

Spot Me



A Gym Memoir
Chuck Trunks

Spot Me: A Gym Memoir

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Nampa, Idaho

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Edited by Emily Faye Cothran

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First printing 2025

ISBN 9798263997731

Library of Congress Number 2025919681

If you're struggling with having to pay monthly fees to a gym or wondering why you even have a gym membership in the first place—you're not alone. More than five years ago, I reached my breaking point and added the commercial gym experience to my ever-growing list of things I used to do. Now it's right up there with voting, air travel, concerts, movie theaters, and most restaurants.

If the corporatization of gyms didn't turn them into soul-crushing places like Crunch Fitness, 24 Hour Fitness, and Planet Fitness, then the phone-laden, headphone-wearing members did. Besides their homes and work, Americans used to have a third space to go to—like gyms, coffee shops, parks, and recreation centers—to find community and forge friendships.

Spot Me: A Gym Memoir is my eighth book, and like the seven that came before, it's comprised of a handful of true stories that serve as gym-related testimonials, each supporting my expressed opinions about the country we live in.

“I want to thank me for believing in me. I want to thank me for doing all this hard work. I want to thank me for having no days off. I want to thank me for never quitting. I want to thank me for always being a giver and trying to give more than I receive. I want to thank me for trying to do more right than wrong. I want to thank me for being me at all times.”

—Snoop Dogg, Hollywood Walk of Fame acceptance speech (2018)

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

—Chuck Trunks

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Preface

Somebody once asked me, “You never run out of stories, do you?” As one who never feels comfortable assuming or accepting the notion that I somehow live a charmed life unobtainable by mere mortals, I gave the same answer I’d given to others who also tried to put me in rarified air. “There’s nothing special about me,” I said. “Other than the fact that I can be totally present in any given moment, I’m no different than anyone else.” And, depending on my mood that day, I might mention the last line uttered by Matthew Broderick in his role as Ferris in the 1986 movie *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*—“Life moves pretty fast; if you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.”

“Oh, so that’s what inspired you to be more mindful of the present moment?” they’d ask.

“No, it wasn’t,” I’d admit. “I like the quote, but I came into this world prewired to naturally invest in moments from the get-go. Like my height and eye color, I can’t take credit for having this kind of mindset. I was simply born this way.”

But the fact of the matter is that I *do* have a never-ending supply of stories—only because, to me, the most captivating, beautiful, and devastating aspects of life inhabit these seemingly insignificant timeframes. What may be inconsequential to some—like what someone does with their hands during an uncomfortable silence or how they respond to a buzzing phone in the presence of others—is monumentally important to me. But again, I can't take any curtain calls because I'm naturally attracted to these tiny spaces; it's both an advantage and a curse to be this way. Even as I was writing this preface, yet another story unfolded in front of me when a four-year-old fell off his electric scooter while trying to wave back at me during my morning run. His seven-year-old sister turned around on her scooter and reached her stunned little brother before I did. Watching her tenderly console and comfort him not only made my heart swell, but it also inspired me to immortalize the incident in a future writing project.

Whether these moments offer heartwarming, worrisome, or disturbing insights about the world we live in, I believe they make stories worth telling. That's why I put my life on hold once again to write another book, *Spot Me: A Gym Memoir*. Since I spent so much of my life going in and out of

commercial gyms, I amassed a vast, untapped resource of stories to choose from. It was difficult, but I settled on seven true events for *Spot Me* because I believe they're entertaining, relatable, and in keeping with the conclusions I've drawn about today's America. Spoiler Alert: Guess what? It shouldn't come as a surprise, but what stripped our society of community, families, tolerance, cooperation, compassion—and sadly, even conversation—are the same evil entities that systematically extracted fellowship and comradery from commercial gyms.

It is with both a heavy and hopeful heart that I offer you what I consider to be my best work to date—*Spot Me: A Gym Memoir*.

Introduction

I've been a keen observer since before starting elementary school in North Hollywood, California, in 1970, back when friends and neighbors called me Charlie. If you've read any of my other books, you'd understand why it was crucial for me to gather information and watch for patterns. I wasn't the first, nor will I be the last, kid to grow up in an abusive and unhappy household. Back then, my physical and emotional well-being not only relied on being able to predict what was about to happen but also on discovering why it would *keep* happening—over and over again. After leaving a miserable home life in 1982, I couldn't help but sharpen the survival skills I was forced to adopt as a child. However, as an adult, the observation and pattern recognition skills that protected me from cruel and sadistic people inside and outside my childhood home were now helping me to successfully navigate the world.

And these skills factored into my receiving academic honors in college as well as a successful 19-year career at a top biotech company in Los Angeles. Moreover, the ability to acutely observe, gather information commonly overlooked by

others, and recognize patterns is paramount to analyzing the social issues I tend to write about and how I present them. When I picture my mind, I envision an antique card catalog cabinet with dozens of drawers. Like the one I remember from my high school's library, it's made of solid oak and meticulously organized. But instead of it being filled with references to every book in the entire library, *my* imagined cabinet contains only those memories of experiences that moved me emotionally. For example, I have no recollection of either my high school or college graduations, but I have vivid flashbacks of things like the dignity etched on a nine-year-old's face as she climbed out of a mud puddle after falling into it in front of a crowd of onlookers or the shame I felt for having been caught gossiping about a former boss who gave me a chance when no one else would.

When I come across a social pattern that's strong enough for me to think of it as a fundamental truth, I want to write about it and share it with as many people as I can. But in order for me—an unknown without a podcast or celebrity endorsements—to win readers over, I have to be totally transparent, sharing true stories from my past that are relatable, pertinent to the message of the book, and most

importantly, entertaining. I begin the work by mentally scouring through my entire catalog of stories, eventually settling on a handful of seemingly unrelated events and situations that meet the book's criteria. Oftentimes, the selected stories don't share the same locations, characters, or even decades. By the time I've finished the book, I typically end up with story chapters that read as if I were writing them from the driver's seat of a *Back to the Future* DeLorean. And if that isn't enough to keep the readers on their toes, I tend to write about the past when the story is already set in the past—just like in *Back to the Future 2* and *3*! Thankfully, I've yet to garner any complaints, but I do make it a point to specify my age, the year, and location where appropriate.

Spot Me: A Gym Memoir is my eighth book, and like the seven that came before, it follows a similar formula. The seven true stories comprising much of this book serve as gym-related testimonials, each supporting my expressed opinions about the country we live in. The book opens and closes in a little church gym in Columbia, South Carolina. In between those first and last story chapters, I'll take you to two gyms along Philadelphia's Main Line, another gym in Camarillo, California, and a couple more in Idaho. Along the way, we'll

visit a famous estate, get a workout on the Las Vegas Strip, and putter around a junkman's backyard. So, what are you waiting for? The DeLorean is warmed up and set to 2024 in Columbia, SC (Chapter One); 1978 in St. Davids, PA (Chapter Two); 1983 in Ardmore, PA (Chapter Three); 2019 in Boise, ID (Chapter Four); 2010 in Camarillo, CA (Chapter Five); 2022 in Nampa, ID (Chapter 6); and 2025 in Columbia, SC (Chapter 7).

Hop in! We mustn't be late! There's a mean boss lady waiting for us in the Christian Life Center. Let's not tempt fate and make her madder than she already is. What do you say? Ready to go?

Chapter 1: The CLC

What Would Jesus Do?

Just when I thought I was home free, I heard it—the sickening sound of an “Excuse me!” laced with palpable contempt and unwavering self-righteousness. Although it was directed at my back, I knew exactly who hurled it like a chalkboard eraser at a middle schooler caught dozing in the back row. For a split second, I thought I could just keep walking away, pretending not to have heard what sounded more like an insult than polite discourse. But after a second, even louder, “Excuse me!” I knew she wasn’t the type to demur and read between the lines, since that would require a modicum of emotional intelligence, a shred of femininity. There were no two ways about it; she would have her pound of flesh—even if it meant climbing down from the stepmill and chasing after me to get it. I stopped in my tracks, letting out one of those long sighs that make your shoulders go up as you breathe in and drop dramatically on the exhale. I kept my eyes on the gym exit—a pair of double doors situated between two mounted whiteboards adorned with inspiring handwritten Bible quotes like “I can do all this through Him who gives me strength

(Philippians 4:13)” and “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes (Ephesians 6:10).”

“Oh my god,” I groaned under my breath, my back still facing her. “I almost made it out of here.”

But did I really have a chance? Of course, I didn’t. Having spent a large portion of my life in and out of gyms, I’ve accepted that I’m no match for female gym rats between the ages of 25 and 65 whose insufferable bravado says, “I’ve got one, too, and it’s bigger than yours!” They’re self-appointed boss ladies hellbent on patrolling the free weights, group classes, and cardio machines, sniffing for the slightest male infraction like a shark honing in on a drop of blood. But I’m never impressed with their willingness to create confrontational scenes with men two or three times their size or their fearlessness to go toe-to-toe with them. Their pathetic brand of boldness is fueled by a pathological need to cut men down to size, knowing they can act with impunity from behind a convenient double standard. Personally, I make it a practice not to tell other men to restack their weights or to stop hogging the cable machine because, like most guys, I’m aware of my

place in the pecking order—somewhere between “fragile” and “do not bend.”

I begrudgingly spun around on my heels, careful not to step toward the grinding stepmill machine and looking as if I had been summoned by Her Majesty for a public scolding. For the past five minutes or so, while using the nearby lat pull-down machine, I watched her out of the corner of my eye, putting up with her dramatic huffs and grunts as she wiped down the stepmill machine more than once, making sure I was well aware of how displeased she was with the condition I had left it in. Now, I was looking directly at her for the first time. Well, actually, I was looking *up* at her as she climbed on the perpetually revolving staircase. She wore a white tank top over light blue running shorts that matched the color of her eyes. She was fit and lanky, her wavy, shoulder-length, blonde hair gathered in a loose ponytail with a black velvet scrunchie—a look reminding me of a girl’s field hockey coach at a blue-ribbon high school somewhere in Connecticut.

“Were you on this machine earlier?” hissed the 50-year-old, her face scrunched up like her hair into a twisted, accusatory expression that gave away her thirst for shaming.

I knew I was in the wrong for having missed sopping up two puddles of sweat on the base of the console's support post—a location near the bottom of the contraption, a place not even the soles of her Adidas would ever come in contact with. I had wiped down the machine's handrails, console, and both heart rate monitoring handles using disinfectant sheets from an adjacent wall-mounted dispenser, but I was still technically wrong for having left evidence of my earlier workout—and the “blonde belittler” would see to it that I was summarily admonished. I hated the way she looked at me even more than how she spat the rhetorical question. Her air of superiority contrasted sharply with the smiling 70-year-old woman carrying two-pound weights on a neighboring treadmill while watching a man in bib overalls install a storm door on HGTV. The etched conviction on my adversary's face looked totally out of place—especially in the midst of low-key octogenarians lumbering from one machine to the next, secretly relishing their independence from assisted living.

