

Be Still My Heart



A Code for Love

Chuck Trunks

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Nampa, Idaho

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How many times do we have to hear, “You’re not trying hard enough,” “You’re going about it the wrong way,” or “You need to step outside your comfort zone?” At first, I bristled at such tiresome platitudes, yet there I was, rolling up my sleeves, putting myself out there, and believing that life gives you exactly what you put into it.

But does it? Has life really given you exactly what you deserve? When so many of us can’t find romantic love, meaningful work, a true friend, a permanent home, or enough money to live on, I can’t help but think that something other than our own poor choices and self-defeating behaviors is working behind the scenes to keep us from acquiring happiness, success, and fulfillment. To me, it just doesn’t add up.

Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love will not only reveal what’s hidden behind the curtain, but you’ll also come to understand that your lot in life isn’t all your fault.

Johnny come lately
The new kid in town
Everybody loves you
So don't let them down

- The Eagles "New Kid in Town" (1976)

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

—Chuck Trunks

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Preface

Why would I write this book when so many will want to put me in a box and slap a bunch of unflattering labels on it? I can practically see them in my mind's eye right now, ranging from blanket assumptions of being bitter and angry to more inflammatory judgments of having misogynistic and narcissistic tendencies. Ouch! In reality, I'm none of those things, and the following pages will prove it. Instead, I'm just a person, like everyone else, whose highs and lows from earlier romantic relationships left them ill-prepared for dating after the age of 40, 50, 60, or 70. What used to be organically possible now feels technically improbable, starting with the mindless back-and-forth in-app texting that has all the excitement and serendipity of junk mail.

I entered the frenzied busyness of the techno-dating world as a bright-eyed but cautious 50-year-old. I was more excited than nervous while recalling the lyrics of a song I would sometimes sing to myself as I walked to and from school in suburban Philadelphia. I certainly was what the Eagles sang about in their song "New Kid in Town" when I arrived in Boise, Idaho, almost nine years ago after residing in Southern

California for over 25 years. But instead of attracting and dating the most desirable woman in town—at least until the next new kid showed up—I garnered the kind of suspicion and alienation typically reserved for those who managed to beat a murder rap on NBC’s *Dateline*—only because the prosecution couldn’t produce a body. For the life of me, I couldn’t figure out why I was getting the cold shoulder—especially since I thought of myself as the elusive unicorn that all mature single women were vying for. I was healthy, in shape, worked for myself, and wasn’t beholden to anyone or anything. “Free as a bird,” some would say.

Rather than declare war on the good people of Boise for not even registering me as a blip on their radar screens, I looked within and simply chalked it up to being a textbook Virgo. But I knew that wasn’t nearly the whole truth. I was—and still am—a complicated, hyper-sensitive empath, my every move predictable by what Myers and Briggs have to say about INFJ personality types. Plus, who was I kidding? I live a life that’s mostly outside of mainstream society. I still suffer from childhood PTSD. I don’t have any family to speak of. I spend the bulk of my time alone. And I’m scared of dogs and can’t

help but be creeped out by cats. I had to ask myself, “Am I really a unicorn or the next Unabomber?”

Over the next nine years, and despite having six different residences in five cities across two states, I dedicated myself to following my inner compass toward experiences and accomplishments that had me believing my life had become an interesting cocktail—a mixture of movie scenes that could’ve easily been mistaken as outtakes from *Forrest Gump*, *The Martian*, and *The Bridges of Madison County*. I was interesting, dammit! And yet, I remained invisible wherever I went. Even after acknowledging that my personality could be, at times, as strange and mysterious as the rituals in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and accepting the steep price to be paid for past indiscretions and poor choices, the chronic invisibility still didn’t add up. It wasn’t like people were getting to know me and then rejecting me—they couldn’t see me. Soon, I was calling myself the ghost of fill-in-the-name-of-the-city-I-was-currently-living-in, which included Boise, Meridian, Coeur d’Alene, and as far as Raleigh, North Carolina. Today, this book could have easily been published under the pen name “The Ghost of Nampa,” but I thought better of it.

Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love doesn't excuse me of the blame for having to walk this earth alone—it shares it with a sleepwalking, overworked culture that somehow complies with prioritizing corporate greed over human need. Once I began to see that most of my frustrations stem from toxic societal practices that not only work tirelessly to separate me from others, they also serve as cruel obstacles to other basic human needs, like affordable housing, access to healthcare, meaningful work, leisure, and enough money to live on. I wrote this book for one reason only. I wrote it to remind you—the uniquely strange and beautiful you—that if you live alone, sleep alone, eat alone, and work alone, it's not all your fault.

Introduction

If you think this book will show you where to find love, then you're going to be sorely disappointed. Or, if you think it will teach you how to make yourself more attractive to the opposite sex, then this will read like a comedy of errors. In a lot of ways, *Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love* is more about finding a path toward personal redemption than romance, which is what I found instead of a significant other. Gees, that sounds like something a gameshow host might offer as a consolation prize, doesn't it? *Oh, that's a shame, Chuck! You were so close! Thanks for being a contestant on Soulmates! But, as you know, no one leaves the show empty-handed! As a lovely parting gift, you'll be going home with personal redemption! That's right, Chuck! There's nothing like personal redemption to keep you warm on a cold winter's night, is there? Best of luck to you, and again, thanks for playing!*

If my flair for comical theatrics isn't a distraction, I believe my story will not only resonate with you on multiple levels, but it will also make you feel better about who you are. That's because, as you read this book, you'll be smiling, nodding, and

relating to my journey as if it were your own, because I'm not so different from you. And by the end of the book, I believe you'll come to realize that your lot in life—whether you're single or in a dissatisfying relationship—isn't entirely your fault. I don't know about you, but I found that to be incredibly comforting, which is another reason why I needed to share my story—my labor of love—with you.

My story—I mean, *our* story—begins with Part I, where I'll take you back to my high school prom and explain how each of us left our childhood homes with a code for love—a set of attributes and triggers that influence us throughout our lives. In Part II, at the age of 50, I'll invite you to join me as I limp into the world of online dating after having struck out trying to meet women without a phone in my hand. The fun continues in Part III, where you'll ride shotgun and be my wingman of sorts while I set up and go on a few memorable first (and only) dates. And in Part IV—the part where you're mercifully excused from having to shoulder all of the blame for your less-than-ideal love life—I'll confirm your nagging doubts about dating apps and society in general.

At some point, the rubbernecking, finger pointing, gawking, and hushed whispers must come to an end, as you will no doubt begin to ask yourself (and this book) why this is happening and what can be done to fix it. And that's exactly what the conclusion of *Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love* will address in a conversation I'll have with my friend, Fran, while we toss pebbles into the flowing ice melt of the Boise River. The revelations along the forested riverbank are sobering, to say the least, but if we're all feeling the same sense of loss and frustration that comes from living in a dystopian society where men and women pretend they no longer need each other, then, in a silver lining sort of way, there's still a sliver of hope that we can turn things around.

Part I: First Impressions

I have to admit that I really enjoyed writing the first part of this book—and not just because I find purpose and meaning in putting some of life’s fundamental truths into words—I finally found a reason to tell my prom story! If you’re like me, you engage more with story-based content, resulting in better comprehension, deeper understanding, and longer retention. Whereas high entertainment value may seem to wreak havoc on learning efficiency, it more than makes up for it in effectiveness. Plus, who am I to position myself as an uninvited, self-appointed lecturer—especially on the virtues of love and relationships? Instead of finding a single, professional doctorate relating to human interaction, a quick tour of my writing space would reveal a five-year-old, turquoise-colored Keurig and cheaply framed prints of Monet’s *Water Lilies* and Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*. What I do have to offer as credentials are stories based on real events that helped shape, and ultimately change, my understanding of both self and relationship love—life lessons learned at the school of hard knocks—not parroted from the self-help section of Barnes and Noble.

Today, more than ever, the dating pool is jampacked with men and women in their 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70s. They'll look you in the eye and tell you that they're ready for a serious, long-term relationship while at the same time avoiding the deep end altogether, preferring to sit on the edge and dangle their feet in the water or make an occasional splash in the shallow end. And when asked about their online dating experience, there's a high probability they'll tell you that the dating pool is more like a cesspool of trolls, players, creeps, scammers, ghosters, and gold-diggers. Even when they're not asked, they'll somehow find an excuse to tell you that they're better off being alone after you've simply asked, "How's it going?" But from my perspective, online dating shares its bleak outlook with most, if not all, of the other societal elements adding to America's rampant toxicity. Let's be honest. Isn't it just as difficult to find an ethical auto repair shop? A budget-minded independent contractor? A doctor's office whose health care isn't metered out by an insurance company's accounting department? A politician you can trust? A friend you can count on? Along with love, all of these examples are the proverbial needles in a haystack that were once as commonplace as payphones in simpler times.

In Part I of *Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love*, you won't encounter a single story about dating—those curious reenactments come later in the book. Instead, Chapters 1 and 2 will take the reader back to my childhood and early adolescence, where amorous feelings went no further than secret crushes, to convey the most entertaining and impactful stories that helped shape my early code for love. It is my understanding that a code for love is an internalized list of desirable attributes that we consciously and subconsciously look for in others, giving us an intrinsic, almost primal, measuring stick to discern whether or not someone is worth pursuing as a viable life partner. For each one of us, the development of a code for love is as innate as building self-worth and self-esteem. So, with that said, we all have our unique underlying stories that formed the basis of what we thought would bring us the most successful and satisfying relationships.

The first two chapters of *Be Still My Heart* could also be viewed as one big chapter because they work together, each of the 12 sections vacillating back and forth between stories about my prom night and tidy vignettes of situations and people who contributed to my earliest blueprint for coupling.

By the end of Part I, you will have not only been exposed to a prom night like no other, but you'll also understand how my code for love was first developed and why I believed I needed to be with a certain kind of woman. So, what do you say? Would you care to join me on prom night? Good, because our ride just came around the corner.

Chapter 1: Handsome in Gray

Tainted Love

The blue and white boutonniere bounced off my lap and skittered under the car seat in front of me. In my mind, I immediately began interrogating my prom date under an unrelenting bright light inside a cramped interview room, getting to the bottom of why she would toss the customary flower at me rather than pin it on the lapel of my scratchy gray suit. *Why would she do that? She was the one who asked ME to go with her to this tired charade!* I had been assured by several supportive classmates that, after I put the twelve-dollar corsage on her wrist, she'd pin the six-dollar boutonniere on me. *And what's with the spending discrepancy anyway?* Instead, I was having to retrieve the errant garland from its resting place between fossilized fast-food wrappers and something damp. Ironically, I was experiencing my very first walk of shame *without* having to actually walk anywhere. I knew right then and there that the botched flower exchange would set the tone for the rest of the evening. What I didn't know was that it would set the tone for much of my romantic life, well into my fifties.

Jennifer was the least attractive of the high school girls belonging to the popular Polo- and Izod-wearing crowd. Still, she had light green eyes that could morph into glacial ice if the sunlight hit them just right and a gorgeous smile that would disarm you and make you wonder why she wasn't cast in toothpaste commercials. Her wild blonde hair was as unkempt as her posture and clothes, but her sarcastic wit, along with a bubbly personality, more than made up for it. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't completely shocked when she approached me after our first period typing class to casually ask if I'd go to the prom with her. But the real surprise came after I said yes. She told me we'd be joining the rest of her friends at Samantha Wallingford's house for a dinner party, where I'd most likely be eating something I couldn't pronounce off delicate chinaware while rubbing elbows with the who's who of well-heeled teenage royalty.

"You look nice," I said, tucking the boutonniere in my breast pocket and pretending that the last ten seconds didn't actually happen.

"So do you," she replied, her gaze fixated on her wrist corsage as if she expected a spider to crawl out of it.

“So, Charlie, you’re on the gymnastics team, right?” asked the driver, Todd, an offensive starter on the undefeated varsity lacrosse team.

“I am,” I replied, grateful to be distracted from the Cold War that had iced over the backseat within 30 seconds of being picked up in front of my house.

“I’ve been meaning to check out one of your games,” he continued.

“They’re called meets,” I responded, instantly regretting my corrective tone. “You know, like swim meets and track meets.”

“Duh! How do you not know that?” teased Meg, Todd’s prom date, who seemed more like a nagging wife than his cheerleader girlfriend since tenth grade.

Weirdly, as the gold Buick sedan pulled away from my neighborhood, I thought of Fred, Barney, Wilma, and Betty heading out in the Flintstone’s mobile for Bronto-Burgers. Even weirder, an image of Archie, Reggie, Betty, and

Veronica going to the malt shop in Archie's rusty red jalopy came to mind. *Who even thinks like this? Who was I kidding?* I was a solid mid-packer in the nerd crowd with a part-time job at Woolworth's who believed his place in the world didn't go further than hamburgers and milkshakes. When the chitchat subsided, I settled back into my seat and turned to watch the houses and yards of suburban Philadelphia slowly grow into mansions and estates. With Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" playing on the radio, I thought of Samantha Wallingford. Although I couldn't recall if we had ever spoken to one another, she seemed like a nice enough girl. Most of the time, I'd see her and her friends from afar. Now, I'd be eating with them.

"Is everything okay?" asked Jennifer.

"Yes," I replied, knowing I had answered too quickly. But when I saw the look on her face, I felt I needed to ask her the same thing.

"I'm fine," she said.

Unconvinced, I turned away from her to resume admiring all

the magnificent homes, realizing we were *both* dreading the dinner party.

Undercover Kid

If I learned anything growing up in one of the idyllic, blue-chip towns along Philadelphia's Main Line, it was that First Class wasn't just a better seat on the plane—it was a better life. From my vantage point as an average, maybe even forgettable, 17-year-old, this realization was made abundantly clear in the angst-filled classrooms and hallways of my nationally distinguished high school. Years later, I would choke on my popcorn while watching the John Hughes movies *Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink*, thinking to myself, *My God! This guy did his field research at MY high school!*

By the time I entered ninth grade, I was already adept at playing the role of double agent—both at school and at home. A carefully metered happy-go-lucky exterior was the perfect disguise to mask inner workings set to solve the puzzles of cruel classmates and unpredictable parents. Incessant and keen observation wasn't just a quirky personality trait of a

quiet and bespectacled boy—it was a means of survival. But not every moment of my young life required the stealth and mental calculations of a hyper-alert Jason Bourne from *The Bourne Identity*. There were plenty of times I could use my superpower to dissect those I believed to be happy, well-adjusted, and liked. I remember thinking that if I concentrated hard enough, I could catch a glimpse of, or even steal, the underlying blueprint that would guarantee my future success.

Unaware that they were living within the crosshairs of my mind's eye, these unsuspecting classmates, teammates, and neighborhood kids seemed at ease, freely laughing, touching one another, and moving about without a shred of the cautionary hesitation that accompanied my every move. And from their clothing, cars, pocket change, and event calendars, they undoubtedly came from families with a lot more disposable income than my lower middle-class station. But that still wasn't enough data for me—not when I required clear evidence in order to move forward. And certainly not when I came equipped with built-in mental scaffolding that could support both an analytical mind and common sense. So, naturally, I needed to swim upstream a bit. I needed to meet the parents.

Who's Got My Back?

“See? I told you we should’ve left earlier,” said a caustic-sounding Meg, still too unseasoned in life to realize it was fashionable to be a little late to a social event.

Todd, on the other hand, seemed like the kind of guy who didn’t get too riled up over things that didn’t hit the back of a net, making me think he was the perfect complement to his girlfriend. “Sorry, ladies. It looks like we’ll have a short hike to the house after I find a place to park,” he conceded, carefully steering the sedan between the cars that lined both sides of the quiet street.

I was relieved to get out of the car. Besides the abundance of available oxygen to address twenty minutes of near suffocation, the added distance from Jennifer better reflected our frigid connection. Since there were no sidewalks separating the enormous front yards from the curb, I walked around the backside of the car to join the others in the middle of the pavement. I quickly produced a response to a question that Meg had asked me, not remembering what it pertained to since my mind was already seeking an answer to a far more

important quandary. I had come to terms with the night most likely exploding at some point—but not while the grenade was still in my hand! I had counted on my prom date to temper my anxiety by foolishly assuming she had a shred of empathy—and that she actually liked me. *What was I thinking? Nothing good comes from stepping out of your lane, Charlie!*

“Have you been to Samantha’s place before?” asked Todd, confirming Meg’s assessment that he was an idiot.

“No. This is my first time,” I deadpanned, my eyes resting on Todd’s and Meg’s intertwined fingers in front of me.

Jennifer and I walked uncomfortably behind her two friends. I was sure she was thinking the same thing I was—that holding hands with each other was not only light years away but trapped inside a dying star that was about to implode on itself. I didn’t mind the silence between us. It gave me time to come up with answers if I was asked why my date was ignoring me. *Can you believe it? We just learned that we’re second cousins! She’s mad because I told her I wanted to keep my options open after she said she loved me. She’ll come around. She’s just playing hard to get.* Who was I kidding? The situation was

unfixable, and I was thirty yards from walking into a hornet's nest slathered in honey that smelled like flop sweat.

"I'm going ahead to look for Cathy," announced Jennifer, holding her dress up with two hands and zipping around Todd like he was her lead blocker.

And just like that, my predicament went from bad to worse. Instead of walking into an opulent party setting with my second cousin, I became the third wheel on the Todd and Meg Show. "Okay!" I shouted, watching her disappear behind a row of hedges shaped entirely at right angles. "I'll see you in there!" Shockingly, when Jennifer reappeared, she was *still* running. *Running to Cathy? Running from me? In a dress? None of this made sense!* It wasn't until later in the evening that I became aware of her strappy pink shoes with three-inch heels.

Because I didn't have much experience with the finer things in life, I could only compare the entrance to Samantha's home to the entrance of the club house at the swanky, private golf course that butted up against Valley Forge Military Academy on St. David's Road. Not only was the members-only club one

of my places of employment, but it was also the most lucrative, allowing me to leave home for good following my high school graduation. Now, it was my turn to pretend I was one of the links-loving doctors and lawyers bringing their wives to an early evening supper of surf and turf served on top of clean white tablecloths.

The door was wide open as we approached, providing me with a much-needed advantage. If I had any chance of surviving this night, I would need the universe to be my wingman. Inside, I could see that everyone was standing. *That's good. I'll look less like a dateless dinner crasher and more like one of the other 30 or so guests.* Next, my eyes went past the mingling crowd, through the floor-to-ceiling French windows, and focused on what looked eerily similar to the 14th fairway at St. David's. Making matters worse, I began wondering how many sand traps I had raked for the parents of these kids, how many of their tables I had cleared, and how much of their dinnerware I had washed.

“And who might you be?” asked a stylish 40-something-year-old who stood as tall as me. “I’m Samantha’s mother.”

Her sudden appearance made me react as if I had just been brought back to life by taking a glass of ice water to the face. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Wallingford. I’m Charlie. I don’t know where she is, but I’m here with Jennifer.”

“Oh, okay. I just saw her a minute ago. I’ll go get—”

“It’s not a big deal,” I interrupted. “I’ll catch up with her in a minute.”

“Doesn’t she look beautiful? That pink dress is so cute on her. Don’t you know that’s supposed to be worn on your lapel?”

“Huh? What?”

“Your boutonniere. It doesn’t go in the breast pocket of your suit,” she said while pulling the flower out of its unsuccessful hiding place. “Let me fix it for you.”

“Umm . . . Okay, thanks,” I stammered, wishing I had disposed of it after getting out of the car.

“See? It comes with this long pin,” she pointed out, oblivious to the other conversations going on around us—including the one-sided version Meg was having with Todd.

“Could we go over there?” I asked, nodding my head toward an adjacent hallway where there was less chance of anyone seeing Samantha’s mommy taking care of the party’s lost puppy.

“You’re right. What am I doing? I should have Jennifer pin this on you.”

“That’s okay. Just pin it on me right here,” I urged, stiffening my body as if a kidnapper were strapping a bomb to my chest.

Mrs. Wallingford was a woman of action. She immediately stepped closer to me and performed the floral surgery with operating room efficiency. And while I was thanking her, I saw what I was dreading most from the corner of my eye. Jennifer, Cathy, and two other girls were staring at me from across the room. My wingman must’ve been on a bathroom break.

A Code for Love

I can still remember where I was when I first learned that infants live in a world of ‘here and now.’ I was sitting on the left side, near the back of a cavernous lecture hall, attending one of my free elective courses on the main campus of North Carolina State University. Although I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Biological Life Sciences four years later, I left college remembering more about what I learned in Psychology 101 than in any of my other classes. The professor said that, when an object is taken away from an infant, that object ceases to exist in the infant’s mind. I remember desperately wanting to raise my hand so the professor would call on me. “Yes. You in the back,” he’d say. Then I’d ask, “Is that the reason why my girlfriend cheated on me as soon as I left for college?” *God, that would’ve brought the house down.* He went on to say that, at some point, the infant will eventually develop an awareness that a removed object is only out of their sight rather than an aberration of the universe—and that this is true for the human beings in the infant’s life as well.

This academic revelation was neither cathartic nor mildly interesting to me since it felt more like common sense than

something that needed to be scribbled down in a notebook—but it did get me to think about my parents. I'm not sure when it happens—maybe somewhere between the ages of one and three—where a child realizes that all children have their own set of parents and that their mommy and daddy are not the only ones. Following that inevitability, it's only natural for the child to start comparing his or her parents to the parents of other children. And it should come as no surprise that a child's emotional wellbeing is directly proportional to the emotional bond they feel between their parents. Let me say that again, but in a different way. If the child consistently detects a strong, loving bond between their two parents, they're more likely to feel safe and secure. Conversely, if the child is subjected to unpredictable verbal and physical altercations between his or her parents, then that child may become withdrawn, retreating to a place deep within themselves to create their own version of safety and security.

It is for this reason that I believe psychologically, emotionally, and physically abused children spend more time than their counterparts observing, noting, and analyzing the differences between how their parents treat each other as compared to the relationships of other parents. Whether or not

the child feels well-adjusted, safe, and secure within the family dynamic, the simple act of assessing the relationship of one's own parents sets in motion the creation of an underlying blueprint—a code for love. Creating a code for love is as innate and natural as building self-esteem and self-worth, and it will take many forms throughout life. But the biggest and earliest contributor to a child's code for love comes from the observable relationship between his or her parents. This is true for you, for me, and for everyone. In my case, by the time I was eight years old, my code for love began formulating in earnest—most likely while I was sitting on the edge of my bed in the dark listening to my parents shout at each other for hours. There was no need to write it down in a journal or anywhere else because it was like a mantra that played over and over in my young mind: “Find someone who's nothing like my parents.”

Singly Mingling

As much as I wanted Mrs. Wallingford to be finished with accessorizing my suit jacket with what felt more like a Voodoo lily than a blooming carnation, I also didn't want her to leave me. The three people I arrived with were nowhere in sight, so

when she headed in the direction of the kitchen, I felt as if a sandwich board had been slipped over my neck—the back side advertising ‘fish out of water,’ the front cautioning upstream guests to ‘avoid direct eye contact.’ Suddenly, what was displayed on the walls and inside two matching curio cabinets in the foyer garnered my full attention. *Was I a high school kid going to his prom? Or a teenage art appraiser silently judging the curation practices of the Wallingford home?* While studying a glass shelf completely dedicated to a menagerie of elephants made from what appeared to be precious metals, I could see the reflection of Samantha and her mother in the mirror behind the figurines. When Samantha made a beeline for me, I knew then that her mother wasn’t finished looking out for the party’s sore thumb.

“Hi, Charlie. I’m glad you’re here. You look great,” said Samantha, who was tall and genuine like her mother but didn’t share the same angular facial features.

“Hey, Samantha. So do you,” I replied, staying next to the curio cabinet as if it were my date. “You’re going to the prom with Ken, right?”

“I am. I was so glad when Jennifer found a date. It wouldn’t have been the same without her.”

I knew Samantha didn’t mean to make it sound like my purpose was to be the ceremonial prom date for one of her best friends, but I still felt like saying, “Ouch.”

“Who collects the elephants?” I asked, clumsily redirecting the conversation toward a less pathetic topic.

“Huh? What?”

This time, I gestured toward the curio cabinet and asked the same question as if I were a model on *The Price Is Right*.

Samantha smiled so sweetly that I secretly wished she was my date. “Oh, that would be my mom. She loves elephants. Come on. Let’s get something to drink and find Jennifer.”

After she stepped past me to close the front door, removing my one and only dignified escape route, I followed her toward the gathering of animated classmates, most of whom I had had at least one or two brief conversations with. Some were sitting

in wingback chairs that pulled colors from the room's heavy drapery and elegant rugs. Some were standing, missing only cigars and snifter glasses to complete the look of future capitalists. Others lounged on expertly positioned couches, looking eager to have their pictures taken. It would take 15 years and a stroll through the lobby of the historic Biltmore Hotel in downtown Los Angeles before I would experience a setting as nice as where I pretended to hobnob with Samantha and her friends.

“Hi, Charlie. Great to see you,” said Nicholas with a smile that used every muscle in his face yet still came off as disingenuous.

“Look at you! You look great, buddy,” said Geoffrey, who made me want to lay down a hundred-dollar bet that he couldn't remember my name despite having shared numerous classes with me and that one regrettable year on the tennis team.

In between the glad-handing and back-slapping with boys I barely knew, I sensed someone getting up from one of the nearby couches to approach me. *How did I not see her*

before? If Phoebe Cates wasn't available to play the love interest of Judge Reinhold's character in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, director Amy Heckerling could only be so lucky to replace her with the prettiest girl in my high school class, Kennedy Justus. *What kind of parents double down on a name like Justus? That would be like naming me Swim instead of Charlie. Swim Trunks. Get it?* Although I wasn't surprised by her wanting to say hello, I still needed to settle my nerves and remind myself to look her in the eyes. Ever since I made the whole class laugh at her expense back in ninth grade, Kennedy has always liked me. Whereas she saw me as a comedic genius for blurting out that she was most likely born on the Fourth of July, I found the punchline unworthy of such praise, since my standards deemed it low-hanging fruit.

