



AXIOM

A True Story



Chuck Trunks

Flop Sweat

“I don’t believe it; it’s actually working today,” I huffed as I hung my towel and swim bag on a hook outside the sauna. One of the major reasons I joined Axiom in the first place was for its pool and sauna. The two go together like peanut butter and chocolate. “Hey man, look where you’re going! You got *your* pool in *my* sauna!” “I don’t think so, dude. You got *your* sauna in *my* pool!” To me, nothing beats sitting in a 180-degree sauna after 45 minutes of mindless lap swimming in 72-degree water. It wasn’t the first time I had to wait three or more weeks before I could emerge from the frigid pool and find the sauna door free from apologetic signage and cautionary barricade tape. You’d think Axiom and other commercial gyms would compensate members when they themselves can’t hold up their end of the bargain. Instead, they continue to shamelessly take their monthly pound of flesh from your checking account and then have the gall to charge an annual maintenance fee with a straight face.

Three slumping heads popped up like alarmed prairie dogs as soon as I opened the cedar door. Their vacant expressions never changed even after I stated the obvious: “So they finally fixed this thing, huh?” Not wanting to make mortal enemies of the three sweaty men, I quickly closed the door behind me to keep the heat from escaping the cramped space and joined them. Like most saunas, the seating was limited to three benches—one against each of the walls not associated with the entryway or the electric heating element. Lucky for me, the bench at the back of the sauna was unoccupied. Once I sat down, I had a commanding view of the sweltering space, and since I was facing the entrance, I could see the comings and goings outside the sauna through the little window at the top of the door.

To my left, two men, somewhere between the ages of 25 and 30, sat hunched over, preoccupied with their phones. One wore earbuds; the other had on a pair of expensive-looking headphones. Like me, they were both wearing running shorts and flip-flops. A barefoot man around my age sat on the bench to my right. He

had a gray bath towel wrapped around his waist and looked to be in his mid-50s. Like the other two, he seemed disconnected from the present moment. His gaze went past his folded arms, settling on the cedar planks on the floor directly in front of his feet. While I searched for a place to focus my attention, I longed for the days when men still spoke to one another in places like saunas and steam rooms. Typically, two guys would start a conversation, and the others would eventually join in, adding their two cents, or at least looking like they were actively listening. Now, it was more like a morgue of perspiring cadavers. Still, I wasn't ready to throw in the towel just yet—not when there was a guy in here without earbuds or headphones who was old enough to remember a time when people were motivated to make new friends.

“Isn't it crazy,” I began, “that a typical vehicle has around 10,000 moving parts and can reliably perform a myriad of functions in any kind of weather, from adaptive cruise control to fuel injection to personalized climate control, and yet this sauna, whose only function is to heat a pathetically small room using six *non-moving* parts, is constantly on the fritz! How is that even possible?”

The gray towel raised his eyebrows and, without looking at me, exhaled, “Yep,” as if my clever comparison wasn't totally on par with something George Costanza might say on *Seinfeld*.

I made a mental note to recycle that line the next time I was in the sauna, or any sauna for that matter. As George would excitedly say to his best friend, “It's gold, Jerry! Gold!” I returned my attention to the young man wearing the expensive-looking headphones because my eyes had adjusted to the low level of amber light emanating from an LED above the room's heating element. At first, I didn't believe it, but after he moved his head a few times, I was positive they were the same pair of high-end headphones that I had purchased a few weeks earlier. Whereas he would subject his pair to exactly what Sony explicitly warned against—temperatures above 100 degrees—my headphones were safely nestled

inside a microfiber pouch on top of a folded face towel on my nightstand because I didn't have a satin pillow, velvet ropes, or a glass case. Although I couldn't understand why anyone would treat a pair of 400-dollar headphones so carelessly, I had to admit I wasn't too surprised—especially since he looked young enough to have been raised by the internet with a phone in his hand.