“I think you know the answer to that,” I countered, suddenly noticing a “What would Jesus do?” poster behind her and thinking she had not one but two better options than her current poor choice. She could have used the stepmill and

focused on something other than my two coaster-sized pools of sweat or opted for an unoccupied treadmill, elliptical, or stationary bike. Instead, she *had* to have the stepmill and to position herself as judge, jury, and executioner.

“You’re supposed to wipe the machines after you use them,” she snapped, looking at me as if I had desecrated one of the many displayed crosses and crucifixes.

“I did,” I said, making sure to limit my verbal output to the bare minimum, since contentious types like her will predictably try to use every word against you.

She quickly looked down at the sweat puddles near her churning feet in dramatic fashion, huffing in a way that said, “You liar. I’m looking at your nasty sweat right now!”

By mid-huff, I had already turned around and started heading toward the gym exit, putting an end to my unwanted participation in this woman’s incessant need for personal vindication via unladylike boldness. However, she did manage to shout something mean, mostly unintelligible, at my back before I made it out of earshot. I picked out words and

sentence fragments one would expect to hear from someone who couldn't forecast the awkward discomfort that'll ensue every time we cross paths in the foreseeable future. "So rude," "disgusting," and "reporting you" hung in the air like unpleasant smells in a truck stop bathroom.

Without turning around, I raised my right arm and said loud enough for her to hear, "Ask the front desk to pull the tape."

The Cutest Little Things

Six months earlier, in May of 2024, I pulled into the Christian Life Center parking lot, thinking about the last time I had worked out in a gym. Since it was the same day that Kobe Bryant perished in that terrible helicopter crash, it wasn't difficult for me to remember exactly where I was when I first heard the shocking news. That was back in January of 2020 when I was already flirting with the idea of cancelling my membership to Axiom, a full-service gym with three locations across Boise, Idaho's Treasure Valley. Weeks later, after pulling the plug, I told a few of my old friends in California and North Carolina that I was officially done with public gyms and that I had no plans of returning. They were aware of my

obsessive-compulsiveness when it came to daily cardio routines but still sent supportive texts anyway, saying things like:

I don't blame you, dude. I read somewhere that gyms are breeding grounds for the virus.

What took you so long? I stopped going a month ago when they kept running out of hand sanitizer.

Perfect timing. There's talk about making everyone wear face masks while working out. That's crazy!

Naturally, they assumed the burgeoning COVID-19 pandemic was the reason behind my decision, but that couldn't have been further from the truth. Had I let them in on my secret, I most likely would've instead read things like:

Why do you let stuff like that bother you? It's just the way things are now.

Dude, stop living in the past. People are busier than ever these days. They don't have the free time you have.

It's like you're trying to find problems everywhere you go. Isn't exercise supposed to lift your spirits?

Choosing not to be honest with my longtime friends wasn't their fault. How could I expect them to understand how much I had changed since being laid off in 2007 after a 19-year career from a company that many of them still worked at? Corporate layoffs didn't just separate you from a steady paycheck and reliable health insurance; they stripped you of your friends, a social life, and, ultimately, your identity. Whereas their problems stem from real-world machinations such as mounting job responsibilities, meeting college tuition demands for sons and daughters, and bitter divorces after 30-plus years of marriage, my issues with the world are often disregarded as nice-to-have problems—problems centered around love, belonging, purpose, self-esteem, and self-actualization. I didn't turn in my Axiom key fob because the fake news convinced me to join in the mass hysteria over a viral bogeyman; I left because the gym atmosphere was breaking my heart.

As soon as I stepped out of my truck, I heard what sounded like music to my ears—a cacophony of shouting, squealing,

and laughing coming from behind a wall of shrubbery and a wrought iron fence. It was the sound of children in perpetual motion—pleasing peals of happiness—that made me walk across the parking lot to see what all the commotion was about. If they weren't climbing on something, they were riding three-wheelers around a rubber track that included a pretend rest stop and gas station. A four-year-old girl with wild blonde hair was riding her bike against the flow of oncoming tricycles, causing the biggest disturbance in the outdoor romper room. By the expression on her little face, she looked positively pleased with the resulting mayhem. *Apparently, the Christian Life Center operates a day care service, too.*

Even though every license plate in the parking lot was bordered in navy blue with silhouettes of crescent moons and palmetto trees, I still found it startling to think I had moved to Columbia, South Carolina, a week earlier from Nampa, Idaho. From inside, an older lady raised a finger at me from behind a large concierge desk as soon as I attempted to pull on the heavy glass entrance door, the universal sign indicating I needed to be buzzed in first. *Apparently, the Christian Life Center has reasons for controlling who enters the facility.* The lobby was warm and welcoming despite two imposing

screens: the video display unit above her head and the desktop monitor obscuring half her smiling face. From the way she dressed, wore her hair, and applied makeup, I could tell the 70-year-old valued respect over attention. A pair of wire-framed glasses hung loosely around her neck, held in place by a delicate silver chain, making her eyewear look like jewelry.

“Well, hello there. How can I help you?” she drawled, reminding me once again that I was truly in the Deep South.

I smiled back at her and did my best to ignore the various call-to-action church announcements that kept popping up on the massive video display. She radiated a sincere kindness, her expression an honest mixture of equal parts anticipation and amusement, making me think she loved her job. “I recently moved to the area, and I’m interested in joining the gym,” I announced.

“That’s great,” she beamed. “I knew you weren’t from around here.”

Feeling like it was okay to joke with her, I stepped back from the desk and said, “Really? What gave it away? Was it the

orange and blue Boise State Football polo? Or the ball cap with the words ‘Idaho’ and ‘Gem State’ on it?”

“How funny! I didn’t even notice what you were wearing. I guess it’s the way you carry yourself. My name is Annabelle, and I’d be delighted to show you around.”

“Nice to meet you, Annabelle. My name is Chuck.”

As she was about to get up from her chair, a trio of ladies carrying pickleball rackets appeared from around the corner. Each looked to be of retirement age, in decent shape, and impeccably outfitted in tennis garb the color of poorly dyed Easter eggs. While Annabelle attended to what sounded like a scheduling issue, I noticed a caravan coming my way from the other side of the lobby. Two young girls wearing face masks, presumably from the day care center, pushed two cartoonish-looking red buggies toward me, each fully loaded with six buckled-in two-year-olds whose astonished faces explained their dangling arms and legs. I smiled and waved profusely as each plastic cart rolled past, burdening the little tykes with having to acknowledge my existence. All I could do was laugh along with the two caregivers as all 12 impossibly tiny humans

ignored me. And before I could say something clever like, “Story of my life,” or “Hey! I’m a person, too, you know!” I saw Annabelle break from the pickleball ladies.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“I surely am,” she replied brightly while noticing the day care parade in the distance. “Aren’t they just the cutest little things?”

Signs, Signs, Everywhere a Sign

It wasn’t until Annabelle steered us toward the elevator that I noticed a splint wrapped around her left thumb and that she had a slight limp. I gestured toward the clump of white tape on her hand and asked, “Are you sure you’re up to this?” while wondering how she could still grip an oversized iPhone with it. She began telling me every detail that led to her falling off a step stool in the kitchen two weeks earlier, including why she had to rely more on her ex-son-in-law for help rather than her more than capable daughter. As she transitioned into medical speak, parroting back verbatim what her doctor had to say, my eyes drifted over her shoulder and into the

gymnasium, where three raucous pickleball games were going on simultaneously. At first, I thought it must be a lady's league until I spied a couple of older gentlemen in the mix. They were twice as big yet much slower than their counterparts, who showed no signs of their advanced ages—darting and dashing like the day care kids I'd seen earlier.

“Do you play?” asked Annabelle, taking note of my momentary rudeness while stepping into the elevator.

“No, but I'd like to,” I replied, sheepishly. “I played tennis for years, so maybe it'll be a painless transition.”

As we ascended to the second floor, Annabelle told me that besides pickleball, the Christian Life Center offers basketball and the usual assortment of women-centric classes, including aerobics, Pilates, yoga, and Zumba, as well as a handful of “tone this and sculpt that” programs—none of which my antisocial personality would ever allow me to attend. She went on to explain that even though the center is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, it wasn't necessary to be a church member to join the gym, allowing me to mentally cross off one of my questions for Annabelle. She winced and reached

for her right knee when the elevator came to a jolting stop, which made me repeat my earlier question, “Are you sure you’re up to this?” She ignored me and pulled out a wad of keys from her jacket’s front pocket.

“If you decide to join, you’ll need one of these key fobs to get around,” she said, stepping off the elevator and making a sharp left toward a pair of double doors, each with a small square window.

While she sifted through a jumble of keys more befitting of a janitor than a receptionist, I took in all the signage plastered on and around the heavy doors. Most of the postings were laminated printouts. A few were carefully handwritten like afterthoughts at the bottom of an important letter typed too hastily—each reminding returning gym members of key Bible quotes, upcoming closures, and conduct expectations. “I think I’m going to like this place,” I said, stepping aside to let Annabelle release the electric door lock.

“How do you know? You haven’t even seen it yet,” she cautioned. “You might find it under-equipped and too small.

Our little church gym can't begin to compare with those big fitness clubs up there in Forest Acres."

"That should be your number one selling point!" I countered, yanking the door open for Annabelle after the lock made a clicking noise. "So far, nothing remotely resembles anything I've seen in those soul-crushing places. Corporate America has taken over everything, and gyms are no exception. And when those money-worshipping snakes wormed their way between us and treadmills, any sense of friendliness, fellowship, and community went right out the window."

I should have known better than to go off like that. I followed Annabelle through the door, immediately regretting what I had just said, since most people would rather play it safe and banter about weather, sports, or vacation plans. My guess is that, by now, most everyone knows Rome is burning—and reminding them of it only serves to sour their mood and make me look even more like a Debbie Downer. Luckily, my self-loathing didn't last but five seconds. While tapping her left ear, Annabelle said, "I'm so sorry, Chuck. What did you say? I don't hear so well out of this one anymore."

Relief permeated throughout my body like a sip of ice-cold Pepsi on a hot summer day. I had dodged a self-inflicted bullet from my big, fat mouth, preserving my chances of still coming off as fun-loving and easy-going. “It wasn’t anything earth-shattering,” I lied. “I just like how unique this place is.” At only two steps from the double doors, I found myself standing in the outermost lane of a suspended three-lane running track that circumvented the gym’s perimeter and offered a sweeping panorama of the entire facility—including a bird’s-eye view of the pickleball games below. Since the track was empty, I maneuvered past Annabelle toward the innermost lane to run my hands along the polished oak handrail and loom over the noisy midmorning players. A mixture of fluorescent and natural light flooded the scene, with the enormous rooftop skylight providing the bulk of the illumination.

While Annabelle straightened stacks of brochures, pamphlets, and flyers on the plastic folding table next to the doors, I caught a player looking up at me. When I met her gaze, she frowned and quickly looked away, making me aware of my voyeuristic vantage point. I stepped back into the middle lane to fight the urge to antagonize her further and spotted cardio machines positioned along the painted cinder block wall on

the two shorter sides of the running track. *Uh-oh. Is this all they have—two stationary bikes, three recumbent bikes, a couple of rowing machines, and a lone elliptical trainer?* Once again, my angst was short-lived when I noticed an alcove on the other side of the track. “Is that the main part of the gym?” I asked, motioning toward the dim recess.

