



ALMOST FAMOUS

A True Story



Chuck Trunks

Have I Got News for You!

“Hey, Bob! It’s Chuck. Are you sitting down?” I gushed breathlessly, most likely making the 70-year-old art reproduction guru think I was either hyperventilating or getting ready to launch into yet another rant about how the art business world is filled with liars and cheaters.

“Hold on a sec. Let me make sure this print is coming out right,” he said, his voice never wavering from an even keel, no matter the situation. Not even my legendary manic mood swings could throw off Bob’s near-constant mellow nature—a trait I greatly admired and appreciated.

With the windows of my truck rolled up, I could easily distinguish the familiar sounds of Bob’s print shop coming through the phone: the high-pitched hum of the large format printer, the rattle of the overhead fan, and the nostalgia of 70s classic rock emanating from two Bluetooth speakers—one situated on a shelf next to rolls of paper and canvas, the other on top of a wooden stool nobody uses. While Bob was checking the calibration of his expensive inkjet printer in the cozy little workshop on Main Street, I sat patiently in my idling truck four miles away, underneath an enormous ponderosa pine two blocks north of Boise City Hall—a modern yet utilitarian-looking building housing the offices one would expect, including the mayor’s. I still couldn’t believe it. Within a few months after spending two years creating a series of Boise- and Idaho-themed art compositions, I was selling cards and prints in a half-dozen stores around the city, including the giftshop in the State Capitol Building. And now I had just presented my work to the mayor, no less! I couldn’t wait to tell Bob that our partnership was about to pay off in a big way, finally separating us from the mildly successful wannabees.

“Okay, I’m back, Chuck,” said Bob, talking to me through the speaker function of his phone.

I imagined he was multitasking, checking his email on the colossal monitor of his Apple computer—the same one we both crowded around when we worked together. “You *do* remember who I was meeting with this morning, don’t you?” I prodded.

“To tell you the truth, I’ve lost track,” admitted Bob. “You’re constantly pitching your artwork around town. Did you meet with another city council member? Or did you finally get with the owner of that new brewery next to White Water Park?”

“No! I just left Mayor Brennan’s office about 15 minutes ago,” I whined, my voice probably sounding too high-pitched for a full-grown man. At the same time, I noticed a few of my artwork samples had slipped out of the unzipped portfolio perched next to me on the passenger seat, making me realize I had left the mayor’s office in a daze.

“Oh, right. I remember. I didn’t think you’d be meeting with him so soon,” said Bob, sounding much clearer after picking up his phone and taking me off the speaker function. “So, how did it go? Let me guess. He bought a few prints from you.”

While trying to zip up my uncooperative portfolio with one hand, I said, “I would’ve been stoked if he bought some of my art like two of the city council members did, but my news is much, much bigger than that, Bob.”

Just then, I heard the annoying, yet unmistakable, beeping noise through the phone—the telltale alarm from Bob’s printer signaling the end of another big print job. But instead of jumping up and putting me back on the speaker function so he could inspect the final product, he calmly asked, “How big?”

“You’re talking to the featured artist for this year’s Treefort Festival!”

Hello Darkness My Old Friend

The road to the mayor's office had kicked off nine days earlier—at least that's when the call came in from his personal secretary, Stephanie, a woman whose voice sounded like she could do commercial voiceovers or occupy a chair in the broadcast booth at NPR. But in reality, the journey had started more than two and a half years ago—way before having had the pleasure of hearing Stephanie's melodious “Good morning. Sorry to call so early. Am I speaking with Chuck Trunks?”

“Good morning. Yes, this is Chuck,” I replied cautiously, still perturbed at myself for picking up a call from a number I didn't recognize.

“Great. My name is Stephanie, and I'm calling on behalf of Mayor Brennan. He would like to meet with you next week. Right now, he has two openings: Tuesday, the 18th, at 10:00 a.m., or Thursday, the 20th, at 2:00 p.m.”

“Umm . . . and this is in regards to—”

“—the email you sent earlier this month,” she said, in a tone that was both clarifying and irksome, like she might've thought I was still a little drunk from the night before. “You expressed an interest in showing the mayor your art series about Boise.”

