like a late-night infomercial about the many talents and accomplishments of the

amazing Mr. Jonathan. For once, I was happy about the distracting TV noise in the background. Somewhere between bragging about her grandson's recent trip to Greece and his IQ test scores, she paused to lower its volume, giving me the much-anticipated chance to end the call. "He's certainly lucky to have you as his grandmother," I interjected. "It's been nice chatting with you, Joann, but I have to go now. I'll call you if I have any more questions. Goodbye."

I was relieved to have rid myself of the president of Mr. Jonathan's fan club, but soon realized that Joann was only the first float to pass by the judge's table of what would end up being a four-month-long parade through the *Twilight Zone*. Days later, Robert, a single man who appeared to be in his late 60s or early 70s, emailed me a series of pictures of his Dentsville colonial-style home—a tidy, two-story brick house set back from the street. "Oh, this place looks promising," I said to no one while scrolling through the photos. However, after taking a closer look at the images, doubt soon replaced hope. Either by design or a complete lack of self-awareness, Robert captured himself in a few mirrors while taking the photos for me. Normally, I'd notice the oversight and simply move on, but in his case, I couldn't because he was naked except for a skimpy pair of boxers. I shared Robert's pictures with a friend who was quick to defend him.

"Don't be so critical," she offered. "Maybe he was too warm or in the middle of getting dressed."

I might have agreed with her if there was only one picture to forgive, but there were three. For me, there was no amount of hypnotism, brainwashing, or electroshock therapy that could help me forget the skinny white legs, knobby knees, pronounced potbelly, scrawny arms, and the infamous threadbare underwear. "I think I'm going to move on from Robert," I said. "Plus, I have a bunch of texts and emails I haven't checked yet."

“Gees, Chuck, you’re the pickiest person I’ve ever met,” she huffed. “Is it even possible for a guy like you to recognize a good thing if it were to happen to you?”

“Actually, it’s a lot easier than you think,” I replied.

“How so?”

“It’s written in the stars.”

Thanks, But No Thanks

When you get down to it, looking for a place to live is a lot like shuffling through an absurd buffet line that limits you to only one item. “You chose *that*?” I’d tease, pointing at your plate, wondering if it was chicken or fish. I liken the late 90s buffet at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas to searching for a home to buy in an upscale neighborhood with blue-ribbon schools, sidewalks, and a Trader Joe’s. But in my case, I certainly wouldn’t feel like I was inside a posh casino. Since I was focused on finding a modest room to rent in a house with people who wouldn’t try to kill me in my sleep, *my* buffet line would be inside a Golden Corral next to the interstate. Even before I’d have a chance to survey all the entrees and side dishes, I’d imagine the cardboard-thin pizza, macaroni and cheese gelatin, and a soupy-looking three-bean chili calling me by name. *Hi, Chuck! The room comes with a minifridge and hotplate—convenience at your fingertips! Look at it this way, Chuck. Sleeping on a twin-size bed leaves more room for a desk, right? Don’t overlook this gem, Chuck! Even though the room hasn’t been remodeled or redecorated since our daughter left for college 10 years ago, it has its own bathroom!* Unfortunately for me, since I have champagne tastes on a lite beer budget, I’d have to give each of these woeful buffet items serious consideration.

It wasn't clear to me whether Archie was looking to rent a room in his house or the RV sitting beside it. Either way, I was still interested since the tree-lined property was shady, spacious, and less than 10 miles from Forest Acres. After a few email exchanges confirming the rental specifics and our mutual interest, I was surprised by his latest correspondence, which read, "I'm going to send you a picture of what I look like. It might make you change your mind." *Oh, boy. I knew it was too good to be true.* "Okay . . . Sure, send it over," I typed, half-expecting to receive a photo of a shirtless, 400-pound Shrek-like creature. Moments later, I went from feeling like I had found my next housemate to counting the number of stainless-steel hoops piercing his gauged ears and wondering if they'd exceed the number of metal studs protruding from his eyebrows, nostrils, and lips.

I prepared myself for the awkward exit by taking a deep breath and typing, "Whoa! You certainly have a lot going on there."

"So, what do you think?" typed Archie, seeming to give no thought to the pensive nature of his question.

"I think it's a little too radical for me," I wrote, thinking that he looks like he'd strangle me in my sleep if I didn't use an unscented dryer sheet. "But that's my problem, not yours. Thanks for being so upfront about it. I wish you the best of luck."