I could only guess that her gaze was locked on me while she sashayed from across the room, because both Nicholas and Geoffrey shot away from me like two billiard balls after a hard break. Watching her glide toward me in front of everyone made me think that having to root around for my own boutonniere like a wretched sewer rat was more than worth it. If the cartoons brought Kennedy to life in the town of Bedrock, Fred and Wilma would be seeing a marriage counselor within

two episodes. If the comics introduced her as a new student at Riverdale High School, she'd steal Archie from Veronica before lunch. And if the TV show *Charlie's Angels* cast Kennedy as the fourth angel, her popularity among the American male demographic would force the network to give her her own spinoff series, called, of course, *The Angel*.

“Hi, Charlie,” said Kennedy in her patented lilt, mixing sparkle with smoke. “Where’s Jennifer?”

“Hi Kennedy. I think she’s upset with me,” I replied, employing a herculean effort not to look at her bare shoulders. “You look really nice.”

“Thanks. You do, too. What happened?”

Grateful that Kennedy was as gullible as me, I hand-selected one of my prepackaged lies from earlier and asked, “I can trust you, right?”

“Oh my God. Of course you can,” she whispered, her eyes widening in anticipation, begging for scandal.

“Well, we rode here with Todd and Meg. They picked up Jennifer first, then me. And while she was pinning this beautiful boutonniere on my lapel in the backseat, she told me that she loved me.”

She stepped closer to me, making the two of us look as thick as thieves. Then she gushed, “Oh my God! That’s crazy!”

“I know. I was totally caught off guard.”

“So, why is she upset? What did you say?”

“I don’t know what came over me,” I continued, feeling both clever and guilty for guiding Kennedy toward the lie’s climax. “The first thing I told her was, ‘I appreciate that,’ and then I went on to say that I was a man with options who wanted to keep them open.”

Kennedy’s mirth was short-lived. She had caught my deadpan expression just as the juicy tidbit was about to strike pay dirt. But instead of rolling her eyes and walking off in a huff, she laughed heartily, delighting in being the unsuspecting mark in a shell game of preposterous tales. And when she put her hand

on my arm to steady herself, I swear I felt my boutonniere reach its fullest bloom.

“Oh my God, Charlie. You are too funny!”

“Sorry to interrupt, but dinner is ready!” shouted Mrs. Wallingford over the amped din of thirty people, saving me once again since I didn’t have a follow-up joke to keep Kennedy entertained. “Everything is in the dining room. Just help yourself and sit anywhere you like.”

“So she’s not mad at you, then?” pried Kennedy, turning her back toward me but still offering enough body language to indicate she was still focused on our conversation.

I followed her toward the dining room, staying close enough for her to hear me and for me to continue breathing in hints of jasmine, lavender, and honeysuckle. As the well-dressed bodies funneled toward the appetizing aromas, Kennedy’s boyfriend swooped in from one side, and two of her girlfriends swooped in from the other side, sandwiching Kennedy in the middle. Seeing that my window of opportunity was closing like a heavy stone slab protecting an ancient Egyptian tomb, I

seized the last available moment.

“Yes, she really is mad at me,” I whispered, most likely looking like I was trying to kiss the back of her neck. “But the real reason is that we just learned we’re distant cousins.”

To me, making Kennedy laugh (or any beautiful girl, for that matter) was right up there with hitting a walk-off home run or getting a twenty-dollar tip from the guys on the cart while caddying in a foursome. But seeing her crack up from behind was even more rewarding—especially after catching my prom date watching Kennedy’s bare shoulders shake from laughter.

Meet the Grandparents

I knew Henry and Mary as Grandpa and Granny, my sophisticated, globetrotting maternal grandparents who were the first to show me that it was possible for a married couple to interact with civility, kindness, and respect. Better still, just when I thought there wasn’t a single male that I could identify with in my entire family, I felt an immediate kinship with my grandpa’s gentle ways. For the first time in my young life, I knew someone who seemed genuinely happy—a man who

listened, laughed, and spoke from the heart. Like a fishing boat's sonar mapping the bottom of a murky seabed, I would focus my superpower on him each time they came to visit. Unlike others splayed beneath my prying microscope, I wasn't looking for any trapdoors, false bottoms, or booby traps. That's because I had already found what I cared about most—a golden heart. Now, I was just mining for ancillary data that could tell me how I could be more like him.

I was excited to get to know this man. He was the polar opposite of my boorish and emotionally stunted father. And since I had a natural inclination toward deductive reasoning, I speculated that my grandpa and I had to have shared a good chunk of DNA. By the time I was twelve years old, the inventory was, for the most part, complete. We were both creative in multiple ways. We were good at telling stories. We liked making those around us feel comfortable. We could talk about our feelings and describe them, almost poetically, in terms of weather, colors, sounds, or anything else. He, too, could immerse himself in the present moment, relishing simple pleasures like good food, a scotch and soda, a spirited game of gin rummy, or anticipating thunderclaps during an afternoon rainstorm.

But as much as we were able to experience the beauty of life at a depth foreign to most, the flip side presented us with a steep price tag that was in keeping with wanting to live a healthy lifestyle with empathy, grace, and integrity. What I didn't know back then was that bearers of a golden heart were often bearers of another metaphorical body part—an Achilles' heel—exposing them to a deeper kind of emotional trauma from either experiencing or witnessing the worst of human behavior. Like me, the marriage between his only child and my father troubled him deeply. From his almost imperceptible facial expressions and gestures, I could tell that their life together made no sense to him, making me believe that he, too, resigned himself to the obvious: what can you do when two people choose to live in misery above all else?

Henry, a Scotsman from Great Britain, met Mary in Shanghai, China, two years before the start of World War II. She was from eastern Europe and worked at the same power company as Henry. After a three-week romance, the dashing electrical engineer and beautiful, raven-haired secretary married before being transferred to New Delhi, India. Having to return to his home country to serve in the Royal British Navy for the duration of the war, Henry left his new wife mere weeks

before the birth of their daughter. After the war, the reunited family of three moved to Montreal, Canada, before settling in Los Angeles, California. His life fascinated me in so many ways. It was full of risk and adventure, yet he was easily amused, calm, and patient enough to get birds to eat French fries out of his hand. When I asked him why he went to China in the first place, he told me that he stowed away on a ship bound for Shanghai to get away from his abusive stepfather.

Although I didn't relate to or feel a connection with Mary, I reasoned that she had to be more than just a pretty face to my grandpa. I figured if I knew about his golden heart, it was certain that she knew about it, too. And if we were truly cut from the same cloth, there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that he'd put his heart within striking distance of a cruel and clumsy woman. For starters, Mary was a very beautiful lady. She had a face that could sell expensive perfume, a body that could command the attention of an artist's paintbrush, and an old-world charm tempered by abject femininity. I could easily see why my grandpa kept coming up with reasons to visit Mary in the office of the power plant. *Good morning, Mary. You look lovely today. Could you file this report for me? Good afternoon, Mary. Is that your perfume I smell? If it is, it's*

intoxicating. Could you type this memo for me? Good evening, Mary. Is that a new dress? It really brings out the color of your eyes. Would you do me the honor of allowing me to take you to dinner tonight? Whether or not my grandpa had ‘game’ or not, he managed to find someone to spend the rest of his life with.

There’s no doubt that the marriage of Henry and Mary contributed to the early development of my code for love, but it was still incomplete. Whereas my grandpa relished the high-octane attention of his grandchildren, Mary, on the other hand, didn’t approve of us doing things like messing up his wispy hair, trying on his fedora, making him dance for us, or giving him silly nicknames. She’d say things like, “His name is Grandpa, not Grampers, Crappers, or Grumps!” “Stop making him look like a bum!” or “He’s not your dancing monkey!” As a kid, I saw her scolding more as a sign of her loyalty to him than a competition for his affection. My grandpa’s wife was beautiful, classy, and loyal—but my superpower didn’t detect a golden heart. And if I was going to find real love later in life, I’d have to do more research to learn what lies beyond the adage, “Beauty is only skin deep.”

Chapter 2: No Bed of Roses

Ships Passing in the Night

The first thing I noticed about the Wallingford's formal dining room was that it was long—long enough to accommodate each prom-goer as they politely shuffled between a never-ending mahogany table and matching buffet. Oddly, the second thing I noticed was that, on the other side of the room, the decorative trim of the china cabinet, hutch, and two waist-high servers all matched the distinctive Baroque carvings on the table's stout legs. Underneath them, an extravagant, ornate runner flowed from one end of the room to the other—the dark wood of the exposed floor serving as a befitting frame for such a fine rug. Next, my eyes were lulled upward, toward the room's floral wallpaper pattern, which quietly, most assuredly, unified the furnishings, drapes, sconces, and picture frames without upstaging the magnificent floor covering.

Because of the numerous silver chafing dishes neatly arranged on either side of me, I felt like I was entering the gauntlet of the 'finer things club.' As expected, the food choices were par excellence and seemed to require some kind of special sauce

more often than not. There was a chateaubriand with béarnaise sauce, chicken cordon bleu, French onion roasted chicken, lobster bisque, shrimp cocktail, oysters Rockefeller, and pan-seared foie gras. There was another beef dish, maybe a stroganoff, but I'm not sure. And there might have been a platter of roasted lamb that came with a garlic-mint sauce. However, I do remember being handed a warm plate by someone wearing a bow tie who looked to be only a few years older than me, making me ponder why the golf club didn't require neckwear for its table bussers.

When the slow-moving line came to a temporary halt, most likely due to a dress being stepped on or soiled from an errant Swedish meatball, I took the opportunity to appreciate the large oil painting above the elegant buffet. Surprisingly, it wasn't what I expected to see in a formal dining room of this caliber. Instead of something like a vineyard nestled in the peaceful French or Italian countryside, the painting depicted two large wooden galleons engaged in an epic, winner-take-all battle on stormy high seas. Hues of charcoal gray, ebony, and midnight blue dominated the composition. Other than the colors of the Dutch and English flags on the masts of the warring ships, the painting was dark in more ways than one.

Most alluring were the tiny explosions of white, yellow, and orange coming from the muzzles of equally tiny cannons strategically positioned on the upper and lower decks of each ship.

Suddenly, as if irony had reached out from the canvas to smack me upside the head, the painting reminded me of the hostility currently being waged between me and my date, prompting me to call for a truce. After spotting Jennifer eight or nine places behind me, I motioned for her to cut through the line to join me, figuring no one would mind since she's my *freaking* prom date. What ended up commencing was a weird game of charades where we communicated back and forth using only hand signals and eye rolls. In the end, she stayed put while I turned back to the painting, feeling a renewed appreciation for the art of war.

After passing through an embarrassment of diversified fine cuisine, another young man wearing a bow tie handed me a set of cutlery as if I had crossed a finish line. The flatware came tightly rolled within a white cloth napkin, the heaviness reminding me of finisher medals given to those completing a big city marathon. When I looked down at my plate, I had to

laugh at myself. The three slices of beef tenderloin, garlic mashed potatoes, and a medley of buttery steamed vegetables looked similar to the plates Chester would leave for me under the heat lamps in the clubhouse kitchen at St. David's. Because there was very little to do in the dishwashing area most afternoons and early evenings, I would do whatever Chester told me to do. He was an old, gray-haired African American cook who kept me busy doing things like stacking plates, washing pots, cleaning the grill, mopping floors, and removing trash. After a few weeks on the job, I found a plate of prime rib, mashed potatoes, and carrots under the heat lamps in front of the quiet commander of the kitchen.

“Hey Chester. Which waitress is this for? I’ll go let her know,” I inquired, always wanting the head chef to be happy with me.

“Don’t know noth’in ‘bout that,” he replied.

Thinking he didn’t hear me, I repeated what I said while pointing at the plate. This time, he looked directly at me and said, “I done told you. I know noth’in ‘bout that.”

And then it dawned on me. *This was Chester's way of showing his appreciation.* And by him pleading the fifth, I figured that was code for, "Take it and eat it in secrecy."

This went on for the three summers that I worked at the golf course. Those were the best times between my father and me, because I left the house on my bicycle early in the morning, didn't return until late at night, earned decent money, and ate somewhere else.

"Not bad," I said out loud to no one in particular, smacking my lips so that any random observer would know I was referring to the punch.

Seeing me holding my plate and napkin roll in one hand and a punch cup in the other, Meg asked, "Would you like to sit with us?" She nodded her head toward a cozy sitting area near a shiny black piano that I hadn't noticed before.

"Sure," I replied, a fraction of a second before seeing Jennifer sitting across from Todd. She was nestled between two of her girlfriends, all squeezed into a loveseat near the lower octave keys of the grand piano. *Dun Dun DUNN!* Clumsily, I came

up with a lame excuse to return to the dining room for something I had forgotten.

“I’ll be right back. I must’ve missed the dinner rolls,” I lied, eyeing one of the fluffy bread squares on a nearby plate.

As I meandered about like an impending shipwreck, thinking of Chester and wanting to eat in secrecy, my prayers were answered in a way. When one of the catering staff members came out through the swinging pantry door, I briefly saw Mrs. Wallingford sitting on a stool in front of a built-in island table that was half butcher block and half counter top. She was alone and smoking a cigarette. And she looked tired. Since there was a second stool, I made up my mind then and there. After quick looks to the left and right, I used my right shoulder to push through the pantry door.

Am I Good?

Other than Mercedes-Benzes, historical landmarks, and pearl necklaces, trees dominated the Main Line corridor between the suburban towns of Wayne and Ardmore. But these weren’t just any old trees. These were a mixture of gargantuan-sized

conifers and deciduous trees that seemed as old as the Revolutionary War itself. They were so big and majestic that they not only attracted admiration but also commanded respect. I spent most of my childhood under those watchful trees, knowing that they could see me as much as I could see them. And sometimes, on more than a few occasions, they even spoke to me.

When the autumn sun signaled for a tilt of the earth, I would see brown, gold, and red leaves bigger than my hands gently falling outside the windows of my middle school classroom. *Charlie, there's money to be made. Come rake me*, they said. And when the winter solstice tilted the earth once again, ice-laden branches broke free and thumped heavily on snow-covered yards. *Charlie, there's money to be made. Come chop me*, they said. A third planetary tilt not only brought back the warmth of springtime but also wind and rain showers, stripping the firs, oaks, maples, and sycamores of any remaining dead leaves, twigs, and branches. This time, the trees said, *You know what to do, Charlie*.

At twelve years old, I was still too young to push a lawnmower yet old enough to create a flawless business plan that was

predicated on the assumption that neighbors would be willing to buy the fallen sticks and branches from their neighbors' yards. What started out as a simple 'pick-up stick' business turned into a 'one boy doing odd jobs' enterprise. The premise was simple: If the owner didn't object to me hauling away the bundled sticks and branches, I'd sell them to their neighbors, who made good use of their fireplaces and woodburning stoves in the winter. *Kindling for sale! Get 'em while they're hot! No charge for the pun!* Since the woody debris would wreak havoc on murderous lawnmower blades, it wasn't hard to collect three dollars for gathering, stacking, and bundling the errant twigs and branches. If you're thinking that I was robbing these unsuspecting customers, think again—these properties were huge and situated inside what seemed like a denser version of Sherwood Forest. Plus, it would take hours to complete, making me feel lucky if I could net a dollar per hour rate for my efforts. Then, I'd drag or carry the awkward bundles either by foot or on my bicycle to sell for a dollar each. Back then, I'd walk away from a sale channeling my inner Daffy Duck, thinking I had found a way to print money. *I'm rich! I'm wealthy! I'm independent! I'm socially secure! I'm rich! I'm filthy rich!*

Soon, stick bundling became weed pulling, mail collection, dog walking, and window washing. And soon after that, I was being praised for my punctuality, work ethic, and attention to detail. By the end of that first summer, cold glasses of ice tea quickly gulped down while standing in sweltering backyards had turned into invitations for lunch inside cool kitchens. The questions were always the same in between bites of a sandwich or slurps from a soup bowl: “Charlie, what are you doing with all this money you’re earning?” “Charlie, what do you want to be when you grow up?” “Charlie, why are you working all the time?” and “Charlie, do you have any friends?”

Suddenly, I was getting an answer to a question I had been asking myself for years—an answer that I wasn’t getting from family, teachers, classmates, coaches, or teammates: “Am I good?” For the first time, I felt appreciated, respected, and even interesting. How could such a wonderful feeling come from such mundane tasks as raking leaves, cleaning out sheds, painting fences, and pruning bushes? These conversations did more than just build my sense of self-worth; they contributed to a young boy’s burgeoning code for love.

Unbeknownst to my growing customer base, I was quietly gathering more than just sticks—I was mining relationship observations from not only a large sample size of couples but also from within the comfort of their own homes. In other words, I was a junior scientist lucky enough to be collecting raw data at the heart of Ground Zero. When the husbands and wives were together, I noticed an easy rapport, an air of kindness, and mutual respect. They were older, retired from professional practices, well educated, and contributed to the affluence that surrounded them. Like an insane detective doggedly searching for missing puzzle pieces to solve the mystery of a crime that had yet to take place, I was beginning to see a clearer picture of what I would need to attract and sustain love.

Is She Good?

For a second, Mrs. Wallingford didn't notice my presence in the pantry. And in that one second, I saw her slouching over a plate like mine—except hers contained oysters, an equal number of shrimp, and two thin slices of foie gras. There were three lipstick-stained butts in a crystal ashtray to the left of her plate and a half-full tumbler of clear liquid on the right, most

likely a vodka tonic or gin. Both elbows were propped up on the counter-top side of the table. Her right hand was loosely curled under her chin, while her left held a burning cigarette in the same laissez-faire manner as Betty Davis when she was about to say something wickedly clever. Had she not introduced herself earlier, I would've guessed she was one of the caterers—but then again, maybe not. Although she was wearing a long-sleeve, white blouse tucked into a knee-length black skirt, I wouldn't think servers wore high heels and pearls. In reality, it would be more likely to mistake her for Samantha, as they shared the same sinewy slenderness and shoulder-length wavy dark hair. In the last remaining fraction of that one second, I allowed myself to indulge in the thought of her wearing a field hockey uniform like her daughter and not being able to tell them apart.

“Oh, did you need something, Charlie?” she asked while uncrossing her legs and carefully leveling her cigarette on one of the ashtray notches.

“When did you start collecting the elephants?” I asked, astonished that I could come up with something so bold at the

exact right time—and then realizing that the universe was trying to make up with me for its earlier hiatus.

“What? Oh! You mean the figurines in the curio cabinet? How did you know that I collected them?”

“Samantha told me,” I replied, taking the liberty of setting my plate, utensils, and punch cup on the butcher block portion of the table across from her. “My grandfather collects them, too. He became interested in elephants while living in India.”

Mrs. Wallingford didn’t make an effort to stand up, making me feel that I was one step closer to sliding onto the other stool.

“Elephants are amazing animals,” she added while looking at what I had just set down on the table. “Don’t you want to eat with Jennifer and everyone else?”

The moment of truth had arrived. If you had been one of the caterers that day, peering into the pantry at that exact moment, you would’ve seen a suited high school senior shuffling back and forth, using arm gestures to punctuate the sentences of

whatever it was he was explaining. You also would've seen Mrs. Wallingford cross her legs while picking up her cigarette from the ashtray—a complex expression emanating from her tilted face. She would've looked both sympathetic and amused at the same time. When she asked, “What was your grandfather doing in India?” I took that as an invitation to sit down.

After telling her a little bit about Henry, I looked at her plate and asked, “What is foie gras made of? Is it like liverwurst?”

“Sort of,” she replied, liking the question. “Liverwurst is made from the livers of pigs and cows. Foie gras comes from the livers of ducks. It's a French delicacy.”

“To be honest, I never heard of it before one of the servers told me what it was,” I admitted.

“Here. You have to try some. Expand your horizons, as they say, right?” she exclaimed, taking the initiative to unwrap my utensils from the cloth napkin. As she set her cigarette back down to make use of both hands, she asked me if her smoking bothered me.

“Oh, no. Not at all. Both my parents smoke.”

Maybe it was instinct on her part—or a sixth sense. Or maybe she was just being polite. Whatever the case, I was grateful that Mrs. Wallingford was more interested in getting a dollop of her foie gras on my fork than asking questions about my parents.

“Tell me what you think of this,” she said, handing me the fork so that I could grasp it from the wider end of the handle.

Normally, I would’ve balked at trying anything foreign, let alone the blood-filtering organ of a woodland creature, but Mrs. Wallingford was insistent. Plus, I already had a history of turning into putty whenever a beautiful woman was talking to me. At that point, I would’ve sampled the liver of the family pet! Whatever it was that went into my mouth seemed to have evaporated as soon as it left the fork. But the taste and consistency were unmistakable.

“It’s like eating butter that tastes like steak,” I proclaimed, admiring the bold simplicity of my description.

“Bravo, Charlie. Well done,” said Mrs. Wallingford, giving me the confidence to steer the conversation toward the painting in the dining room.

Never in a million years would I have predicted that I’d be having dinner with Samantha Wallingford’s mother instead of my prom date—on my prom night. But there we were, enjoying the serendipitous nature of the evening.

“What’s the name of that huge painting in the dining room?” I asked, watching her scrape something that looked like a bad cold off an oyster shell with a baby fork.

“It’s called *The Battle of Margate*. It’s wonderful. Don’t you think?”

“I agree. Since the line was moving slowly, I had time to admire it. It’s a Dutch painting, isn’t it?”

“It is. How did you know that?”

“I’ve been enrolled in an art appreciation and art history course at the Barnes Foundation over in Media. One of four

high school students, actually. Have you heard of it?" I asked, taking a bite of tenderloin and, ironically, thinking it tasted like butter.

"Of course I have. I've only been there once, since it's pretty difficult to get a tour of the art collection, let alone a seat in one of Violette De Mazia's courses. I'm impressed, Charlie."

"Wow. You even know my teacher's name. Now I'm impressed," I gushed. "I know the painting isn't a Rembrandt, but it reminds me of his style, so I assumed it had to be another Dutch master."

"And you'd be right about that. The painter's name is Willem van de Velde. It looks like Ms. De Mazia is doing a great job of teaching you about fine art," said Mrs. Wallingford, pushing her plate forward to make room for her elbows. "So tell me, Charlie, what do you think of my daughter? And I hope you'll be honest with me."

"You mean, is she good?" I asked, immediately realizing I had made my first faux pas of the evening. Thankfully, Mrs. Wallingford only responded with an inquisitive look, allowing

me to sidestep what would've been a far too complicated explanation. "I meant, is she a good *person*?"

"Yes," she replied, looking at me like everything was still copacetic between us. "I think you have good insight when it comes to people."

"Thanks. I think she's a terrific girl. Although I don't run in the same circles as her, I can tell she's kind, sincere, and genuine. I've been going to school with Samantha for six years now, and I've never heard anyone say anything negative about her. If they say anything at all, it's always something nice."

Mrs. Wallingford leaned back on her stool and brought her cigarette to her lips without taking her eyes away from mine. "You made my night, Charlie. To be honest, we haven't been getting along for a while now. But listening to you describe my daughter so glowingly makes me want to do a better job of listening to her side of things. Oh my God! I can't believe I'm telling you all this!"

"It's okay. Really, it is. Of course, it goes without saying that I'll keep this between us."

“Thanks for saying that. So what are your plans after grad—”

Suddenly, the heavy door swung open, causing the inner sanctum of the pantry to pop like a balloon, putting the kibosh on whatever remained of mine and Mrs. Wallingford’s spirited conversation.

“Mom! Have you seen Charlie?” shouted Samantha just before stepping into the pantry. “Oh, there you are. We’re getting ready to take pictures on the terrace.”

“Oh, okay,” I replied, getting up to gather my plate and utensils to ease the guilt that was coursing through my veins with each heart palpitation.

“It’s okay, Charlie,” said Mrs. Wallingford. “Just leave everything there.”

“Mom, is everything okay?” asked Samantha, making me stop to look at her mother, whose eyes suddenly looked a little red, like she had been crying.

“Yes, dear. Charlie just finished telling me a sweet story about his grandfather.”

And just like that, Mrs. Wallingford had forged our covenant by making something up on the spot. And with me feigning embarrassment by looking at my shoes and adding, “I can be chatty sometimes,” I signed the invisible contract with invisible ink.

“Aren’t you coming, too?” asked Samantha, watching her mother carefully dab her eyes with a white cloth napkin.

“Yes, honey. Just give me a minute. I’ll be right out.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Wallingford,” I said, striding to the door while looking into her eyes.

“My pleasure, Charlie.”

In my wildest dreams, I imagined walking over to Samantha’s mother, taking her hand, putting it through my arm, and escorting her to the terrace, where our picture would be taken

together in front of everyone. That way, I'd have a prom memento, and Kennedy would get her scandal.

Mrs. Gartner

Not every childhood job, whether it involved picking up sticks or not, contributed to the early development of my code for love. There was the meat market job, where rotund Italian tough guys promised to put me behind the deli counter if I spent the first year cleaning a four-station butchering room after school. Of course, I would be fired after less than a month of slicing salami, prosciutto, capicola, and provolone. But in my defense, who gives an always-hungry sixteen-year-old direct access to mouthwatering cold cuts? And then there was the job in the chaotic mailroom of an automotive publishing company that had me sorting and delivering interoffice envelopes, letters, and packages through a labyrinth of offices like Michael J. Fox's character in *The Secret of My Success*—except I was the only white kid working in the loosely knit ten-person department. Although the nine African American young men didn't contribute anything to my romantic future, they did teach me how to talk above-average, smack, and laugh at myself.