Suddenly, as if by reflex alone, I sat down on my still-warm bed, the phone cradled against my shocked face. *Was I still asleep? Had my dreams become more realistic? Am I hearing this right? The mayor of a state capital wants to meet with me—a struggling artist with only a handful of wins after nearly 15 years of near-constant disappointment? And it only took one email? Did I unknowingly travel to an alternative universe through an invisible wormhole?*

Normally, I would need to wear down my targets through incessant emailing, endless cold calling, and, at times, even succumbing to cyberstalking.

“Really?” I asked, realizing my surprised response exposed a less than stellar track record in the art business world—a record that consisted of mostly discouraging news. “That’s great! Tuesday would work for me.”

“Okay, I’ve got you down for Tuesday, the 18th, at 10:00 a.m. Do you know where City Hall is?”

“I do.”

“Good. The mayor’s office is on the fourth floor. There’s a waiting area to your left as you step out of the elevator. Either I or someone else will come get you when he’s ready. I’ll warn you now; sometimes his meetings run long, so don’t be surprised if he can’t meet you exactly at 10, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, remembering what I wrote in the email. “I do have one question, though. How long is the meeting scheduled for? I’m curious because I only asked for six minutes of his time.”

“I know. We talked about that,” she replied. From the lilt in her voice, I could tell she was smiling. Then she added, “It’s scheduled for 30 minutes.”

“That’s terrific! I guess the mayor and I can talk Boise State football for the last 24 minutes,” I joked.

“Oh, he would love that,” she deadpanned. “We look forward to seeing you next week, Chuck. Have a great day.”

“You, too. Thanks for the call, Stephanie. See you then.”

As I hung up the phone, I felt a familiar shadow begin to creep over my momentary elation. “Not again,” I sighed, feeling the cloud of pessimism do what it does best: wreak havoc on the dopamine coursing through my body like a sadistic killer bent on murdering anything resembling hope. “But my artwork is perfect for what I have planned for this city,” I said to no one. I got off the bed and walked over to the window. I liked looking at Albertson’s Stadium, home of the Boise State Broncos. The venue was so close to my apartment building that I could see a little bit of the iconic blue turf whenever the maintenance guys opened the gate to the field. “Even the reason for doing all these compositions is a great story,” I continued, doing my best to forget the number of doors slammed in my face, emails never acknowledged, calls never returned, and appointments cancelled at the last minute. “LA’s art scene was probably just too big for me,” I reasoned. “But that’s all behind me now. Boise seems like the right size for my brand of art, and hopefully Mayor Brennan will think so, too.”

Mayor Brennan

I was right about the mayor’s personal secretary. Not only did she have a voice that belonged on the radio, she had the face for it, too. Instead of encountering a 30-something in the tailored dress and heels I had imagined over the phone, Stephanie turned out to be in her late 60s and appeared comfortable in a pair of flats and an ill-fitting pantsuit. Her hair style reminded me of Aunt Bea’s bun from *The Andy Griffith Show*—the yellow and white strands serving as evidence that she was once a natural blonde. “Okay, Chuck. He’s ready to see you now,” she whispered, looking at me with big gray eyes through oversized wire-framed glasses. “Follow me, please.”

To recall an office as spacious and well-appointed as Mayor Brennan’s, I’d have to go back almost 30 years to a meeting I had with the bishop of a Mormon Church in Southern California. While sitting on one of several couches in his shockingly opulent church office, surrounded by heavy furniture supporting more

delicate things, like vases, antique clocks, and picture frames, I remember disappointing Joel, telling him that the Mormon faith wasn't for me and that he wouldn't be baptizing me that day. Mayor Brennan's office was different from Joel's in that it was long enough to accommodate two couches spaced end to end and still have enough room for an end table between them. *Was this the mayor's office or United's first-class lounge in Dallas-Fort Worth's Terminal C?*

A stocky, gray-haired man wearing slacks and a long-sleeve dress shirt, who looked to be 10 to 12 years older than me, reached for my hand and introduced himself. "Hi, Chuck. I'm Bill Brennan. It's so good of you to come." He let go and gestured toward the large portfolio I was carrying. "I'm looking forward to seeing what you've brought. From what I've seen online, it looks like good stuff."