“Yes, it is,” replied Annabelle, who looked satisfied with the table’s arrangement. “That’s where we’re going.”

I started toward the alcove but didn’t get very far. “You need to know this about the track,” she continued, pointing at a laminated sign underneath a clock that reminded me of the ones I watched in middle school. “We walk in this direction on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and the other direction on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Of course, we’re closed on Sundays.”

“They certainly run a tight ship around here,” I mumbled, thinking that all these rules and regulations are most likely the reasons why I hadn’t seen anyone under 60. “Personally, I’ve had it with gym members who need to always make it about themselves.”

“What’s that? Who makes it about themselves? Remember? My ear?”

I waited for Annabelle to catch up with me and replied, “I was just saying that splitting up the walking direction like that has probably saved countless hips, knees, and ankles from injury—especially the knees.”

I made it a point to walk at Annabelle’s gimp pace, giving me ample time to take in more of my surroundings. I counted eight banners made out of the same dark blue vinyl fabric unfurled and fastened to the track railing, the white lettering on each touting more Bible quotes instead of the typical homogenous ads from local predators like insurance agents, wealth management advisors, and real estate brokers. I don’t know how I missed it before, but a 20-foot-tall wooden cross hung on the far wall above one of the recumbent bikes. Beneath it, a laminated printout caught my eye. That’s when I noticed similar white signs had been posted above each of the cardio machines around the track area. As I approached a stationary bike positioned near the entrance to the alcove, I read the sign affixed above it out loud: “Please limit your exercise time to 30 minutes when others are waiting.”

Just then, I felt a hand tap my upper arm. “What was that?” she asked yet again.

I turned to face Annabelle without a hint of annoyance and smiled. “I said I wasn’t going to just *like* this place; I’m going to love it.”

Old Folk Heroes

“Now that’s something you don’t see every day,” I said, loud enough for Annabelle to hear as we walked into the alcove.

“Isn’t that the truth?” she added. “Those stepmill machines aren’t the easiest to come by—at a decent price, that is. She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

“That she is, but I was referring to the French doors letting in all that natural light,” I replied, striding closer to the paperback-sized window panes and noticing a bricked terrace on the other side with three unoccupied redwood tables placed equidistant from one another. Each possessed two matching chairs and a maroon canvas umbrella sprouting from their centers like imprisoned little trees. “Do people from the gym

sit out there sometimes?” I asked, already envisioning myself quietly reading, meditating, or outlining my next writing project in the secluded space. When I didn’t hear an answer, I turned around and found Annabelle talking to a man sitting on a leg extension machine.

“Chuck, this is Stewart. He’s 86 years old and practically never misses a day at the Christian Life Center.”

“Impressive. Nice to meet you, Stewart,” I said, thinking he looked like the type who preferred anonymity over attention and head nods over handshakes.

“You as well,” he answered back, briefly meeting my eyes before returning his gaze toward Annabelle.

Stewart appealed to me instantly—as does anyone who appears incongruent with mainstream conformity. His pale blue eyes had a pleading quality about them, like he had a lot to say yet couldn’t find the words. He wore a sweatshirt over a sweatshirt and still looked emaciated. Surprisingly, he thought it best to wear shorts, revealing translucent legs so spindly that I was reminded of the skinny wiffleball bats I used

as a kid to swat tossed acorns into the De Palma's front yard across the street. Out of politeness, I waited while he and Annabelle exchanged pleasantries. He spoke in wheezed sentences of no more than three to six words at a time, as if his lungs weren't capable of delivering enough juice for more. And though I had only been around Stewart for less than a full minute, I already felt like I could impersonate him—especially since he whistled his esses. When I watched him speak, I was oddly transfixed by his remarkable full pink lips, making me and other straight men admonish ourselves for inexplicably wondering how soft they were.

Annabelle grimaced and reached for her knee as she sat down on the leg curl machine behind her. “Chuck, why don't you look around on your own while I visit with Stewart for a few more minutes? It's not like you don't know your way around a gym.”

The alcove's fitness area, a rectangular space illuminated by the brightness of the adjacent gymnasium and the aforementioned French doors, felt cozy—thanks, in part, to the nylon Berber carpeting that appeared worn but well taken care of. If the fitness area were a football field, Annabelle and

Stewart would be catching up on the 50-yard line. To the right of them, there were dumbbells, kettlebells, mats, exercise balls, a chest press, and a universal multi-function weight machine, featuring a lat pull-down station. To their left, I counted four treadmills, each of a different brand, and one hulking stepmill—its menacing height and black matte finish making it look like the alpha machine of the lowly treadmills. Once again, laminated signs dominated the wall space throughout; however, they shared it with several disinfecting wipe dispensers mounted strategically near the cardio and weight machines. There were the usual “Limit your exercise to 30 minutes” and “Please wipe down machines after use” signs, but I especially liked the yellow placard underneath the suspended flat screen: “Do not change channel from HGTV.”

“Finding everything to your liking?” chimed Annabelle. She had returned to her feet but was still rubbing her right knee gingerly.

“I am,” I replied, motioning toward a steep staircase leading up to what appeared to be a loft with the lights turned off. “What’s up there?” I asked.

Annabelle nodded at me and placed a hand on Stewart's shoulder. She leaned toward him and said something that made him laugh. "They put three more elliptical machines up there. You're welcome to go up and have a look. The light switch is on the left at the top of the stairs."

"No, thanks. I'm good."

Suddenly, Annabelle began waving at someone behind me. *Huh? Other than Stewart, I hadn't seen anyone else in the alcove.* When I spun around to see who was there, it all made sense. A diminutive older lady, probably in her late 70s, stood in a brightly lit storage closet underneath the loft. While one hand clutched a tattered *People* magazine with a younger Pierce Brosnan on the cover, the other waved back at Annabelle. She wore a pair of glasses whose angular frame matched both the color and severity of her Prince Valiant hairstyle—a mixture of black, gray, and silver, the color of gravel. Almost immediately, my eyes gravitated to the bold lettering underneath her oversized navy-blue cardigan. She had on a white t-shirt featuring a cartoon graphic of an open book and the words "Read a book." I watched her hastily

return the magazine to a stack of similar periodicals on a shelf in the closet and shuffle past me to greet her friend.

“It’s your lucky day, Chuck,” beamed Annabelle, limping toward the little gray-haired reader. “My two favorite people are here today. I want you to meet another hero of mine.”

I thought they would hug. But when they met in the shadow of the towering stepmill, they just stopped and smiled at each other. As I closed the 20-foot gap from the foot of the staircase to where they were huddled, I noticed that the reader lady wore an impish expression, like she was on the cusp of saying something really funny but needed a straight man to tee it up for her. Now, I could envision her enjoying the attention that would no doubt come her way from wearing a t-shirt that practically solicited commentary. With a stature of under five feet wrapped in clothes two sizes too big and a grin that never left her face, Annabelle’s miniature hero looked both prepared and equipped to jump into the fray of lighthearted banter at a moment’s notice.

“Chuck, I’d like you to meet Jean,” said Annabelle, lifting her injured hand, palm side up, as if she were presenting a freshly

baked soufflé and saying, “Ta da!” “She’s another fixture in the Christian Life Center.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” I said, making no effort to shake her tiny hand. “I like books, too.”

“What’s that?” asked Annabelle, leaning toward me and cocking her head to the side.

“He said, ‘He likes to read, too,’” offered Jean. “It’s because I’m wearing this.” The pint-sized gym fixture stepped back and opened her cardigan in the same manner as a Central Park flasher, which made me laugh out loud.

Annabelle laughed with me as we both looked at her friend. “You and your t-shirts, Jean. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen this one before.”

“You haven’t seen it because I just got it at the library gift shop in Lexington,” Jean explained, pulling her cardigan tightly around her bony shoulders as if she suddenly felt a chill. “Have you been to that library—the one on Augusta Road?”

“Excuse me, Jean,” I interrupted, looking at her and then back to Annabelle. “Are the locker rooms nearby? I need to use the restroom.”

“Locker rooms? There aren’t any,” she replied, gesturing toward an exit between the chest press and a rack of dumbbells. “But there are bathrooms through that door over there.”

“Okay, thanks,” I said, walking toward the exit and taking in a hodgepodge of signage plastered on and around the dark wood door. There were the usual posts decreeing gym hours, upcoming events, emergency contact numbers, Bible quotes, “open door slowly,” and “don’t forget to collect your belongings,” but one particular sign stood out to me: “Did you leave the gym area neater than how you found it?” *Was I about to walk through a door in a gym or the resource room of my elementary school from 50-plus years ago?*

“Bye, Chuck! I’m leaving now!” shouted Jean. “Great meeting you!”

I turned toward the two ladies, who looked to be on the brink of parting ways. “You as well, Jean,” I said while catching the mischievous twinkle in her eye, daring me to add something clever. Instead, I told Annabelle I’d be back in a moment and pushed through the door. And like so many times before, when it was already too late, I came up with the perfect zinger—at least perfect for someone born in the 1940s. Had I thought of it sooner, I would’ve said, “Hey, Jean! Don’t take your t-shirt’s advice while using the treadmill!”

That would’ve brought the house down.

Little Ceasars

By the time I returned to the alcove’s quiet mishmash of exercise equipment, a space that smelled and sounded like the waiting area at my dentist’s office, Annabelle had reseated herself on the lat pull-down bench while Stewart held what appeared to be the smallest kettlebell of the bunch in front of a mirror midway between the chest press and French doors. He held the modest weight with both hands in front of him like a husband relegated to purse-holding duties outside an Ann Taylor dressing room. As I watched him lower himself

repeatedly from the knees, his back stiff and straight, he looked more like someone detonating dynamite with one of those old-timey mine-blasting plungers.

“Are you ready?” asked Annabelle. “Have you seen enough? I’d better get back to the front desk.”

We both said goodbye to a grimacing Stewart, who vapidly ignored us, acting as if *we* were the targets to be blown up for disturbing his concentration. Despite his hot and cold nature, I had to hand it to him; how many rail-thin 86-year-olds were doing routine kettlebell sumo squats without a personal trainer, physical therapist, or geriatric nurse in sight? I wanted to tell Annabelle that I hoped to be as dedicated as Stewart when I got to his age—but thought better of it. We both knew I was just as disciplined and had been for as long as I could remember—a dedicated lifer among the other relentless gym rats, distance runners, calorie counters, and waistline monitors.

Just when I thought we were leaving the alcove, Annabelle abruptly stopped in front of a waist-high cabinet, whose countertop organization wasn’t to her liking. From the posted

signage on the two cabinet doors, I made a mental note to remember where to look should I or anyone around me need first aid—anything from Band-Aids to baby aspirin to the electrified paddles of an emergency defibrillator. While she dutifully gathered, sorted, and stacked what looked to be duplicates of the same reading material collated on the folding table near the entrance, I had time to notice that the church had installed an above-average number of conspicuous surveillance cameras throughout the gymnasium and fitness area. As my head swiveled from one smoke-colored dome to the next, I imagined a sleepy monitoring officer suddenly springing to life to capture screenshots of a dubious guy in bright orange and blue garb looking like he was casing the joint for security blind spots.