The bussing job at a seafood restaurant did nothing more than add money to my college fund and leave me with a lifelong appreciation for lobster bisque—that is, *good* lobster bisque. Then, one would think that finding a job at a high-end women’s department store would fill out some of the empty squares on my code for love, like a wide-open bingo card. Sadly, this position didn’t involve the handling of delicate undergarment apparel in the lingerie department. Instead, I cleaned bathrooms and emptied the trash in every department *except* the lingerie department. *C’mon, Universe! Throw a boy a bone once in a while! Geesh!* But as the old saying goes, “Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it.” A year later, when I was somehow, inexplicably, hired as a Nautilus instructor at a women’s aerobics studio, I remember falling to my knees in humble recognition of nothing less than the direct handiwork of God Himself. *Do I phone the editors of Ripley’s Believe It or Not? Create a name for this supernatural windfall, like “The Miracle on Lancaster Avenue?” Or just keep quiet to avoid waking up from a dream featuring dozens of spandex-clad, middle-aged women trying their best to look like Jamie Lee Curtis from the movie “Perfect?”* As much as it seemed like I had died and gone to heaven earning five dollars an hour to adjust the seats and backrests of weight

machines for women who looked at me in ways I wasn't ready for, I ended up trading my shorts and tank top for jeans and a t-shirt to work with an old junk man who refurbished discarded furniture to sell in his antique shop. *Ahh . . . Much better!*

Back then, my code for love required relationship data that typically came from observing and interacting with married couples. But sometimes, in rare instances, qualified data could be mined from married individuals as well. Enter Mrs. Gartner, the manager of the Woolworth's store where I worked until I left home soon after my high school graduation, my first tyrannical boss—and bonafide secret crush. Standing in wedged heels that always matched the monochromatic bright colors of her dresses and eye shadow preferences, Mrs. Gartner was as tall as me yet loomed larger, given her position and no-nonsense approach to retail sales. She had shoulder-length blonde hair that was straight everywhere except along the sides, where she used a curling iron to twist the hair softly inward, framing her face between two rivulets of shimmering gold. It was a hairstyle I'd seen in pictures of women working in factories during World War II—the same style they wore four years later when wildly reuniting with decommissioned

husbands and boyfriends captured in those iconic photos on V-J Day.

She was a classic beauty who could attract the attention of men in any era. Years later, I would see her doppelganger, Shelley Long, on the TV sitcom *Cheers* and become smitten all over again. But she was terse, cold, and geographically unpredictable, like a vampire silently appearing out of nowhere—to let you know she was always watching. *Be still, my beating heart!* Mrs. Gartner, my micromanaging oppressor, was a definite contributor to my early code for love. It was more than just her looks or the way she rebuffed my sophomoric attempts to make her laugh. It was the way she carried herself—like a heavy-handed general in a lavender cotton dress. She appealed to the lover boy inside me, since my inner caveman, Zog, was still buried beneath manners and decorum. If I was going to find love later in life, she'd have to be prim, ambitious, upwardly mobile, and, oh yeah, it'd be nice if her wedges and eye shadow matched the color of her dress.

Girls Just Want to Have Fun

“You guys alive back there?” asked Todd from the driver’s seat, an actual hint of doubt in his voice.

“Sorry. I was just imagining how the place was going to look,” I lied, pretending that the awkward silence between Jennifer and me wasn’t the suffocating elephant inside the rolling Buick.

I get it. I should’ve at least offered to stand next to her during the picture-taking session. Instead, I found excuses to avoid the event altogether. Since the terrace of the Wallingford home wrapped around both sides of the house, imparting several escape routes to the backyard, I found myself strolling the grounds like a preoccupied Albert Einstein during his days at Princeton University—hands behind my back, somewhere deep within a thought experiment. By the time we got back into the car, dusk had come and gone, leaving behind a black velvet sky streaked with plum, crimson, and sapphire. Most would think it was a beautiful sight, but for me, it just looked bruised.

“Ever been to The Willows before?” asked the illuminated eyes in the rearview mirror, making me take notice of the dashboard lights.

“Yes, of course,” I replied, wondering if this man-boy was capable of thinking before he spoke. “It’s only four miles from my house. I’ve gone sledding and ridden my bike there, but never for a party or anything.”

Of course, I had never been there at night either, so when we approached the venue from Darby Paoli Road, I was surprised to see the old estate mansion lit up like a multifaceted crystal in a roped-off display case. The three-story, Spanish Revival-style building appeared only fractionally larger than the Wallingford home, with its numerous French doors and windows making it look more French than Spanish to the untrained eye. It was situated on top of a grassy hill overlooking 47 acres of majestic trees, flowering plants, two babbling creeks, and a sizable pond that doubled as an ice rink for impromptu hockey games between local boys in the winter. The mansion, originally built in 1910, was intended as a wedding gift. After changing hands several times, the township eventually purchased it in 1973 and began calling it

The Willows in reference to the ubiquitous weeping trees throughout the property.

When Todd made the left turn onto Willow Road too sharply, Jennifer slid across the backseat, stopping only because she was mashed up against my left side. The unexpected mishap made us both laugh, creating a momentary hiccup within our hours-long stalemate and making me appreciate the lack of friction between pink chiffon and car seat vinyl.

“Whoops! Sorry, guys,” said Todd, straightening the car’s trajectory and angling toward the parking area.

“It’s okay,” replied Jennifer, who kept looking at me while moving back to her side.

What is with this girl? First, she’s cold. Then colder. Then freezing. Now warming? Why am I still on this ride? I know why. It was because of her pretty face, crooked smile, and those light green eyes that looked like beveled ice cubes floating in a frosty mint julep, each one reflecting the festive lights of the illuminated mansion.

After finding a parking spot in the near-full gravel lot, I quickly emerged to open Jennifer's door, thinking she'd appreciate the chivalrous act of offering my hand to help her navigate the unsteady surface. But that was not to be. When Meg saw that I was already out of the car, she asked, "Charlie, would you hold these for me?" It was a bouquet of flowers—the same ones I saw in a crystal vase on the dining room table at Samantha's house. I would've had more of a chance to help Jennifer if Meg had slipped handcuffs on me since the flowers were loose, awkward, and still wet.

I watched Meg step out of the car without offering a hand to help her, since they were both occupied. "Where's your boutonniere?" she pried while taking the flowers from me.

I was surprised that she would notice the missing carnation, so I had to make up a lie right on the spot. "I guess it fell off while we were having our pictures taken," I stammered.

"Oh, that's too bad," she said while offering me one of the red roses from the bouquet. "You can cut the stem and slide it inside your pocket. You'll look debonair."

“I’m good,” I sighed, watching Todd help Jennifer to the sidewalk.

When the four of us walked through the front door and into the large foyer, I wasn’t surprised when Jennifer darted into the heart of the occasion, leaving me to survey the setting like a fire marshal looking for maximum occupancy violations. From my vantage point, I could see that most of the stereotypical cliques were well represented within the various clusters. There were the brains, jocks, troublemakers, smokers, potheads, elites, emos, do-gooders, jokesters, and nerds. But you wouldn’t have known that from the way they were acting or from what they were wearing. With barely a hint of streamers, balloons, or redundant signage, the whole place reminded me more of a chapter from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* than a scene from the movie *Carrie*—you know, *before* she went demonic from having pig blood poured on her at the prom.

“Hey, Chuckles. How’s it hanging?” asked Mike, the undisputed leader of the nerds and chief comedy writer for the rest of us. “Where’s the hot babe? Don’t tell me you guys did it already!”

“Ha-ha . . . I don’t think so, Mike. She’s with her friends over there,” I replied, shrugging a shoulder toward a gaggle of girls in front of a table of refreshments because I didn’t want to take my hands out of my pockets.

Then, just as Mike and I were looking, Jennifer grabbed one of her girlfriend’s hands, and, at the same time, a drum and guitar riff started thumping from a set of speakers in front of the DJ table. She led her to the dance floor, where two other girls soon joined them. I’ll never forget watching my girly classmates dance to The Go-Go’s “Our Lips Are Sealed,” the four of them in their pastel-colored dresses looking like what happens when you mix Mexican jumping beans with Easter.

“Nice,” said Mike, extending the *ice* portion of the word for at least two seconds. “I dare you to go dance with all four of them.”

“Not my style, Mike.”

“C’mon, dude. You know I live vicariously through you. You gotta give me this one, Chuckles!”

“Ha-ha . . . I’m waiting for a slow song. That’s really all I want—just one slow dance with Jennifer.”

Mike put his hand on my shoulder, patting it as he said, “Dream bigger, my friend.” And then he was off, spreading his wicked sense of humor to whomever was in his crosshairs.

In an attempt to appear eager to dance, I meandered closer to the action, stopping at the edge of the parquet floor and putting myself in Jennifer’s line of sight. *Would she take the hint? Or would I have to do all the heavy lifting tonight?* When I saw that she wasn’t even making an effort to see where I was, I began to second-guess myself. *Maybe I look too desperate. Too eager? Or maybe I scared her off by circling the dance floor one too many times, like a ravenous shark waiting for the perfect moment to strike?* Even when I chummed the water by rocking on my knees and mouthing the words to KC and The Sunshine Band’s “Shake Your Booty,” I still couldn’t get Jennifer to take notice. *I guess that confirms it. Girls really do just want to have fun.*

More and more promgoers had made their way to the dance floor, but I could still see Jennifer and her friends through the

ever-increasing tangle of waving arms and bobbing heads. If those four girls were a video arcade game, they'd be Pac-Man, frantically devouring songs like they were pixilated cookies. "I Ran" by A Flock of Seagulls—chomp! "I Love Rock 'n' Roll" by Joan Jet and The Blackhearts—chomp! "Mony Mony" by Billy Idol—chomp! "Slow Hand" by The Pointer Sisters—hold on! Finally, the slow song that I had been waiting for! Within seconds, I managed to weave myself through the dance floor chaos, sidling up to Jennifer just as she began to exit the pheromonal fray with her friends.

"Would you like to dance to this song?" I asked, eager to collect my reward for having shown patience *and* boldness.

"No, I don't think so," she replied, turning her back to me and adding, "Plus, I don't like this song."

And that was the end of my prom. If I had any shred of self-respect, I would need to leave immediately and take the first bus to anywhere but here. But I was still a month away from graduation—plus, I only lived four miles away. *Should I just walk out of here without telling anyone?* It wouldn't be the first time I walked away from an uncomfortable situation.

Four miles is nothing—not after bailing out of a ninth-grade swim meet and walking ten miles to get home. *You've got this, Charlie.*

As soon as the night air hit my face, I felt like I could breathe again. Using the fading light emanating from the raucous mansion behind me, I forged ahead toward Willow Road. I didn't look back. Soon, the trees darkened, becoming grotesque, gnarled silhouettes trying their best to look ominous and foreboding in the shadows. But I wasn't scared. I was among friends. I saw through their thin disguise as easily as they saw through mine. I recalled how the trees watched over me and how they sometimes spoke to me.

“Do you think she'll see it?” I asked.

She will, they replied.

“Yeah, but are you sure?”

There's no way she'll miss it, Charlie.

And with that, I made my way to Darby Paoli Road, feeling assured that Mrs. Wallingford would find my blue and white carnation next to her silver cigarette case on top of the pantry table.

A Passport to Love

“Good morning, Chet!” I said while sailing into the caddy shack bright and early—like I did every summer morning, except Mondays. It was my way of saying, *Yoo-hoo, Mr. Caddy Master, in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m ready for that early morning loop!* By this time, my third summer at St. David’s, a loop meant carrying *two* golf bags for eighteen holes. Ideally, it was best to be assigned a loop within a foursome that included a cart. That way, there were potential tips from the two riders if I raked their traps, tended their pins, and spotted their errant shots. Getting an early enough start put me in a position to be assigned a second loop before having to report to good ol’ Chester in the clubhouse kitchen by midafternoon.

From behind the smudged glass of his tiny office, Chet grumbled, “Yeah, yeah, I see you, Trunks,” without looking

up from a series of clipboards that would coordinate the day's events like a score of sheet music for an awaiting orchestra. For some reason, Chet wasn't a fan of mine. I sensed the disdain when he spoke to me—a bitterness that would sometimes spill over if his mood was sour enough, his tolerance tempered only by his awareness of my relationships with Chester and Mr. JCPenney, the resident golf pro who reminded me of the middle-aged men modeling suits in Sunday newspaper circulars. Whereas I gladly did whatever Chester told me to do in the sweltering kitchen, I would reluctantly take the empty wire basket and yellow hardhat from the anatomically correct scratch golfer.

“What's this for?” I asked when I was handed the basket for the first time.

“I need you to collect golf balls with it,” he replied, his short-sleeve, aquamarine Polo shirt neatly tucked into 30-inch-waist khaki pants.

“And the hardhat?”

“That’s to protect you from getting hit in the head. Now go stand on the other side of the fairway between those two pine trees over there,” he instructed, his toothy smile making him look like a sadist *and* a soap opera star at the same time.

“Is this even legal?” I’d ask myself while standing 80 yards away from a half dozen ladies being instructed on how to properly swing their six and seven irons. When the wind died down, I could hear him saying things like, “Follow through,” “Remember to breathe,” and “Don’t worry. He’s wearing a hardhat.” It didn’t take very long to figure out that I wasn’t in any real danger of taking a direct shot to the face since the ladies weren’t teeing off with their drivers. Still, it was fairly easy to lose the high-arching shots among the clouds, causing me to close my eyes and brace myself. Often times, the ball would miss its intended target, but I’d have to endure listening to an unnerving *whoosh* sound, followed by a too-close-for-comfort *thump!* Other times, the ball would hit paydirt, resulting in a teeth-jarring *thwack* that made everyone stop to see if I would keel over. A quick wave toward the group, proving that I still had control over my motor functions, would prompt Mr. Warmth to say, “See? He’s fine. Okay, ladies, let’s

get back to it. Don't forget to tuck your chin and lead with your hip."

Looking back on it now, I understand why Chet assigned me to loops involving mostly women and couples. I'd be the first to admit I wasn't a high-caliber caddy because I didn't play the game; plus, I was either having to do yardwork to keep my father off my back or at another job on Mondays when the club allowed caddies to sharpen their golfing skills on the challenging par 72 course. I guess that was the time to connect with the other boys and get on Chet's good side, earning his trust that I wouldn't make a fool of him if he penciled me in for the more lucrative tournament loops. Although I wasn't earning the bigger bucks carrying golf bags at the swanky club, I was still eating prime rib three to four times a week in the kitchen, earning extra money serving as a human target for golf clinics, and supplementing my code for love during each and every loop involving men with their wives.

There was a cordial nature between the married couples at St. David's—relationships that appeared respectful, supportive, even friendly—facets of healthy interaction that I didn't see in my own parents. I liked listening to how they spoke to one

another since my presence didn't seem to affect their exchanges, making me feel like the proverbial fly on the wall.

“Oh, dear. I think that one went into the water, too,” she'd comment instead of shouting, *Crap! I did it again! And it's all your fault! Stop watching me swing! You're making me feel too self-conscious!*

“Yeah, but your swing looks a lot better. Try using the seven-iron instead of the nine,” he'd offer instead of throwing gasoline on the fire by retorting, *Okay, here we go again. Everything is always my fault. Why can't you just chill out and enjoy the day? Now you know why I don't like golfing with you!*

The ease of their rapport and spirit of agreeability made me want to emulate them, despite not having yet advanced beyond the stage of a secret admirer. Still, instinctually, I wanted what they had. As I dutifully wiped dirt clumps off of pitching wedges, pulled flags for makeable putts, and stifled hay fever sneezes during backswings, I was quietly putting two and two together, figuring, at that point, I had a pretty good idea of the kind of woman that would attract me.

My last loop at St. David's was bittersweet. High school graduation was behind me, and it was time to set out on my own. Those last 18 holes netted me 16 dollars after a mostly forgettable round by an older couple who requested my caddying services from time to time. "Good luck in college," they said, both waving from the apron of the 18th green as I turned to haul their bags back to the caddy shack for storage. In some ways, I recall feeling that my code for love was more like a passport to love—each page stamped with undeniable proof that I had acquired all the necessary answers to a question that could be the difference between marital bliss and a reenactment of Michael Douglas' and Kathleen Turner's roles in *The War of the Roses*. Some of those passport stamps came from my grandparents, Mrs. Wallingford and Mrs. Gartner, and a host of married couples I had the good fortune to work for in the neighborhood and at St. David's.

Back then, I saw my future wife as being highly educated, most likely with advanced degrees. Maybe she'd still speak fluent French or Italian after studying abroad for a year. She would be ambitious and eager to climb the corporate ladder using her superior intellect, wit, and gamesmanship. She'd make as much money as me, setting us apart as an enviable

power couple with his and her BMWs in the driveway and first-class tickets to exotic, warm destinations every holiday season. She'd be able to point out and masterfully articulate the artistic subtleties between post-modern impressionist painters—all while looking regal and unflappable. She'd be the kind of woman who could explain how Beethoven bridged the classical and Baroque styles of music while, at the same time, hiking the 2,000-mile Appalachian Trail during a six-month sabbatical from her high-pressure partner position at an environmental law firm. And she'd be aloof, making her unapproachable to those who felt they couldn't match her style, grace, and contradiction.

The future looked bright—and not just because the midafternoon sun was blinding me as I angled the two golf bags into the cramped caddie shack. As soon as I stepped inside, I could hear the usual boisterousness of a poker game going on in the back between the older caddies willing to gamble their hard-earned tip money. Thankfully, 38 Special's "Caught Up in You," emanating from an ancient radio perched on the window sill above the workstation sink, masked their profanity-laden banter. *How weird*, I thought. *I annoy the hell*

out of Chet, yet the raucous commotion of a high-stakes poker game, mere feet from his office, doesn't seem to bother him.

“Hey, Chet. Should I put these away or leave them by the sink?” I asked, knowing this would most likely be my last interaction with the irritable Caddy Master.

With his face buried in an array of charts on his counter-sized desk, he replied, “Sink,” without looking at me.

I get it, I thought. He's busy tabulating the rounds from earlier in the day. But why does he look and act like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders? Isn't it just a game? I leaned the golf bags against the other ones in the overflowing rack beside the stainless-steel sink, knowing that Whitey, a 60-something-year-old wino who mumbled incomprehensibly, would be cleaning the clubs later that afternoon. Without much fanfare, I stepped out of the caddy shack for the last time and headed to the clubhouse kitchen to say goodbye to Chester. But when I arrived, instead of finding the amicable old chef behind the grill, I found a pile of overstuffed garbage bags that needed to be taken to the outside dumpster. When I came back to the kitchen a half hour later, I found the no-

nonsense kitchen boss shuffling heavy pans from one stove burner to another.

“I thought you left for college already,” he said as soon as he saw me.

“Tomorrow,” I said. “I just came over to say goodbye.”

Without averting his eyes from the sizzling pans, he asked, “Hey, what happened to all those trash bags?”

Smiling because I knew he’d get my meaning, I replied, “I done told you. I know noth’in ‘bout that.”

Part I: Single White Male

Since Part I of *Be Still My Heart* ended at my high school graduation, it's only natural to assume that Part II would begin when I'm a college student at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Why wouldn't the story pick back up at the very first place where I could act on my newly minted code for love? Not only does Part II skip over my college years, but it leapfrogs over the entirety of my 20s, 30s, and 40s. Of course, during those 30-plus years, a slew of relationships came and went. A lot of them lasted only a few months. A few went for more than a couple of years. One even resulted in a brief marriage. Today, none of them could tell you which state I live in—let alone what city. But because I took to heart the advice that Dorothy gives to Tom Cruise's character on their first pseudo-date in the movie *Jerry Maguire*, I'm sparing the reader from having to suffer through my sad stories.

My many relationship failures weren't the result of having synthesized the wrong code for love while transitioning from a child to an adolescent. How would that even be possible? That would be like saying I grew to the incorrect height or developed the wrong personality type—it's just the result of

when nature meets nurture. The problem for me—and most likely for the majority of people who also find themselves single late in life—is that my code for love doesn't work in a society like the one we're all living in now. Over the last few decades, the dynamic between men and women has changed drastically—so much so that it feels like I'm trying to run an outdated program on a computer that no longer supports my love script. This is something I'll address later in the book, because, in my opinion, I believe the current societal construct has more to do with my lack of relationship success than my history of poor decisions and a handful of persistent self-defeating behaviors.

To put the next two chapters into a unique perspective, imagine being rocketed toward Earth from a planet full of single men in their early 50s. But instead of touching down in a cornfield somewhere in Kansas to begin meeting single women in ways that would feel both genuine and serendipitous, your spaceship's trajectory is suddenly overpowered by the intense gravitational pull from an invisible black hole. However, this isn't your typical run-of-the-mill remnant of a supernova explosion—it's dark matter nothingness, where the naturalness of making an honest

human connection goes to die. And if that black hole had a name on the interstellar map, it would be called online dating.

In truth, there is no mention of rocket ships, planets, or black holes in Chapters 3 and 4. If it's deflating to you that my book doesn't unravel into a titillating sci-fi thriller where I brazenly conquer a world of gorgeous warrior goddesses, then you'd be joining me in that disappointment. Instead, I'll be taking you on a not-so-epic journey that begins with cringeworthy rejections resulting from what I thought would be perceived as charming old-school boldness. Then, just when it seems it couldn't get any better, we'll visit a Verizon Wireless store, where I'll buy my first smartphone to download dating apps to begin the parade of ladies down King Charles Avenue. Of course, the planned festivities are cancelled due to inclement weather, insufferable profiles, filtered photographs, and texts from hyperactive high school sophomores disguised as middle-aged women.

Chapter 3: Phone Forensics

Say Anything

“Huh?” she blurted, taking a step backward toward her girlfriend, her eyes narrowing in accordance with a practiced hair-trigger mentality to judge approaching men as aggressive creeps.

Watching her recoil made me feel like a cringing comedian leaning into a microphone and asking, “Is this thing on?” to a cacophony of crickets on open mic night. “I said I thought you looked nice. Not many women dress up these days, so I figured I’d let you know that it’s appreciated. By the way, nice touch matching your shoes and handbag to the dress,” I ad-libbed, thinking I had successfully transitioned from a struggling jokester to headlining at The Laugh Factory in Los Angeles.

“Okay . . .” she said, standing shoulder to shoulder with her less attractive friend, both of them holding their phones as if they were panic buttons.

There was so much more that I wanted to say in the Starbucks on Edgewood Avenue in Eagle, Idaho, but my only remaining move was to turnaround and slink back to the table I came from, a two-seater with a bicycle helmet, backpack, iPad, and a half-empty soy latte on top of it. As I walked away, I could only fantasize about having said things like *Relax, it's just a compliment*, or *This is where you say 'thank you,'* or *Sorry, I should've texted you first*. Normally, I was much better on my feet than that, but my whole approach unraveled when her single-word communication style came with an unexpected fight or flight response, making me believe she thought I was inviting her to a grungy mattress under a nearby freeway overpass.

And then there was the woman in Trader Joe's on Front Street in downtown Boise who promptly maneuvered her grocery cart between us after I said, "Hi. I just moved to this beautiful city, and I'm so glad there's a Trader Joe's here. Don't you just love this little grocery store?" *Hmm, I guess she doesn't need tomatoes after all*, I thought, watching her unnaturally pull her cart in reverse and disappear behind a display of dried fruit and mixed nuts. *Nice move, lady. Thanks for making sure*

it'll be exceedingly awkward each time we pass each other in this tiny space.

After a couple of unsuccessful swings in the batter's box of my new home in Southwest Idaho, strikes three and four came in rapid succession, each one handing me a response I never would have predicted. There was the bank teller who went from smiling at me to looking like she wanted to shrink to a size less than the height of the counter so she could leave the scene without the possibility of making further eye contact. "I have a nine-year-old to raise, so I'm not looking to date," she huffed while looking intently at whatever was on her computer screen, giving me the impression that she was reading her response to my courtship-seeking boldness.

The fourth strike almost didn't happen. After cordial exchanges of our names and mutual appreciation for Boise's abundant bike paths, I realized that I had forgotten to ask for her number soon after she left the bike shop, where we had both been waiting for our bikes to be serviced. I immediately went outside to see if I could catch Rebecca getting into her car on North 13th Street. Unfortunately, there was no sign of her. I jogged around the corner to West Main Street and saw

her just as she closed the driver's side door from inside her Subaru Outback. *This is playing out like a freaking John Cusack movie. All I'm missing is the boombox,* I thought as I bounded up to her window like Prince Charming to ask for her number.

“Oh, good. I'm so glad I caught you, Rebecca. I'm new to the city, so it's rare to meet anyone, let alone someone with a common interest. Plus, I liked talking with you. Would you be okay with giving me your number?” I asked, quickly realizing that my phone was neatly tucked inside my backpack, which was still on the bike shop service counter.

With her hands still gripping the steering wheel of the running car, she let out a less than enthusiastic sounding, “Sure.”

Sure, I thought as I stared down at the bookish-looking woman whose athletic frame made me think she could easily keep up with me on a 40-mile bike ride. *Gees, is there anything worse sounding than the word 'sure?'* *It's both committal and non-committal at the same time—merely one ladder rung above the listless-sounding 'meh.'* “Can you believe it?” I said, patting the non-existent pockets on my t-shirt and shorts for

effect. “I left my phone in the shop. How about if I give you my number instead?”

“Sure.” *Ugh* . . .