"Thanks for making the time, Mr. Mayor," I said while trying to push away the sudden rush of not-so-good memories triggered by hearing him say 'good stuff.' Whether I asked my former girlfriend what she thought of the last movie she saw, the book she was currently reading, the date I just took her on, or anything else requiring a thoughtful review, Denise always gave the same unsatisfying answer: It's good stuff! *Ugh! What does that even mean? Is it a passive-aggressive way of saying, "I hate it?" Or is it indicative of a limited vocabulary? Or maybe it's because—*

"Chuck, did you hear me?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry. Could you say that again?" I apologized, embarrassed yet grateful for the nudge back to the present moment.

"Chuck, I hope you won't mind if Silvia Ross joins us this morning," repeated the mayor. "Silvia is president of the Idaho Historical Society. She was on her way out after our meeting but asked if she could sit in when I told her about you."

Silvia sat primly in the middle of the couch, closest to the mayor's desk. She didn't get up to shake my hand, opting instead to extend hers without putting her coffee cup down or uncrossing her legs. Yet, despite the tepid greeting, her smile was still warm and welcoming. The 60-something-year-old, who could pass as a no-nonsense warden at a women's prison, wore a black long-sleeve blouse over black pants that closely matched the color of the leather surrounding her. At first glance, it appeared as if the bulky couch was in the process of swallowing her whole.

"Nice to meet you, Silvia."

"Likewise," she replied.

Mayor Brennan positioned himself between his massive desk and an equally heavy-looking conference table, surrounded by six chairs. "So, how do you want to do this, Chuck?" he asked, eager to get the show on the road.

Having already presented my Boise art story a handful of times, I knew exactly how I wanted to do this. And, having had enough practice, I managed to whittle my spiel down to six minutes. "Would it be alright if we gathered around the conference table?" I asked, knowing that showing one art piece can illustrate talent, two can demonstrate consistency, and a bunch can reveal intention. And my reason for coming to the mayor's office was to show just that—intention—an *overwhelming* amount of intention.

"Sure, Chuck," he replied, prompting Silvia to give up her seat and come join us.

I placed my portfolio on the table, unzipped it, and began arranging the 15 or so art samples in a way that would support the story I was about to tell them. Each time I did one of these dog and pony shows, I'd relish watching the faces of my audience light up when they saw my work in person—a direct reflection of my

skills as a graphic artist and Bob's mastery at reproducing it in all its glory. Thankfully, Mayor Brennan's and Silvia's reactions were no different from those of supportive friends, business owners, and various other civic leaders.

While bending over a 24 by 20-inch piece called *Zoo Boise*, Mayor Brennan said, "Chuck, this is amazing!"

"I love all the colors!" chimed Silvia. "They're all so bright and happy."

"Thank you so much," I beamed. "And each piece comes with an abstract that offers one or more of the most attention-grabbing historical facts about the composition's subject. For instance, the city's zoo got its start in 1916 after a monkey, missing from a traveling circus performing in nearby Mountain Home, resurfaced in downtown Boise."

As Mayor Brennan made his way to the other side of the table, Silvia picked up one of my favorite pieces and asked, "What about this one?"

"I bet you can guess what the name of that one is," I deadpanned. "To me, it's fascinating that the earliest prisoners of the old penitentiary quarried sandstone from the nearby foothills to help build the foundation of the State Capitol building and used that same sandstone to finish constructing the prison."

Silvia put the print back down on the table, but her eyes never left it. "How cute," she said. "I get it. The three hearts are the prisoners. And I can see they're pushing wheelbarrows of rocks down from the Boise foothills. Oh, and they're attached to little balls and chains, too! How clever. I love it!"

"I guess the hearts are your signature," said Mayor Brennan, extending both arms over the table. "They're on every piece."

“I’m glad you mentioned that,” I replied, maintaining eye contact with the mayor and moving to the other side of the table so I could better address him and Silvia. “For as long as I’ve been doing graphic art, I’ve always incorporated hearts into each of my compositions, which basically signify my gratitude for that particular subject—and the state of Idaho and its capital city are no exception. I was so blown away when I moved here two and a half years ago. I love that there are so many trees, city parks, and bike paths—and that the downtown areas are totally walkable and safe at night. Plus, the people are friendlier here. And they don’t seem to miss an opportunity to boast about their ‘City of Trees.’ In some ways, Boise reminds me of Boulder, Colorado, in the 1990s.”

Like so many others who’ve been around a full display of my artwork, Silvia kept her head down, scanning each piece, one by one, from the Boise collection as well as the newer ones from my Idaho State Parks series. “Where did you move from?” she asked.