And the personal admissions didn't stop there. Nathan, the owner of a rustic, two-story Georgian-style house in Sandwood Hills, was embarking on his maiden voyage as a first-time landlord after remodeling a portion of his home into a separate studio apartment. The rental space looked inviting—perfect for holing away to focus on my latest writing project—but I still had a few questions for him.

“Hey, Nathan. Where would I park my truck? I didn’t see an obvious spot in the pictures,” I texted.

“Good catch, Chuck. I live on a busy road, so you’ll have to pull in, go past the house, and turn around in the backyard. I wouldn’t advise backing out of the driveway.”

“Okay, but where would I park?”

“In the backyard.”

“On the grass?”

“Yes.”

At that very moment, a cautionary vision came to mind. I was sitting in my parked truck, hands gripping the steering wheel, listening to the sound of steady rain, and anticipating the frustration that would come from having to transfer multiple grocery bags from the soggy backyard to the little apartment. It was an insidious daydream, as I was wearing brand-new Sketchers slip-ins. *Oh, the humanity!*

Although the living arrangement had already lost its appeal, I went ahead and inquired about the heating and air conditioning. “I noticed you have one of those Mitsubishi ductless units hanging in the bathroom. Is that the only one in the apartment, and how would I control the temperature?” Since Nathan also had an iPhone, I watched the little bubble of dots appear on my screen, indicating that he was in the process of texting me back. After almost five full minutes, I received his response and saw that it was a fairly beefy text, making me recall the undisputed adage that long texts are rarely good texts.

“Another good question, Chuck. Yes, that’s the only unit. Unfortunately, the thermostat is in my part of the house, so we’d have to work something out. I was planning to remedy the situation before somebody moved in, but my husband and I have recently separated and . . .”

Nathan’s text went on to tell me that he was gay, along with some of the specifics behind his troubled relationship with Kyle. With the idea of having found a nifty writer’s nook in a cool-looking studio apartment now a fleeting memory, I clumsily exited the budding transaction. “It sounds like you still have some work to do on the rental space and your personal life. In my experience, it’s better to iron out all the wrinkles before bringing in a tenant. As for disclosing personal details like political leanings, religious affiliations, or sexual orientation, I think it’s best to keep them to yourself. It just makes things easier. Thanks again for the consideration. Good luck with everything.”

Over the next several weeks, my track record looked like an initial stock offering whose share price had experienced a few fleeting surges yet ultimately flatlined across most of the websites I was using to find a temporary home in Columbia. Never before had I had such a difficult time finding a house to share—especially since I have a solid reputation and a background as pure as the driven snow. What would possess Maria to tell me that I’d have to leave if her previous renter wanted to move back in? *Huh?* Did Rick actually think I’d still move in after asking me if I’d bring ladies home for him, too? *Are you kidding me? If you even knew me a little bit, you’d know that I was never a club guy. Call an escort service, dude!* How about Laura? Why would she send pictures showing me two available bedrooms—one with furniture and one without—only to tell me that I’d have to get my own furniture since she likes to nap in a room other than her *own* bedroom? *Umm . . . Earth to Laura! Check out the name of the website you’re on. It’s called Furnished Finder—emphasis on the word “furnished!” Crazy!*

I didn't want to admit it, but after more than a month of back-and-forth correspondence, deciphering poorly written property descriptions, and lobotomizing my brain with a tsunami of bedroom photos, it was time to come up with a different strategy—one better than dubious housemate websites but worse than cold calling—sending unsolicited emails. But I wasn't worried. I had it all figured out. Or at least I thought I did. I'd target local realtors, city promoters, and church groups to help me land a short-term rental by leveraging their positions to assist a potential resident in exchange for either future commissions, contributions, or testimonials. At last, I'd be in a position to advocate for a person-to-person relationship rather than the less-than-satisfying transactional exchange between a renter and a landlord, putting them in the position of benevolent matchmaker. But sadly, even that was not to be, as I soon learned that the higher elevations of society are not immune to the madness standing between me and my new life in South Carolina.