Of course, I never received a text from her, making it somewhat unpleasant to see her riding or walking her dog along the bike path that cut through Julia Davis Park, not far from the bike shop where we first met. When our paths did cross, I was reminded of how much the world had changed since I last pursued a relationship. It was 2016, and I still thought I didn’t need a smartphone, believing that women would value in-person approaches over milquetoast text messages through dating apps. When I complained to my newly acquired tennis friends, a small group of older retirees who also lived like well-financed middle schoolers, they asked me what these women were doing when I approached them.

“Looking at their phones,” I replied, opening a new can of tennis balls and savoring the sound of factory freshness.

“Then get *on* their phones, Einstein!” they urged, eager to get the game started so they could feel the sweet satisfaction of

beating a 50-year-old whipper-snapper by running him ragged with everything from precision serves and baseline backhands to perfectly-placed dinks and lobs.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.” I sighed. “I guess it’s time to say goodbye to my old flip phone and hello to a new smartphone.”

“Man, you really are behind the technology curve,” laughed Tommy, a disheveled-looking octogenarian who could return any serve I could blast at him. “They stopped calling it a smartphone five years ago. Now it’s just referred to as a phone. Got it?”

I had to laugh along with Tommy. Who wouldn’t find old geezer smack-talk hilarious? “Where’s a good place to buy a smart, er, I mean phone around here?”

“Go to the Verizon Wireless store in Meridian and ask for Joleen,” suggested Harry, one of the more colorful characters in the crotchety group of tennis-loving single and married men.

“Why? Is she single?” I asked, knowing that I was setting myself up for more good-natured ridicule.

“Yeah, she is,” said Tommy. “I just broke up with her!”

“Sorry, Chuck. Joleen and I are going on a cruise next month,” added Vince, a religious man who normally doesn’t participate in these types of exchanges.

“Joleen from the Verizon store? That’s crazy! She took an Uber from my place this morning,” joked another.

“Dudes! Knock it off! That’s my wife you’re talking about!” shouted Harry.

Leave it to Harry to make everyone laugh together. The guy had natural comedic timing, making me believe he never had to tap a microphone and ask, “Is this thing on?”

Clean Up on Aisle Five

“Thanks again, Joleen,” I gushed while being met with an unexpected thud against my right shoulder as I tried to exit the

dinky phone store, a place that smelled like the heated back of an old TV console.

Joleen was standing in the center of the store with her hands folded in front of her, looking more like a proud optician who just fitted a near-sighted patient with corrective lenses than a 30-something-year-old strip mall store manager who just sold a tech-phobic customer his first iPhone. The look on her face was one of both curiosity and amusement, as if her eyes were saying, “Fly away, little birdie. Now that you have the internet in your pocket, you can soar to new heights!”

“You have to pull it open,” she instructed, fighting an urge to laugh out loud behind the thin veil of a well-intentioned smirk.

“Umm . . . thanks,” I said, holding up the bag that contained my new phone and an assortment of accessories. “I guess I’ll need to learn how doors work first before tackling *this* gizmo, right?”

“Ha-ha . . . I have faith in you, Chuck. You got this!” she joked, unfolding her hands to give me a spirited double thumbs-up. “Don’t hesitate to call if you have any additional

questions.”

I didn't think it was possible, but once I configured and got the hang of my new phone, I was forced to admit that it did, indeed, improve the quality of my life more than my Keurig coffeemaker could ever do. I no longer had to rely on the position of the sun or distant mountains to navigate. I could respond to emails in front of dairy cases in busy grocery stores, post photographs on social media depicting every single meal I was about to consume, and check the weather once every waking hour. If I thought it was pretty cool to order stuff on Amazon in slow-moving traffic, you could imagine what it must've been like for me to shop for a girlfriend on a dating app during the commercial breaks of a Saturday night rerun of *Columbo*.

I was amazed by what was being presented to me on the dating apps and likened it to selecting a breakfast cereal from among an overwhelming number of choices in any given grocery store. I wasn't looking at dating profiles—I was looking at the front of cereal boxes. Whereas the busy, colorful boxes used slogans like “Stays crunchy, even in milk!” “I'm cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs!” and “They're magically delicious!” to attract

shoppers, dating profiles pitched intros to potential suitors with descriptions like, “I’m shy at first until I get to know you,” “My friends say I’m hilarious,” and “I’m just as comfortable wearing a little black dress as I am in a pair of blue jeans.” And if a profile’s pictures and introduction appealed to me, I would do what I’d normally do if I were attracted to a silly rabbit, a brawny tiger, or an impish leprechaun—I’d investigate the box further by looking to see what was on the back and reading the nutrition facts from the side panel.

Often times, the disclosed details revealed too much information, making me think I was reading a warning label instead of a list of ingredients. “If you voted for Donald Trump, swipe left!” “If your world doesn’t revolve around human-animal bonding, do us all a favor and crawl back into the heartless, devil-worshipping cave you slithered out of!” “Don’t contact me if you have a shred of lingering emotional baggage from your last relationship—I’m not your therapist!” And then came the list of *nos* that felt like sharp finger-jabs to the sternum as I read through each one: “No hookups!” “No one-night stands!” “No friends with benefits!” “No married guys!” “No couch potatoes!” “No guys who work for

themselves!” “No guys claiming to work on an oil derrick off the coast of Yemen!” And not to be outdone by mere love taps to the breastbone, some women preferred arm twists and headlocks in the form of *musts*. “Must like kids!” “Must be attracted to plus-size women!” “Must go to a real job Monday through Friday!” “Must be financially secure!” “Must live in a house!” “Must have a car!” “Must want to travel!” and my personal favorite, “Must love dogs!”

Of course, not every cereal box was carefully returned to the shelf as if it contained nitroglycerin—some actually made it into my shopping cart. But as I was placing box after box on the sticky checkout conveyor belt, it became exceedingly obvious to me and the wide-eyed cashier that I’d be leaving the store with nearly two dozen different breakfast cereal options.

“Umm . . . it’s not what it looks like,” I’d say, calling attention to the elephant sitting in the middle of the express lane.

“You do know that it’s 15 items or less, right?” she’d say, adding insult to injury.

“You’re probably wondering why I have so many different boxes of cereal. It’s because—”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to explain,” she’d interrupt, keeping her eyes fixated on the steady flow of colorful cardboard boxes.

Pretending that I didn’t hear her, I’d pick up from where I left off and say, “It’s because these women are slow to respond back to me, so I end up sending messages to a whole bunch of them. I guess it’s like playing a numbers game.”

“Whatever,” she would deadpan. “That’ll be \$62.50 *plus* your pride and dignity.”

Just One More Thing, Ma’am

I love watching old reruns of *Columbo*—so much so that I’m willing to honor the seemingly absent-minded, rumpled raincoat-wearing, cigar-smoking LAPD detective by dedicating precious book real estate to his ability to solve classic whodunit mysteries by accounting for the tiniest of details. “How ironic,” I mumbled while enjoying an episode I

hadn't seen before called "Lady in Waiting." Beside me, perched on top of a carefully placed couch pillow, my iPhone's illuminated screen revealed more than a dozen active conversations with age-appropriate women from all over Idaho's Treasure Valley. With that many ladies, I was practically guaranteed to receive at least one or two text messages each time I picked it up during commercial breaks.

This time, I was ignoring the umpteenth airing of an ad, where the marketing team went with an inane 60-second spot showing an entire town participating in a musical-themed sales pitch for yet another drug to treat diabetes. *Is this a commercial or a scene from a 1980s Kevin Bacon movie?* If you had it in you to snoop through my unlocked phone after I excused myself for a bathroom break, your burning curiosity most likely would've remained unfulfilled if you had decided to waste the entire five-minute window reading through strings of dating app correspondence. Instead of finding the desired gratuitous and salacious text exchanges typically hyped by those most spurned from years of online dating, you'd soon discover mundane responses to insufferable questions like "Where did you grow up?" "What do you do for fun?" and "What kind of music do you like?" Your frustration

with what trepidatious adults text each other after the evening news would've quickly transformed into sheer boredom, making you lose track of time and resulting in an awkward situation where you'd have to explain yourself.

“Oh my God! I can't believe I did that, Chuck! I'm really sorry. I guess you could say my curiosity got the best of me,” you'd blurt, bolting upright in the adjacent recliner just as I reentered the room.

“It's okay,” I'd say, noticing the open dating app as I took the phone from you. “With everything I've been telling you about my online dating experiences, I can't say that I blame you. Pretty lame, huh?”

Feeling like a disaster was narrowly averted, you'd breathe a sigh of relief, relax into the recliner, and reply, “It's like you said. The women seem to play their hands close to the chest, offering only the most familiar, vanilla-flavored questions and answers.”

“I know . . . It's *beyond* boring,” I'd add. “At this point, I'm so desperate for comic relief and witty banter that I've taken

to sending these women sarcastic texts that tease them about their chosen photos and predictable profile revelations: ‘I’m most proud of having given birth to my three amazing children.’ *Ho-hum*. ‘Don’t talk to me until after I’ve had my first cup of coffee (he-he).’ *Ugh*. ‘My favorite thing to do is go paddleboarding with my dog.’ *No thanks.*”

Of course you would’ve laughed at what I had just said because I used a falsetto voice to imitate the ladies. Then you’d ask, “That’s hilarious. But it sounds like you’re not interested in these women. What motivated you to text them in the first place?”

“Oh, but I *am* interested—in the ones without visible tattoos, piercings, or purple hair. And that’s just the first cut! After that, I weed out the ones lacking any semblance of a healthy diet or fitness routine. Then, I have to say adios to those who share too much information, those who describe their perfect mate in the same manner they’d order a sub at Jersey Mike’s, and those who find it perfectly acceptable to include pictures of their dogs licking their open mouths from the comfort of their cars, couches, and beds. Shockingly, as hard as it is to believe, that still leaves about 500 available women in my age

range out of a pool of approximately 25,000 in the Treasure Valley.”

Then, without hesitation, you’d reply by saying, “I’m so glad I’m off the market. Those dating odds sound miserable.”

“What can I say?” I’d joke. “I like my odds like I like my milk—two percent.”

Oh No She Didn’t

Lieutenant Frank Columbo solved homicides by noticing and considering the details that eluded most detectives as they scoured various crime scenes. The unorthodox human bloodhound didn’t overlook the last setting of a thermostat, the lingering scent of mouthwash emanating from an apparent suicide victim, scuff marks made by a certain kind of boot heel, or an incriminating thumbprint left on a nickel inside a seemingly insignificant parking meter. But why am I comparing my dating app sleuthing to an improbable and fictitious TV character? I don’t think of myself as a wannabe detective, plus there aren’t any crimes for me to solve. And

yet, I've had to channel my inner Columbo in order to gather enough evidence to find out who these women actually were.

It wasn't just about how they *looked* in their profile pictures—it was also about how many they shared, if there were any reoccurring themes within the curated photos, and whether or not there were obvious omissions in what they thought would entice someone to reach out. Were there more than six photos of her on her profile? And were all the selfies taken from an unnatural, overhead, one-o'clock position, as if she wanted you to see what she'd look like from a second-story window? Or were all the selfies taken from inside her car, making certain that each one captured her dogs romping in the backseat?

Maybe she didn't like her most recent selfies, opting instead to share a medley of rehashed Facebook photos highlighting three years' worth of evenings spent partying with her girlfriends? You know the pictures I'm talking about. It's like these women gather at some kind of secret summit once every ten years to agree on capturing the same tired moments. What guy doesn't want to see pictures of the woman he's interested in surrounded by a bevy of better-looking women all mugging

for the same camera in a crowded bar? If the holding of drinks high in the air isn't an immediate turnoff, the flirty, pursed-lips expression commonly known as the "duck face" will guarantee that you'll swipe left.

"Ha-ha . . . You're so funny, Chuck. You need to take this act on the road," you'd quip as my imaginary recliner friend, whom I forgot was still watching Columbo with me. "You must be exaggerating, because I don't think I've ever seen the barroom pictures you're talking about."

"What? You must live under a rock. Either that, or you really are just a figment of my imagination," I'd say. "If you haven't seen pictures like those, then you've most likely come across derivatives of the barroom photo blasts. Come on, don't tell me you haven't seen women doing the same thing in kitchens, backyards, and at Kenny Chesney concerts. If it's a kitchen shot, it's usually a dinner party with friends from the same socioeconomic strata, where wineglasses replace cocktail glasses. And if they've gathered in the backyard, it's typically bottles of Corona held out toward the camera, forcing viewers to acknowledge, 'Girls just want to have fun!'"

“Ha-ha . . . What about the Kenny Chesney concerts?”

“Not to worry. I saved the best for last! You know, sometimes I feel more like a motivated sociologist than a mildly interested Romeo, making me think that my inner Columbo is some kind of compromise between the two. I can’t help but be fascinated by repeating patterns—especially when they emerge from within social constructs. Take the Kenny Chesney concert pictures, for instance. No matter their age range, groups of female besties will cluster together wearing the same outfits consisting of denim shorts, cowgirl boots, a black concert t-shirt with the short sleeves rolled up to the shoulder, and of course, the all-important straw cowgirl hat. With the illuminated stage behind them and \$17 Michelob Ultras hoisted high above their heads, the photo almost justifies the \$200 tickets, \$40 parking, and the 500% markup on tasteless beer.”

“Ha-ha . . . Come to think of it, I *have* seen those photos before. And you’re right. They do dress the same!” you’d say, just as Columbo begins to explain how the perpetrator committed the crime in the final climactic scene when he states, “Ma’am, you might have gotten away with it, but you

missed one tiny detail.” Then you’d ask, “Are there any pictures you dislike more than second-story selfies and still shots from *Girls Gone Wild* videos?”

“Ha-ha . . . Hey, I make the jokes around here!” I’d reply to no one sitting in the recliner, thinking I’d better start resuscitating my near-dead social life before it flatlines completely. “Actually, there are. The worst pictures of all—worse than the cringe-worthy duck faces—aren’t pictures at all. They’re images—images of sugary-sweet sayings that we either already learned in elementary school or figured out were meant for the criminally insane. ‘Live, Laugh, Love.’ *Huh. What does that even mean?* ‘Be yourself. Everyone else is taken.’ *No. Not true. I aspire to be just like you!* ‘Fall in love with as many things as possible.’ *Yeah, sure, and the next thing you know, you’re on A&E’s Hoarders.*”

“Ha-ha . . . You’re on fire, Chuck! Any last words before we call it a night?”

“Yeah,” I’d say in my best raspy-sounding Columbo voice, “take her downtown and book her on suspicion of murdering her online dating profile.

Chapter 4: Catch and Release

Like Herding Sheep

No, of course there aren't any ladies being dragged off to online dating prison—nor should they be. At the risk of coming off as misogynistic, I'm merely trying to obey the cardinal rule of writing without altering the reality of my online dating experience. And to be reminded of that rule, I need only glance at the two-inch-tall gladiator figurine on my writing desk—his tiny, outstretched arms making me recall Russell Crowe's memorable line from the Oscar-winning movie: "Are you not entertained?" But make no mistake—any other 50-something straight guy who's spent more than an hour on a dating app in 2023 could corroborate what I've laid out so far. Besides observing the ins and outs of online dating from an up-close and personal perspective for more years than I care to admit, it's also in my nature to take a step back to try and see the bigger picture. By becoming aware of and eventually understanding what I was looking at from 50,000 feet, my persistent head-scratching back at ground zero all but disappeared.

I felt different about the whole online dating thing once I learned that most of the dating apps are owned and operated by one company—Match Group, Inc. Knowing this tidbit of information made me want to go back and actually read the Terms of Agreement that I so casually accepted when I first downloaded Match, Plenty of Fish, Hinge, Tinder, Our Time, and others. But even back then, I already knew that attempting to decipher a contract from Corporate America was an exercise in futility. What’s the point when they spend millions on corporate lawyers to draft lengthy legal documents designed to guarantee they always win—no matter what? My curiosity about Match Group’s Terms of Agreement at that point was limited to finding out if they reserve the right to make your profile appear active after you’ve canceled your subscription and whether or not they can add your profile to their other dating apps without your consent. My gut tells me that the fine print allows them to do whatever it takes to keep three billion dollars rolling in year after year.

Isn’t it strange how we allowed a few capitalistic entrepreneurs to slip in between us—into a once sacred space that used to be reserved for crushes, courtships, and romance? How did we become so docile and compliant as to allow others

to monetize what used to be serendipitous, beautiful, electric, and natural? I don't get it, but here I am, like everyone else, breathing through my mouth and scurrying toward the open chute, allowing myself to be corralled, fleeced of \$39.99 each month, and told how to go about finding someone to share my life with. In my opinion, Match Group, Inc. is only doing what every profit-seeking company does to capitalize on whatever isn't nailed to the floor in this country—following its lead blocker, Big Government. Without Big Government paving the way through its fear-based rhetoric, agendas, and policies designed to keep us intolerant and fearful of one another, Corporate America wouldn't have been able to sink its claws into each and every one of us, keeping us tethered to something we intrinsically don't need as long as our credit card remains valid.

Since Big Government has succeeded in making us feel distrustful and suspicious of those with a different skin tone, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, sexual orientation, culture, and language, does it really come as a surprise that this same “guilty until proven innocent” attitude exists in the dating world, too? What happened to gut instinct and intuition—you know, the millions of years old onboard primal

alarm system that runs through your conscious and subconscious minds to ensure your safety? Remember that old, dusty thing? Oh, that's right. What was I thinking? It's in my hand—inside the algorithm of a dating app I downloaded to my phone's circuitry like all the other single sheep. I can remember numerous times when I excitedly tapped the “Agree to Terms of Agreement” button without reading a single word of it, knowing it was the shortest distance between me and that elusive last kiss—conveniently dismissing the fact that my dating wingman was a for-profit business.

Mind Your Own Beeswax

When I wasn't constantly being presented with women outside my age range, preferences, and geographical limits, I began to notice an emerging pattern—a set of profile attributes that would actually entice me enough to swipe right. If you were in the room with me, you wouldn't have to ask which direction I swiped. Since my left hand isn't allowed to do anything with the phone except hold it steady, my right index finger is in charge of everything—including who's pursued and who isn't. Whereas swiping right would appear as if I were gently tweaking the ear of an invisible kitten, a swipe to

the left had the theatrical flair of an over-the-top stage actor bent on letting his loud gestures do most of the talking. Even those sitting in the back of the darkened venue would be able to see King Charles' right arm fling violently to the left, banishing ladies-in-waiting from the royal court for their unsightly nose rings, ankle tattoos, and Kool-Aid-colored hair.

Do I really think of myself as a self-appointed monarch? Of course, I don't. But who doesn't feel like royalty when a mere flick of the finger decides who lives and who dies on OkCupid? In truth, my right index finger is attached to a man more complicated and confounding than the iconic TV character Tony Soprano, a glass half empty type of guy who, at the same time, still believes in walk-off home runs, boy gets girl, and other fairytale endings. Thankfully, when I do come across a dating profile that attracts me, the near-constant inner wrestling match between hopelessness and possibility takes a welcomed hiatus, with "she could be the one" being declared the winner. If spending more than five minutes on an attractive profile were akin to cyberstalking, I could imagine receiving a call from a representative of the dating app:

"Hello. This is Maria Gonzales from Bumble's online security

office in Palo Alto. Am I speaking with Mr. Trunks?” she’d ask.

“Yes, you are,” I’d reply, instantly transitioning from feeling smitten to defensive. “Why are you—”

“You’re probably wondering why I’m calling,” she’d interrupt. “We noticed that you’ve been spending an inordinate amount of time on Denise’s profile without swiping left or right. Why is that, Mr. Trunks?”

“Really? Are you kidding me? What if I don’t want—”

“Sorry, but you don’t have a choice. It’s in the Terms of Agreement,” she’d interrupt again.

“Okay . . . But what if I just make stuff up? That way, you wouldn’t—”

“You can’t do that either since that’s also covered in the—”

“Terms of Agreement,” I’d interject in a mocking sing-song tone, giving Ms. Gonzales a taste of her own boorishness.

“Alright, I give in. I’m too tired to argue. What do you want to know?”

“Good. Is ‘Denise’ a swipe left or right situation? Either way, we’d like to know your rationale for why it’s taking so long to decide.”

At first, I’d toy with the idea of fabricating a stomach-churning story in which I was suffering from a double dose of Montezuma’s Revenge after having consumed two questionable hotdogs from a gas station rotisserie, but most likely I’d end up telling her the truth just to get off the phone sooner rather than later. “It’s definitely a swipe-right situation because there’s a bit of mystery about her,” I’d reply.

With the tepidness of an underpaid receptionist in a busy doctor’s office, Ms. Gonzales would ask, “Mystery? Could you elaborate further?”

“Really? You need more information than that? Okay, but after I break it down for you, can we put an end to this call? Please?”

“Relax, Mr. Trunks. Yes, we can end the call after that, but remember, this conversation is being recorded.”

“I figured as much,” I’d huff. “First of all, Denise’s entire profile is understated, which makes me want to know more about her. In the three pictures that she shared of herself, not one of them includes her kids, friends, coworkers, pets, or any of her material possessions. Plus, I don’t have to imagine what she really looks like behind airbrushed filters that add ridiculous things like whiskers, mouse ears, and halos of flying hearts or tweety birds. For me, it starts with an infectious smile, and hers seems to come easily. And unlike a lot of maturing women, Denise didn’t cut her hair off, leaving her with a more feminine appearance that frames her face beautifully. I don’t have any data to back me up, but it seems like more and more women are opting for that all-too-common utilitarian Fred Flintstone look because it’s a much easier hairstyle to maintain. I get it. But ladies, stop kidding yourselves. It doesn’t make you look sassy or younger.”

“Okay, okay, Mr. Trunks. I think we have more than enough information.”

“Wait! There’s more,” I’d continue, reminding myself that it was Ms. Gonzales who insisted on punching a hole in this dam. “Denise is wearing a dress in one photo and a skirt and blouse in another—actual lady clothes at a time when no one but me seems to be gawking at the women doing their grocery shopping in slippers and what they slept in the night before. Along with seeing that she styles her hair and wears a tasteful amount of makeup, I can’t help but think that Denise revels in her femininity. There’s definitely a regal elegance about her.”

“Wow. That’s quite a mouthful, Mr.—”

“But the best thing about Denise, Ms. Gonzales, is that her profile introduction doesn’t include the usual list of bossy-sounding ‘nos and musts,’ giving me the impression that she’s open-minded and hasn’t allowed the world to extinguish the grace and compassion that come from being a loving woman. Instead, her profile describes what she misses about being in a committed relationship without feeling the need to disclose her track record or the cretinous men who stacked her loss column. As simple as it sounds, a lack of bitterness and the absence of a victim mentality go a long way toward attracting a sensitive overthinker like me.”

“Don’t forget to include the over-communicator, too,” she’d add, as if she had been waiting to end the call with a scathing zinger to remind me who was the boss of who.

“I hear you, Ms. Gonzales, but you *did* ask,” I’d say. “But all of this is one big moot point if Denise doesn’t like me back, you know.”

For the first time, I would hear the Bumble representative laugh when she’d say, “How could she swipe left on someone who’s already coronated her as a queen amongst mere mortals?”

Not one to pass up a chance to beat someone to the punch, I’d offer a sobering, self-deprecating revelation to end the call on an awkward note by admitting, “If she swipes right, we’ll have a good time—until she learns that I work for myself writing books that nobody reads.”

After a long pause, she’d say, “Hmm. It sounds like you need to work on your *own* sales pitch.”

“You think so, Ms. Gonzales? What about you? What’s your relationship status?”

“Goodbye, Mr. Trunks.”

Gone Fishing

Is there a better cable TV moment than when the Alaskan fishing boats pull their crab traps from the bottom of the Bering Sea on A&E’s *Deadliest Catch*? Although the almost 20-year-old reality show is still filming new crab fishing seasons, it certainly isn’t as popular as it once was. But that doesn’t stop my memory banks from recalling the reactions of every captain, deckhand, and greenhorn as each trap was hauled to the windswept surface using a hydraulic winch. As soon as the first crab pot hit the light of day, everyone—including the television viewing audience—knew if the captain’s gamble to set his expensive line of gear in a particular location on the sea floor paid off or not. To me, it was “must-see TV”—but also a humble reminder that I had no right to make fun of the guys who like watching other guys play poker on ESPN. Sometimes the traps were teeming with

King or Snow crab; other times, the pots came up empty—and everywhere in between.

If you subtract the short crabbing season and the fact that fishermen can't support their businesses or their families if they don't meet their quotas, online dating is a lot like what I've seen on the decks of the *Time Bandit*, *Cornelia Marie*, and the *Northwestern*. In my case, I let my line of duplicate profiles “soak” at the bottom of a number of dating apps for a couple of days before returning to see what messages crawled underneath the various notification tabs. And just like Captain Sig Hansen of the *Northwestern*, when the crab traps were lifted from the icy waters, I, too, was left with an expression that reflected the outcome of a carefully planned strategy.

Of course, it was always exciting to find inbox after inbox chock full of messages from ladies I may or may not have tried luring with smoldering compliments, playful sarcasm, or smart-alecky questions about their hobbies and interests. But just as I thought my love life had broken free of the frigid Bering Sea ice floe, I soon found myself doing what deckhands do before adding their catch to the boat's holding tanks—they sort the good ones from the not-so-good ones.

What once was a haul that even the great Captain Sig would tip his hat to would quickly become a dwindling biomass of undulating crab legs and other sea creatures—some of which I never even knew existed.

“And what’s wrong with *this* one?” an exasperated greenhorn would ask, grabbing on to the sorting table to steady himself on the slickened deck surface.