“Los Angeles,” I mumbled, sheepishly looking down, knowing how much the locals disdain the recent influx of fed-up Californians.

Mayor Brennan, having picked up on my subtlety, said, “Well, it certainly didn’t take you long to realize that the increase in transplants from California is a polarizing issue for the people of Boise, Chuck. But as Californians are concerned, I’m glad *you’re* here.”

“Me, too,” added Silvia.

“Thanks for saying that. Now can we start building the wall to keep the rest of them out?” I joked.

“Ha ha. I see you *have* been talking to the locals,” quipped the mayor. “So, Chuck, what’s your plan? Where do you go from here?”

“When you ask it like that, Mayor Brennan, it reminds me of when I go out to eat on a Saturday night and the server says, ‘So, what are your big plans tonight?’ So I’ll just give you the same answer I give them: This *is* the big plan.”

The mayor stepped back to lean against his desk, folding his arms as he did so. He looked both relaxed and ready to hear a real answer. “Ha ha. You’re a funny guy, Chuck,” he said.

“In all seriousness, I created this collection because it’s the only way I know how to show my gratitude to a city that has embraced me and made me feel like I belong. I found peace, serenity, purpose, and even personal redemption. I know that sounds self-serving and a tad grandiose, but it’s true. I want to share my work with the city that has inspired me in more ways than one, but I can’t do it alone. I need help. As much as I’d like to think that I can do it all, I simply can’t. That’s why I came to see you—to see if my style of art and the message behind it align with yours.”

“Oh, it does, Chuck,” he replied, looking at Silvia, before returning his gaze to me. “Have you heard of our kindness campaign?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“It’s basically a new initiative that isn’t even a month old yet, so your timing couldn’t be more perfect. I’d like to incorporate your Boise-themed art and a few of your Idaho State Park compositions—the ones that aren’t too far away from the city, that is.”

“I think it’s a perfect fit,” added Silvia.

“That would be great,” I gushed. “I love the idea of my art being associated with a city-wide kindness drive.”

“But that’s not all,” continued Mayor Brennan. “Are you familiar with Boise’s annual Treefort Festival?”

“Sort of. I haven’t attended one, but I’ve heard about them. They’re Boise’s version of Seattle’s Bumbershoot Festivals, right?” I said, keeping it to myself, that big city music festivals are too loud and chaotic for me.

“Well, we like to think Treefort is in a class all by itself,” said the mayor, taking a few casual steps toward the door. “It’s a five-day indie rock festival held at numerous venues throughout downtown Boise, and I’d like for you to be our featured artist this year.”

“Really? You’re serious? It would be an incredible honor. Thank you!”

“Congratulations, Chuck,” said Silvia, who had moved back to her original spot on the couch.

“Well deserved,” added the mayor with his hand extended. “I’ll have the Treefort management team reach out to you next week, okay? How does that sound?”

“That sounds more than terrific,” I gushed, shaking his hand to seal the deal while opting not to spoil the moment by asking a bunch of questions.

After quickly gathering the art samples back into my portfolio and saying goodbye to Mayor Brennan and Silvia, I did something I almost never do to a woman as I walked past Stephanie’s desk toward the elevator: I held out my fist and waited to see if she’d bump hers against mine.

“I take it things went well, yes?” she asked, meeting my fist bump with equal enthusiasm.

“Better than expected, Stephanie—*much* better,” I replied while looking at my watch. “I guess I needed more than six minutes after all.”

Second Strike

As is the case from time to time, albeit rarely, good news can materialize for the deserving in bunches—and at exactly the right time. On Thursday, following my meeting with Mayor Brennan, my once-every-ten-years good fortune officially became an embarrassment of riches when I received an email from Marriott International. Of course, my first impulse was to delete it as spam, or, as I like to refer to it, false advertising designed by law firms allowing companies to legally lie to your face—in writing, no less! But something made me hesitate. Rather than finding the usual scam promising free stays at one of its properties in exchange for signing up for a predatory line of credit, I suddenly remembered an email I had sent weeks earlier.