“Okay. That’ll do for now,” admitted Annabelle as she backed away from the counter. “Let’s walk out the same way we came in.”

We retraced our steps along the suspended polyurethane track, moving slowly enough for me to grow increasingly agitated by its unearthly color—an irksome amalgam of unnatural shades of jade and teal. Since no one was using the track or

the cardio machines against the walls, I turned my attention to the spirited pickleball games on the gymnasium floor below. On the far court, a kindly old grandpa just completed an aggressive overhead smash, sending the orange plastic ball careening off the shoulder of an open-mouthed grandma before ricocheting toward a small group of onlookers gathered underneath one of the half-dozen basketball hoops. I watched four gray-haired seniors politely tap their pickleball racquets over the net on center court, prompting a new foursome of elderly matrons to commandeer the coveted playing space. However, the real action was on the near court, where I listened to shouts of “I got it!” “Let it go!” and “Nice shot!” Adding to the theatrics, I also heard fits of dramatic self-deprecation: “What’s wrong with me today?” “Sorry for playing so badly, Monica!” “What are you doing, Candice? Get your head in the game!”

“So, Chuck, you’ve said some kind things about our little gym, but you haven’t mentioned whether or not you plan to become a member,” pried Annabelle, stepping onto the elevator, her limp more pronounced.

“If you had to guess, what do you think I’ll do?” I teased, following her inside and pressing the button for the ground floor. I leaned against the back wall of the elevator, folded my arms, and awaited her response.

“I think you’re going to sign up right now.”

“Really? What gave it away?” I chaffed, continuing to poke fun at Annabelle. “Tell me, is it because of the bounce in my step? Or the tears of joy welling up in my eyes? Or maybe you put two and two together after watching me pull out my checkbook?”

“*Everybody* is a comedian around here,” huffed Annabelle, pretending to be annoyed. After walking out of the elevator, she showed me where to sign in and out of the gym with a key fob that would soon find its home on a silver ring between my house and truck keys. “I’ll need to take your picture and have you sign a few things. Don’t worry. They’re mostly routine waivers,” she added.

While Annabelle rifled through the drawers of her desk, removing forms and a little tin box with the words “front desk

petty cash” scrawled over peeling masking tape, I saw an opportunity for redemption. A fresh crop of buckled-in two-year-olds lumbered toward me; their over-engineered carriages would have looked straight out of Ancient Rome if they were painted gold instead of red. The same two mask-wearing girls pushed the future emperors from behind, like trusted slaves of the reigning aristocracy.

“Watch this,” I announced to Annabelle. “I’ll get at least one of these baby Caesars to wave back at me. They totally ignored me last time, but now I know what I did wrong.”

Annabelle was hunched over her keyboard, her face inches from the large monitor in front of her. Without looking away from the screen, she asked, “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“I said, ‘The little emperors are rolling this way again.’”

“Uh huh. That’s nice,” she replied, still staring into her screen. “I’m trying to open the camera on this thing so I can take your picture.”

My mind raced with ideas as the two plastic chariots approached the front desk. My self-esteem, even my sense of well-being, suddenly depended upon one or more outstretched arms of doll-like toddlers, whose upturned or downturned thumbs would decide my mood for the remainder of the day. “Would you look at this?” I declared. “The universe is giving me a second chance.” I didn’t think it was possible, but I managed to lock eyes with all twelve bewildered little faces, allowing me enough time to execute an idea that would bring me the redemption I so desperately needed. Instead of simply waving and saying something hilarious that even the caregivers wouldn’t get, I stole a few lines from one of Disneyland’s most iconic amusement rides.

“Well, shiver me timbers! Thar they be!” I bellowed. “Ahoy there, lads and lassies! Remember to keep all hooks and peg legs inside the cart until the ride comes to a complete stop!” Their dead-eye stares and overall lack of empathy reminded me of DMV employees and most customer service representatives. Soul-crushing as that was, I still sang the last line: “Yo-ho, yo-ho, a pirate’s life for me!” Again, the stone-faced mini monarchs left me high and dry. Without a single smile or wave to reward my willingness to play the fool, what

else could I deduce? The verdict was in: I was either guilty of being wildly pathetic, or the little judges were high on Capri-Suns and Pop-Tarts and couldn't appreciate comedy gold even if it was delivered on a silver platter.

"That was awesome," laughed the girl pushing the first comically big cart.

"These kids must be talent scouts and booking agents," I joked, looking at Annabelle, who was no longer fiddling with her computer.

"Brutal crowd," she deadpanned.

"Don't take it personally," offered the girl pushing the second cart. "They just woke up from their naps."

"Then there's still hope," I beamed. "Quick! Take my picture, Annabelle, while I still have a shred of dignity left."

Senior Class

When I wasn't bombarded by the sound of squealing preschoolers wafting across the center's parking lot, I walked toward the adjacent day care, peeking over the wrought iron fence, between two birch trees, to once again look at its outdoor play area. This time, abandoned tricycles, scooters, Big Wheels, and wagons littered the kidney-shaped racetrack. Motionless spring riders appeared catatonic without their lively 40-pound jockeys—the giraffe, rabbit, and toucan looking particularly bummed out. Hula hoops, kickballs, and heaps of colorful little jackets eerily lay underneath monkeyless monkey bars, in front of a frozen seesaw, and beside a wooden swing set whose canvas seats twisted ever so slightly in the barely noticeable late-spring breeze. Logically, I knew the children were somewhere inside the building, but I couldn't help imagining they were vaporized from existence, like in a science fiction movie where all but humanity remains after a global apocalypse, where a pandemic actually *does* kill everyone.

As I drove out of the parking lot of the Christian Life Center, I felt different. Even the sound of my keys rattling against the

truck's steering column sounded different, a "clinking" rather than the more familiar "clanking"—no doubt a direct result of having added the gym's key fob to my key ring soon after saying goodbye to Annabelle. While doing my best to avoid the potholes on North Timberwick Road, the agreeable weather prompted me to roll down both the driver and passenger windows; yet, despite 70-degree weather flush with the fresh scent of blooming magnolia trees, I couldn't shake the foreboding scene of the empty play area. The evidence of life without the requisite humanity reminded me of the last several gyms I frequented before calling it quits more than four years earlier. Now, I was more like the fitness-minded loners I'd see shuffling along the patchwork of crumbling sidewalks outside my kitchen window, except I'd be running—without a dog, cell phone, or earbuds to subtract me from the here and now.

What once was a welcomed sanctuary away from the frenetic and taxable world of profit-driven everything—a respite from the near-constant pinging of needy cell phones—public gyms have become the equivalent of an inert, soulless Starbucks, where a sense of community means having access to the Wi-Fi password. Gone are the days when actual friendships

materialized on the gym floor through shared interests and goals—a time when we could interact and even look at one another without being labeled as threatening or creepy. If anything should be deemed creepy, it's the remote worker crowd and social media addicts who migrated from their tables at Starbucks to the cardio and weight machines inside public gyms. Together, they brought their exclusive bubbles of self-isolation, plugging themselves in with earbuds, eyewear, and phones with front-facing cameras and playlists—their faces masked behind muted expressions of indifference.

Unlike the deserted play area shrinking in my rearview mirror, the gyms I used to go to were always full of bodies; yet I felt like I was the only one present—I'd have a better chance of acknowledgment from the overhead TV than the person on the treadmill next to me. But that was all about to change. My time with Annabelle, Stewart, and Jean offered hope that it was still possible to find community and fellowship while investing in health and fitness—and that I wouldn't have to trade one for the other. The Christian Life Center was less like a church gym and more like a senior center full of people who could remember when friendships began serendipitously and organically—a golden age when one's reputation and intuition

weren't reduced to an online footprint and a background check. Like most people born in the 40s and 50s, they're not only excellent rule followers, but they're also good at ensuring that others follow them, too. And as a consummate believer in the metaphorical adage "When in Rome, do what the Romans do," I like this underappreciated characteristic of the salt-of-the-earth types—it keeps the riffraff out.

When I heard the sounds of heavy construction, I made a left on Sylvia Drive from the heavily patched median of North Timberwick Drive. Doing so allowed me to exchange the inevitable stop-and-go traffic from an approaching waterline project for serene views of stately brick ranches and split-level houses on lot sizes more appropriate for six-bedroom mansions. The late morning sun was directly overhead, causing inky shadows to take cover beneath their sources for an hour or two, giving me more than enough time to fully appreciate the lime-green lawns and sangria-red homes tucked underneath thickets of no-nonsense oaks, stoic maples, and sympathetic dogwoods. Of course, the utopian-looking properties, leafy canopies, and shimmery ponds along Sylvia Drive were pleasing to the eye, but I came for her curves.

However, my lust for a high-speed serpentine thrill would have to wait for another day.

Just when it was time to punch the gas, a 2006 Lincoln Town Car pulled in front of me and promptly gathered and maintained a speed of no more than 25 mph. As is customary when someone drives 15 mph or more below the speed limit, I tailgated the clueless driver mercilessly, hoping he or she would get the message and speed up so the free world wouldn't come to a grinding halt. Up ahead, the Gingerwood Road intersection would offer an opportunity to get an up-close view of the yo-yo driving the beige four-door sedan with the distracting floral-patterned tissue box on the rear deck. If they continued straight on Sylvia Drive, I'd be in business, since I'd be making a left from a separate lane at the three-way stop. Sure enough, as soon as I pulled up to the stop sign and looked to my right, I saw an ancient relic behind the wheel—a bony octogenarian wearing a blue runner's cap with a Nike swoosh on the side and a bright yellow polyester t-shirt. He wore a bulky black watch with a digital face and appeared to be traveling with a small canvas gym bag on the passenger seat. On the other side of his car, beside a flowering lilac bush, I noticed a posted speed limit sign I hadn't seen before—it said

25 mph, reminding me of another memorable maxim: *Be careful what you wish for.*

Chapter 2: Phoenix

The Wrong Side of Town

By the time I was 14 years old, I had already accumulated a growing list of neighborhood places that I did my best to avoid and forget about. To dodge having to experience repeat performances of past traumas, each anxiety-inducing locale was meticulously plotted on a mental map that continued to expand like a heavy drop of water on a paper towel. Even if I had been able to push the memories of violent helmet-to-helmet collisions and spine-jarring muggings out of my brain, my sister's Schwinn Breeze bicycle reminded me of them as soon as I rode past Cowen Park on Radnor Road. *Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!* The three-speed's temperamental front fender alarmingly began rubbing against the rolling tire. In an instant, gruesome flashbacks of football practice from three years earlier came flooding back in vivid detail—including the sobering moment my alcoholic father decided that I was no longer a son worth investing in:

“What do you mean you quit the goddamn team?” His menacing tone frightened me more than usual, as he spat his

question with palpable anger and disgust. My wild-eyed father stared at me as if I had told him I wanted to wear a skirt and be a cheerleader for the team. It wasn't like him to meet my eyes. Now I knew why; they were sad and bloodshot, making him look both wounded and dangerous.