I wiped the sweat from my eyes and squinted at the wall clock on the other side of the sauna door. "It's like I have one of those pop-up thermometers you find in turkeys," I joked to the gray towel. "I know exactly when my 15 minutes are up."

This time, there was no response from him. I wanted to say, "Um, is this mic on?" Instead, I stepped down from my perch, causing all three men to pull their legs back, one after the other, like a game of Hungry Hungry Hippos. Within three small steps, I was in position to exit the cedar closet of the living dead. I opened the door just wide enough for my body to slip through and quickly closed it as if I were trying to keep something wild and dangerous from getting loose. As I unknowingly retrieved my towel and swim bag, I had no idea that within a month, I'd be scrambling out of the sauna from something that wasn't wild or dangerous but rather draining and desperate.

Mr. Green Shirt

"Man, I need a friend," I sighed as I floated upward from the bench, stopping when the lat pull-down bar could go no further. I let go of it and plopped back down after having finished my last set. From my position in the middle of the bustling gym floor, I surveyed the perpetually moving after-work crowd. Arms pushed and pulled. Legs squatted and pressed. With time-constrained people far outnumbering the weight machines, the climate felt more competitive than motivating and reminded me of the stress and tears that came from playing musical chairs at elementary school birthday parties. Above me, along all four railings in the mezzanine, rows of cardio machines hummed, vibrated, and

beeped. On each one, a human being waged a personal battle. They huffed and puffed with scrunched-up faces expressing both misery and determination. The sound of moving parts mixed with the energy of moving bodies created a thunderous cacophony that filled the gym on Parkcenter Drive, ruining any semblance of calming, meditative thought.

Most sane people try to avoid going to the gym during peak hours, but not me. I don't particularly like the frenetic atmosphere either, but with this many people, I statistically had a much better chance of having a conversation and possibly making a friend. The real question I had to ask myself was why, after having worked out at all three of its locations in Boise's Treasure Valley for five years, I hadn't acquired a single friend at Axiom. I had a few lady friends to go out to lunch with, but they just liked to complain about their exes and try to convince me why it was okay to have three glasses of white wine in the middle of the day. I needed a wingman—someone close to my age who was also interested in meeting women, staying active, and having a male friend to talk to about guy stuff. There was no doubt about it; I was in serious need of male bonding—the kind that many of us enjoyed and appreciated earlier in life. But now it seemed like I'd have to win the lottery twice before I'd ever meet male friends for a group hike or for breakfast at the local pancake house.

Why does life have to be so challenging all of the time? If I wasn't manufacturing dates with women, I was having to perform sorcery to find a home or land a business opportunity. Was the universe telling me I had to do the same thing just to find something as simple as a friend? *Hey, Universe! Why do I always have to do the heavy lifting around here? I've already given up searching for a wife, a permanent residence, and a steady paycheck. How about tossing me a friend? Is that really too much to ask?*

Either the universe was agreeing with me or it had grown tired of my incessant whining and complaining because, out of nowhere, I spotted someone who looked

like he could be the wingman I was looking for. He was sitting down, stretching his legs in front of an unoccupied cable machine. I recognized his technique as old school—the kind of stretches our gym teachers taught us how to do in the 70s before sending us off to run laps around a hot cinder track without water bottles or sympathy. He struck me as the type who wouldn't abandon winning habits simply because they were no longer cutting edge. At first glance, I could imagine the two of us passing as cousins—maybe even as brothers. Like me, he had thinning light brown hair that turned gray at the temples and sideburns, an angular face reminiscent of a Scots-Irish background, and a lanky runner's frame. He wore a green microfiber t-shirt emblazoned with the words "San Diego Rock n' Roll Marathon" over a pair of black Kahuna shorts and wasn't tatted up like every member of the gym rat tribe.