Having been in the art business game for more than a dozen years at this point, I already knew that the best strategy for sending unsolicited emails is to send my pitch to every contest, art gallery, business, company, and organization I could think of and hope to eke out a win with one or two bites. A less-than-elegant way to visualize such a strategy is to imagine throwing, as they say, everything at the wall and seeing what sticks to it. Unfortunately for me, despite getting better and better at creating colorful, eye-catching graphics, nothing was sticking to the wall. That is, nothing was working until I heard from Mayor Brennan’s office and now the general manager of Boise’s newest downtown hotel—Marriott’s Residence Inn on Capitol Boulevard.

Although Shannon Miller’s email was an exceedingly late response to mine, I was more than grateful to get it—especially since she had agreed to meet with me. Even better, she wanted to meet in the lobby the following day at 10 a.m. After writing her back to confirm and reiterate that I’d keep my proposal pitch to under

six minutes, I once again called my art reproduction guy and fellow curmudgeon, Bob.

“Hey, Bob. It’s Chuck. I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Good morning, Chuck. No, not at all. I’m in between print jobs, and I’ll be photographing a few paintings for a new artist this afternoon. So, this is a perfect time. What’s up? Did you hear from the mayor yet?”

“Dude, I only spoke to the guy two days ago. Plus, I told you he said they’d contact me next week, remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” he replied. “Now I do.”

Needing some fresh air, I closed my laptop and stepped out of the cramped room that served as my office, art studio, and bedroom and out to the apartment’s tiny fourth-floor balcony. Besides having a sweet view of the football stadium, I could also see a tiny portion of Boise’s downtown skyline. “Oh, *now* you do?” I teased. “It’s almost as if you’ve forgotten that I’m about a week away from being a pretty big deal around here.”

“Ha ha. My bad, Chuck. Please forgive me. I certainly wouldn’t want you to take your business elsewhere,” joked Bob, who normally didn’t encourage such silly bantering.

“Okay. That’s more like it,” I deadpanned. “Now let me tell you why I called. Do you remember me telling you about an idea I wanted to pitch to the management of the new Marriott hotel in downtown? Well, you’re not going to believe it, but I have a meeting with the general manager tomorrow morning. So guess what, dude, lightning *does* strike twice!”

“That’s great, Chuck! You’re on fire! Now don’t forget about us little people when you’re hobnobbing with Boise’s social elite.”

“Ha ha. In all seriousness, Bob, I couldn’t have made this happen without your help. I know you already know this, but my wins are *our* wins,” I said, fully aware of his discomfort with anything remotely sappy.

“Yeah, okay,” he mumbled, putting me on his phone’s speaker function so he could most likely fiddle with something. “Let me know what happens.”

I returned to the inside of my apartment and closed the sliding glass door behind me after noticing the crew of landscapers pulling into the building’s parking lot. Since there’s very little vegetation on the property, they end up spending several hours blowing dust and debris from one end to the other; the twice-monthly routine accomplishes nothing other than heaping needless decibels of machine noise into a woodland environment once dominated by the sound of the nearby Boise River. I thought of the cool quiet of my partner’s workshop as I replied, “Of course, I’ll keep you in the loop. This wouldn’t be any fun without having someone to high-five!”

“Sounds good, Chuck,” said Bob, taking me off the speaker function—an indication that he was ready to end the call. “Well, I need to pull this print and start the next—”

“—Sure thing, Bob,” I interrupted, “but I have one more thing to ask you.”

“What’s that?”

“Dianne from the Capitol Building’s giftshop called yesterday and needs a dozen more greeting cards of each piece from the Boise series, including the Idaho State Parks series, okay?”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Yeah, I need three more prints of *Boise Coffee to Go*, too,” I replied, knowing I’d have to repeat the order in a follow-up email and then never pester him about it. Like me, Bob is a true *artiste*, whose creative process can’t be rushed or badgered.

“You got it, Chuck. I hope it all goes well at the Marriott.”

“You what?” I teased. “You *hope* it goes well? How could it not? After I *casually* spill the beans about being selected as the featured artist for this year’s Treefort Festival, how could I *not* win them over?”

Shannon Miller

“Well, there she is,” I sighed as the 10-story hotel came into view from Myrtle Street. It was a weighty sigh that stemmed from both appreciation and frustration: appreciation for the opulent-looking structure made up of tinted glass, shiny steel, and hundreds of right angles, and frustration over Boise slowly becoming an extension of California’s Inland Empire. It was a year and a half in the making—including a matching parking garage. But instead of turning left into the garage, I opted to turn right onto Fulton Street and zero in on my secret parking spot—a no-name side street sandwiched between the Boise Zoo and a nifty little movie theater that features independent, foreign, and art films. Besides being shady and free, I’d avoid having to navigate my full-size Chevy Silverado through the tight turns and tiny spaces of the busy downtown parking garage. After walking two short blocks and illegally crossing Myrtle Street with my portfolio, I was just a few steps away from entering the lobby of the Residence Inn for the very first time.