“I turned in my uniform to Coach Fran last week,” I replied while feeling the collective relief from my mother, brother, and two sisters—that they weren't in his drunken crosshairs that evening at the dinner table. “Coach Fran agreed with me,” I added.

“Of course he would,” said my father, infusing the already uncomfortable dining room with pointed sarcasm. “Nobody wants to be around a quitter—only losers are quitters!”

“What happened?” whispered my mother, directing the question at me while looking at her keeper to gauge what the rest of the night would be like.

The eye contact—or lack thereof—around the dinner table spoke volumes of a family that lacked symmetry. While my mother and siblings looked at me, I stared at the side of my

father's face as he focused on his pickup truck in the driveway. The muscles in his jaw gave away his restlessness. Perhaps he was planning a beer run after dinner? Guilt washed over my 11-year-old conscience when I secretly hoped he'd get pulled over by the cops or, better yet, crash into one of the many deciduous trees in suburban Philadelphia. Witnesses would tell the first responders that they heard a loud crash followed by the sound of a continuous horn blast. They'd explain how they cautiously approached the smoldering wreckage and found a man slumped over the steering wheel. They would insist on offering details: "He wasn't moving," "He appeared to be dead," and "There were a bunch of empty beer cans on the floorboard."

"I got a concussion," I began, pausing my daydream at the point where an EMT covers my father's face with a white sheet after the coroner notates the time of death at 9:47 p.m. "At least that's what Coach Fran told me. After I threw up, he made me go back to the locker room. The next day, I couldn't remember walking from Cowan Park to Saint Katherine's or how I got home that afternoon."

“Everybody gets their bell rung every now and then,” interrupted my father. “They deal with it and move on. They don’t quit!”

“I missed a week of practice before telling Coach Fran that I didn’t want to play anymore,” I continued. “I told him I wasn’t cut out for football, and he agreed with me. He said it’s important to have that killer instinct on the field; otherwise, football isn’t very fun if you’re running scared all the time.”

My father pushed back his chair and stood up so abruptly that all five of us flinched in unison—the sound of metallic mid-century chair legs against 20-year-old linoleum adding an exclamation point of dread to mark the end of another family dinner best forgotten. “I’m done with this,” he announced. “Christopher, don’t be like your brother.”

“But, Dad, that wasn’t my first concussion,” I pleaded to my father’s back.

He spun around with the expression of someone who enjoyed adding salt to open sores. “If you haven’t been going to practice, then what the hell have you been doing after school?”

“I don’t know. I went over to Jay’s house yesterday and—”

“I want you to clean up the woodpile and restack it before I get home tomorrow,” he interrupted. “Oh, and wash the tarp, too, but make sure it’s dry before putting it back on the wood. Since you can’t handle playing football, you’ll be working around here after school. But unlike Coach Fran, I don’t tolerate quitters.”

An increase in the rattling fender’s cadence interrupted my unhappy thoughts and brought me back to the task at hand. I gained more speed leaning into a right turn onto Willow Lane, followed by a quick left onto North Aberdeen Road. For now, the ghosts of Cowan Park were behind me. Up ahead, elevated train tracks, running parallel to Lancaster Avenue, bisected the treeless street lined on either side with wooden rowhouses in varying degrees of disrepair—their tiny front yards deemed off-limits by sagging chain-link fences. If I rode under the tracks connecting 25 miles of suburban sprawl with Philadelphia’s Center City and crossed Lancaster Avenue, I’d be at my former school, an established Catholic compound anchoring a corner of the better side of town. Instead, my ride would come to an end on *this* side of the tracks, keeping me

within a blue-collar neighborhood of tradesmen, truck drivers, and construction workers. I had recently heard of a new gym where it was possible for me to blend into the background unnoticed—a place where high school bullies and my father wouldn't find me.

If it weren't for the daunting sounds emanating from two open front-facing windows, I would've ridden past the Phoenix Gym, a one-story building of gleaming white stucco without signage to indicate it wasn't just another construction staffing agency or a tradesmen office. I heard heavy objects thumping against the floor, iron plates clanging against one another, grown men grunting as if being tortured, and Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Gimme Three Steps" blaring from a stereo. The unnerving din found its way inside my ears, cautioning me to rethink my plan. *Do I resign myself to the cruelty of my peers in the high school weight room? Or should I accept the belittling nature of my father as "tough love?"* Given the current set of circumstances at school and at home, I found myself locking my sister's bike to a railing separating the gym entrance from the small parking lot.

The noise intensified as I approached the heavy wooden door, reminding me of more than one movie scene where a hapless nerd mistakenly walks into a raucous biker bar, attracting the attention of Neanderthals holding pool cues and beer bottles. I had heard that by grunting explosively, it was possible to lift more weight, but the guttural releases from the other side of the door sounded more like they were coming from actual cavemen. But the prospect of remaining the object of ridicule for sadistic classmates and an abusive bully of a father made me feel like I had no other choice. I pushed the door open and heard one of the oversized troglodytes shout toward an area of the gym I couldn't see, "Eh, yo! Dom! There's someone at the door!"

Dominic

I should've been alarmed by how dark it was inside the cramped neighborhood gym, but by the time I had reached puberty, I was already comfortable with anything that kept me in the shadows. Back then, before my winning behaviors turned self-defeating, I made it a point to stay out of the spotlight at all costs, realizing early on that the less people knew about me, the better. The Phoenix Gym was comprised

of two large quadrilateral rooms. A rectangular area contained a half dozen weight benches, two squat racks, two fixed-weight barbell stands, and two racks of dumbbell sets ranging from 10 to 60 pounds each. A square-shaped room housed the lower body and cardio machines. There were two leg presses, two leg extension machines, a leg curl machine, and a calf press on one side of the room and two stationary bikes as well as a low row machine on the other. A total of only four windows—two in each room—gave the sweaty space a hazy ambience of low light, locking in mildewy smells you'd expect from the bottom of soggy hampers.

Having finished my first year of high school a couple of weeks earlier, I wasn't surprised to count only four people inside the gym at 11:00 a.m. on a Tuesday—two that I could see in the larger, rectangular room and two more I could hear in the smaller one. The hulking figures in front of me made me think of the girls in my freshman class who most likely called each other at night to make sure they wore similar outfits the following day. But instead of matching acid-washed jeans and cowl neck blouses over camisoles, both men wore skimpy running shorts and threadbare t-shirts with the sleeves ripped off. They even stood the same way—with arms akimbo,

looking at a cable machine I hadn't noticed before. Like mechanics confounded over an engine that refuses to turn over, the two bodybuilders appeared to be either confused by the apparatus or seriously calculating their next moves. With mainstream media saturating TV and magazines with images of Arnold Schwarzenegger and company at Gold's Gym in Venice Beach, California, I was unfazed by the duo's puffy bulkiness and overly tan physiques.

From the next room, I heard a door open and then close, followed by the jangle of keys. Brief but friendly salutations were exchanged between three people I couldn't see until a 35-year-old man holding a set of keys appeared at the entryway that connected the two gym spaces. Like the two men in front of the cable machine, his hair was dark brown—a common trait in St. Davids and any other Irish-Italian community. As was the style in the 1970s, he wore his hair long, past his collar, feathered back, and parted down the middle. Except for a thin mustache, he was clean-shaven. Again, my upper arms felt overdressed when I noticed he was wearing a white sweatshirt with the collar and sleeves surgically removed, making the garment look butchered yet cancer-free. White stripes ran down the outside seams of his

dark blue polyester track pants and terminated alongside a clean pair of Adidas sneakers. His eyes met mine as he approached with his right hand already extended. He appeared much smaller than the two weightlifters, giving me the impression that Dom was the brains of the operation.

“Hey there. I’m Dominic. What can I do for you?”

I shook his hand and immediately reclassified him as having brains *and* a kung-fu grip. “I’m interested in joining the gym,” I replied, taking back my hand and trying not to grimace.

“What’s your name?”

“Charlie.”

“How’d you hear about this place?”

“I heard some guys talking about it over at St. Katherines. My family goes to church there,” I explained. “I used to walk along this street when I played football for St. Katherines. We practiced at Cowan Park.”

Dominic relaxed and invited me to sit across from him on an adjacent weight bench. He pulled his pant legs up as he sat down, revealing that, for him, wearing socks was an option. “So, do you go to Archbishop Carroll now?”

“No, Radnor High School,” I said, easing down on the bench. “I just finished my freshman year.”

Suddenly, a stack of free-falling weights made a sound so thunderous that, for a moment, I didn’t know where I was. Even Dominic seemed fazed. Instinctually, we spun toward the source of the explosion, stopping when our eyes reached the cable machine. “Sorry, Dom,” said one of the weightlifters while placing a stainless-steel pin into a deep slot on the weight stack. “It got away from me.”

Without missing a beat, Dominic reclaimed the moment and asked me, “Are you still playing football?”

I immediately became suspicious of the question. I clearly didn’t look like a football player—not even as a punter, placekicker, or third-stringer. But then again, despite his lack of size, Dominic looked like he played both Pop Warner and

high school football. He struck me as someone who didn't know what it was like to be running scared all the time. "No. I didn't really like it," I admitted. "I was on the boys' gymnastics team this year, and I need to get a lot stronger if I want to improve. That's why I'm here."

"Really? You can do all those flips through the air?"

"I can't do anything like that," I said. "I'm not even comfortable being upside down! My coach told me that I'm what you call a specialist since I only focus on the pommel horse event. All-arounds compete in all six events."

"I thought the horse thing was what the gymnasts ran at and jumped over."

At this point, Dominic knew more about my role on the high school boys' gymnastics team than my father did. "You're thinking of the vault," I said, clarifying a common misunderstanding. While the fingers of my left hand served as the apparatus and the fingers of my right hand swirled around it like a tiny gymnast, I added, "The pommel horse involves doing things like leg circles and scissor cuts."

“Yeah, okay, you’re right,” he said, getting up from the weight bench. Dominic looked at the wall clock between the two windows and then back at me. “You *do* need a lot of upper body strength to do that stuff.”

I was still thinking about the student discount that Dominic gave me as I sailed through the red traffic light, riding across Lancaster Avenue on my way home. For twenty-five dollars, I’d have access to the Phoenix Gym for the entire summer—a place to improve myself without the burden of having to worry if my father or any other insecure sadists would show up. I could finally relax my mind, exchanging hair-trigger vigilance and distraction for focus and concentration. Exit strategies could wait for me in the parking lot, alongside my sister’s locked bike. I had a good feeling about the Phoenix Gym. After we talked, Dominic showed me around and pointed out two closed doors. One was his office; the other, the bathroom. Of course, there was only one bathroom. Up to that point, I had never heard of, let alone seen, a girl in a weight room.