As the seasoned captain of the imaginary 90-foot crabber, *Charlie’s Angels*, I’d attempt to restrain myself from snapping at the first-year deckhand. “What’s *wrong* with it? Are you joking? It’s an albino eel, you idiot. Throw it overboard!”

Turning away from my scowling face, the greenhorn would mumble, “Aye, aye, Captain,” just as he’d heave the wriggling, translucent sea snake back into choppy water the color of ink.

“Listen up, rookie,” I’d grouse. “If it doesn’t have 10 legs, get rid of it. If it does, slide it across the table to me so I can make sure we’re only keeping males of a certain size. Got it, bonehead?”

Despite a strong farmer's tan and a few well-earned patches of sun damage on my face, I'm certain no one would mistake me for a surly, ill-tempered crab boat skipper—at least not while I was sitting in a Starbucks checking my dating app messages. In between blowing on and sipping from a hot drink no self-respecting man's man would order—a nonfat vanilla latte—I quickly learned that text messages, like poorly written intros and stacks of self-glossing selfies, can be just as disheartening. Besides the word 'sure,' which is the ambivalent, commitment-phobic offspring of 'yes' and 'no,' the singular 'hi' is the absolute worst message to receive in the history of mankind. I could easily imagine archeologists finding and piecing together an ancient stone tablet only to discover the equivalent of 'hi' chiseled into it. I can practically read the rectangular placard inside the museum's glass case now: *"Pulverized Stone Tablet—Early example of a male Neanderthal's reaction to receiving a single-word message from a female Neanderthal (circa 40,000 BC)."*

Even if the singular 'hi' came from a woman I was angling for and not from some random lady or from the nefarious dating app itself as a spambot auto reply, there simply isn't a way to respond back without having to fork over a decent chunk of

self-respect. That would be like saying “You’re welcome” to a woman who wiggles the pinky of her phone hand at you while she sails through the door you’re holding open for her. The only instance I can think of where I’d say ‘hi’ and nothing else is when I’m waving back at a preschooler who’s clutching a stuffed animal and watching me ride my bike past their driveway. Even then, I’d probably chastise myself later that afternoon for not adding, “What’s your bear’s name?”

Bristol Bay, the portion of the Bering Sea between the Alaska Peninsula and Cape Newenham, was calm in my mind. Despite the flatness of the dark water, *Charlie’s Angels*, though securely anchored, was still bobbing up and down as unseen waves slapped against the starboard side of the crabber’s steel hull. Don Henley’s “Boys of Summer” was blasting from four waterproof deck speakers, giving the deckhands and me something to sing to as we processed the latest catch under a monotonous gray sky.

Of course, it would be the greenhorn who would notice the ship’s captain pushing a cart full of squirming King crab across the deck toward the port-side railing. “Are you tossing those back?” he’d ask.

“No, these are for the seagulls who’ve been waiting patiently for the last two hours. Yes, they’re going overboard. Why else would I be doing this?”

Having no fear of a grizzled, perpetually grumpy captain who’s his only ticket to surviving a dangerous crabbing season, the greenhorn would peer into the cart and ask, “Wow. That’s a lot of crab. They look fine to me. What’s wrong with them?”

“You need to get back to the sorting table right now,” I’d bark, taking comfort in knowing that I’d be assigning the way-too-comfortable millennial to the hell that is bait prep for the next three days.

“Aye, aye, Captain,” he’d mumble, navigating back to his workstation on legs more rubbery than the salmon, trout, and char hauled in with the precious crab.

Starbucks had become much busier over the last hour, making me feel somewhat guilty for sitting alone at an enviable table for four near the window. But as long as I avoided making eye contact, I could live with myself for another 30 minutes. In the

midst of a cacophony of noise—a dozen conversations mixed with blenders, grinders, and espresso machines—it was oddly satisfying to equate the act of deleting profiles with flinging crabs back into the Bering Sea. *Splash!* There go all the women with single-word responses. *Splash!* There go the women, whose digital communication is limited to emojis. *Splash!* There go the women, who text that they’re currently on vacation or on a business trip and are looking forward to getting back to me in a few weeks. *Splash!* And there go the women, whose response times are slower than floating icebergs.

Thankfully, *Charlie’s Angels* won’t be encountering any icebergs in the foreseeable future. I imagined turning the empty cart away from the railing to join the others at the sorting table. Don Henley’s “Boys of Summer” was still playing in the background when I heard the song’s signature sound of squawking seagulls. Strangely, I couldn’t tell if the high-pitched mewes were coming from the deck speakers or from the gulls circling high above my head.

Is This Thing On?

Within an instant, I could feel how sweaty my hands were as they gripped either side of the small lectern situated on top of the conference room table in the YMCA's community room. *Why am I so nervous? I'm among friends, right? And aren't we all suffering from the same thing—a winning mindset that somehow became a self-defeating behavior?* Suddenly, the space felt cramped. The nine hopelessly well-mannered people staring back at me seemed more like a thousand. The room appeared too bright, despite having closed the blinds before the start of the midmorning meeting. My head felt as light and empty as a balloon on the verge of bursting. Instead of opening my mouth to allow me to speak, the handful of still-functioning neurons were too busy pondering how my tongue became so weirdly swollen—and why it felt like it belonged in someone else's mouth.

“You got this, Chuck!” shouted Evelyn from a chair near the door.

“Piece of cake, buddy!” added Marty, who was standing and leaning against the window sill on account of his troublesome sciatica.

Their encouragement was enough to momentarily stop me from orbiting toward a mental black hole, enabling me to get on with it: “My name is Chuck, and I suffer from Stage 3 single-mindedness.”

“Keep going!” cheered Linda while transitioning from leaning back in her chair to sitting on the edge of it. “You’re almost there!” she added.

“At Stage 1, I learned that I’m terrible at multitasking. At Stage 2, I found that I prefer to invest all my energy in the present moment. At Stage 3, I accepted—”

“Say it, brother!” interrupted Big Mike, pounding the table for emphasis.

“Thanks, Mike. At Stage 3, I accepted that I tend to text and talk on the phone with someone as if I’m sitting next to them having an in-person conversation.”

I think it's odd that people don't feel the need to apply in-person social graces to texting sessions and phone conversations—especially when the exchanges are supposed to be in the spirit of starting a friendship or something more. If I close my eyes and think back really hard, I can still conjure up images of a time when first impressions occurred during actual first dates. However, in today's online world, it seems that first impressions are established through a deluge of text messaging and far fewer phone conversations. So much so that, by the time I've gotten to know them a little bit better through my iPhone, I no longer want to get together. I mean, who wants to meet someone who will suddenly disappear in the middle of a text conversation only to reappear a few hours later or the next day with a text that reads, "Sorry, I didn't get back to you sooner. My sister in St. Louis called and invited me to go on a cruise with her family next month. Cabo San Lucas, baby! Here I come!" *Good for you. There's nothing better than being trapped on an amazing ship in a gorgeous part of the world without a significant other to share it with.*

More often than not, I'm left staring at my phone, doing my best to convince myself that there's probably a perfectly good reason for why she left me hanging in the middle of a text

conversation that had begun to show both rhythm and promise. That would be like resurfacing after having retrieved your cocktail napkin from underneath a bar table and finding that your date is MIA. *Hmm. She was just here a moment ago. Where did she go? There's a second glass of a very nice Petite Syrah with lipstick on it, so I must not be imagining things. How strange. The conversation seemed to be going so well—just the right amount of flirtation and witty banter to soften the harsh reality of having to look for love just when menopause and prostate checkups kick in.* Then, despite my better judgment, I'd text her the next day, asking how her morning was going and hoping to hear why she vanished from our online chat the night before.

“Great. How R U?” she'd text, making me bristle at the thought that I'm not worth her time to spell out every word. *It's not like she's running late for a summit meeting on climate change or anything.*

With such a tepid response, I'd be forced to show my hand by texting, “I'm doing fine, *like yesterday and the day before.* Did something happen last night while we were texting? I was

hoping to at least get an attaboy in response to that scathing crack I made about your backyard herb garden.”

90 minutes later, I’d receive a text from her that made it clear that she believed punctuation, grammar, spelling, and apologies were optional. “LOL. My daughter called and needed me to walk her through a lasagna recipe. Then I noticed that the clothes I wanted to wear for casual Friday were still in the hamper, so I threw in some laundry while I made a fruit salad for the potluck we’re having at lunch today. LOL.”

Umm, did I mention that the use of ‘sure’ and ‘hi’—as stand-alone text messages—are the absolute worst words to see on your phone? I’m sorry. I guess I got ahead of myself. *That* infamous distinction belongs to a word that’s not even a real word, and it doesn’t even need to make up the entirety of the text message to be cringe-worthy. Whenever I see the acronym ‘LOL,’ I immediately think of two passive-aggressive phrases typically found in interoffice emails: ‘We kindly ask’ and ‘Please advise.’ Whereas ‘We kindly ask’ is code for ‘This is your final warning before we bring this matter to Human Resources,’ ‘Please advise’ is the politically correct way of

telling someone to do their damn job! In a way, ‘LOL’ could be the step sister of ‘Yada, yada, yada’ because they’re both used for glossing over transparency, culpability, vulnerability, or any other form of emotional discomfort. For example, notice how they’re practically interchangeable in the following text exchanges:

“Good morning. Is everything alright? You disappeared on me while we were texting last night.” I’d ask.

“My ex stopped by last night . . . Yada, yada, yada . . . I’m so tired this morning,” she’d text back.

Or she could text, “My ex stopped by last night. I’m so tired this morning. LOL!”

“Ha-ha . . . That is so freaking true, Chuck!” laughed Big Mike, pounding the table again as if he had no other way of punctuating his sentences.

“You got that ‘Yada, yada, yada’ thing from *Seinfeld*, right?” asked Marty, who was now seated next to Evelyn but still looked to be favoring his right leg.

“Guilty as charged,” I replied. “But doesn’t everything relate to at least one *Seinfeld* episode? If the internet, cell phones, and dating apps were around in the 90s, I could imagine George showing his iPhone to Jerry in their usual booth at the diner and saying, ‘Would you look at this, Jerry? Who texts ‘hi’ and nothing else? What am I supposed to do with this? No, ‘What are you up to today?’ No, ‘I’m glad you reached out to me?’ No, ‘Thanks for the kind words about my understated profile?’ No, ‘I like your smile, too?’ I’m telling you, Jerry, if she wants to get nuts—then let’s get nuts!’”

“Oh, I remember George saying that line in another episode,” chimed Linda. “I think Jerry responds to George’s tirade by saying, ‘Whoa, big fella,’ right?”

Thinking I had exceeded my allotted time by giving the popular 90s sitcom way too much air time, I quickly nodded at Linda and said, “So, again, my name is Chuck, and I’m addicted to doing one thing at a time and focusing on the present moment. Okay, you can do it now, Mike.”

“Do what?” he asked.

“Pound the table.”

Following the thunderous bang, which added a theatrical exclamation point to the end of my talk and made the lectern shift to one side, I carefully repositioned it while adding, “Thank you for your time.”

Part III: Check, Please!

What good is a book about the trials and tribulations of searching for love after 50 if it shirks its obligation to pander to the voyeur within all of us? It's the still-smoldering carnage following a horrific traffic accident that makes us slow down to witness the unfortunate misery of others, right? And I'm no different in this regard. *Oh my God! Are they performing CPR on that bloody heap?* And I also think I'm no different from anyone else when I say there are only so many dopamine hits one can get from pointing and gawking at car wrecks, train wrecks, and even life wrecks. That's why I chose a few of my more memorable, G-rated dating stories and limited them to Chapters 5 and 6. Again, as a reminder, I wrote *Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love* to open the reader's mind to the present-day obstacles that stand between living a solitary existence and a life that includes a significant other—not to titillate the reader's imagination with storylines better suited for *The Jerry Springer Show*. Jerry! Jerry! Sorry about that. Force of habit. Obviously, I was a fan of the show, too.

In Chapter 5, my dating life moves from texting while on the bench in the dugout to talking over the phone in the middle of

the on-deck circle. *Look at me! I'm so close to getting in the game, I can practically feel the action on the field!* But instead of an easy transition into the batter's box, I learn that even the walk toward home plate is just as difficult as everything else in my online dating experience so far—rife with disappointment and challenges I didn't expect from women who presented themselves as having the same availability and desire as me. Without the necessary time and energy, budding relationships, like all things on God's green earth, fail to take root and die before ever having a chance to see what blossoms.

If Chapter 5 puts the cherry on top of everything leading up to a face-to-face first date, then Chapter 6 invites the reader to be the proverbial fly on the wall—that is, if the wall were positioned behind home plate. From your enviable vantage point, you'll be front and center to witness the gamesmanship between an in-over-his-head batter and a bevy of pitchers wearing eyeshadow and carrying purses. Will I drive one into the gap for a stand-up double? Better yet, will a rocket down the third base line be good enough for a triple? Or will a slow roller across the infield allow me enough time to beat the throw to first for a hard-earned single? Better still, will I make you ooh and aah by crushing a belt-high, hanging curve ball

for a crowd-pleasing home run? With all this talk of getting on base, you'd think I was referring to degrees of sexual conquest. All I'm missing are quips about "playing the field" and getting into "scoring position."

As much as I enjoy writing in the secret code of salacious inuendo, the conveyed stories in Chapters 5 and 6 couldn't be further from what can be heard from the play-by-play baseball announcer in Meatloaf's and Ellen Foley's 1977 hit, "Paradise by the Dashboard Light." Instead, I share real dialogue from relatable situations that will convince the reader that I've not only "been there and done that," but it will also show that I'm just a guy running into obstacle after obstacle while trying to become relevant in the game of life.

Chapter 5: Lost in Translation

What's That Sound?

I stopped listening to her 10 minutes into the phone conversation. While Heather went on and on about all the narcissistic men in her life—a popular go-to term used by untrained female clinicians because self-centeredness doesn't sound mean enough—I was focused on all the background noise that was vying for my brain's attention. Just by the cadence of the garbled words coming from what had to be a TV, I could tell she had it tuned to a news program—most likely Fox News—by the telltale sound of people shouting over each other. Then there were the intermittent dog barks, causing me to deduce she had at least two pets since one of the yelps sounded deeper than the other. But the TV and dog noises were easy for me to figure out. Instead, my inner Columbo was riveted by a combination of sounds emanating from what Heather was doing while she was on the phone with me—our first ever over-the-phone conversation since transitioning from texting purgatory.

What in God's name could she be doing? I wondered, closing my eyes as if it would help me filter out the blaring TV, barking dogs, and what she was saying. What could be so important that it required multitasking at 7:30 in the evening after I asked when it would be a good time for me to call—preferably at a time when she'd be free from distraction? Hmm. I could make out two distinct sounds. One reminded me of cardboard—but not the heavy kind used to ship dishwashers. It sounded more like shoebox cardboard. The other distracting noise was of a tinny quality, instantly making me think of things like soup can lids and aluminum cupcake liners.

“Chuck? Are you still there?”

“Huh? Yes, of course. I was just listening. You were telling me about your second husband.”

Not one to back away from an opportunity to shame someone—even if that someone is a man she just met on a dating app—Heather said, “No, I was telling you about the *third* idiot I married.”

“Okay. I have to ask. What are you doing right now? Wait! Don’t tell me. Let me guess,” I said, excited to find out if my inner detective correctly solved the mystery of ‘The Multitasking Heather.’ “Are you organizing a kitchen drawer?”

“No.”

“Are you wrapping something in tin foil?”

“No. I’m boxing up Christmas ornaments. Why? Is that bothering you?”

“Oh my God! I never would’ve guessed that—especially since we’re in the middle of March. And, yes, it’s a bit distracting. Personally, I don’t think it’s possible for people to do multiple things effectively at the same time. I guess some people would label that as being efficient. But in my opinion, they’re just efficient at doing a bunch of things poorly. You know what I mean?”

“I do, but I’m not one of those people. I can totally do this and talk to you at the same time,” she explained.

“I have no doubt, Heather. I guess it’s a problem on my end. I’ll get in touch with you later in the week. I hope you get all your decorations put away. Goodnight.”

What is it about our society that makes people believe that constant busyness is a virtue—that working hard and playing hard is a tenet of good citizenship? Do we live this way so we’ll avoid the devil’s playground of idleness? Maybe it’s because we’ve been brainwashed into believing that incessant activity and material acquisitions are replacements for intellectual thirst and spiritual enlightenment. Or does this way of life simply provide the all-important photographic fodder needed to gain meaningless approval on social media? Or, in Heather’s case, maybe she’s learned to stay busy so there are no moments for self-reflection—to see the good, the bad, and the ugly—so the real work can truly begin. But in her defense, living a simple life with calmness, integrity, and purpose within the confines of a toxic, frenetic society like ours is a much more difficult road to take.

Talking on the phone used to be fun, especially with girls. Who doesn’t remember being hunched under a table or behind a couch while having an exclusive one-on-one conversation

with their crush? Or the cursing from family members who inadvertently stumbled over the stretched-out 30-foot phone cord turned trip wire? In those innocent moments, nothing was more important than giving each other the day's rundown, the latest gossip, and sharing self-deprecating stories to make the other one laugh out loud. Now, thanks to the joylessness of online dating, these phone conversations are routine and predictable—even perfunctory—with the same excitement you'd expect from listening to the same script over and over again.

“So, is writing a real job for you, or is it just a hobby?” asked Lisa.

From the comfort of a soft leather sofa in the living room of my apartment, my bionic ear picked up the sound of an uncooperative grocery cart wheel in the background. *I know that sound*, I thought as I held the phone to the side of my head. When I asked Lisa to call me back when she had finished her after-work grocery run, she explained that she would be too busy to talk when she got home. She still had to cook dinner, take the dog out for a walk, and water her yard.

“How long has it been since your last relationship?” asked Monica.

I could live with the consistent hum of the dryer in the background, but it was only a matter of time before the cycle would end, resulting in a brain-piercing buzzing sound that would no doubt cause me to lose my train of thought. But again, I could manage that. It was the sound of her emptying the dishwasher that put me in a tailspin. *Clang!* Two plates are grabbed. *Clang!* They’re set on top of other plates in the cupboard. *Clink!* A glass is yanked from the upper rack. *Chink! Chink! Chink!* Now she’s putting the silverware away.

“Monica, why don’t you call me back after you’ve finished with your nightly chores, okay?”

“Sorry, Chuck. This is the only time I have. I’m helping my daughter apply to colleges tonight.”

What is it with these women? I can only conclude that they’re instructing me to call them when they’re juggling only one or two tasks at the same time. I guess, for them, mental distraction begins when three, four, or more things are

happening at once. Were people more capable of staying singularly focused in the 1970s? Maybe, but it's hard to make that claim when there was pen and paper beside those clunky old phones. Back then, if someone's thoughts wandered while sitting and talking on the phone, they'd mindlessly doodle as a harmless distraction. That setup worked so well that I still sit in a chair and doodle while having a phone conversation. Unfortunately for me, the ladies on the other end of the line are driving, grocery shopping, running errands, doing chores, or walking their dogs.

King Charles

I was excited to receive a text back from Bethany—especially since learning that she, too, was raised in the northeast part of the country. Although we were from two different states, only the Delaware River separated our hometowns of Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. And since we were the same age, there seemed to be no limit to the people, places, and things we had in common. Within seconds of hearing her voice over the phone the night before, I picked up on the distinctive Jersey Girl accent, reminding me of Ruthie, my very first girlfriend 40 years earlier.

My *modus operandi* was always the same. If our initial phone conversation was going well, I'd find out about her availability and willingness to meet before saying, "I'll come up with a plan and text you sometime tomorrow." By this time in the online dating game, I had already figured out that, since I was the one who was expected to plan and pay for the initial meetup, I might as well suit myself. After all, these weren't real dates, plus I had yet to lay eyes on any of these women. I figured meeting at a neighborhood bar within walking distance from my apartment for a beer or a glass of wine would make everyone happy—they didn't have to come up with an idea or bring their wallet, and I could enjoy a leisurely walk to an inexpensive evening with a relative stranger.

If you were watching me read Bethany's text response to my invitation, you would've seen my eyes widen and my jaw drop. I couldn't believe what I was reading. From memory, it went something like this: "A glass of wine? Are you joking? I don't leave the house for anything less than a steak dinner!" I had to hand it to her. She definitely opened up a can of Jersey Girl moxie, but it was misplaced moxie on every level. Once I calmed down and collected myself, I decided to play along with Bethany and texted her back that afternoon. "You're

right. What was I thinking? Let's meet at Ruth's Chris or Chandler's Steakhouse. You pick." Unfortunately, the game ended there because she had already deleted our exchanges on the dating app and blocked me on her phone. *Eh, yo, Adrian? Why youse gotta be like that?*

I wasn't always so callous. Underneath a crusty layer of charcoal, if one poked around long enough, they'd find that my heart still had a few remaining pockets of squishy pink parts that had yet to become hardened and pessimistic. That's why I'd offer to meet these women halfway if there was an obvious geographical distance between us. And by distance, I mean 45 to 60 minutes of driving time. And since most of them already had jam-packed weekends coming up, we'd usually meet during the week. I'd text a suggestion for getting together, needing only Google Maps and Yelp to come up with a fair and equitable idea. For the most part, the majority of these women were immediately onboard—even going as far as to text back, “Wow! I thought men who could come up with a plan to meet were extinct!”

But here's where my distrustful heart would need convincing. If I've learned anything during my years of online dating, it's

that women really do want to find love. However, they're not willing to work for it—even if they find a guy with potential. I've thought about this head-scratching observation for many years now and can only conclude that they're subconsciously content with their lives as they are. *Huh?* Then why would they be on dating sites to begin with? I think it's because it feeds their delusion that they're open to sharing their life with a man. Plus, it allows them to offer proof to concerned family and friends that they're “really trying” to meet someone. So, when there's a 30-minute drive for her to contend with after an eight- or nine-hour workday, I try to see how easy it would be to convince her to opt for Plan B, which requires the least amount of effort on her part. For example, even though Faith eagerly agreed to get together with me on Thursday evening, I still texted her a free “get out of jail card” on Wednesday afternoon:

“Hi, Faith. I hope you're having a wonderful day so far. I'm really excited to meet you in person. And I know you are too. However, I'm thinking it might be a little too hectic for you tomorrow. I know you have to drive home after work, walk your dog, freshen up, and change your clothes before having to get back in your car and drive another 30 minutes to meet

me. And even though your next two weekends are booked up, how about if I make the hour-long drive on the following weekend? That way, we can meet at a place that's close to you, so you won't have to drive very far."

Within an hour, I heard back from her. "That would be perfect, Chuck! Thanks for being so thoughtful."

"Works every time," I mumbled while tossing my phone on the bed. "Really, Faith? We're going to text and talk on the phone for two and a half more weeks before getting together? Can you hear the balloon deflating like I do, Faith? That's not the sound of air leaving a balloon. That's the sickening sound of dating momentum coming to a grinding halt. Plus, you seem pretty okay with having me do all the heavy lifting—work around your schedule, come up with an entirely new plan to meet, and travel to your neck of the woods—just so you're not inconvenienced. Don't you know who I am, Faith? I'm King Charles!"

Saved by the Bell

Because each of my book covers displays a big red heart, with the same hearts showing up on a lot of my artwork and some of my photographs, it comes as no surprise when I'm asked if the heart doubles as my personal logo. Although it's the truth, I don't really like my answer, since it could be construed as a less-than-subtle marketing ploy. "Yes and no," I'd tease, "the heart only tells half the story. If you want to see the entire logo, check out the cover of my book, *Heart Appreciation: Stories of Gratitude*." Typically, after telling them that, a fantasy reel would come to life in my mind. In it, the asker would be so compelled to know the story behind the logo that they'd invite me to lunch to hear the enchanting tale that doesn't disappoint. Instead, I'll hear them say, "I'll have to check that out," knowing with great certainty that I'll never hear from them again.

A more likely fantasy would entail receiving a cease-and-desist letter from the corporate law office of a "we own everything" internet company telling me that legal action will be taken if I continue to use the red heart in my logo. "No biggie," I'd mumble to myself. I would just use my backup

logo—something Neil deGrasse Tyson described in his 2022 book *Starry Messenger* as “perhaps the most powerful and profound statistical tool in all of science.” Better known as the famous “bell curve” and what German mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss referred to as “the normal distribution of any given data set,” this nifty little device allows me to organize my experiences, find patterns, and formulate theories about the society we live in.

No one wants to hear stories from the middle of the bell curve. That would be like telling stories involving women who are five-foot-four inches tall—the U.S. average—and thinking it would be more interesting than writing about dwarves and Amazons. Where’s the fun in that? Although the theories that are expressed in this book are based on a vast number of “average” experiences that would call the center of the bell curve home, I tend to write about one-off experiences that are left or right of center and, thus, have a lot more entertainment value. But I’m not a sensationalist either. The stories may provide comic relief, but, more importantly, they contribute to the point I’m trying to make. Does every lady demand a steak dinner? No. Does every woman have the attention span of a squirrel? No. Does every lady begin household chores as soon

as I call? No. Am I fed up with online profiles, mindless texting, distracted phone conversations, and uninspired women? You betcha!

Chapter 6: One and Dones

Tiffany

I saw her before she saw me. It had been a colder than usual autumn in Boise, so I wasn't surprised to learn that an October snowfall was likely within the next few days. It wasn't cold enough for me to see my breath, but it was clear that Tiffany was freezing as she stood in front of the agreed-upon meeting place, an upscale restaurant at the center of an outdoor mall. Her hands were jammed deep within the pockets of her long black sweater, giving her the look of someone trying to wrap themselves in a blanket. She was smaller than I imagined, but it only added to her attractiveness, which was on par with actress Amy Adams—if Amy Adams were more curvaceous and had a wicked sense of humor.