As soon as I walked in, a young woman greeted me with a chipper-sounding “Good morning. How can I help you?” Caitlyn—as her name tag indicated—looked nothing like someone named Caitlyn. Shoulder-length black hair framed one side of her face and matched the color of her nail polish. On the other side, a buzz cut allowed for an unobstructed view of a gauged earlobe. She stood behind a white granite reception desk that wasn’t much larger than a hostess stand at an upscale steakhouse, making me think Marriott International was only one or two steps away from mandating self-check-ins.

“Hi. My name is Chuck Trunks, and I’m here to see Ms. Miller,” I replied. “She said she’d meet me here in the lobby at 10.”

Caitlyn’s eyes drifted down to my portfolio, causing me to almost say in jest, “Eyes up here, Caitlyn,” but I thought better of it. “Just have a seat, Mr. Trunks,” she instructed. “I’ll let her know that you’re here.”

With so many varied seating options, I told her that I’d wait over by the fireplace. A quick nod of her head confirmed her approval, releasing me to serpentine through a myriad of comfy-looking couches, loveseats, and oversized chairs expertly paired with end tables, coffee tables, and floor lamps. But I wasn’t looking for a place to sit down. I was busy scanning for two things: a surface large enough to accommodate everything in my portfolio and complimentary lighting. As luck would have it, there were two large conference tables on either side of the lobby’s central fireplace. Each had a smooth, polished finish and matched the cookies n’ cream color of the reception desk—a perfect contrast against the primary colors of my artwork. And since both tables were unoccupied, I quickly laid claim to the one without any direct sunlight, preferring its softer ambiance of diffuse illumination.

Without looking, I could tell from the quick tempo of footfalls emanating from around the corner that they belonged to Shannon Miller. *Clickety-clack. Clickety-*

clack. She was right on time, emerging from behind the fireplace, looking at her watch with a furrowed brow. The five-foot-two Boise native walked with both efficiency and purpose. And from the way she walked, I had no trouble seeing her as the boss. In the time it took for her to reach me from across the lobby, I knew I'd be pitching my artwork ideas to a no-nonsense little general whose every minute seemed accounted for.

“Hi, I’m Shannon. Nice to meet you, Chuck,” said the diminutive 40-something, whose natural complexion reminded me more of a backpacking rock climber than the general manager of anything. But her outfit said otherwise. She wore a charcoal gray peplum top underneath a darker blazer, along with a black pencil skirt, tights, and boots. Like so many working women in America, her chosen hairstyle was sensible, plain, and low-maintenance—short and parted to the side. “Are you talking to other hotels in the area?” she asked, her blue eyes looking kind and decisive.

“No, this is a first for me,” I replied, motioning for her to look at the artwork I had organized for her on the table.

I’ll never get tired of this, I thought as Shannon immediately began to maneuver around the table, her eyes darting in every direction. “Oh, Chuck! This is wonderful! I love all the colors,” she gushed.

“Thank you, Shannon. I’m going to stick to the six-minute time limit, but feel free to interrupt me if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions.”

“I don’t think I can properly *look* at a quarter of this terrific artwork in six minutes, Chuck.”

“I appreciate that, but a promise is a promise. If you have the time and interest to continue after that, I can definitely oblige you.”

“Okay, Chuck, I’m starting the timer now,” she joked.

During the first three minutes of my practiced spiel, I repeated what I had pitched to Mayor Brennan and a handful of other decision-makers. But the second half was a different story. I explained that my artwork’s playful attractiveness would garner eyeballs and plenty of attention, followed by conversation centered around all the neat things to learn about and do in and around the city of Boise.

“Take this one, for instance,” I said, gesturing toward a composition called *Eagle Island State Park*. “42 years ago, this place used to be a prison farm.”

“That is *so* interesting. I’ve lived here my whole life, and I didn’t know that,” admitted Shannon.