Swings and Misses

“Do I know you?” was the response I received from a high-ranking pastor of a prominent church in Forest Acres. Although short and to the point, the 10 letters reeked of palpable annoyance and self-importance. It was as if he thought of me as a pathetic street urchin who had the gall to tug on his velvet robe while pestering His Excellency for a measly breadcrumb. By the time his response reached the part of my brain that decodes what my eyes see, it sounded more like, “Do you know who I am?” In that moment, and despite being familiar with only a handful of Bible stories, I felt like he broke every rule in the book.

Pastor Bob wasn't responding to an ill-conceived, self-serving email proposal. Instead, he was responding to a modified version of what I had written and posted on housemate-finding websites like Furnished Finder. In the version he received, I included that I had experience living with and assisting older folks with minor disabilities, hoping he'd consider me to be someone who could do the same for

one of his elderly church members. The email, of course, included the fact that I was moving to Columbia from Idaho to look after aging family members in Forest Acres and listed all the places he could find me on the internet as a way of showing that I had nothing to hide. At first, I was excited to see Pastor Bob's name in my inbox, thinking his correspondence would include welcoming me to his neck of the woods and asking questions about my extended family. However, in his defense, out of 84 staff members holding positions in seven different churches in Forest Acres, Pastor Bob was the only one to respond to my email. Looking back, it's really rather shocking when you consider that neither Pastor Bob nor the other 83 self-proclaimed men and women of God invited me to their church.

After successfully fighting the urge to share Pastor Bob's email with his superiors, peers, and congregation, I redirected my efforts toward organizations whose missions are to attract new residents and businesses to the city of Columbia. Surprisingly, I received only three responses from 106 email solicitations to management-level employees of four well-known and well-established organizations. Two responses were the equivalent of hearing, "Good luck with that," after telling someone you recently discovered a strange lump in your neck. But the email I received from Stella was on a whole different level: "Get a freaking life! Get a job! Stop trying to scam people! I am reporting this! You sent one to my coworker yesterday, so it's being discussed in our offices! Get a life and a job!" Unfortunately for Stella, I was no longer in a forgiving mood like I was with Pastor Bob. I added my thoughts to her baseless and senseless tirade and forwarded them to the company's executive team.

Shockingly, I received a very apologetic email from the president of the company, Mark, who informed me that Stella would be reprimanded for her unprofessional behavior and that I should expect a written apology from her by the end of the day. *Wow! Who knew tattling could feel so good?* When her email finally showed up in my inbox, I was prepared with a fresh cup of coffee and a trio of Pepperidge

Farm Milano cookies. “This is going to be awesome,” I said, pulling my chair closer to my laptop as if it were a coveted ringside seat. “So let’s see what a freshly-spanked Stella has to say for herself.”

Deep down, I knew it would be a lame apology, thinking she was just sending it to keep her job. However, it started off much better than I gave her credit for: “Dear Mr. Trunks, I do not have the adequate words to sincerely apologize to you for my negative email reply.” *Hmm . . . So far, so good.* “I receive a large amount of spam in my inbox every week.” *Here we go . . . Here comes the excuse to rationalize her inexcusable behavior.* “I had just been dealing with a very negative email situation, and I confused your message with another.” *Ha-ha . . . And there it is: the ol’ I-thought-you-were-someone-else routine! Shout out to Miss Stella: You are who I thought you were! Apology score: C-minus.*

After informing Stella’s boss that I had indeed received her apology, Mark seemed almost too relieved and even promised to have one of his realtor friends assist me in finding a place. *Side note: No one ever contacted me on Mark’s behalf.* And he wasted no time shocking me by asking if he could buy me a glass of wine and show me around the city when I arrive in May. *What in tarnation is in Columbia’s drinking water? Nice try, Mark, but I don’t date men. Way to turn a resolved situation into a personal opportunity!* I never did respond to Mark’s or Stella’s last emails, preferring to simply add them to the list of swings and misses in my efforts to find a home base in Columbia. Now that it feels like the bottom of the ninth, I’d have no choice but to rely on my last two bench warmers: real estate agents and Facebook.

Back to the Buffet

“I’m sorry, LaTasha. I still can’t hear you. Could you repeat that?” I asked, doing my best to tolerate a cacophony of background noise emanating from my phone. It was a mixture of swishing wiper blades, AM talk radio, and the crinkling of

heavy paper. Since it was noon in Columbia, I figured she was driving in the rain with one hand and eating lunch out of a drive-thru bag with the other. And given the urgent cadence of the wiper blades, it must have been a heavy rainstorm.