Despite it being a midweek evening, the mall was hopping with shoppers, diners, walkers, people-watchers, and workers, who were busy putting up holiday decorations and a ridiculously small ice rink. Once we locked eyes, it was clear that our expectations had been exceeded. I stuck out my hand as if I were meeting a consultant from IBM, and she pushed it

away like an amusement park turnstile. Instead of taking my hand, Tiffany swooped in and kissed me right on the mouth! It wasn't like I felt her tongue or anything, but it was still shocking. Not only was it our first time meeting each other, but this was my very first online date.

“Oh my God! I had to get *that* out of the way,” she said, breathing as if she had just run up two flights of stairs. “Now I feel much better!”

Not one to be prudish, I could feel the momentary surprise dissipate almost as fast as it came on. In its place, I, of course, felt flattered, but I also felt the same sense of relief that Tiffany was alluding to. The kiss, impulsive as it was, definitely squelched any remaining pregame jitters and made me appreciate her as a woman of action—a lady who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to reach for it. She was a mother of three, single for the last eight years, lived with her parents, and managed an auto parts store. For a guy without kids or a nine-to-five grind, her situation should've added up to three strikes, with one extra strike thrown in for good measure. But she was a good listener and had a caustic, uncensored wit about her. Plus, it didn't hurt that she was nice to look at.

A memorable scene from the movie *City Slickers* comes to mind when I look back on my first and only date with Tiffany. In it, Billy Crystal's character asks Curly, a lifelong cowboy played by the late Jack Palance, if he's ever been in love. To his surprise, Curly tells him that it was with a woman he didn't know and that it only lasted for a few seconds. He describes seeing the love of his life on horseback as she hung laundry out to dry. He went on to say that, with the sun directly behind her, he could see the silhouette of her shapely form through her cotton dress. When Curly stops talking, Mitch asks what everyone was thinking in the crowded theater: "That's it? That's the love of your life? You didn't even try to meet her?" Then Curly responds with the greatest of answers. He says, "No, I just rode the other way. I figured it wasn't going to get any better than that."

Unfortunately, I'm not as cool as Curly. Whereas the kiss should've been the signal for me to walk back to my truck so I could immortalize that moment forever, I ended up sitting down at the bar with Tiffany and watching her order two shots of Jack Daniels and a Budweiser. But instead of listening to the sirens going off in my head, I heard my inner voice saying, *Well, maybe she needs three drinks since the kiss*

wasn't enough to take the edge off her nervousness. However, that notion went out the window when she took out her phone to show me pictures of engagement rings and honeymoon destinations. By the time I finished my beer, “we” had agreed on a two-carat princess-cut diamond and two weeks at the Ahi Beach Resort in Rarotonga. *Check, please!*

Amanda

There were two reasons why I was smiling when I pulled into the back parking lot of the University of Idaho’s Law School on a bright and sunny Saturday afternoon. I was loving the fact that so few people knew about this parking oasis while at the same time anticipating my first date with Amanda. I especially liked it when I’d see people shaking their heads as they watched me roll my truck into the near-empty lot that was only a couple of blocks from the center of downtown Boise. I imagined them saying to their friends, “He has no sticker. Where’s his sticker? Doesn’t he need a sticker? You need a sticker to park there, right?” Without the proper signage, little did they know that mere mortals—as opposed to law students and government employees—could park here on the weekends for free. *See you later, suckers. I wish this Southern*

California transplant had the time to educate you locals about your own city, but I have a hot date to crush!

As I made my way to the rooftop bar situated in the city's Basque District, I had to ask myself, "Was this a date, or was it a meetup to see if we wanted to go on a date?" Back in the day, when the only people who texted and video chatted over computers were the cartoon characters on *The Jetsons*, there wasn't any confusion about being on a date. You were either on one or you weren't. Before social media and online dating apps warped our understanding of interpersonal relationships, men would typically ask out women *after* they were already a little bit enamored with them. That's because the good people of the United States used to be open-minded and curious about one another. We weren't constantly tethered to a phone, and we lived our lives in close proximity to one another—in places like neighborhoods, towns, schools, jobs, gyms, stores, entertainment venues, and places of worship—allowing us to interact naturally before someone gathered up enough courage to show their hand. Was I a little bit enamored with Amanda? How could I be? We only talked on the phone once while I looked at pictures of her from three years ago.

From the street, just outside the old brick building, I could hear the unmistakable music of Imagine Dragons raining down from the three-story structure, causing me to gaze upward. Right away, I noticed several palm fronds and an equal number of brightly colored umbrellas extending out over the sidewalk. “Yep. This must be the place,” I mumbled before pushing the heavy wood door open and stepping into a nearly empty restaurant. A despondent-looking waitress greeted me with her arms folded while leaning against one of the many vacant booths. My expression must have asked, “How do I get to the rooftop?” because she pointed a finger to my left without saying a word or unfolding her arms. The song “Believer” was still playing when I reached the top of the winding staircase, but as soon as I saw Amanda, my mood went from giddy excitement to a bitter cocktail of disappointment and apprehension.

In just two seconds, I was able to gather, coordinate, and file everything I was going to need in order to excuse myself from what was surely going to be an awkward and embarrassing scene. In the first second—the most pleasant of the two—I took in the layout, decor, and atmosphere of the crowded, sunlit bar. Right off the bat, if someone had said I was looking

at a reproduction of a set from the old television series *Gilligan's Island*, I would've believed them. The open-air bar, which could've easily doubled as a hut from the iconic show, had a thatched roof and was situated in the center of the rooftop. Booths, tables, and chairs—all looking like they were constructed out of bamboo—surrounded the bar in the same way deck furniture encircles a hotel pool.

In the following second, I saw my date for the first time. She was falling down drunk in front of the bar with her back turned toward me. She was wearing white sandals that matched her cotton spaghetti strap dress and was unaware her outfit had ridden up, offering a clear view of her underwear. She had a drink in one hand and was flailing the other as if it would make what she was saying more believable, giving me the impression that she was either holding court or arguing with everyone. As I moved toward her, I sensed an uncomfortable number of eyeballs boring into me. And when the bar's decibel level seemed to momentarily dip, I felt like I was in the crosshairs of even more eyeballs. Taking her cue from several patrons who were pointing at me, Amanda spun around and slurred to no one in particular, "See? I told you he'd show up!"

Although the brief, albeit sweaty, hug transferred at least half of her heavy makeup from the left side of her face to the shoulder of my dark blue polo shirt, it gave me a chance to grab the hem of her dress and pull it down without embarrassing her any further. Finding two open stools at the front of the crowded bar wasn't hard because people were literally making room for us as if they were expecting the second act to be even more salacious than the first one. For the next 15 minutes, I went back and forth between keeping her dress pulled down—as she kept sliding off her stool—and talking her into calling her best friend. When she finally did, I convinced her to let me talk to Sheri.

“Hi, Sheri. This is Chuck. I'm with Amanda at The Reef in downtown Boise, and she's totally wasted. Can you come get her?”

“What? Who's this?”

“We had planned to meet here for a date this afternoon, but she's in no condition to drive or be in public, for that matter.”

“Oh my God! You’re *that*, Chuck. I’m so sorry. She’s normally not like that. I’m in Meridian right now, but I can be there in about 20 minutes. Can you stay with her until I get there?”

“Wow. That’s great. She’s lucky to have a friend like you. Sure, I can do that.”

Amanda was either shouting at one of the bartenders or the TV suspended above his head as I ended the call with Sheri. When I looked for her purse so I could put her phone away, it was no longer on top of the bar. Instead, it was under her stool—along with half its contents—making me guess she had knocked it off with that one flailing hand. And while I was crouched down, gathering her things and putting them back into her purse, I had to laugh at myself. It was in that moment that I suddenly felt a little bit enamored with Sheri.

Cassie

I had been coming to this simple neighborhood bar so often to meet first-time dates that you would’ve thought the bartenders and waitresses had come up with a nickname for me. But

instead of greeting me like I was Norm from the television show *Cheers* and shouting out my name or something cool like silver-tongued devil, I was merely tolerated and reminded of their great selection of locally brewed beers. The place may have been missing the memorable characters from the wildly popular sitcom from the 1980s, but it provided a similar atmosphere—complete with dark earth tones, heavy woods, brass fixtures, and masculine energy.

Cassie had arrived before me and was seated at a cozy table for two near one of the few windows that offered a partial view of the tree-lined Boise River. Even though it was already dark outside, it was a nice reminder that if things went well, Cassie and I could find ourselves walking along the river's edge later that evening. It was more than just her long, silver-blond hair that made her stand out from the rest of the noisy crowd. She radiated a regal elegance that intensified with her good posture and conservative style of dress. Did she look the part of a no-nonsense advertising executive for a local TV station? Absolutely. Was it likely that Cassie would bore me to tears by playing her hand too close to the chest like most of the other women I had tried meeting? No doubt. Would I be forced to admit uncomfortable truths about myself in order to save the

evening at some point, like a desperate Hail Mary pass with no time left on the clock? The Magic 8-Ball says, “It is certain.”

As soon as she saw me approaching her table, Cassie pushed her chair back, stood up, and moved her arms in a way that said she was, indeed, a hugger.

“Hi, Cassie. You look great,” I said as I went in for the embrace, making sure to leave the equivalent of the Grand Canyon between our midsections.

“Thanks. You do, too,” she replied, pushing her wireframe glasses up the bridge of her nose and retaking her seat. “Do you live close to this place?”

“Not too far. I live—”

“I had to drive all the way from the other side of town,” she interrupted. “The traffic is always insane this time of day—especially going this direction.”

Hmm. She's already complaining. Because this was coming from a woman who didn't suggest an alternative and whose schedule I was accommodating, I didn't feel sorry for her in the least. “Hey, instead of waiting for the waitress, I'll just get our drinks at the bar. I'm going to have a beer. What would you like?” I asked, hoping that the momentary distraction would serve as a preemptive move against any further bellyaching.

Without looking at me, Cassie replied, “I'll have a white wine.” That's because she was busy pulling a phone out of her purse since she sensed she'd have a few minutes of alone time.

Yes, Your Majesty, I thought. “Okay, I'll be right back,” I said, thinking that my date, or meetup, or queen, or whatever you want to call her, was accustomed to being waited on.

By the time our drinks were half consumed, I was already tuning out, thinking about riding my bike to Lucky Peak State Park in the morning and hoping I could get back home early enough to catch an episode of NBC's *Date Line*. It wasn't until the conversation turned toward what we did the previous weekend that my mood went from “Can I go now?” to “Time

to shake things up.” I knew there wasn’t a way to tell Cassie what I did last Saturday without coming off like a weirdo— unless she asked me, point blank. And with that, the stage was set.

“Blah, blah, blah . . . and that’s why I love to paddleboard with my dog. Well, that’s what I did last weekend. How about you?” she asked, handing me the opening I was patiently waiting for.

“As crazy as this sounds, I did a photo shoot for a BDSM group in the Box Canyon Nature Preserve about 15 miles past Hagerman. It’s an offshoot of the Snake River and has a few nice waterfalls. Have you ever hiked there before?” I pried, fully knowing I had just pulled the pin from an invisible grenade. Would it explode? Or would it provide me with a chance to tell her a terrific, PG-rated story about some of the nicest people I’ve ever photographed?

What remained of Cassie’s smile after she told me about her water-loving Rufus quickly vanished. In its place was a furrowed brow, narrowed eyes, and an expression that looked

like I had just asked her what her bra size was. “Why would you tell me that?” she sneered. *And boom, goes the dynamite!*

I was prepared for the white wine to spray from her mouth, but not the condescending tone. I have to admit that the worst of me makes a guest appearance as soon as someone seizes the higher moral ground, which, in my opinion, is the first move toward an attempt to shame me. Men hate to be shamed. I hate to be shamed. In an instant, I decided then and there that I wouldn't say another word to Cassie until she asked me why I wasn't saying anything. Then, instead of telling her an amazing story about the photo shoot, I'd offer a mini-TED talk on the virtue of seeking to understand rather than rushing to assume the worst. It wasn't the uncomfortable truth I had planned on, but it would still give me a chance to pump life back into this uninspiring date.

After 30 excruciating seconds of casually looking around the bar and avoiding eye contact, I suddenly imagined myself as a professional bull rider about to be let out of the chute. I could hear the announcer introducing me to the crowd and informing them that I'd be attempting to ride the most feared bull in all of West Texas: Awkward Silence. I would've lost \$100 if I bet

Cassie couldn't stay quiet for a full minute, \$500 if she couldn't do it for two minutes, and \$1,000 for three minutes. Wow! Awkward Silence lived up to the hype and then some. However, at just past the three-minute mark, Cassie excused herself to the ladies' room, taking her phone with her in the process. *There she goes*, I thought, *to let her friends know how much of a weirdo I turned out to be*. By the time she returned, I had finished my beer, knowing I would need the extra ounces of courage to continue riding the raging elephant-sized bull until she asked me the question I was waiting for. At this point, I was all in. This was either going to end as a great story to tell our future friends about or a nightmare to entertain our next dates with.

From the corner of my eye, I could see that she made no effort to put her phone away as she sat back down. *Come on, Cassie. You can do it. Ask me the question so I can get off this crazy beast!* Instead, she said, "I bet this is a great place to watch Boise State games," making me shift uncomfortably in my chair—a reaction to feeling Awkward Silence zig when I thought it would zag. At that point, Cassie had had enough of the silent treatment and stated, "I guess you're not talking to me." *Oh my God! So close!* Granted, she did make an accurate

observation but couldn't put the ball in the end zone by asking *why* I was no longer talking to her.

As I continued to move my eyes back and forth between my empty beer glass and a nearby couple, who were actually talking with one another, Cassie abruptly stood up, grabbed her jacket, purse, and phone, and proceeded to the exit. The commotion caused many of the other customers to join me in watching her leave. But when heads began to swivel toward the guy she had just walked out on, I quickly focused my attention on what was on the other side of the window, hoping to appear unfazed by my date's sudden departure. Outside, I could see the evening twilight reflecting off the ripples of the flowing river. Along its banks, two shadowy figures moved peacefully through the silhouetted birch and cottonwood trees. But instead of finding a romantic couple, I saw myself calmly walking beside Awkward Silence.

Harry

“Dude, where do you find the time and energy to do the amount of online dating that you do?” asked Harry as he pulled two 16-ounce Pabst Blue Ribbon Tall Boys from an old

backpack filled with half-melted ice. “You’re either a sex addict or selling Amway.”

After tossing my racquet in disgust and watching it knock over several empty Gatorade bottles like bowling pins, I joined my equally exhausted friend on the bench between the two tennis courts. “I guess you can’t recognize a cry for help when you hear it,” I replied, anticipating the frosty goodness of a cold beer on a hot summer day.

I hated to lose—especially on the tennis court—yet, oddly, I didn’t mind losing to Harry, whose chronic hangovers, bad knees, and disheveled appearance made him look like he had no chance of beating an athletic, in-shape guy ten years his junior. The best part was that he made no attempt at anything resembling humility or graciousness. Instead, he would gush over his wins, meticulously recounting every backhand winner, passing shot, blistering ace, and perfect lob. The angrier I became during the match, the more he’d pile on the raucous laughter and relentless chatter—all designed to get into my head and take me out of the game. But that was Harry. To know him was to love him.

“Seriously, dude. I don’t know how you do it,” he said. “95 percent of the time, I’ll show up to a first date, take one look at her, and wish I could go back in time to swipe left.”

“I hear you, Harry, but it’s the same for me, too. The only difference between you and me is—”

“That I’m a handsome devil?” interrupted the undisputed class clown of the tennis league.

“That you are,” I said, taking a big swig from the iconic red, white, and blue can, “but the difference is that you allow yourself to be bummed out 95 percent of the time, while I’m never bummed out—no matter who or what shows up at the date.”

“So, you’re telling me that you’d be happy with her even if she’s a lot older, heavier, and frumpier than what you saw on her profile? Come on, give me a break, dude.”

“I didn’t say I’d be happy with someone like that—I said I wouldn’t be bummed out. Big difference. When I go on a date or a meetup, like you, I’m crossing my fingers and hoping I’ll

come out of it having made some kind of connection. If that connection is a romantic one, great! If it's strictly platonic, then I've made a new friend. And if neither connection is possible, I simply slip on my invisible lab coat."

"Your what?"

"My invisible lab coat, including a pair of invisible safety goggles, an invisible clipboard, and an invisible pen."

"Dude, you are so *freaking* weird," mumbled Harry while retrieving another 16-ounce beer from his soaking wet backpack.

"Weird or resourceful?" I questioned. "The way I see it, if I took the time to shower, comb what remains of my hair, smell good, dress nice, and show up on time, I might as well get something out of it, right? Whereas you go from feeling butterflies to feeling bummed out 95 percent of the time, I go from feeling those same butterflies to becoming an on-the-spot social scientist 95 percent of the time. That way, instead of a kiss and plans for a second date, I go home having learned what makes some random lady tick, which, ultimately,

contributes to my overall understanding of women and our society as a whole.”

“Did I say weird?” teased Harry. “I meant verbose. Man, you should start your own cult or something.”

“Ha-ha. Unfortunately for you,” I explained, “I’m just getting started. But if it’s any consolation, you can have my second beer—that is, if you brought four.”

“I did. And it’s a deal!”

“Of course, I’ve had my share of ladies whose appearance didn’t come close to their profile pictures—and some whose choice of dress left me scratching my head. Like this one lady who showed up to our morning coffee date ready for yoga. Normally, for obvious reasons, I wouldn’t mind that, but she was quick to inform me that her gym was across the street and that her class would start in an hour. I don’t know about you, Harry, but I get a warm fuzzy feeling knowing I’m included in my date’s efficient use of time.”

“Right now, these beers are giving me the warm fuzzies, but keep going, Chuck. Somehow, you’re managing to stop me from drifting off.”

“Ha-ha. I’m so glad I’m keeping you awake. And then there are the ladies who watch more *Dateline* than me, making them take extreme precautions to avoid becoming the next murder victim of a guy whose docile life is that of a well-financed middle schooler. I remember when this one lady met me outside of the agreed-upon meeting spot for our first get-together. I believe it was an upscale breakfast place. Anyway, she demanded that I allow her to take a photo of my driver’s license before going inside.

“What are you going to do with it?” I asked while not reaching for my wallet.

“Send it to my best friend,” she answered, appearing as if this was standard dating protocol. “You know, just in case.”

“Just in case, what? Just in case I turn out to be a serial killer?” I asked, my voice climbing in pitch to convey a ‘you cannot

be serious' tone. "Isn't it enough that we're meeting in a public place? Plus, we're connected on Facebook."

"Sorry, Chuck. Those are the rules."

"You see, Harry, it's all so incredibly interesting."

"Gees, dude. Don't leave me hanging. What did you do?"

"I told her that I was beyond insulted and reminded her of a little thing called intuition. Then I walked back to my apartment to make a fried egg sandwich."

Harry let out a big laugh, reminding me of when I tried to launch a tennis ball into deep space after double-faulting for the eighth time earlier that afternoon. "But believe it or not, she wasn't the worst." I teased.

"Oh my God. Let's hear it!" he urged, moving from the bench to the hard surface to either get more comfortable or stretch his back.

“I met this lady at the District Coffee House in downtown Boise. You know where that is, right?”

“Of course,” he replied, savoring a rare moment of feeling pain-free with his knees pulled into his chest. “I did some carpentry work in there a few years ago.”

“Anyway, it was our first time getting together after a week of texting through the dating app. I picked the place because they were having a talent show, and I thought it would be worth a few laughs and give us plenty of material to talk about. But during the whole first half, I kept noticing a gangly 13- or 14-year-old girl staring at me from one of the nearby pleather couches. When I mentioned it to my date, she put her hand over her mouth and mumbled, “I’m so sorry. That’s my daughter.”

“Really? Why don’t you invite her to join us?” I asked, trying to act like I’m the kind of guy who regularly goes with the flow.

“Oh my God. She’d be mortified. Quite frankly, I’d be mortified!”

“And she’s here because—”

“Because she’s scared for me. So, she likes to come on my first dates and blend into the background. That way, as she says, she’ll be able to watch my back.”

“Oh, okay. So, did *you* get the heebie-jeebies from our texting and phone conversation?”

“Not at all.”

“So, you brought her anyway?”

“Well, she insisted. What was I supposed to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe remind her that *you’re* the adult and leave her at home so your date wouldn’t be creeped out by a not-so-subtle teenage spy?” I said to Harry, pretending he was my coffee house date.

“You really said that?” he asked, returning to the bench in a heap.

“No, but I tried to get her to ask her daughter to come over,” I replied, sliding to the other side of the bench to make more room. “That would’ve been a banner evening for the social scientist in me since I’ve never interviewed a mother and daughter at the same time.”

“Oh, that reminds me of another story,” jeered Harry.

“Knowing you, I can only guess.”

“It starts out with me taking the first set 6-3 by running you ragged and ends with me winning the match by beating you 6-1 in the second set. God, I love watching you implode.”

“Ha-ha. Nice one, Harry. I have to admit—I didn’t see that coming.”

“I’m not surprised,” he said, setting me up for his insult finale. “You didn’t see those four aces coming either.”

More Harry

“Let’s go sit over by our bikes,” suggested Harry while getting up from the bench like an arthritic 90-year-old man.

If anyone was watching us get to our feet, they would’ve seen not one but two geriatric patients gather their tennis gear and shuffle toward the gate closest to Parkcenter Boulevard. Once we settled down on the cool grass outside the two-tennis court enclosure, I had to laugh at our situation.

“What’s so funny?” asked my half-inebriated tennis buddy.

“You do realize we look like a couple of homeless street bums to everyone driving by, right? I mean, look at us. We’re flanked by two ancient-looking bicycles. We’re both wearing t-shirts and shorts that should’ve been tossed years ago. And we’re drinking beer in the middle of the afternoon on a Wednesday.”

“I know,” he said, repositioning himself and sliding his still-soaked backpack under his head like a pillow. “Ain’t it great?”

Now it was my turn to laugh out loud. Harry was right. Not having to be obligated to anyone or anything was like winning the lottery, but still, it would've been nicer spending the afternoon playing tennis with a beautiful woman than a sloppy, silver-haired, five-foot-eight, semi-retired boozer. Despite having an heir of tragedy that surrounded him like Pig Pen's dust in the old Charlie Brown comics, I more than admired my friend of three tennis seasons. He felt comfortable sharing his personal history with me, including multiple divorces and an equal number of failed businesses. But what I remember most about Harry was his love of life—a love that extended to his two daughters, his big family in San Diego, and his passion for white-water rafting. For him, tennis was an outlet for his comedy routines and an excuse to drink. How do you *not* love a guy like that?

“Don't you hate it when these women start badmouthing their exes within 10 minutes of meeting them?” I asked, clumsily steering the conversation back to the wonderful world of online dating.

“Of course,” replied Harry, sounding as if he had burped his two-word response.

“But the opposite can be just as awful,” I cautioned. “I remember having to slip on my invisible lab coat soon after my date began telling me how good the sex was with her last boyfriend. ‘Really? And what made him such a good lover?’ I pried, quietly pulling out my invisible clipboard and pen to collect what could only improve my repertoire in the bedroom.”

“Oh, he was amazing. He’d fly in from San Francisco and get a room at the Grove Hotel. Then we’d make love the whole time,” she beamed. “One time, we didn’t leave the room for three days!”

“Do you still have her number?” joked Harry.

“And some of these ladies are online just to try and sell you something, leaving me no choice but to applaud them for their unique marketing ploy while at the same time admonishing them for having the gall to leverage the innocence of love. I’ve been hit up by realtors, financial planners, insurance agents, and even multi-level marketers like Amway. But the most interesting pitch came from a lady who looked more like the

stereotypical reference desk librarian than a waxologist specializing in hair removal for men.”

Harry laughed while rolling on his side, propping his head up with one arm. Now he looked like an extremely unattractive model stretched out on a fancy French couch, waiting to be sketched. “Oh my God! Please tell me you still have *her* number!”

“Ha-ha, you might be in luck, Sasquatch. I just met her in Nampa a couple of weeks ago,” I said. “Doesn’t all of this online dating seem like one job interview after another? Don’t get me wrong. I understand it’s the result of everyone having a high-throughput mentality, but some of these women take it too far. Like this one lady—”

“I was just going to say, ‘Like this one lady,’” interrupted Harry. “Dude, you have a story for everything.”

“So, anyway, I met this lady at a Starbucks in Eagle,” I continued, “and within five minutes she started calling me by another name, Brad. When I called her on it, she got all

flustered and admitted that she had four first-time dates lined up for the day—and that I was batter number three.”

“That’s crazy!”

“No, that’s not the crazy part. She scheduled all four guys to meet her at the same Starbucks, giving herself 15-minute breaks in between,” I explained.

“I would’ve left right then and there,” interjected Harry.

“Not me. I was fascinated by her plan and what motivated her to turn the magic of budding love into an interview process.”

“She sounds nuts. So, did you get the job?”

“No, but she cuts my hair now.”

“Ha-ha, dude, that’s hilarious. You need to write a book about all these encounters,” laughed Harry while struggling to get to his feet but looking like he was crawling out of a smoldering car wreck.

“I just might do that,” I replied, groaning as I stood up to gather my scattered tennis gear. “But if I do write the book, you’re definitely going to be in it.”