After I was shooed away from the lat pull-down machine by a fit 35-year-old boss lady in yoga pants, I settled into the nearby bicep curl machine, giving me an even better view of my potential sidekick. Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined crossing paths with another unicorn—a fellow rarity in that he had no visible tattoos, was clean-shaven, and wasn't wearing audio equipment or carrying a phone. But the most promising commonality by far—the one attribute that truly gave me hope—was that he was by himself, making me think he was capable of dealing with a toxic gym culture without the need for distraction. If I wasn't feeling 100-percent confident that he was my next best friend, I most certainly was after I watched him interact with people he didn't know. He effortlessly acknowledged those around him by smiling, nodding his head, or simply saying hello if they weren't wearing earbuds or headphones.

From behind me, a monotone voice asked, "Hey, are you done using this?"

I spun around, startled as if someone had squirted me with their water bottle. "Oh, sorry," I stammered. I quickly rerouted my focus from Mr. Green Shirt to the two college-aged slabs standing behind me. "Yeah, I'm finished with it."

I knew which one of the two spoke to me because he was already putting his earbud back in with an arm completely covered in indistinguishable tattoos. He had on a black tank top with the Boise State logo on the front and gray shorts, while his workout buddy was wearing the inverse: a gray tank top over black shorts. They both wore their ball caps backwards and donned audio headgear. The only differences were the buddy's bulky headphones and his neck and calf tattoos.

I stepped away from the bicep curl machine and decided to use the disruption as an excuse to introduce myself to Mr. Green Shirt. But as soon as I began my approach, he got up from the floor and started adjusting the heavy arms of the cable machine behind him, causing me to divert my trajectory toward a rarely open low ab machine. I set the weight at a measly 30 pounds and sat down on the narrow vinyl seat. I reached up with both arms and gripped the handles while tucking my knees under the padded crossbar. The proper way to use the low ab machine is by pulling the handles toward your diaphragm and lifting your knees at the same time, mimicking the opening and closing motion of a Venus flytrap's snapping jaws. As I curled and uncurled my body, I could relate to the nature of the carnivorous plant. I was quietly biding my time, waiting for the opportunity to trap the unsuspecting insect—er, I mean Mr. Green Shirt—in seemingly by-chance discourse. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized I was going through the exact same gyrations as if Mr. Green Shirt had been a curvaceous blonde with long legs.

With the resistance set so low, I was able to do sets of 30 repetitions with relative ease. I continued to fold and unfold on the low ab machine while my mind took a step back to assess the situation. If I wanted to have a realistic chance at making friends with another dude, I'd have to approach Mr. Green Shirt in a way that wouldn't make him feel suspicious—like I was trying to sell him something or, worse yet, to ask him out on a date. If I went with a direct approach and said something like, "Hey, we're both working out alone. Want to be friends?" or "I've been coming here for years and haven't made a single friend. Want to be my

first friend?”—I’d be creeped out by me, too. But even the scenarios where I’d approach Mr. Green Shirt in a less obvious manner all played out the same way in my mind. I could imagine saying, “Are you new? I haven’t seen you around here before” or “Would you mind spotting me over here?” or “You look pretty fit. Are you training for anything specific?” —and coming off like a worm angling for money, information, or a date.

Mr. Green Shirt stood facing me as he pulled the cables across his chest. Was he looking at me? My eyesight isn’t that good, but I’m pretty sure he saw me. If he did, he would’ve seen a guy who sort of looked like him, methodically curling and uncurling on the low ab machine like a Venus flytrap patiently waiting to make its move.

The Kick is Up

In the 1970s and 80s, making friends came easily for me in classrooms, on teams, and at work, but as someone in their mid-50s, that’s certainly no longer the case for me and most older men who were indoctrinated at an early age to stereotype, embrace stoicism, and fear anything perceived as gay. Not only are these beliefs passed down from generation to generation, but women have also come to expect *real* men to behave this way. But what if you drank the Kool-Aid like all the other boys and it didn’t have the same effect? Life would be very different for the boy who retained his ability to think and act on his own terms, where the Golden Rule discerns what is right from wrong. And what if that boy imagined there were others like him—boys who could blaze new trails and men who managed to free themselves of a dehumanizing doctrine that serves only its authors? Despite an overwhelmingly low probability, that boy would mature into a man who could find it within himself to trust that it’s still possible to make friends past the age of 50.