I zoomed past St. Katherine’s, knowing that I was happiest when I was by myself. I felt both autonomous and anonymous leaning into a tight right turn onto Pembroke Avenue from

South Aberdeen Road—an intoxicating concoction that gave me the momentary power to forget the pain, to pretend I was somebody. I rode past lawns that I mowed and raked—past driveways I swept and shoveled. I surveyed the flowerbeds and gardens I weeded and the windows and cars I washed. I had solved my money problems. Now, I had solved my summer bullying problems with time left over before lunch. However, my celebratory chest pounding was short-lived when the bike’s front fender chimed in as I blew past the stop sign at Louella Drive, less than fifty yards from my house on South Wayne Avenue. *Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!* And then it dawned on me; my family never did ask me about my concussions.

Home Alone

The house was quiet when I entered the kitchen through the mudroom. Still, to be certain, I stopped, held my breath, and listened. I could hear water refilling the toilet tank in my parents’ upstairs bathroom, muffled lyrics from Billy Joel’s “Only the Good Die Young” emanating from the third floor, and the sounds of luckier kids jumping into the next-door neighbor’s pool. My invisible life didn’t stop at the stairs

outside leading up to the mudroom; it continued inside the house. Seeing that the coast was clear, I didn't hesitate to tiptoe toward the door behind the stove. Like a trained ninja, I quietly opened it, stepped through the doorway, and closed it without a sound. It was pitch black at the top of the stairs. To illuminate the basement, I had to descend each step in the dark, turn left, turn left again, and fumble around for a light switch on the wall beneath the staircase. Having snuck down to the subterranean space countless times before, I knew my way around.

Like most unfinished basements in the Northeast, it was damp, cool, and smelled like hose water evaporating from a hot sidewalk in the summer heat. Despite having an adequate number of small rectangular windows near the tops of the basement's perimeter walls, artificial light was necessary no matter the time of day. Sunlight not only had to navigate its way through a thick canopy of leafy trees to reach our yard, but it also had to bypass the bushes in front of the basement windows. It seemed like a lot to ask of sunlight.

Going down to the basement was like landing on the moon. It was eerily quiet and always cold—even if it was blazing hot

outside. And when the lights were on, it was clear that the cellar had a dark side, too. To the left of the staircase, a central area contained my father's messy workbench, my pathetic weightlifting gear, and random cardboard boxes whose contents were long forgotten. Two well-lit rooms branched off from either side of the workbench. One contained a washing machine and a utility sink; the other, a ping pong table. On the other side of the staircase, where shadows shrouded every horror film cliché, the dark side of the basement housed a furnace like the one seen in the movie *Home Alone*. Even with the thermostat turned off, it would crackle, belch, and hum as if it were trying to unburden itself of the terrible secrets it knew about the families who came before us. Although I had made peace with the monsters lurking in the basement, I still didn't feel comfortable turning right at the foot of the stairs.

Taking advantage of the waning adrenaline still permeating throughout my body for having found a place to lift in relative peace, I stepped over and straddled my flimsy weight bench, feeling the itch for a flurry of incline presses before lunch. The cold vinyl against my shoulders startled me as I leaned back to grip the barbell. After a few sets with 70 pounds of sand packed inside cracking plastic, I sat up and swung my legs

over the bench. At my feet were two dumbbells comprised of more sand, supposedly weighing 15 pounds each. Above me, my earliest engineering feat loomed overhead—a two-pulley system that allowed me to do tricep extensions and lat pull-downs with 10 to 20 pounds of sand-filled weights. While looking down at the adjacent rug where I did my push-ups and sit-ups, I noticed a small tuft of brown hair, which, unfortunately, made me look up and spot the paint-spattered metal stool in the corner. It wasn't just specific places that I avoided; I tried to forget particular objects as well.

The metal stool wasn't always in the corner; it occupied the same spot where I had set up my Sears weight bench two years earlier. Some people—like those who disdain bodybuilding—might refer to my weight bench as a torture device. If that were the case, then I essentially swapped one torture device for another. Before I earned my own money doing odd jobs around the neighborhood, I had no choice but to accept and endure whatever it was my father wanted to give me—even when it came to getting haircuts. Despite pleas to take me to a real barber, he'd make me sit on that cold metal stool every three to four months. He was a big man on the outside: six-foot-four, 220 pounds, with hands the size of catcher's mitts.

To feel his paws on my head made me think of a Magic 8-Ball in the hands of a clumsy orangutan. If that were true, I would've asked my favorite childhood toy in the heat of the moment if my impending haircut was going to be both painful and humiliating. The Magic 8-Ball likely would have answered, "Most definitely."

His method included a formula of consuming 10 or more beers followed by a simple two-step process of coarse adjustments and fine-tuning—except his kind of barbering would be classified as cruel and unusual punishment. Once he located the two dullest implements in our house—a pair of scissors we opened mail with and his Japanese-made haircut razor—he'd drunkenly call for me to come down to his torture chamber, slurring his words and filling me with a kind of dread only those walking to an electric chair would know. He'd begin by using the scissors to lop off chunks of precious identity-concealing locks, altering my mop of hair from the perfect disguise to something horribly conspicuous. Even without a mirror, I imagined a panel of my peers offering critiques with phrases like "There's no symmetry," "It's uneven on the sides," "He left way too much on top," and "I suggest giving him a buzz cut and trying it again in three months." When he'd

rudely toss the scissors on top of the workbench, it meant the humiliating first half of the haircut was over—and signaled the start of a painful second half.

“Aww, quit your crying,” he’d bark as he literally scraped my head with the hair razor in the same manner he’d plane a piece of wood.

I sat frozen, staring at the chaotic workbench before me through watery eyes. I equated its disorganization to the emotional mess inside my father—a mess so profound that it desensitized him to the fact that he was hurting his firstborn son, the one named after him. “But it really hurts like last time,” I’d whimper. “Did you sharpen it since then?”

I immediately regretted asking the question—especially since I already knew the answer. I wasn’t allowed to challenge my father in any way. Doing so meant certain retribution. “What the hell do you know about haircuts?” he’d bellow as he doubled down on the scraping. “You better toughen up, or this world is going to eat you alive. You wouldn’t last a day in the army. Now hold still!”

Down in the basement—at way too young an age—I learned that it was possible for the mind to escape when the body could not. I'd leave my physical self as soon as the haircut began, imagining I was merely six feet away, straightening up his cluttered workbench so that it would be as neat and tidy as everything in my third-floor bedroom. If I were busy separating nuts, bolts, nails, screws, and washers into repurposed coffee cans and jelly jars, I'd hardly feel the scissors clipping my ears and poking my neck. While mentally arranging wrenches and sockets by size on the mounted pegboard above the bench, I'd be too occupied to react to the feeling of being scalped alive. His alcohol-fueled rants and disparaging nature faded into the background as I reorganized his hand tools within the drawers of the tool cabinet. He was not on my side, nor could he empathize. He was too busy fighting demons I couldn't see or understand.

After two sets of bicep curls, I stood up from the weight bench, turned the lights off, and made my way to the foot of the stairs in total darkness. Halfway up, my heart sank. I heard something I wasn't expecting from the kitchen—especially in the early afternoon on a weekday—the sound of heavy boots on linoleum. Standing motionless on the stairs, I considered a

full-on retreat back down to the basement but was quickly overruled by the fire-breathing metabolism of a starving 14-year-old boy. I took a deep breath and prepared myself for the inevitable. Since he didn't see me working in the yard when he drove up, I would have to pay a steep price—usually in the form of a lecture I knew all too well. However, the sight of me emerging from the basement would no doubt provoke his most inflammatory taunts.

I took one more deep breath before turning the doorknob and acted as if I were surprised to see him. “Oh, hi, Dad. I didn't think you'd be coming home for lunch today.”

“So, you're lifting weights instead of doing the things I asked you to do?” he said while his dirty fingers peeled off slices of American cheese from an open deli wrapper.

“I don't know,” I replied. “I was planning to weed the garden this afternoon.” I stepped around my father to the other side of the kitchen counter. From the bottom of the staircase leading to the second floor, I added, “I have to do some stuff in my room.”

“One more thing,” he said with his mouth full.

“Yeah?” I answered.

“Gym muscles aren’t real muscles.”

Scott

By mid-summer, I had established a routine that kept me away from the house and out of my father’s cerebral cortex. You know the old saying: out of sight, out of mind. Through trial and error, I was able to keep him off my back if I did three things: complete my assigned chores, not ask for anything—especially money—and eat somewhere else. I managed to balance caddying and washing dishes at a local private golf club as well as odd jobs around the neighborhood with two to three trips to the Phoenix Gym each week. Most days, a thoughtful homeowner or an empathetic golfer would provide my lunch, saying things like:

When you’re finished weeding the flowerbed, Charlie, meet me in the kitchen. I made you a grilled cheese sandwich and some tomato soup.

Hey, kid, before we start the back nine, grab yourself a couple of hot dogs and a Coke. Tell 'em to put it on Mr. Harbinson's tab.

In the evenings, I feasted like a king. I'd eat entrees like prime rib, crab legs, chicken marsala, pasta primavera, and stuffed peppers—that is—if I could keep the no-nonsense older chef, Chester, humming along with clean pots, pans, plates, utensils, and knives at the ready. Not only was I raking the traps and tending the pins for the members of St. Davids Golf Club during the day, but I was also throwing out their garbage and washing their dishes at night. Between 11:00 p.m. and 12:00 a.m., I'd leave the quiet kitchen and walk the quarter mile to where I would stash my sister's bike at around seven-thirty each morning. A thicket of hydrangea and arborvitae along the property line between St. Davids and the Valley Forge Military Academy perfectly camouflaged the bicycle, protecting it from the sun, rain, and territorial caddies who despised competition. Earlier in the summer, on my first day at the golf club, *my* bike was vandalized by a group of cruel boys who appeared to have come straight out of *Lord of the Flies*. It wasn't until I hit one of them in the neck with a five-iron behind the pro shop that the harassment finally stopped.

Unfortunately, earning a reputation as a raging psycho when provoked didn't bring back my mangled Schwinn LeTour 10-speed, but I no longer had to look over my shoulder every two minutes.

On Mondays, when the golf course was closed for maintenance, I made it a habit to put in my biggest lift days at the Phoenix Gym. Dominic was always there no matter when I arrived—so were a cast of characters wearing loosely tied white leather basketball sneakers, striped Dolphin running shorts, and barely-there stringer tank tops. Many wore Catholic pendant necklaces featuring biblical souls such as St. Christopher, St. Benedict, and St. Michael, while others sported sailor knot bracelets from the Jersey Shore. But all of them obviously worked on their tans as much as they did on their puffy, water-retentive physiques. Until I could comfortably blend into the background, I had to briefly endure the burning spotlight of perceived conspicuousness each time I entered the gym on North Aberdeen Road—especially since I was one of the few members who came alone.

Back then, I had no concept of style; I simply put on what was available. My canvas low-tops, cutoff jeans, and t-shirts with

intact sleeves contrasted sharply with what the other members of the gym were wearing. I was younger, smaller, skinnier, and quieter than the rest. Nobody wore glasses except for me. If the gym was a cover for Mafia wiseguys to secretly meet and play cards, then I'd no doubt be addressed by a derogatory nickname *and* be expected to make their sandwiches, refill their drinks, and light their cigars.

Eh, yo, four-eyes! I'm not going to tell 'youse' again. Go easy on the provolone. I can hardly taste the freaking capicola!