Part IV: Opponents of Love

Once upon a time, in a faraway former life that now feels more like a dream than nostalgia, I was paid handsomely to come up with sophisticated yet easy-to-understand analogies that would help explain highly complex subjects ranging from biological processes to manufacturing procedures to convoluted business practices. For 14 years, I took pride in performing a totally unique function that so few could master. Back then, my success wasn't secured by how clever I was—it was determined by the number of lightbulbs that went off. There was an invisible fist pump when company executives could understand how a master cell bank was created, a moment of relief when an entire manufacturing department appreciated how a tangential flow filtration system separated protein molecules from cellular debris, and a self-administered “attaboy” when the folks from sales and marketing could better explain the differences between the types of clinical trials to their doctor clients. Today, those kinds of requests have long since dried up, leaving me to retool my analogy-making craft to better support my art and writing efforts, which attempt to shed light on abstractions like love, purpose, happiness, and gratitude.

Now, at this very moment, I'm directing my superpower at Chapters 7 and 8 to give you a crystal-clear preview of what's to come in Part IV of *Be Still My Heart*. So, without further ado, imagine that you're driving your car toward a destination called love. It's a winding highway with the typical obstacles and unpredictable weather one would expect from such an ambitious road trip. You let out an audible sigh when, up ahead, you notice an array of online dating apps strewn across the roadway, blocking your progress. You stop the car without pulling over to the shoulder first. You step out of the vehicle and onto the dusty, desolate road. A quick survey of the situation tells you that these impediments to having and sustaining an actual love life could probably be pushed out of the way without having to seek help. Though cleverly disguised and marketed as a sure-fire way to gain access to the most desirable singles (who really want to meet you) without needing to get up from the couch, you know better than to believe the tired sales pitches that have a better chance of matching toasters than human beings. After what felt like a Herculean effort, you're not only rewarded with a passable roadway; you'll be continuing your drive under a pleasant blue dome since the puffy, white clouds inexplicably decided to share the afternoon sky.

Your mood brightens further since, according to the map spread out on the passenger seat, the route will be angling toward the ocean, which is somewhere in the distance on your left. After another hour of driving, you finally catch sight of the telltale haze from a still-unseen surf through the middle of the windshield. Excitement sets in. “It won’t be long now,” you say to yourself over the sound of Captain and Tennille’s singalong “Love Will Keep Us Together” emanating from the dashboard speakers. “I deserve this,” you continue. “I put in the work. I survived all those solo eat-love-pray years. I’m worthy of love. I’m ready to give—” And that’s when you see it—an enormous landslide of societal ills burying the entire roadway underneath a mountain of corporate greed, militarized government control, corrupt legislation, shady propaganda, and the disproportionate distribution of wealth between a tiny elite class of Americans and everyone else. You sigh again, this time louder, knowing all of it is toxic to anything resembling romantic love.

While still able to see the entire mass of shifted earth, you stop the car in the middle of the road to get out, leaving the engine running and the door wide open. After a few steps toward the demoralizing scene, you drop to your knees like Charlton

Heston's character at the end of *Planet of the Apes*. But instead of saying, "You maniacs! You blew it up!" you lament to your maker in the sky. "I don't get it! Who wins when the powers that be make it almost impossible to find and sustain love?"

Chapter 7: Dating Apps vs. Love

Craigslist

Believe it or not, organized online dating has been around since 1995, but instead of arcane names like Tinder, Bumble, or Hinge, it was simply called Craigslist Personals. If today's dating apps could be compared to smartphones, then the now-defunct section of Craigslist would represent the long-forgotten pager. And despite being as utilitarian and clunky as you'd expect from the early days of the internet, Craigslist Personals delivered on both fronts—creating a digital playing field on which men and women could meet each other for a variety of reasons while entertaining voyeuristic sideline dwellers with both subtle innuendo and tantalizing boldness. As an admitted sideline dweller who religiously read the Dear Abby newspaper column before the sports section, I noticed how more and more personal ads on Craigslist were becoming less playfully suggestive and more overtly salacious. It was like going to see the same PG-rated movie every few years and watching the sexual content progressively ratchet up to PG-13, R-rated, NC-17, X-rated, and finally Triple X. And since it was becoming increasingly difficult for us peeping Toms to

sort through, Craigslist came to our rescue by creating categories based on gender, sexual orientation, and the number of people required for a plethora of casual encounters.

Somewhere along the line, maybe around 2010, I lost interest and forgot about the pornographic posts on Craigslist until the spring of 2018, when every major news outlet informed me that the iconic website was shutting down its infamous personals section. Earlier that same year, Congress passed two new laws aimed at cracking down on sex trafficking and was hellbent on holding websites like Craigslist criminally liable if members use the site unlawfully. Although I was well into my third year of legitimately using various dating apps to meet women in the hopes of becoming someone's boyfriend—as opposed to their pimp—the recent news dominated my inner thoughts for days. Suddenly, as if a set of blinders were rudely slapped off my face, I could see that the dating apps on my phone were following the same pattern I observed on Craigslist decades earlier, making me realize that apps like Plenty of Fish, Silver Singles, and Zoosk would, at some point, follow suit. Profile intros, pictures, and text messages were not only becoming more sexually brazen like the posts on Craigslist Personals; they even drew hard lines in the sand to

highlight intolerance of opposing political, religious, and social viewpoints.

Let's continue to keep it real, shall we? Do you really think a multibillion-dollar industry would simply elect to pick up their ball and go home just because of an act of Congress and a handful of potentially dangerous internet trolls? Unfortunately, that would require a sliver of morality and social consciousness. Remember, it wasn't until a law was passed that the bean counters at Craigslist shut down the personals section. Prior to that, there were numerous, well-documented attacks where people were being robbed, kidnapped, sexually assaulted, or murdered after meeting with someone through Craigslist Personals. And by someone, I mean men and women offering wink-wink, exotic services—all of which were going on under the nose of Craigslist for years. My guess is that it was cheaper for Craigslist to nix the personals section than to create and maintain some sort of vigilant watchdog department to monitor and police personal ad traffic. After all, since it was a free service, they were only saying goodbye to some of the money they were making on advertisements—not membership fees. But that's not the case for Match Group, the internet and technology company

headquartered in Dallas, Texas, owners of many of the most successful and recognizable dating apps available. They not only collect advertisement revenue that would dwarf the total annual income of Craigslist, but they also collect a steady stream of monthly membership fees from millions of online users.

So, like it or not, and despite its predictable descent toward an ever-increasing base-nature appeal, I believe dating apps are here to stay. But entrepreneurial greed isn't the only reason we'll continue to live with this unnecessary evil. We, the people, allow this blight to exist and flourish by doing our part in believing whatever our phones tell us to believe. Is it really necessary to order food through a third-party app? Door Dash says, "Absolutely." And do we really need a third-party app to find love? eHarmony says, "It's the only way." Since FOSTA (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) and SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) became laws in 2018, I suspect that the evolution of online dating will become increasingly monitored—even to the point of censorship. That way, we'll not only be using an unnatural tool to find our soulmates, but we'll also be able to follow a script when we do.

Add to Cart

“It was great to finally meet you,” I said, speaking truthfully but knowing I’d never see her again.

“Likewise,” she replied, her perfunctory tone signaling it wasn’t a match for her either.

Claire followed me out through the double doors of the busy French bistro, putting us in the middle of a group of weekend cyclists in different stages of dismounting, organizing, and locking their bikes. I chose the popular breakfast place because of its proximity to the Boise River, thinking we could go for a stroll along the river’s edge if there was a spark over beignets and café au lait. Instead, we exchanged polite goodbyes, acting as if we weren’t surrounded by spandex, incessant chatter, and the clickety-clack sound of bike shoes on cement. After an “I’m okay, you’re okay” hug, I watched Claire walk away, wondering if she’d pull out her phone to text a friend one or two telltale emojis indicating her quest to find Prince Charming was far from over. When she disappeared behind the restaurant, I took that as my cue to start heading back to my apartment.

Like the vast majority of women that I met online, Claire loved everything about her life. She loved who she became in the last few years following the dissolution of a 28-year marriage. She loved her three adult children and was genuinely happy that her 26-year-old son moved back in with her the previous year. She loved her job and the people she worked with. She loved her family, friends, and neighbors. She loved the community she's called home for 54 years. She loved her two rescue dogs and her black-and-white Siamese cat, Mr. Belvedere. She loved her house and the fact that she did half of the remodeling work herself. Like I said, she loved everything about her life—yet was frustrated by the elusiveness of what I'll call the last missing puzzle piece needed to complete her “almost but not quite” picture-perfect life. She needed a man.

At least, that's what I was hoping for. In reality, Claire didn't need a man. After listening to her for over an hour, I got the impression that, in some ways, she was more of a man than I was! Instead, Claire wanted a man—someone who could lift 50 pounds, reach the top shelves, open stubborn jars, scare prowlers away, and be her plus-one at the company Christmas party. Whereas her effort to share her life hinged on finding

someone who could fit neatly into her life like a puzzle piece, I was looking for a woman who would be willing to put her fingers next to mine on the mysterious and unpredictable Ouija board planchette. Where would it take us? A condo in Miami Beach? A ranch house on a five-acre lot in Billings, Montana? Or a life on the interstate in a 25-foot Winnebago? Remember, a completed jigsaw puzzle, like its cousin “paint by numbers,” produces a predetermined picture—the one on the box! However, anything is possible on the Ouija board.

Personally, in the same way that I don’t covet the life of ship barnacles, I’m not particularly thrilled by the idea of needing to be slotted into a woman’s rooted life in order to find relationship symbiosis. Nor would I expect her to shed her pre-relationship world in order to glob on to mine. I get it. In the end, it all boils down to compromise and the belief that we’re all doing the best we can with what’s available to us. Still, I can’t shake the feeling that a “swipe to the right” on Bumble is no different than clicking on Amazon’s “add to cart.” How am I wrong when both reduce the art of shopping and mating to “hard to pass up” convenience, efficiency, and scrolling? Who wants to prepare dinner from scratch when you can microwave it or have it handed to you through a drive-thru

window? Time is the real currency we trade today, and like the dollars that remain after buying the basics and paying the bills, there seems to be so little of it.

As a former, longtime business analyst, I completely understand the logic and rationale behind the for-profit dating apps, but that doesn't mean I think it's wise or even healthy to use them. In essence, after you've completed and submitted your dating profile, you've essentially created a billboard ad and erected it along a stretch of the internet highway. Now, presumably, hundreds, maybe even thousands, are driving by the picture you took of yourself sitting in your car three months ago because you thought you looked cute that day. When the much-anticipated interest doesn't accumulate beyond looky-loos, out-of-staters, trolls, and scammers, you're left scratching your head and wondering why that is. If you ask me, I think the answer is aired during most of the commercial breaks on your TV.

When I read that the pharmaceutical industry accounted for 75 percent of advertisement spending on national TV in the United States, I remember feeling both disgusted and enlightened—disgusted since most countries have laws

against this type of marketing and enlightened because it reminded me that dating apps, like the pharmaceutical industry, are for-profit companies. Whereas drug manufacturers make money by brainwashing people into believing pills solve problems, I believe that the owners of dating apps make money by holding back potential matches to upsell lovelorn hopefuls with false promises of delivering a better brand of person. From my perspective, I can see that when the dust settles, people aren't feeling any better, and they aren't finding viable life partners either. Instead, the self-serving drug and dating app companies are getting richer and richer by the day, and it doesn't have to be that way.

Thanks, Dr. Phil

In the beginning of this chapter, I wrote about the steady decline of the once popular, now fossilized Craigslist Personals toward a cesspool of intolerance, self-righteousness, and debauchery, and that today's dating apps are carrying a similar, if not exactly the same, torch. Did Plenty of Fish force me to create a profile that exaggerated my best attributes while minimizing my less than admirable qualities? Did Silver Singles expect me to have a requirement list so long that only

seven women on Earth could possibly qualify to date me? Did Tinder prompt me to send texts that, if unearthed, would put an immediate end to my having a future in politics or law enforcement? Did OkCupid require me to carry on with multiple women at the same time, giving each of them the impression that they were the only ones?

Am I a terrible person? No, but I admit that I became one for a few years. How was that even possible when my dating history, up to that point, was as pure as the driven snow? Never in a million years could I see myself asking a woman I barely knew what her bra size was—and yet there I was, asking in real life from behind an illuminated phone screen like a grimy little weasel. Had I developed an addiction to chasing lots of women, or did I already have a suppressed alter ego that was just waiting for the perfect conditions to wield dominance over my better judgment? Not to imply that I'm deserving of absolution or a free "get out of jail" card, but, to me, I believe the online dating process makes it incredibly easy for good people to act badly and for bad people to act worse.

And just like we understand that guns don't kill people, we realize that our less-than-becoming online behavior is of our

own doing. We willfully construct and upload inflated dating profiles that are curated, filtered, and utopian-sounding. A four in looks is now a nine. A sedentary reality is replaced with a sudden penchant for on-the-go activities. A one-bedroom apartment near the railroad tracks, a 13-year-old Mazda, and a job at window number five at the DMV qualify as an episode of TV's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. I get it. Even before online dating, there was a tendency to upsell the goods to attract the best possible mate, preferably someone out of our league. And this tendency is alive and well on today's dating apps—except now it's supersized and on steroids.

If my early online dating behavior earned me poor marks, I can accept that, but don't be too quick to assume the higher moral ground since I'm betting we have more in common than you're willing to admit. Right off the bat, within a few weeks of participating in online dating, I found myself treating women in the same manner that I would treat a stack of jeans at a clothing store. You don't take one pair to the dressing room. You take the whole stack. Then, once inside, you'll slide that flimsy bolt to the left, get undressed, and try on the pair that you believe will fit you the best. And if they do, what do you do? You'll try on the rest because you're already half-

naked in the dressing room, and you can make doubly sure that the first pair of jeans are truly the best ones in the stack. You're not only efficient; you're effective. Bravo!

I'll agree. It's a great use of time—if you're at the Gap. Like pairs of jeans, people come in all shapes and sizes. However, unlike America's favorite choice of pants, human beings are distinctly unique, strangely perceptive, and emotionally complex, who, collectively, detest the feeling of being draped over the door of a dressing room—relegated to a sort of dating limbo—while the wearer works their way through the rest of the stack *after* having tried you on. How do I know all this? It's because I've been draped, buried in the stack, and the wearer more times than I can count. If you get a text from your date three to four weeks after what was, inarguably, a terrific initial meetup that reads something like, “Hi there. I just want to let you know I'm finally back from my *business trip* and would love to see you again,” then you were most likely draped. It feels great, doesn't it? If you're like me and petty enough to want retribution for being temporarily ghosted, your only option is to type back, “Who is this?”

And then there's the exhaustion of it all. Prior to the emergence of online dating, the likelihood that a first date would result in a full-blown, exclusive relationship—complete with boyfriend and girlfriend name tags—was greater than 90 percent. At least, for me, it was. As I mentioned earlier in this book, I think it had more to do with things like having common friends and interests, the same employer, a shared religious faith, or even a longstanding mutual crush while running in the same circles. Now we're meeting perfect strangers and saying, "Next!" after our first dates, 90 percent of the time. Imagine how tired someone must look, sound, and act for you to tell them—a complete stranger that you've been face-to-face with for less than 30 minutes—that they need to take a break from all this online dating nonsense. If you can't, it goes something like this:

"Wait. Did you just say that I should take a break from dating?" asked Leslie, setting her second glass of house Cabernet down on the small circular table between us.

“Yes,” I replied, unafraid and expecting the awkwardness that would commence from straight-up, unfiltered honesty, “for at least six months.”

“Oh, you think so, Chuck?” she said, picking up her wineglass and taking a quick sip as if she were topping herself off in preparation for a long debate.

“I know so because I’ve been sitting here listening to you tell me about yourself in a way that seems scripted, memorized, and performed like you’re sleep walking through a sales presentation given who knows how many times. Plus, you’ve told me about how all the men in your life have treated you horribly, stopping just short of saying all men are pigs. I’m not sure you can even see me right now. I’m probably just a blur to you—the next guy who’s going to be awful to you. You’ve got so much in your head that you can’t see you’re sitting across from a decent guy. So, instead of making me feel guilty until proven innocent, like it’s up to me to make amends for all your bad decisions, why don’t you just take a break?”

“Wow. Thanks for your amazing insight, Dr. Phil. Is this what you do? You go around giving people advice they didn’t ask for?”

“Look, a friend is someone who’s willing to tell you something you won’t want to hear. But they say it anyway—with respect, kindness, and tact, of course.”

“We’ll then,” she said, finishing her wine and getting up from the table. “That’s three strikes, and you’re out, Chuck.”

“Wait, Leslie,” I replied, gesturing for her to sit back down. “I’m just trying to be your friend, okay? You know I’m right, so let’s talk about it.”

“Goodbye, Chuck.”

“C’mon, Leslie. Just let me add one more thing. It’s really important. Will you sit back down?”

“Just say it already. And make it quick,” she snapped.

“Spend some time with yourself, getting comfortable *being* by yourself for a little while. Find out what brings you joy and serenity. And instead of wasting that precious time getting tattoos, piercing your face, dying your hair purple, rescuing a dog or two or three, or going all in on social media, maybe you can learn to paint, write a book, play an instrument, study something that interests you, or learn how to speak Portuguese.”

I was bummed when Leslie walked out of the nearly empty neighborhood bar before hearing the last line of my parting words—especially the part about learning Portuguese since it isn’t easy to work that awesome sounding word into every day conversation. I knew I was right to tell her the truth about how I felt. But as I walked back to my apartment in the dark, I still felt disheartened. I wasn’t thinking of Leslie. I was thinking about online dating and that I needed to be done with it—for good. Because it was in that moment that I knew what destroyed Craigslist Personals and what would eventually be the demise of online dating—and it all has to do with base natures. Whereas the base nature of men is to sexualize women, the base nature of women is to shame those same men. And round and round it goes.

Chapter 8: Society vs. Love

Midfield Limbo

Imagine, if you will, the most annoying voice, a condescending singsong voice with a self-important “I told you so” overtone, offering you unsolicited sage advice that you figured out on your own decades earlier. Now with that same voice in mind, here comes the advice you already know: You have to learn how to love yourself before you can love someone else. And, yes, this is what I want to talk about to begin Chapter 8, because it’s hugely important. What’s that? You don’t need a refresher course? Wait! Don’t skip over to the next section. You’ll miss out on my cool football field analogy and my take on how society literally works against each of us when it comes to finding self-love.

I think I came up with the football field analogy while riding past Albertsons Stadium, home of the Boise State University Broncos. Once you experience the field’s signature blue turf in person, it’s impossible to forget. But then again, most, if not all, of my ideas come to me while riding my 18-year-old hybrid bicycle with over 45,000 accrued miles. Moving left to

right, I think learning to love oneself begins on the one-yard line and ends at the 50-yard line, resulting in self-awareness, self-acceptance, and, of course, self-love. And by self-love, I don't mean the tsunami of self-praise we're forced to stomach when scrolling through our feeds on every single social media platform. To me, there's a profound difference between personal pride and flat-out bragging.

Not everyone began their journey to the 50-yard line from the one-yard line. Our starting positions depended on factors that weren't in our control—things like the environment we were born into, who raised us, and genetics. Even the speed at which we gain or lose yardage is different for each of us, much of it depending on who we associate with, the choices we make, and how we react to various stimuli. And, like everything in life, there's no guarantee that any of us will make it to the 50-yard line. But if you do, you'll see me—a weathered old guy with a gray beard looking more like Tom Hank's character in *Cast Away* on his last day on the island than his first one.

“Hey there, old timer,” you'd beam, trying not to compare me to a homeless drifter or gawk at my tattered tent shelter. “So, this is the 50-yard line? I thought I'd never get here.”

“Welcome!” I’d announce, surprised and delighted to have the company—even if it was only temporary. “I have something for you.”

Not knowing if I was going to pull out a knife or a volleyball with a bloody handprint, you’d respond with a tentative, “Okay.”

“Here you go.”

“What’s this?”

“It’s a gold medal. You earned it because so few people get this far.”

“Thanks, but shouldn’t it be a silver medal since I still have 50 more yards to go?”

“Don’t worry, my friend. There’s a platinum medal waiting for you in the other end zone. That is, if you can get there. Now that you’ve learned how to accept and love yourself, the next 50 yards are about learning how to love someone else and to accept their love in return.”

“I get that,” you’d say, “but why are you camped out on the 50-yard line, and how long have you been here?”

“Too long, since the next 50 yards requires a significant other who also wants to take this journey with you. Unlike the previous 50 yards, you or I can’t do it alone. Do you see that bench on the sideline with all those players sitting on it?”

“I do.”

“Those players represent aspects of my personality (and possibly yours) that can’t get into the game without the context of a committed relationship. Let me rattle off a few of their names for you. There’s generosity, loyalty, commitment, compassion, trust, accountability, affection, patience, and forgiveness. Should I keep going?”

“No, I get it.”

“So until I’m worthy enough to attract an equally worthy partner to drive toward the end zone with, I’ll have to stay here and hand out the gold medals,” I’d admit, retreating back into

my sun-bleached tent to continue writing about the virtues of love and relationships.

Realizing that our conversation had come to an abrupt end, you'd offer, "It was nice meeting you, sir, but I never did get your name."

"It doesn't matter," I'd reply, stepping over the lip of the tent floor and lifting the screen zipper up from my bare feet to the top of the worn canvas before disappearing into its shadowy darkness.

What my latest gold medal-wearing friend didn't realize was that he managed to complete a journey of self-discovery despite the efforts of Big Government and Corporate America to stop and tackle him for a loss—maybe even injure him to keep him from realizing that there's more to life than being an indebted, taxpaying consumer. Early on, from around the 10-yard line, he had to figure out that his primary and secondary schooling were nothing more than systematic indoctrination. Then, around the 20-yard line, he'd see that his college education prepared him for the real world by requiring him to rack up a student loan of \$150,000 at a 6% interest

rate *before* having earned a single paycheck. And just when he thought he was going to be pulled down from behind at the 40-yard line by skyrocketing cost-of-living increases, he managed to escape the smothering tackle by foregoing needless material acquisitions and abandoning his belief in the so-called American Dream.

From outside the tent, I'd hear the shout of another successful person who had made it to midfield. "Hello? Is anyone in there?" she'd ask.

Excited to hear the sound of a woman's voice, I'd take a quick peek to see if she's my type. Instead, she'd have pink hair, a neck tattoo, a diamond stud in her nose, and two rescue dogs. "Howdy! I'll be right out," I'd say, taking one of the gold medals off the hook and reminding myself that only a precious few make it this far.

Whoa, Nellie!

If you're a true football fan, there's only one thing better than watching your team march down the field toward the other team's end zone—seeing them do it with methodical

precision. There's an undeniable feeling of satisfaction in witnessing—whether from a seat in the stadium or your living room recliner—the flawless execution of a winning game plan. When performed perfectly, it's poetry in motion—like a well-oiled machine dialed into the steady beat of a choreographed dance number. But if gridiron action isn't your thing, then you've probably experienced the same feeling watching couples dance together on stage or on ice. At times, it can take your breath away.

But what if a football team's entire defensive squad were let loose on that same stage or ice rink—their collective primal brains set only on one brutish objective—to cut down every ballet dancer and figure skater at the knees? What do you think that would look like? Sound like? Or feel like? I could imagine it feeling like I was unceremoniously shoved into a riotous mosh pit from my comfortable aisle seat at the symphony, obliterating the moving sound of a Baroque concerto with heavy metal thrasher music. Not only would I have forgotten that I was listening to Vivaldi's Trio Sonata in C, but I also would've forgotten about the woman who accompanied me to the concert. A bit extreme? Possibly. A setup to further my diatribe about how Big Government and Corporate America

conspire to block you from finding and sustaining healthy relationships? Definitely.

There's a whole new defensive squad that readily charges out of the locker room tunnel and trots out onto the field after you've crossed the 50-yard line—becoming realistic, appreciative, and accepting of yourself as an individual while doing so. These latest defenders are bigger and even more ruthless than the first squad you managed to elude on your way to midfield. They're Big Government's and Corporate America's finest, a new breed of All Americans whose destiny is shamelessly earmarked for the Hall of Shame. In the games leading up to today's Tostitos Lovefest Bowl, these merciless marauders destroyed the coordinated cohesiveness of all the other teams by using the simplest of tactics—divide and conquer. What better way to decimate your opponent than by making them distrust, dislike, and fear one another? Separate them through their socioeconomic standing, political affiliations, religious beliefs, native tongues, skin color, and sexual orientation—reducing the hopeful and once-cooperative pulse of the American people to a dreadful and dystopian cold-heartedness.

Although nothing is off-limits or too sacred to deter Big Government's and Corporate America's insatiable appetite for control, power, and wealth, today's game requires the self-serving tandem to turn men against women and women against men. Their game plan begins with workplace diversity, giving jobs and promotions to people based on gender or ethnicity rather than relevant experience and required qualifications. Next, they'll introduce strict workplace sexual harassment policies and the "Me Too" movement to ensure men feel as comfortable approaching a woman to start a conversation as they do eating lunch by themselves at a playground full of children. Incredibly, we now live in a society where the more assertive gender would rather remain single than be labeled as a creep or, worse yet, a predator for simply wanting to attract the attention of a female. Don't get me wrong. Like every rule-following, tax-paying do-gooder in America, I abhor injustice and violence of any kind. I want nothing other than fair and safe practices that protect and support *every* citizen—not just the demographic that advances the egocentric agendas of our political leaders.

If we were prepared and lucky enough to have met someone significant despite these first waves of attack, our push to the

end zone would still be in the beginning stages. The next step would be to find out how damaged this person is from 25 years of internet access since Big Government and Corporate America long ago figured out how to weaponize it, making it the most powerful propaganda machine ever created. Plus, with its excess of nefarious websites and toxic social media platforms, there's no telling just how much your new partner's mind has been misinformed, deluded, and corrupted. Even the notion of matrimony is suspect, especially since the dissolution of a marriage contract rewards women no matter who initiates the divorce proceedings. As a side note, according to numerous websites reporting the same 2023 figures, women initiate 70% of all divorces in the United States—90% when accounting for college-educated women. Interestingly enough, in non-marital relationships, men and women are equally likely to end the relationship.