One would think finding a male or female friend in a commercial gym would be a lot easier than, say, at the grocery store, in a coffee shop, or even online. Whether I'm at a Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, or Walmart, it's always the same vibe—on-task shoppers subordinating acknowledgement of fellow human beings to getting in and out of the grocery store as quickly as possible. Thankfully, salutations *do* take place in coffee shops; however, the caffeinated patrons reserve them for whoever pops up on their screens. Online dating to the rescue, right? I've never ordered food through DoorDash, but it must be similar to using online dating apps because they, too, are overpriced, take too long, and lower expectations. I was thrilled when these same intrusive apps expanded to include friendship categories for opposite- and same-sex relationships. But that was short-lived after I learned that a lot of the men I encountered online referred to themselves as “bears seeking cubs” and vice versa. *Um, no, thanks.*

As daunting as it seemed in 2019, I came to accept the fact that if I wanted to find a friend, I'd have to look for them at Axiom, a gym no different from any other commercial fitness center in that they, too, figured out a way to combine and implement the worst social elements of grocery stores, coffee shops, and online dating apps. Still, I'd forge ahead with a renewed sense of self-inflicted optimism, knowing I stood a better chance of finding socially inclined life forms 200,000 miles away on the dusty surface of the moon. There I was, surrounded by perspiring, health-conscious people who, for the most part, want what I want—a common interest in feeling good inside, looking attractive to others, and postponing financial ruin from the American healthcare system. And yet, from the number of acknowledgments and returned hellos, I might as well have been exercising by myself in a cubicle on the windowless eighth floor of a soulless for-profit insurance company. The gym may have looked crowded and sounded noisy, but there was a distinct feeling of cold separateness, at least for me, as I navigated between the main floor and the mezzanine.

It surprised me when I saw Mr. Green Shirt sitting on the shoulder press machine not far from where I first noticed him a week earlier. He was wearing a black microfiber t-shirt with a Seattle Seahawks logo on the left side, just above his heart. Once again, he wasn't preoccupied with a phone or any of the flat-screen TVs haphazardly mounted throughout the gym like obnoxious, poorly curated art. I came down from the mezzanine and settled into the posterior deltoid machine, which not only put me in close proximity to Mr. Green Shirt, but it also faced the machine he was on, giving me an opportunity to boldly listen in should he have a conversation with someone. Astonishingly, while I pushed my lifted elbows backwards against light resistance and Mr. Green Shirt rested between sets, an older man in his mid-60s approached him and asked a question that left me both dumbfounded and intrigued.

"Pardon me, but didn't you used to kick for the Seahawks back in the day?"

"Wow! That was a long time ago and only for a few seasons," replied Mr. Green Shirt. "I was barely recognized even when I was with the team."

I couldn't believe my ears. Not only was he a former professional athlete, but he was also modest. I hadn't finished my current set before I was already imagining our successes as each other's wingman. *These Boise divorcees wouldn't know what hit them!* Suddenly, an announcement came over the gym's loudspeakers, reminding everyone, for the third time that hour, about their *amazing* "refer a friend" program and the *awesome* benefits that you'll receive when you buy 10 or more already discounted training sessions with the trainer of your choice. Whatever was said between the two men was unintelligible for the duration of the blaring promotion, leaving me to curse Axiom while I watched them shake hands and go their separate ways. I may have missed my chance to introduce myself to Mr. Green Shirt for a second time, but now I had the perfect lead-in should I see him again.