Where'd you find this teetotaling paddy? Next time, less soda and more Johnnie Walker, capiche?

Other than a Sony Walkman, personal electronics, let alone portable phones, were unheard of in those days. You'd be hard-pressed to find a TV anywhere outside the family den or living room. Once in a while, on rare occasions, I'd spot a small black and white TV on a kitchen counter. Back then, people were not immune to the lure of distraction—but instead of social media posts and notification pings coming through a phone, they came in the form of discourse between actual friends who did things together. Since I didn't have any close

friends and lived in a home where silent treatment was the rule rather than the exception, I was oddly comforted by a cacophony of energy whenever I entered the gym. It was a mixture of high-spirited, loud conversations laced with the usual grunts, banging weights, and whatever was playing on Dominic's stereo.

The only other gym member who consistently came alone on days I was there turned out to be someone I'd never forget. Scott was pasty-white, clean-shaven, and appeared to be around 30 years old. He was an inch or two under six feet, weighed at least 250 pounds, and sported a buzz cut like the one worn by Sergeant Carter on the 1964 sitcom *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* Scott typically came to the gym wearing a weightlifting belt over baggy camouflage pants, a dirty rag fashioned into a makeshift tank top, and heavy work boots. He was so swollen with slabs of muscles on top of muscles, he looked like an over-the-top caricature of the bodybuilders from Arnold's gym in Venice Beach. On the scale of action figures and superheroes, Scott was somewhere between the Incredible Hulk and Rambo. And like the Hulk and Rambo, he didn't say very much at all.

As soon as he'd walked into the gym, he'd transfer his duffel bag from his right shoulder to his right hand in one swift motion while surveying the availability of the six weight benches at the rear of the main room. Then, shockingly, without hesitation, he'd throw the oversized bag at the bench he wanted—regardless of whether someone was using it! He was careful not to hit anyone with it—especially if they were in the middle of a bench press—but whatever was inside made the bag heavy enough to cause a loud thump when it hit the floor. Even more shocking was that nobody said anything to him—not even Dominic. The tossed bag seemed to have the same effect as quarters placed on a pool table's top rail in the middle of a game—it was understood who got the table next. I noticed that the guys in the gym would barely react if Scott's bag thudded near their feet, opting instead to calmly finish their sets on the desired weight bench and move on. I got the impression that Scott was less of an alpha male and more of a genuine psychopath with underlying anger issues.

Near the end of that first summer at the Phoenix Gym, I, too, was a target for Scott's flying duffel bag; however, I wasn't as calm and collected as the others. Rather than endure the murderous stare from an unhinged he-man, I simply re-racked

the plates from the barbell and excused myself to the adjacent room to work on my quads. Just as I sat down on the leg extension machine, Dominic came over to talk to me.

“Hey, man, don’t let that beast freak you out,” he offered. “He’s just another gorilla juicehead.”

I didn’t know what a gorilla juicehead was, nor did I care. I was too busy basking in the thought that anyone—especially a respected commercial gym owner—would care enough to reach out to me. *Why wouldn’t he? An intimidating grown man had just harassed an unsuspecting, innocent minor!* Dominic met my eyes and correctly read the expression on my face.

“What I mean,” he explained, “is that he’s obviously taking anabolic steroids, growth hormones, bodybuilding supplements, or all of the above. That stuff will make it easier to develop muscle mass, but the side effects are brutal. I can usually tell if someone is taking them. First of all, they get way bigger than normal at a rate that’s faster than what’s possible. Taking steroids usually results in acne on their face and back, gives them a ruddy complexion, and leaves them looking bloated from all the water retention.”

“Where do I sign up?” I joked.

Our conversation was interrupted by a weightlifter who resembled Greg Evigan from the 1979 TV show *B.J. and the Bear*—if he was sunburned and inflated to twice his normal size. “Hey, Dom. There’s somebody in the parking lot looking for you. He says he has your money.”

“Okay. Gotta run, Charlie,” said Dominic as he began to follow the actor lookalike. But before he exited the smaller of the two rooms, he turned around and added, “Oh, I forgot to mention the worst of the side effects.”

“What’s that?” I asked as I got up from the machine to adjust the seat.

“They’re full of rage.”

Moonlighting

The next three summers—the ones before my junior and senior years and my first year at college—were pretty much carbon copies of the months before my sophomore year. I still

did odd jobs around the neighborhood for the same homeowners, except I had graduated from pulling weeds and raking leaves to refinishing furniture, painting fences, and feeding pets while they vacationed in seaside towns like Avalon and Cape May at the Jersey Shore. I continued to work at St. Davids as well, scrubbing pots and pans for minimum wage and for Chester, who didn't stop feeding me like a prize fighter. Caddying for club members turned out to be the most lucrative of all. By the time I left the golf course to attend North Carolina State University in Raleigh, I was carrying two golf bags for 36 holes rather than one for 18. Instead of shagging balls for the club pro for anemic tips, I was picking up caddying assignments in club tournaments where I could triple—even quadruple—my typical earnings. And I'd make even more if my golfer was competitive and finished in the money.

My summer memberships at the Phoenix Gym paid off, too. I added enough muscle to my lanky frame to become one of the top pommel horse gymnasts in the school district, yet failed to acquire any friends. I was elected captain of the boys' gymnastics team in my senior year as a single-event specialist—and promptly hid the rare distinction from every

one of my family members. And to make certain they never came to see me perform my routine with an Olympic-level mount, I lied and told them that it was just a club for losers who weren't able to make the cut of real sports—that it wasn't a competitive team. Admittedly, it was overkill just to keep my father as far away from my personal life as possible.

I learned that Scott wasn't the only one taking steroids at the Phoenix Gym. From Dominic's earlier description and from what I observed, it seemed like half the weightlifters were morphing into various forms of the same distended beast, giving me the impression they could explode physically or emotionally in any given moment. I'd seen the clear plastic pouches of tablets no bigger than a matchbook secretly passed from one meaty paw to another. I held one in my hand at one point while its seller touted the undeniable benefits. Each pouch contained around eight pills, each a different size, shape, and color.

“Do I take all the pills at once?” I asked.

“Yeah, that's a single dose,” he replied.

“I take one of these every day?” I continued, holding up the sealed packet.

“That’s right.”

“How long do I take them for?”

“As long as you need to,” he said.

My quantitative nature didn’t like his qualitative response. Vague, indeterminate answers always put me on the defensive—a reflex I developed and sharpened at home. “So, what’s in this stuff?”

The seller snatched the packet from my fingers and put it back in his gym bag. “Mostly vitamins and various supplements for weight training and bodybuilding,” he replied.

I turned down his offer of a 30-day supply at a significant discount, opting instead to accept whatever nature intended for me. Had I taken the pills, I would’ve considered myself as weak as them, foolishly believing that a handful of magic beans could replace hard work and dedication. Between the

bodybuilders at the gym, the bullies at school, and my father, they all seemed to need something extraneous yet damaging to feel like the men they thought they were supposed to be. Whereas the bullies required weaker boys to humiliate and dominate, the weightlifters doped on steroids. For my father, it was alcohol. Even as an awkward teenager, skilled in the art of invisibility in plain sight, I knew, intrinsically, that I possessed what they were missing inside. Despite a lack of bravado, I wasn't devoid of self-esteem, self-worth, or self-confidence; they were hidden, wedged somewhere between modesty and sensitivity. Such duplicitousness made me feel like a contradiction to those around me. They saw me, but they could not see me.

After my last dishwashing shift, I took my time riding my sister's bicycle back home. I still hadn't replaced mine, thinking I'd get a used one as soon as I arrived in Raleigh. Knowing that I'd be leaving for school in less than a week—and probably never coming back to Philadelphia—I made it a point to savor the two-mile ride. Lucky for me, the moon beamed bright that night from behind partly cloudy skies. A balmy breeze caressed my face as I turned left onto Radnor Road from the end of the golf club's long driveway, my breath

remaining steady as I allowed the downward slope to pull me past the military academy toward Eagle Road. As soon as I made the right turn, the moonlight disappeared behind tall, leafy trees, leaving me in the dark and making it necessary to navigate potholes and storm drains from memory. With little traffic this late at night, I turned left onto North Wayne Avenue without looking to my right and quickly sailed under the railroad tracks. On the other side, a short, steep hill forced me to stand on the pedals for more power. At the top, I was in position for a thrill I could never say no to.

I knew it was foolish, but it was too tantalizing to ignore—especially for a strait-laced, rule-following teenager—an unnecessary risk that would result in either a momentary high or a lifetime as a quadriplegic. Before I'd catapult my sister's bike down North Wayne, through the center of town like a reckless alpine skier, I'd wonder if tonight would be the night I'd end up in the hospital on life support. A short flurry of maniacal pedaling sent me careening toward Lancaster Avenue at a speed that wouldn't allow me to stop in time if a car suddenly appeared. The essence of the gamble centered around the fact that two large buildings—a bank and a jewelry store—blocked my view of both east- and westbound traffic

on Lancaster. It was do or die five nights a week during the humid summer months—an adrenaline-fueled, irrational urge to cheat death and feel reborn on the other side of Wayne’s busiest road. I’d fly through the intersection so fast that I could coast past the pizza place with my favorite arcade games, the fire station, the library, and even my former middle school.

On this side of Lancaster, North Wayne became South Wayne Avenue—the street where my house was located. The moonlit ribbon of road curved to the left around an assisted living facility and gently steepened toward its terminal end at Conestoga Road. By the time I pedaled past Runnymede Avenue, my heart rate had returned to normal; at Windermere Avenue, the endorphins had finally dissipated to pre-peril levels. Besides my breathing and lovesick crickets, I could hear the bike’s rusty chain finding the teeth of the back wheel’s gear cassette. The moon was high above the trees and perfectly centered over the road. The breeze was at my back as I rode past Audubon Avenue, pushing me and my sister’s tank of a bike past the rolling lawns I had worked on for the last five years. In the quasi-darkness, my thoughts were, once again, interrupted by the *Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!* sound from the possessed front fender, regardless of how many times

I had adjusted it. No longer was I reflecting on five consecutive summers of industriousness and perseverance. Instead, I recalled my father's unpleasantness and heard the echo of his small-minded belief that "gym muscles aren't real muscles."

As I leaned into the left turn at Pembroke Avenue, I had a sweeping view of our corner house. During the day, it looked like it belonged in Wayne's Historic District, but at night, especially to a kid who felt misery lurked in every corner, the hulking six-bedroom behemoth looked eerily similar to the house in *The Amityville Horror*. Jagged shadows from nearby trees slashed across its broad exterior, making it look even more grotesque and foreboding. My bike naturally slowed, and before it could lose its momentum, I steered toward the garage's side door. I hopped off with practiced precision and quietness, opened the door, and leaned my sister's bike against the yard tools that would soon wonder what happened to Charlie. While exiting the garage the same way I came in, it suddenly dawned on me. Even though I knew he wasn't referring to steroids when he'd say it, my father was partially right—*some* gym muscles aren't real muscles. But I wouldn't tell him that. We didn't talk about anything.