I picked up the piece titled *Boise Farmers Market* and showed it to the obviously overwhelmed general manager. “And this long-standing Saturday tradition wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for the Chinese railroad workers coming to Boise from Garden City to sell their produce and flowers.”

“I like it, Chuck. I like it a lot. And where do you suggest we display your work in the hotel?” she asked, taking a familiar seat at the head of the table.

“Anywhere that’ll help guests talk to one another instead of reaching for their phones, you know? I could see my work hanging along that corridor leading to the elevators,” I replied. “I could also see it along that wall, on either side of the coffee bar. Or maybe they could be hung inside the hotel’s conference rooms and management offices. To me, you can’t go wrong steering guests and staff toward a better appreciation of Boise, right?”

“Oh, you’re good, Chuck,” teased Shannon, extending the word *good*, for affect. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to have some of my staff come over to ask them

what they think, okay? Personally, I love what I'm seeing here, but I feel better making decisions with a consensus."

"Absolutely!" I replied, feeling somewhat taken aback by the little general's confession. And *because* she sought inclusion, I liked her even more.

One by one, they came, supporting their boss's initial glowing review. "These are amazing," said the marketing and sales manager. "Oh my god! Can I have one for my office?" asked the banquet manager. Shannon's accounting manager held up a complicated piece called *A Boise State of Mind* and asked, "How long does it take you to complete one of these?" After learning that it takes me from three to five weeks, she said, "Well, I'm not surprised. It's all the little details that pull you in. I love it!"

After a few more high-ranking staffers paraded through to lavish either me or their boss with compliments about my artwork, the lovefest finally came to an end. When the last one left, Shannon turned to me and said, "Here are my thoughts, Chuck. I can definitely see selling greeting cards and prints in our gift shop. And I can certainly see hanging a few of your larger canvas prints around the hotel, including back in our management area. I love that they evoke such positivity. But I have a question for you. Can you paint murals?"

"I never had the opportunity before, but I understand the gist of how it's done," I offered. "Where are you thinking of having them done?"

"On the wall between the hotel and the parking garage, and an additional one up on the rooftop bar."

"I've always wanted to paint a mural," I gushed. "It would be an honor, Shannon."

The general manager rose to her feet, signaling the end of our meeting, which had ballooned to 45 minutes. While I quickly gathered and stacked my art samples to prepare them for the portfolio, Shannon announced that she would email me an order the following week and that we would continue our discussion about the murals. Just when I thought it couldn't get any better, she asked, "Do you have one of those greeting card racks that spin around?"

"No, I don't."

"That's fine," she said, backing away from the now empty conference table. "I'll get one specially for your cards."

After we said our goodbyes, I practically floated across the lobby floor toward the reception desk, thinking about all the people who said I was crazy for betting the farm on an art career. "Have a great day, Caitlyn," I said, wondering if she, too, could see me having an outer-body experience. Moments later, from the privacy of my shaded truck cab, I made the requisite call to the one person who disliked interruptions more than me.

"Hey, Bob. It's Chuck. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"No, you're good," he answered, without a shred of the usual hint of annoyance in his voice. "What's up?"

"I just finished meeting with the general manager of the Marriott, and you're not going to believe this," I stammered, giving away the straight flush in my hand like an overzealous poker player.

"Before you give me the details, Chuck," interrupted Bob. "What did she think of you being the Treefort artist this year?"

“Oh my god,” I replied. “I totally forgot to mention that!”

Gimme a Break

Weeks later, I rolled into the crumbling parking lot that Bob shared with a small glass repair and replacement business. Earlier that day, after having returned from an impromptu trip to see his son in San Francisco, Bob texted me, letting me know that my print order was ready. It was the same order I had placed with him over the phone while gushing about my upcoming face-to-face with Shannon Miller. Normally, it doesn't take the print guru a month to complete an order. But I'd never complain since Bob's impeccable work was worth waiting for, plus he hadn't planned on being away for more than a week. Like all the other times I parked there, I had to inform at least one approaching glass technician that I was a print shop customer; their faces were always grim and quick to tell me it was a private lot. “Relax,” I'd huff. “I'm here to see Bob.”