With the whistle sounding to end the third quarter, you make a big show of rallying your teammate, even though you feel hopeless inside. Three quarters have gone by, and you're still 40 yards from the end zone. You're bruised, battered, and demoralized, but you've been taught to give your best until the play clock reads double zeros. A splash of cold water on your

face temporarily quiets the negative mantra that's been gnawing on your brain since the game began. In a moment of clarity, an idea surfaces. "Get the ball to the 20-yard line and kick a game-winning field goal in the final seconds," you say, knowing you're deluding yourself. But then again, all relationships, at their very core, are pursuits of delusion.

Game Over

"What? Are you crazy?" she hissed, quickly looking over her shoulder from the huddle to see if any of the defensive linemen could hear her. "That's not even a real play!"

"It is," he insisted, trying to keep his voice down. "It's worth a shot since they're playing so far back in a zone defense; they're practically handing us a first down and more. So, let's run a mister-and-missus-30-year-mortgage-double-crybaby on one. Break!"

"Wait," she stammered. "Are you sure about this? You really want to get married before we're ready, lock ourselves into a contract where we spend most of our lives paying a bank more than what our house is worth, *and* start a family when we both

know we'll be working so much that we'll barely have enough time to take care of ourselves?"

"Exactly!"

Unfortunately, what the young, starry-eyed couple doesn't know is that they're being lulled into a trap from which there is little hope for escape—let alone a touchdown where everyone goes home and lives happily ever after. Clearly, this isn't Big Government's and Corporate America's first rodeo, which explains a shift in its defensive strategy from divide and conquer to smother with responsibility, obligation, and insurmountable debt while they're still in their 20s. Of course, the twin towers of doom will make it easy for them to tie the knot, rack up consumer debt, borrow an unspeakable amount of money from a bank to buy a house that's at least 30 miles from their soul-crushing cubicles, and saddle themselves with mini-mes they can't possibly support financially or emotionally.

At some point, because the couple I'm writing about have drawn the same conclusions as I have, they'll eventually figure out that we're all prisoners—slaves, if you will—within a

societal construct that somehow allows Big Government and Corporate America to control and suppress at least 99% of a U.S. population that's approaching 340 million citizens. Sadly, for this couple and many like them, it will be too late to change course. And to the vast number of Kool-Aid drinkers—those who believe what their phones and TVs tell them—this declaration will seem unfathomable. But with enough historical research, keen observation, and boots-on-the-ground experience, one can only deduce that we're experiencing the same human cruelty that was inflicted upon the poor and working classes of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome.

It begins with an insidious, decades-long campaign to hypnotize and subdue the masses, inundating them with relentless and meaningless distraction designed to shamelessly tempt and exploit their instincts, primal thought processes, and resulting behaviors. We may live in a time where just our cell phones would have made us godlike to the inhabitants of those ancient civilizations, but the illusion of freedom and choice is the same game played over and over again. Today, that illusion is beamed down from orbiting satellites, pumped through fiber optic cables, and wafted over

the airwaves to glaze over the eyes of a mostly clueless population like a poisonous gas. As the financial and power disparity between the elites and the rest of us—those who serve them willingly or begrudgingly—becomes more and more obvious with increasingly dire circumstances for the struggling majority, a kind of national awakening will commence. And when that day comes, the bad guys will be ousted, the good guys will retake the reins, and the once comatose American Dream will come back to life, right? Keep dreaming.

Even if this sobering realization were to happen tomorrow, I believe it's already too late to do anything about it that would resemble order and restraint. That's because, like every professional sports team, Big Government and Corporate America have a collective owner—a powerful elite class who would never allow themselves to be seen sitting in a posh owner's suite inside a multibillion-dollar stadium. Publicity is their enemy, as they are the ones who create publicity—as well as the rest of the news storylines—based off of a carefully manufactured narrative that they produce with their own self-interest in mind. In the simplest of explanations, this tiny, invisible class of Americans not only possesses much of the

wealth and power in this country, but they also own the lawmakers charged with writing and rewriting the tax codes that benefit their corporate behemoths.

What's that? You think you can win back America through a courtroom? By electing a savior into office? Or maybe through an insurgence of some kind? Think again. Remember: The elites own our government, which controls the legal system, banking institutions, prison system, and every form of defense, from the local police to the Marines. So if you're not willing to go against the richest, most powerful, and most corrupt nation in the history of the world—and last all but one second—you'd better return to your place in line, stay quiet, and go back to checking out the porn star wannabe girls on Instagram.

“I can't believe it,” she grumbled. “There's only six seconds left on the clock, and we're too far away to attempt a field goal.”

“I know,” he replied, looking at the goal posts as if they sprouted up from an unattainable promised land. “There's only one thing we can do.”

“Take a knee and end this beatdown?” she asked.

“No,” he replied, squatting down to rub dirt into his sweaty palms. “You know what we have to do.”

“Throw the Hail Mary?”

“No, the other one,” he replied grimly.

“You mean—”

“Yes,” he interrupted, standing up to call the play. “We’re running a magic-eight-ball-pie-in-the-sky-flea-flicker on three. Break!”

“So that’s it then,” she said, staring soberly at her muddy cleats. “We’re simply going to choose to believe that we won’t be railroaded into getting a divorce, that our investments will actually be worth something when we retire, and that we won’t be bankrupted by the American Healthcare System should anyone in our family need medical attention. You’re right. That isn’t a Hail Mary pass. It’s more like three of them in a row!”

“Exactly!”

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Debbie Downer

I don't know about you, but it seems like forever ago when I began this book—writing about a bittersweet yet unforgettable prom night and peppering it with personal insights about what it meant to begin life with a code for love. It was fun there for a while, wasn't it? I'm like the guy who turns on the sprinklers in the middle of a festive backyard barbecue, blurts out the heart-wrenching ending of a movie before it's over, or who tells you how likely it is to contract the diarrhea-inducing norovirus on a cruise ship a week before you set sail for the Bahamas—the original Debbie Downer from those iconic skits on *Saturday Night Live* in the early 2000s. But wait! I'm much worse than that, because I just spent the last two chapters explaining how dating apps and the world, in general, are against you finding and insulating yourself within a loving relationship—a significant layer of protection from a society whose level of toxicity knows no bounds.

How did it get like this? How did we allow this to happen? It all seemed to change overnight—at least it feels that way. I

blame the elite class of this country, along with their two hellhounds, Big Government and Corporate America. But I'd be remiss if I didn't shoulder some of the blame. I should've known that choosing a life of integrity and authenticity—in an Orwellian society of doublespeak that touts “reach for the stars” while offering a narrow definition of success and only one way to get there—would be the hardest road to take. It isn't fair, but I can accept being duped by the false promises of the American Dream. I don't like it, but I can even accept the elite class's shameless gluttony for power, money, and control to secure a lifetime of extravagant wealth for each of their great-great-grandchildren. I get it, because it's the same sickening behavior that's been played out over and over again throughout recorded history.

If you were to get a hold of the elite class's playbook, you'd find it's not that complicated because it's designed to lord over lesser classes of people who've long forgotten how to listen to their own hearts or think for themselves. The plays are conceptually rudimentary but heinous in execution. Hypnotize an already sleep-walking nation into believing they can't cooperate, trust, or tolerate one another. Divide them with incessant messaging that highlights and accentuates their

differences. Distract them with meaningless frivolity, for-profit collegiate and professional sports, out-of-touch celebrities serving as self-appointed role models, reality TV that sensationalizes the mundane and normalizes the hedonistic, and a regurgitated news cycle formulated to both shock and numb at the same time.

In actuality, there's no need to slip on a cat burglar's outfit or a ski mask in an attempt to steal the other team's playbook. The elite class's game plan can be found in thousands, if not millions, of history books. Once you've familiarized yourself with enough of these books, you'll not only agree with my observations of the elite class, Big Government, and Corporate America, but you'll also be able to predict their next moves. Like me, you'll come to understand why the elite class must keep the men of the lower worker-bee classes divided and in constant conflict with one another. And if you're still like me, you'll wonder what's in it for them to divide men from women and women from men.

To me, it doesn't make sense to pit gender against gender since a declining population growth rate only hurts the elite class. Who's going to work alongside the robots in Amazon's

fulfillment centers? Who's going to be shipped off to fight the Russians or Chinese when the current proxy wars cease to line their pockets? What happens next? Will the elites start fighting amongst themselves? You don't have to ask me—the sprinkler valve turner, the movie ruiner, the vacation destroyer, the Debbie Downer—the answers are in the history books.

Yin and Yang

Books can't replace experience. And experience can't replace books. You need both. Sometimes, you have experiences after reading about them. Other times, you read something that explains *what* you've been experiencing, giving you that precious aha moment—and a temporary reprieve from feeling like you're slowly going crazy. That was the case for me in the fall of 2016. After having read *The Way of the Superior Man* by David Deida, I'm pretty sure I stumbled around downtown Boise in a daze, scaring fellow pedestrians and passing motorists, stammering and mumbling things like “That explains everything!” “He nailed it!” and “Why didn't I think of that?”

Once I crudely distilled the contents of his book down to an easy-to-digest, bite-sized nugget, I was ready to pitch Mr. Deida's findings to friends to see if they, too, would agree with his insights. Not only did 100% of my male friends agree with what I had learned, but 100% of my female friends agreed as well. Bravo, Mr. Deida!

“So, what is it *this* time, Chuck?” teased Fran, a woman I had met through an online dating app who I became friends with soon after we discovered romantic chemistry just wasn't in the cards for us. “Did you finally figure out the antidote that'll make men and women need each other again?”

“No, but I read something that explains *why* they don't. It's really interesting. Do you have time now for me to tell you about it?”

Fran promptly got off her bike and leaned it against the back side of the bench between the bike path and the Boise River before taking a seat. “Something tells me you won't take no for an answer. So, let's hear it.”

“Awesome!” I blurted, leaning my bike against one of the many birch trees thriving along the river bank. “I *know* you’re going to find this interesting. Plus, I want to know if this theory makes sense to you.”

“Go for it,” she urged. “Just remember that I have to be home by four. I don’t want to miss the beginning of the Academy Awards.”

“Doesn’t it start at six?”

“Yes, but I like seeing everyone walk the red carpet before the show starts.”

“Oh, that’s right. I like that, too,” I said, sitting down next to Fran. “Okay, I’ll make this quick. For relationships to work—especially romantic relationships—they need to be highly polarized. And by polarized, I mean there needs to be a strong feminine presence and a strong masculine presence. And since gender doesn’t factor into the equation, this would be true for gay and lesbian couples, too. Like the Chinese symbols yin and yang, feminine energy counterbalances masculine energy, and vice versa. What do you think so far?”

“I don’t want to be rude, but ‘duh.’”

“It gets better. I promise. Oh, and since we’re both straight with a tendency to embrace traditional gender roles, I’m going to continue explaining this using a fictitious couple as an example, where the woman is feminine and the man is masculine. But remember, this works for gays, lesbians, *and* straight couples where the woman is masculine and the man is feminine. And when I say “feminine,” I don’t mean she wears dresses, paints her nails, or cries easily. It means she does everything through a lens of love. It’s her feminine center. And masculinity isn’t about ruggedness, big muscles, or being stoic. It’s about doing everything out of a sense of purpose. That’s *his* masculine center. If you were to put both centers on a ruler, love and purpose would be on the one- and 12-inch lines, respectively. That’s the polarization I was talking about. Can you see that image?”

“Yes, Professor Trunks. I wonder what Lady Gaga will be wearing tonight.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t miss a minute of the Oscar’s pregame,” I assured her. “If you’re like me, you’re probably

wondering what relationship polarization looks like and what it means to be in a relationship with the yin and yang of a strong feminine center coalescing with an equally strong masculine center.”

“Right now, I’m imagining every cover of a Harlequin romance novel.”

“I know you’re joking, but you’re not too far off,” I said. “You know you’re polarized when you want to hold hands all the time, eat from the same side of the booth, and want to be in each other’s presence as much as possible since togetherness is what charges your emotional batteries. And, as for the feminine and masculine centers, let me explain it this way: Let’s say our polarized couple is expecting a baby, and they’ve decided to paint the baby’s room a shade of yellow. Both would be as proficient as the other in regards to painting, but the woman, in this case, would be thinking about how their color choice will help promote the baby’s happiness and motivation, while her husband would be recalling that yellow-colored bedrooms only add to the resale value should they decide to move.”

“I can totally see myself as that woman,” admitted Fran, getting up to remove a Gatorade bottle from the cage on her bike frame. “So now, I just need to find a guy who understands that masculinity involves having a strong purpose. Gee, Chuck, that won’t be too hard to find!”

“I hear you, but believe it or not, most relationships start off with high polarity—especially when each person is comfortable enough to relax into their natural inclination to be either masculine or feminine.”

“What do you mean by ‘relax into being either masculine or feminine?’ Isn’t that a predetermined trait like height or bone density?”

“Awesome question, Fran. It *is* predetermined. But everyone is born with both a masculine side and a feminine side, with a tendency to be more dominant in one over the other—sort of like being right- or left-handed. If your dominant right hand were to accidentally find its way into the business end of a wood chipper, you’d have to start learning how to use your left hand, wouldn’t you?”

“Nice image, Chuck. So, is it possible for someone’s naturally stronger feminine or masculine side to be shut down, forcing them to rely on their less dominant side?”

“Did you really just ask that question, Fran? Nobody asks that question. Wow!”

“Really? What’s so great about it?”

“You just set me up to explain why most relationships are destined to fail in this kind of society.”

Stuck in Neutral

It was unusually quiet for a blustery Sunday afternoon in Ann Morrison Park, but then again, it was overcast with a wind chill that made it seem much cooler than the 60 degrees that my iPhone was reporting. Other than an occasional passerby riding a bicycle or scooter or walking a dog or two, only the early spring wind could be heard rustling through the still-naked trees like a mother trying to rouse her sleepy children for school after a night of peaceful slumber. Even the nearby ducks weren’t quacking, a noise I find impossibly comical

every time I hear it. Despite sitting so close to the river's edge, it was easy for Fran and me to hear each other over swift-moving ice melt that was eerily quieter than the hum of the white noise machine I fell asleep to each night.

“How are you doing on time, Fran?” I asked, pulling the sleeves of my windbreaker down to cover my bare forearms. “I’m fast approaching the homestretch of yet another episode of *The World According to Chuck*.”

“I’m actually liking this episode,” admitted Fran, who seemed unfazed by the random wind gusts that felt like they came straight from Antarctica. “It’s better than listening to you rant on and on about tipping, dogs, taxes, education, Facebook, billionaires, fake news, healthcare, and inflation. Should I keep going?”

“Gees, when you put it that way, you make me sound like the quintessential get-off-my-lawn guy. Well, every neighborhood needs one, so I guess that’s me. Do you want me to finish telling you about the feminine and masculine centers and how relationships are doomed in this kind of toxic

society? Or do you want to listen to me rant about our current gun laws?”

“As much as I’d like to hear that rant, I’d rather you continue with the current one. Who knows? You might shed new light on why my 23-year marriage ended eight years ago.”

“Awesome. So let me begin by telling you how romantic relationships *used* to end in the context of the feminine and masculine dynamic,” I teased, hoping Fran would take the bait.

“Wait. What do you mean by ‘how they *used* to end?’” asked Fran, clearly succumbing to the ploy and even mimicking how I emphasized the word *used*.

“I knew you would ask that,” I replied while repositioning myself on the bench. “Just be patient and hear me out. Way before Big Government handed the keys of our nation to the elite class and Corporate America—and before we found ourselves living more of a meaningless virtual life than a real one—romantic relationships would typically begin to unravel as soon as the masculine-centered partner lost sight of their

purpose, which in turn impacts the overall purpose of the relationship. If you recall our traditional straight couple example and the ruler metaphor, the man in this case would be drifting away from the 12-inch line and slowly gravitating toward the feminine-centered side of the ruler.”

“Oh, I know why,” interjected Fran. “Because he’s a crossdresser, right?”

“Umm . . . no,” I replied, trying to stay on point. “It’s impossible to pinpoint the exact reasons why a naturally masculine-centered man can lose sight of his purpose. But from my perspective, it seems to happen to a lot of men after having established a career, tied the knot, bought the house, and had the kids. He’s achieved everything that was expected of him from day one, yet it can breed complacency—a void that leaves him no choice but to get in touch with his feminine side.”

“I just now thought of this,” said Fran. “Isn’t it weird how you never hear about women wanting to get in touch with their masculine side? I wonder why that is.”

“If you’re asking me, I think it’s a lot easier to lose one’s purpose than to fall out of love. So, when the feminine-centered woman in our example feels her man begin to vacate the post of his purposeful center, she begrudgingly has to leave the comfort of her center of love to remind him of his obligation to lead. The mere act of nagging her partner’s passivity allows her to meet him at the center of the ruler—a place of unsatisfying neutrality where passion for closeness is reduced to being coparenting business associates living as roommates.”

“Oh my God! I think you just described the last 10 years of my marriage.”

“I wish I could take the credit. I’m merely quoting what I’ve recently learned in a book I found at Barnes and Noble. In any case, doesn’t it seem like this exact scenario describes the beginning of the end for the majority of failed relationships?”

“I’d have to agree with you, Chuck,” admitted Fran. “But if that’s how relationships *used* to unravel, how does it happen now?”

“This next part is based on my own observations, since the author of the book I just read published it in 1997. So, these next thoughts take into account how technology helped capitalists decouple society from anything resembling spirituality, security, enlightenment, personal growth, health, and community. Are you still willing to listen to my personal take on all this?”

“Man, you’re one deep guy! Although I’m enjoying this, promise me you’ll be done in 20 minutes and that you won’t mention anything about dogs.”

“Okay. How about if I finish in 10 minutes, but I can mention dog *owners*?”

“Nice try, Chuck. You’re down to 19 minutes.”

Separately Together

“It’s not like today’s relationships are dissolving in a *completely* different way,” I admitted to Fran, the two of us side by side, lazily tossing smooth-to-the-touch river stones the size of grape tomatoes into the frigid water. “If we stay

with the earlier example of a traditional couple where the man is masculine-centered and the woman is feminine-centered, it's still the man who typically loses focus first. And in today's social climate, he's more likely than ever to become confused—detached from an unknown passion he feels inside—by the brainwashing he received as a young boy to always feel the need to incessantly work and strive for the illusion of success. All his life, he's been conditioned to earn a college degree, work for a corporation, get married, buy a house, have kids, mow the grass on Saturdays, pursue material wealth, and worry about social status.”

“Gee, Chuck,” huffed Fran, throwing a rock toward a trio of boulders surrounded by white water. “Why don't you tell me how you *really* feel?”

“I know it sounds terrible, but you know I'm not wrong,” I answered, looking at my watch. “Believe it or not, that's not the worst of it. Do you remember when I talked about how a highly polarized relationship was like starting out on the opposite ends of a ruler? The masculine center of purpose would be on the 12-inch line, while the feminine center of love would be on the one-inch line.”

“Yes, of course I remember. How could I not? That’s when all the kissing and snuggling happens, right?”

“You’re funny. Yes, and no. Feeling amorous doesn’t necessarily require high polarity, but things like intimacy, bonding, vulnerability, and emotional connectivity do.”

“Gotcha!” blurted Fran while searching for more stones to throw. “But why are you bringing that up again?”

“It’s important to mention, because I don’t think today’s relationships start off with that kind of high polarity. When you factor in more than two decades worth of invasive technology, rampant corporate greed, rising divorce rates, shrinking birth rates, a vanishing middle class, and the lack of investment in individuals, marriages, families, and communities, I believe you end up with a nation of men and women—regardless of their sexual, religious, or political orientations—who have no choice but to live in the center of the ruler while they’re forced to toil their singular lives away in order to have basic needs met. Today, I feel like I’m surrounded by exhausted, defeminized, single mothers and emasculated, lonely, depressed men.”

“Umm, I think you should add a few beers to your Oscar night, Chuck. I say this as a friend who cares.”

“Ha-ha. But I’m not quite through explaining why current relationships end differently these days.”

You mean there’s more bad news?” asked Fran, who seemed to be trying to hit a blue and yellow Twisted Tea can caught on a low hanging branch partly submerged in the rushing water.

“To me, there are three major factors that help explain why relationships unravel differently today than 30 years ago, and I’ve already covered two of them. I mentioned how masculine-centered men are even more apt to lose or never know their underlying purpose in life and how relationship polarity has gone from starting out with a bang to tepidly stumbling forward with mild interest. Can you guess what’s coming next?”

Without looking at me or losing focus on the aluminum can, Fran answered by sarcastically saying, “Hmm. Let’s see. You’ve blamed men. You’ve blamed the dynamic *between*

men and women. It's a total shot in the dark here, but I'm going to guess that women are next on the chopping block."

"Ding, ding, ding! You're right, but please try to remember to phrase your answer in the form of a question," I joked while trying to strike the can before Fran with my own stash of rocks.

"Sorry, Alex. I meant to say, 'What's wrong with today's women?'" teased Fran, sensing the competition and upping her rock-throwing attempts to rapid fire.

"It's like this, Fran," I began. "The women of today aren't that much different than the women from 30 years ago or even 80 years ago. They all want and need the same thing—babies and the necessary security with which to raise them. But today's women are more likely to be feminine-masculine hybrids—even more so if they're college educated—who don't need masculine- or feminine-centered men *after* they've obtained their biological offering and legal rights to their past, present, and future earnings. With a family court system that awards them the kids, alimony, and child support, who can blame these indoctrinated and brainwashed hybrid females for

initiating the vast majority of divorces in this country? Of course, there are many instances when a divorce is the absolute right decision for a variety of sad and understandable reasons, but from my perspective, it seems like most of the reasons stem from women simply not feeling as happy as they think they should be.”

“Wow! It’s amazing you’re still single, Chuck,” laughed Fran, striking the tin can with a loud pop as if adding an exclamation point to her half-serious remark.

“Don’t forget,” I cautioned. “It’s all about the statistical bell curve with me. Roughly 10% of relationships between men and women are much better—or much worse—than what I just described. My rant disclaimer is that I’m talking about the 80% hump in the middle of the diagram. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.”

Fran was already putting on her gloves and getting ready to get back on her bike when she said, “I need to introduce the two of you. Alcohol, this is Chuck. Chuck, meet alcohol. Ha-ha. I’m just playing with you. The truth is, I really can’t argue against any of the points you’ve made. It’s all so depressing

when you lay it out like that. That's why I just want to go home, sit on the couch with my dog, eat toaster pizza, and watch people I'll never meet walk down a red carpet talking about things that don't matter."

Last Words

I watched Fran ride away, knowing she'd soon be making a sharp right turn onto the narrow foot and bicycle bridge, taking her up and over the Boise River and toward her home in Garden City. Her pace was sluggish at best, a result of having cooled down to the point of stiffness. Or, even more likely, she was feeling the weight of hopelessness that comes from listening to a Debbie Downer prattle on and on about the societal woes that plague modern life by reducing things like self-actualization, contribution, leisure, empathy, and love to an ugly winner-take-all competition for survival. I didn't mean to make her feel bad, but then again, I reacted the same way after discovering we're all living in a dystopian nightmare that somehow jumped from the cautionary pages of fiction to real life. In time, like me, she'll come to realize that the elusiveness of long-lasting love, supportive family members, true friends,

meaningful work, a permanent residence, and enough money to live on is not entirely our fault.

As I headed in the opposite direction toward Bown Crossing on Boise's eastside, I relished the idea of riding alongside the river underneath a mostly empty canopy of red maples, honey locusts, black cottonwoods, and western white pine. Despite the pleasing distraction of the mingling and interlocking branches high above my head, my mind kept circling back to the conversation with Fran. It's one thing to be able to explain the reasons behind why we're all witnessing and experiencing the same outrage from having been tricked into believing that all work and no play is virtuous, but it's a completely different story to know what to do to fix a society that, in my opinion, is fractured beyond repair.

Not too long ago, I figured out that masculine- and feminine-centered men and women need the context of smaller communities in order to find and sustain the love that eludes us all. If Fran were to ask me how I would go about making that happen—a question most loudmouths get from time to time—I'd probably try to redirect the conversation toward Boise State football or a new place to go biking. Having

learned a long time ago that people don't like Debbie Downers—especially Debbie Downers in overdrive who know what they're talking about—I wouldn't be able to tell her that we're too far down the rabbit hole at this point and that the answers she's looking for have been grimly recounted in numerous history books.

As it still happens from time to time, my old friends paid me another visit when the bike path angled toward Parkcenter Boulevard, allowing me to happily ride through an uninterrupted half mile of dense forest. "It's always the same," I mumbled to myself. They always seem to make themselves known when I'm alone, in deep thought, and under a darkening sky—their heavy trunks anchoring crooked branches that welcome rather than frighten me. The trees have always looked over me.

Cheer up, Charlie, they said.

"Do you think it'll ever happen for me?" I asked.

Oh, yes, it will. And when it does, you'll be over the moon in love, they promised.

“Be still, my heart,” I said sarcastically, suddenly realizing I knew better than these optimistic old trees.

The End

About the Author

Chuck Trunks is a writer and artist who grew up in suburban Philadelphia. After earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology from North Carolina State University, Chuck had a successful 19-year career in positions ranging from genetic engineer to software developer to business analyst at Amgen, Inc. in Thousand Oaks, California. During his tenure in the biotech industry, he traveled extensively throughout the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean. For inspiration, he bicycles, runs, and reads whatever he can get his hands on.

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