I began my last set on the posterior deltoid machine, no longer worried about coming off desperate or queer in front of Mr. Green Shirt. I had a relevant, lighthearted icebreaker in my back pocket that would allow me to confidently walk up and say, “I couldn’t help overhearing that you played football for the Seattle Seahawks.”

Hot Tub Surprise

Other than my footfalls, the treadmill hardly made a sound in the opulent setting. As I hammered out six seven-minute miles in preparation for an upcoming half marathon in San Francisco, I surveyed the Luxor Hotel and Casino’s expansive fitness center. With its massive renovation completed just a month earlier, the pyramid-shaped hotel was one of the star attractions on the Las Vegas Strip in 1999 and exuded an Egyptian-themed magnificence that didn’t stop at the near-empty fitness center or adjacent spa. Noise of any kind was quickly trapped and absorbed by elegant blue and gold drapes framing floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the enormous three-sided pool, colossal wall coverings featuring authentic-looking hieroglyphics, and ceramic urns sprouting tall date palms—all on a carpet of sand-colored Berber. Even with a handful of things competing to capture my attention and bedazzle my eyes, I was distracted by the only other person in the gym besides myself—a wide-bodied Black dude clumsily plodding away on a stair climber machine as if it were his first time using one. I tried to ignore him, telling myself to mind my own business and stop acting like a self-appointed know-it-all. But my obsessive-compulsiveness, coupled with actually knowing what I was talking about, said otherwise. I reluctantly pressed the pause button on the treadmill, hopped off, and walked toward the row of stair climbers to save the big man from injuring himself.

“You’re going to destroy your back if you keep doing it like that,” I said, stepping in front of him but slightly off to the side so I wouldn’t startle him.

“Huh?”

Seeing that he was a lot taller and stouter than I anticipated, I took a cautionary step back and repeated what I said: “If you keep going all the way down with each step while hunched over like that, you’ll risk a low back injury.”

“Okay,” he drawled without a shred of annoyance in his voice. He stopped climbing and let the foot pedals drop to the floor. Now I could clearly see that this man not only towered over me, but he was also wearing brand-new Nike everything—a long-sleeved navy-blue shirt over dark green shorts and white running shoes. Without saying another word, the gentle giant gestured toward the machine next to him.

I took his cue and stepped onto the stair climber and proceeded to demonstrate the proper way to use the machine—a technique I learned from a friend who works at a sports medicine clinic back in Los Angeles. “Notice how my back stays aligned with my shoulders when I only step halfway down while placing my hands at the top of the rail instead of the middle of it,” I said.

“Oh, okay,” he replied, “I’ll definitely give that a try. Thanks for showing me.”

After telling him, “No problem, you’re welcome,” I went back to the treadmill to finish the last two and a half miles of my training run. Thankfully, the machine was still in the pause mode, so with the push of a button, I was soon back to running at a speed of 8.6 MPH on a semi-torturous 2.5-percent gradient. When I wasn’t looking at the inviting pool outside, I was checking out the big man and admiring my handiwork. “Ahh, much better,” I beamed. He was still on the stair climber when I finished my run, but he was nowhere to be found on the gym floor when I returned in swim trunks and flip-flops on my way to the pool. However, our paths crossed yet again 30 minutes later in the spa area’s hot tub. Like in the fitness center, we were the only two people in the bubbling warm water. He sat

across from me with his long arms stretched out on the deck behind him as if we were in his office and I was there for an interview. He looked like a kingpin in his well-appointed lair, yet when he spoke, he radiated a warm, welcoming, and relaxed demeanor. If this conversation *were* an interview, I already knew I wouldn't mind having him as my boss.

"We meet again," he announced in a pleasant tone. "So, tell me. How do you know so much about exercise form?" he inquired. "Are you a trainer or something?"

"No, but I'd like to have that kind of job when I grow up," I joked. "I belong to a couple of running clubs in Los Angeles with coaches and members who seem to know what they're talking about. Plus, I'm friends with a few certified trainers at my company gym."