“I said, ‘What kind of house are you looking for?’” repeated LaTasha. “Can you hear me now?”

“Now I can,” I lied. “Like my email said, I’m not looking for a house right now, but I will be in about six months after I’ve become more familiar with the lay of the land in Columbia. Right now, I just want a short-term rental in a private home.”

The multitasking realtor made a gurgling sound that could only come from a straw sucking up air and soda, confirming she was indeed eating fast food. “An apartment won’t work for you?” she asked.

While doing my utmost to suppress a growing annoyance with LaTasha, I replied, “Yeah, I explained that, too, in the email. Nowadays, apartments are like dog kennels that require 12-month lease agreements. Plus, I don’t own any furniture. I figured, with you being a longtime real estate agent in the Forest Acres area, you’d have insider information regarding the kind of rentals I’m looking for. I would think you’d know plenty of new homeowners who are feeling cash-strapped yet too cautious to open their home to a virtual stranger. If you were to present a vetted, LaTasha-approved renter such as myself, you’d be helping *two* parties while securing a future commission as *my* real estate agent. What do you say?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Chuck. I was replying to an urgent text, so I didn’t hear that last part. Now what were you saying?”

Now it all made sense to me—why I was able to string a series of coherent sentences together. She had muted her phone’s speaker, thus eliminating the list of audible distractions—allowing me to think more clearly. “I really appreciate you reaching out to me, LaTasha, but it seems like you have a lot going on at the moment. Why don’t you give me a call when you’re not so busy?”

I never heard back from LaTasha or any of the other dozen or so realtors I spoke with over the phone. After having sent 126 emails to five agencies, all I had to show for it was a daily dose of automated real estate spam with subject lines in all caps hyping things like, “It’s a buyer’s market in Columbia!” “Check out this hot new listing!” and “Welcome to your dream home, Chuck!” *Hmm . . . If nobody reads their email anymore, where do they spend their time?* Then, it suddenly dawned on me. Had the world changed so much for the worse since the pandemic that social media—that direct spawn of Satan herself—would be my ticket for finding my next humble abode? As crazy as that sounds, I ended up joining 21 different flavors of so-you’re-moving-to-Columbia Facebook groups so I could post a reassuring picture of me and my bicycle with a Cliff Notes version of what I had been emailing out for the past three months.

Never having posted anything like this before, I figured I’d get more engagement than what my current run of posts—understated pictures of a smiling me holding one of my books with captions announcing, “On Amazon Now”—have been able to garner. Not only did I not receive a single viable lead, I didn’t receive a comment that went beyond, “Nice bike.” Instead, I attracted a handful of “likes” from a potential audience of over 13,000 group members. How is that even possible when competing against posts of dog birthday parties, play-by-play vacation updates, and decrees of love from couples bent on publicly congratulating themselves for yet another relationship milestone? And what kind of person “likes” a well-intentioned post seeking assistance and opportunity? *Huh?* That’s like giving a thumbs-up to a homeless guy holding a cardboard sign

that reads, “Anything helps.” *Earth to those who limit their communication to the thumbs-up emoji: They don’t help!*

With May rapidly approaching, I found myself back in line at the Golden Corral buffet, revisiting the en suite bedroom fit for a 10-year-old girl who dreams of ponies, rainbows, and crushes. The homeowners, a married couple from Scotland, said the space was still available and that a May move-in from Idaho would be perfect. What could I do? Pride and personal preferences had long since become out-of-reach luxuries. And the buffet analogy didn’t end after my arrival at the big yellow house in a questionable part of town, on a road without curbs, sidewalks, or a recognized speed limit. In my imagination, I sauntered to an empty table, carrying a tray with a single bowl of the watery three-bean chili I had seen earlier during my first trip through the buffet line. After stirring the lukewarm concoction with a battered spoon, chunks of mystery meat and soggy vegetables began rising to the surface. Upon further inspection, it became clear to me: The little girl’s room would have no electrical outlets in the bathroom, a weak internet connection, no dresser, broken blinds, rotted bath mats, black mold in the shower, no closet doors, and airflow that requires the bedroom door to remain open at all times. Thankfully, I made it to Columbia to begin life anew, but it’s still a mad, mad world.

The End



Linda and family, 1972