Thankfully, my triggered annoyance was always short-lived once I stepped into the sanctuary-like vestibule on the other side of the windowless print shop door. The front room walls of Bob's workspace were filled with framed, original art, some of which leaned against heavy wooden easels. Standing between one of the easels and the front door, even Bob's all-black electric bicycle looked like a piece of art to me—the matte finish reminding me of the paint job on a Mercedes-AMG. I liked knowing that, in addition to sharing an appreciation for art, my print reproduction guy and I were like two peas in a pod when it came to bicycle riding. Like him, I did most of my commuting and errand-running on a bicycle—except, of course, when I had to pick up non-bike-friendly stuff, like a pizza or a print order.

As usual, Bob was on the phone, so he did what he always did to buy himself a few extra minutes—pointing at me, then lifting that same finger into a number one position, signaling, “Hang tight. I'll be right with you.” Not only did I not

mind waiting, I relished the uninterrupted freedom to peruse Bob's current collection of jobs-in-progress while listening to music that reminded me of much simpler times, before society began monetizing everything. Even the smell of acidic ink cartridges and musty canvas rolls added to the satisfying nostalgia. I often wonder if writers feel the same way as I do when they walk into an old book store or a seldom-used wing of a city library. Having free range to move about Bob's noisy printers and art-strewn workbenches meant that, while under Bob's watchful eye, I'd need to put him at ease by clasping my hands behind me, thereby avoiding hearing him grumble things like "Hey, don't touch that" or "Be careful. That's still drying," or "Are your hands clean?"

It didn't take long to find my order, which, of course, was always thrilling—and not just because it was *my* artwork that I was looking at. Bob had a way of organizing and presenting a finished order that made all of his customers—including me—feel like he had spent as much time reproducing the work as each artist put into creating the originals. Undoubtedly—at least on that particular day—it was a bittersweet moment to have to look at the same artwork that the mayor and general manager raved about a month earlier. When their promised follow-up correspondence didn't arrive after one week, then two, I didn't panic. Like a combat-weary soldier who's seen his fair share of skirmishes on the battlefield of disappointment, I was well-equipped when it came to making excuses for others, hoping for the best, and planning for the worst.

"*Still* haven't heard anything?" asked Bob, walking toward me after having ended his phone conversation.

"Nothing," I sighed, shaking my head and pointing at the print order he had arranged so nicely on the table. "It all looks terrific as usual," I continued. "The colors are spot on, especially the red. You *know* how I need my red to pop!"

Bob leaned against an adjacent workbench, folding his arms as he did so and looking as genuinely perplexed as me. “So, I take it you’ve called and emailed them a bunch of times, right?” he asked.

“Right.”

“That’s so messed up,” he huffed, visibly stopping himself from emoting any further.

I stood up to begin collecting the brightly colored and happy-themed greeting cards and prints, thinking how disconnected I felt from my own artwork. Of course, a civic and business leader had blown me off countless times before, but not in the same week—especially after receiving such high praise from both of them.

While Bob stacked the greeting cards and slipped them into a repurposed cardboard box, he asked, “Do you think you have time to go have a coffee with me at McDonald’s?”

“No, not today, Bob,” I replied, sidestepping the truth that I didn’t have it in me that day to sit amongst the homeless crowd, who’ve made the inside and outside of the McDonald’s across the street their home during business hours. I added that I still needed to get a ride in and work on a new art piece.

“I get it,” he said. “I’d feel pretty bummed out, too, if I was put through that kind of thoughtlessness. I’m sorry, Chuck.”

“It’s okay. Thanks for saying that, Bob,” I replied while picking up the boxed order from the workbench. “Could you hold the door open for me?”

“Sure, Chuck. Just let me know if you want to go get a beer or something.”

While orienting the tangle of keys in my hand so I could unlock my truck, a disheveled-looking man suddenly came out of nowhere, almost causing me to drop the packaged order cradled between my body and right arm. I instantly recognized him as one of the “regulars” from McDonald’s. “Hey, man,” he said. “I’m going through a lot of problems right now. Do you think you could help me out? I could really use a break right about now.”

“Hold on,” I grumbled, opening the back passenger door and gently arranging the artwork on the back seat bench. For a second, I thought about blowing the afflicted man off, telling him I didn’t have any cash on hand. Instead, I reached inside the center console, knowing it contained six dollars. I pulled the money out, turned around, and handed it to him, saying, “As far as breaks go, I could use one, too. Here you go.”

“Oh, thanks a lot, man. God bless!”

“You’re welcome,” I said, climbing into my truck and thinking that I live in a mad, mad world.

The End