"I see," he said, picking up his towel off the deck and wiping his face. "What do you do for work now?"

"I work as a business analyst for a biotech company. I started out as a genetic engineer and transitioned to supporting senior management a few years ago. I like it because I get to travel a lot. How about you?" I asked.

"I work mostly in Seattle," he replied.

"Okay, but what do you do there?"

"I play football."

I tried not to gush like a smitten schoolgirl, but from his smile I could tell I was failing miserably. He continued to watch me as I connected the dots, frantically

rifling through a mental Rolodex of current Seahawks players while stalling for time. Defensive player, right?" I asked.

"You got it."

"Defensive lineman?" I pushed.

"That's right."

"Cornelius Kennedy!" I blurted.

"Almost. Cortez Kennedy."

"Oh! I was so close," I pleaded, in a voice that made me sound like I hadn't reached puberty yet. "Oh my god, did I really try to tell Cortez Kennedy, a perennial Pro Bowler, how to use a freaking stair climber? Now that's hilarious."

"Hey, what you said made sense," offered Cortez while wading toward me and extending his right hand. "What's your name?"

"Chuck," I said, shaking his hand.

"Chuck what?"

"Chuck Trunks."

Cortez let go of me and angled toward the hot tub steps. "Well, Chuck Trunks, it was nice meeting you, but I have to go."

"You don't have to go, Mr. Kennedy. I promise not to tell you how to properly sit in a hot tub," I joked.

Cortez laughed as he climbed out. “No, I’ve been in here a lot longer than you.”

“Good luck this coming season,” I said while Cortez picked up his towel. “And don’t forget to mention my name during the post-game interviews after the Super Bowl win next year. Remember, I was the one who corrected your form on the stair climber.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I will,” said Cortez, slipping into his Nike shower slides. “I’ll give a special shoutout to ‘Chip’ Trunks.”

“Ha-ha. Nice one, Mr. Kennedy. I had that coming.”

Operation Bromance

The gym was unusually busy for a late-afternoon Friday, but then again, it was the day before an extended July Fourth weekend, where toned bodies were most likely to be put on display at various celebrations along the banks of the Boise River. However, I came to understand that many of Axiom’s members didn’t need the excuse of a national holiday to show off what good genes and daily workouts can do for one’s self-admiration. More often than not, I’d have to circumvent one or more half-naked posers in the men’s locker room, who made no effort to stop flexing or photographing themselves in front of the mirror as I navigated from the urinal to the sink. While I washed my hands, I wondered if I’d turn up in the pictures they’d upload to their social media accounts that evening and secretly wished I had the guts to turn around and sardonically ask, “Love yourself much?” Even if I had the courage to confront the self-worshippers, I believe that in a society where abject shamelessness is rewarded over modesty, such bravado would most likely be construed as an act of war against Gen Z men who are merely identifying as their own god.

With the main gym floor crowded with members squeezing in last-minute

workouts before the big three-day weekend, I knew it would be difficult to spot Mr. Green Shirt. Besides, he probably had plans for the weekend and had already left town. But just to be certain, I meandered around the free weights, strolled past the weight machines, and hung out in the stretching area. Instead of finding the retired Seahawk, I watched two young women with bulky headphones, whose attire left nothing to the imagination, film themselves exercising as if it were perfectly natural and acceptable to do so in a public space crawling with people. One squatted with a 20-pound dumbbell while the other worked her glutes doing single-leg kickbacks. In both instances, tripods held their cell phones, which, of course, hindered access to nearby equipment and frustrated those around them.

“I should check upstairs,” I sighed, thankful for the opportunity to distance myself from such blatant displays of unapologetic self-centeredness. Just before I started climbing the open staircase in the middle of the gym floor, a very attractive young lady, a girl I’d seen many times at Axiom, jumped in front of me on her way up to the mezzanine. I can appreciate beauty at any age, but what struck me most about the pretty brunette was what she was doing—what she always did—as she climbed the stairs in front of me. Whether she was walking into the gym, leaving it, lifting weights, using the machines, stretching, or buying a smoothie at the in-house juice bar, she never looked away from the screen of her iPhone. I understand that that’s not so unusual in 2025, but for pre-Covid 2019, it looked downright crazy. What made it even weirder was how she’d hold the phone up to her face as she walked from one exercise station to the next. Even back then, I had already figured out that the more attractive a woman was, the more likely she’d be preoccupied with a phone in public—but this Axiom girl took it to a whole new level.

At the top of the stairs, the phone addict turned left and headed toward a cluster of stair climbers without tripping once while I went to the right. It didn’t take long for me to pick out Mr. Green Shirt, who was actually wearing the infamous green marathon shirt and looked to be near the end of a session with an elliptical trainer

that overlooked Parkcenter Drive. “Today’s the day,” I declared, happily retreating downstairs to wait for him. If he were like me and knew that it was best to save resistance training until after a cardio workout, he’d most likely come down to use the weight machines or do some light stretching. In either case, I had both areas covered and was ready to put “Operation Bromance” into motion by casually telling him an abbreviated version of my Cortez Kennedy encounter.

After 20 minutes had passed, then 10 more, followed by another 10, I returned to the mezzanine only to find that Mr. Green Shirt had somehow eluded me again. “That’s it,” I huffed. “I’m done. You win, Universe! I’ll stick with my men-bashing lady friends and say adios to whatever flame of testosterone I still have left as it’s smothered underneath a wet blanket of inebriated feminine bitterness. Although it wasn’t a lap swimming day, I felt like I needed 15 minutes of what only the sauna could offer—comfort food in the form of superheated air in near darkness. As I defeatedly trudged toward the men’s locker room, several members were leaving the gym to begin their holiday festivities. “Have a great weekend,” I said brightly to the small group, which, to me, sounded more reflexive than sincere. One of them was the beautiful young lady I had followed up the stairs earlier that afternoon. Not surprisingly, her eyes never left her phone.

Wide Right

Even with numerous signs and pictures indicating that cell phone usage in the bathroom, shower, and changing areas in the men’s locker room was strictly prohibited, guys—young and old alike—brazenly disregarded what should’ve been thought of as a common courtesy. There was a time when I would’ve been outraged had I caught someone secretly filming or taking pictures of me, but now I could care less. According to multiple sources across the internet, cameras are ubiquitous in the public domain and capture the movements of the average American more than 30 times a day. To me, what additional harm can two or three covert cell phone cameras in the locker room do that the first 30 image

captures didn't cause already? I'd rather focus on living a clean and decent public life instead of worrying if someone saw me spit out my gum on the sidewalk, not return a shopping cart, or stare too long at the bustline of the girl making smoothies behind the juice bar. Believe me, it's the smarter move—especially in a society where a public misstep attracts immediate negative attention like flies to manure and good deeds go unnoticed. *Do you want to disappear from society without having to build a shack in the woods? Be a nice guy!*

Compared to the frenetic activity on both gym floors, the men's locker room felt more like a creepy bus terminal after midnight than a gateway to a fitness regimen or a three-day weekend. Three men, in various stages of undress, occupied the space. Each was holding a cell phone. Two sat slumped on benches beside open lockers, scrolling through their phones, while a third performed in a make-believe Mr. Universe pageant in front of the bathroom mirror. Interestingly, he had the foresight to bring a mini tripod to position his phone on the sink counter. I took off my shirt and changed into the black running shorts and flip-flops I always carried with me to the gym. I grabbed my towel, shut the locker, and made my way toward the sauna, past the two electronically induced dopamine addicts and the cringe-worthy orgy of self-love going on in the mirror.

Along with a satisfying hot air blast to the face, I was reminded of several long-forgotten affirmations as soon as I opened the sauna door: “Good things come to those who wait,” “Every dog has its day,” and “Timing is everything.” Before me sat a shirtless Mr. Green Shirt—as elusive as the Pussycat Swallowtail, a rare butterfly tracked down by Lord Beasley Waterford on an episode of *Gilligan's Island*. I couldn't have dreamed of a more perfect situation where he and I would have the sauna to ourselves. The stage was set. Now all I had to do was execute my plan and make it look and sound natural and unscripted.

“So they finally fixed this thing, huh?” I said as I entered the blistering hot sauna. Mr. Green Shirt was sitting where the gray towel sat a month earlier, so I chose a

seat against the back wall, facing the door. Now that I had established that friendly discourse was welcomed, the ball was in his court.

“I can’t believe it’s working either,” he huffed. “I was getting ready to go talk to the manager about it.”

Wow! He was both coherent and lucid; plus, we shared a common beef with the gym’s management.

“Isn’t it crazy,” I began, launching into my spiel comparing a car’s 10,000 moving parts versus the sauna’s six non-moving parts. Unlike the disappointing acknowledgement I received from the gray towel, Mr. Green Shirt seemed to be chomping at the bit to respond even before I was finished. I knew it was a killer comparison, and my soon-to-be wingman was about to confirm it.

“Speaking of non-moving parts, what do you think of this watch?” he said, extending his left arm to give me a closer view of what looked like an old-school analog Timex—the kind my seventh-grade math teacher wore.

Hmm. Where did that come from? It was such an odd dismissal of what I was saying, yet I couldn’t help but feel he would’ve redirected the conversation toward his watch whether I was talking about the sauna, snow tires, pizza, or sock puppets.

Although I was caught off guard by his random response, I recovered in time to mask my disappointment with more witty banter. “I could see NASA engineers in the 1960s wearing a watch like that while designing rockets on drafting tables,” I said. “I like it. It’s definitely a guy’s watch.”

Mr. Green Shirt scooted to the edge of his seat and turned to face me. He opened his legs, leaned forward, and dropped an elbow on each knee. I slid back, thinking

he was either going to confess an uncomfortable truth about himself or ask me to pray with him. “Believe it or not, this prototype has only one moving part and doesn’t need a battery. My buddy and I have been working on it for about four years.”

“Working on what?” I asked.

“Getting this watch into mass production!” he gushed. “It’s going to be huge. I can feel it!”

I regretted saying it as soon as it came out of my mouth: “What’s holding you back?”

“Investors!” He blurted. “We haven’t been able to raise enough capital to get this thing off the ground.”

Of course, I knew that was coming. The only thing worse than listening to someone drone on about their side hustle was having to endure a timeshare sales pitch just to earn two dinner cruise vouchers. Both were brutal beatdowns.

“I see,” I said unsympathetically while crossing my legs and folding my arms—the universal sign conveying I wasn’t open to hearing more about his watch or investment problems.

True to form, Mr. Green Shirt ignored my body language and doubled down on telling me more about the greatest watch ever conceived. He began by recounting what inspired him and how family and friends helped him with the initial seed money to finalize the design and create the prototype.

“That’s great,” I offered, looking at the wall clock through the sauna window.

“What’s great is that I found out who my *real* family and friends were,” he continued.

Mr. Green Shirt went on to tell me about the deep-seated resentment between him and his father, his estrangement from his mother, and other revelations best reserved for a trained therapist. I sat and listened to the mental clock in my head, waiting for the turkey thermometer to pop up. I no longer wanted to tell him about Cortez Kennedy. I didn’t even want to know his name. We were two different people. He wanted to sell watches. I was hoping to make a friend.

“Sorry to interrupt, but my 15 minutes are up,” I announced while rising from the bench.

“Really? You can do five more minutes, can’t you?” he asked.

“No, that’s my limit. Good luck with the watch.”

I slipped out of the sauna, shaking my head, remembering that the kick was indeed up, but unfortunately, wide to the right.

The End (of Chapter 4)