Chapter 3: Summer Daze

Momma Told Me Not to Come

“I’m sorry,” I said as I leaned in closer to her. “I can hardly hear you over the music. Is there someplace else we can talk?”

Bridgette, who moments earlier corrected my pronunciation of her name from a heathen-sounding ‘jit’ to the more refined French modulation of ‘jeet,’ replied, “Sure, let’s go into my office.”

Bridgette was slim, spandex-clad, and certainly appeared like she belonged in the West End Workout in Ardmore, an exclusive, well-heeled community along Philadelphia’s ritzy Main Line—but not as the owner of the popular aerobics studio. She looked to be in her early forties with shoulder-length dark brown hair cascading over a fuchsia-colored headband and a soft yet angular face. Her 1980s makeup was flawless: blue eyeshadow, heavy mascara, fluffy filled-in brows, and bubblegum pink lipstick. Up top, she wore a tight-fitting, turquoise crop top that bared her defined shoulders and flat tummy while showcasing her feminine wiles. Her

matching tights, accented with powder blue knitted leggings, completed Bridgette's outfit, making her look both colorful and poisonous.

It was a relief when she closed the door behind her, mercifully muffling the Pointer Sisters' "Jump for My Love"—a song I was already tired of hearing even though it had only been on the radio for a few months. Little did I know the song was a favorite among the West End's aerobics instructors and that I'd be jamming pencils in my ears within a week of working there. Bridgette sat down behind her desk and gestured for me to sit in one of two chairs across from her. The small space smelled like a blend of perfume and inorganic chemicals from brand-new exercise equipment.

"So, now that you've had the grand tour, what do you think? Think you can handle covering a Saturday shift and two more during the week? I believe you mentioned over the phone that you work for an estate from Monday to Friday, correct?"

"That's right. I do," I boasted, setting myself up to blow Miss Jazzercise right out of the water. "I work at the Ardrossan

Estate in Radnor—you know—the one owned by the Montgomery family?”

“Never heard of it,” she deadpanned dismissively while simultaneously arching her back and stretching her neck from side to side.

I ignored her display of boredom and proceeded to jeopardize my impending employment as her part-time Nautilus instructor by continuing to gush about the wildly rich and eccentric family. “Really? Did you know their legendary parties and lavish lifestyles inspired the 1940 movie *The Philadelphia Story*, starring Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, and Jimmy Stewart? My grandfather was even portrayed in it. He was the family’s butler.”

Bridgette stifled a yawn and repeated herself: “So, can you work on Saturdays and two evening shifts during the week?” Obviously, she had no interest in my personal connections to local blue bloods and Hollywood elites. In some ways, I probably deserved her dismissal. *Well played, Bridgette.*

“That’ll work,” I replied while mentally reeling in the name-dropping and whatever dignity I had left. Now it was *my* turn to simultaneously arch my back and stretch my neck from side to side. But I wasn’t bored; I just didn’t know what else to do.

“Glad to hear it, Chuck. Why don’t you come in at nine o’clock this Saturday so Anthony can start training you on all the different machines?” she suggested, pushing her chair back and standing up. But instead of extending her hand and saying, “Welcome aboard,” she asked, “What size are you?”

“Huh?”

“What size t-shirt do you wear?”

“Large, I guess.”

Bridgette sashayed around her desk and opened a cabinet beneath an interior window that provided her with a sweeping view of the all-female aerobics studio. “Here. Take these,” she directed while handing me two white t-shirts with red and blue lettering that read “West End Workout” across the front.

“They’re mediums, okay? We can’t have you hiding those muscles from the ladies, can we?”

If I wasn’t already feeling the heebie-jeebies from Bridgette’s near-constant preening, I certainly was after her last comment. Even though I had dated my share of college co-eds during my freshman year down in Raleigh—and lost my virginity in the process—returning flirtatious banter with a middle-aged married mother of two was simply too much for a still-boyish 18-year-old. Now it was my turn to be dismissive. I took the t-shirts and asked, while looking down at myself, “What about shorts? Are these okay?” Instead of redirecting the conversation to something—*anything*—that wouldn’t make me blush, I did the opposite and steered her eyes from my shoulders and chest down to my midsection. Suddenly, I felt trapped between Dustin Hoffman’s unwanted son-in-law character in the 1967 movie *The Graduate* and every high school nerd portrayed in a 1980s John Hughes film.

Without missing a beat, Bridgette cooed, “Oh, those skimpy running shorts will do just fine.”

Alexis

I honestly didn't think I'd be back in Philadelphia so soon, but my grandmother—the butler's widow—managed to secure a summer job for me on the 650-acre Ardrossan Estate, working as a landscaper with the grounds crew. I can still remember watching 72-year-old Alex Montgomery precariously descend the brick staircase outside his breakfast room to welcome me on my first day. His thinning, slicked-back hair matched, in color and shine, the heavy black frames of his glasses, making him look like an older version of Cary Grant. But after I saw what he was wearing, my first impression was that he looked more like Hugh Hefner. Alex wore a pair of slippers and a fitted red satin bathrobe with black trim on the cuffs and collar; however, instead of Hugh's trademark pipe, he was carrying two tiny dogs—one white Shih Tzu cradled in each arm. Of course, Alex was nothing like the iconic magazine publisher, but I could still see him walking out of the Playboy Mansion to ogle the Playmates frolicking in the grotto.

“Charlie Trunks' grandson! I can't believe it!” beamed Alex, stopping on the second-to-last step as if he were about to address the press corps. “So tell me, Charlie, which university

are you attending, and what are you studying? Your grandfather would be so proud of you.”

Thinking I should walk toward Alex since he stopped short of where I was standing, I stepped closer but quickly realized he wouldn't be able to shake my hand. “Good morning, Mr. Montgomery. First of all, thank you for giving me the opportunity to work here for the summer. I'm studying biology at NC State in Raleigh.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Montgomery,” interrupted Peter, my 50-year-old boss, who was standing behind me. “Charlie needs to get started in the greenhouse. He has a lot of work to do this morning.”

Although I had only met Peter twenty minutes earlier—a sweaty, rotund man who came to work wearing Bermuda shorts, a dress shirt, and loafers—I could tell by his tone that he wasn't thrilled about my connection to his boss's famous family. Perhaps it was an inroad he coveted yet didn't have a way of producing.

Alex repositioned his drowsy dogs in one fluid motion and shifted his gaze over my shoulder. “Hold your horses, Peter! I still can’t believe Charlie Trunks’ grandson is here.” Then he looked at me and said something I couldn’t believe. “Your grandmother told me you don’t have a car because you’re paying your way through school, so I want you to take one of the work trucks for the summer.”

“Really?” I stammered. “That would help me out a lot!”

“And make sure you gas up here on the estate, okay?”

“Yes, Mr. Montgomery,” I beamed, thinking I should bow or salute him—anything to let him know I was eternally grateful. Not only was I beginning my estate job as a quasi-celebrity, but I was also getting ready to start a second job as a Nautilus instructor at an all-female gym. Life couldn’t get any better.

“Did you hear that, Peter? I want Charlie to have one of the trucks for the summer. And show him how to use the gas pumps, too.”

Peter had already started walking toward the colossal greenhouse. He gestured with his right arm in a way that indicated he acknowledged Alex's request and, at the same time, disagreed with it.

While still smiling like a madman, the pajamaed dog porter shouted, "Peter! Did you hear me?"

Peter spun around and began walking backwards. "Yes! I'll take care of it after we—"

Suddenly, from the other side of the mansion, a distant shout was heard. "Daddy! Daddy! Is that Charlie's grandson?"

Alex nodded toward a middle-aged woman standing inside a pool enclosure, wearing nothing but a bikini. "Charlie, go say hello to my daughter, Alexis."

As I said goodbye to Alex, thanking him profusely for everything he'd done for me, I looked for my moody boss, but he had already disappeared into the greenhouse. I turned my gaze to Alexis, who made no effort to cover herself, opting instead to remain standing in heels while holding on to the

pickets of the wrought iron fence that separated us both physically and financially. The brunette looked 10 years older than she was with the face and locks of a partied-out Kennedy—complete with a ravaged complexion, overly tanned skin, and an indestructible hairline. Her eyeshadow matched the magenta highlights on her bathing suit, which appeared at least a size too small for her curvaceous frame. I looked at her hands and noticed they were as tan as the rest of her and that she wasn't wearing a wedding band. And when she smiled, her pale blue eyes smiled, too, making me feel as powerless as a fly trapped in a spider's web.

“Nice to meet you, Charlie. I'm Alexis,” she said, offering her hand in between the pickets. “Will you be working here all summer?”

“Likewise,” I replied as I reached for her hand. “I'll be working with Peter until I go back to school at the end of August.” I wanted to ask her about my grandfather but quickly lost my focus when I felt two of her fingers wiggle against my palm. I let go, but she didn't.

While still lightly gripping my hand and looking into my eyes, the bikini-clad spider said to the overmatched fly, “I’m here almost every morning, Charlie. I’d be delighted if you’d come by sometime and put some lotion on my back.”

“Um . . . sure, no problem,” I stammered before pulling my hand away and backing off the fence. “Well, I’d better go find Peter. He’s probably wondering where I’m at. It was nice meeting you, Alexis.”

Alexis returned to her chaise lounge and sat down like a lady. “You, too, Charlie,” she purred. “Just don’t let Peter push you around, okay?”

“I won’t,” I replied while walking toward the mansion. When I reached the stairs that Alex had stood on, I heard her shout, “He works for my daddy. And my daddy does what I tell him to do!”

I waved back at Alexis and turned to look at the greenhouse. Peter was standing outside with his hands on his hips, staring at me. He looked as steamed as the windows of the oversized hothouse.

I Could've Had a V8!

Even after a month of driving the Ford F-250 around town, I still felt like a badass. Two heavy garden rakes, a shovel, and a cinderblock rattled in the truck bed as I threaded Saturday morning traffic along Lancaster Avenue eastbound toward the West End Workout. If you were standing on the corner of one of the many cross streets between historic Wayne and downtown Ardmore, you would've seen a dirty white, full-size pickup roll past, complete with caked mud splatter on the quarter panels and more dents from actual work than dings from inconsiderate shoppers. You also would've seen my West End Workout t-shirt flapping in the breeze and recognized Modern English's "I Melt With You" on a loop emanating from the truck's tape deck. But don't let the surface machismo fool you. I was on the way to my second job, where for eight hours I'd vacillate between soul-crushing boredom and acute discomfort.

As usual, Bridgette was there when I arrived—and so was Anthony, a dark-complexioned, chiseled 30-year-old who, no doubt, resembled many of the airbrushed men on the covers of my older sister's romance novels. Each Saturday, Anthony

split his time between the aerobics studio on the ground floor and with me in the Nautilus room down in the basement. From what I could gather in my first three Saturdays with him, I deduced that Anthony's main function was to openly flirt with the clientele, including Bridgette. After storing my personal items in the mat room, I'd begin my day by sweeping the aerobics studio and arranging its step platforms, resistance bands, and hand weights for the first class, followed by wiping down the machines with disinfectant. Then, when I wasn't running errands for Bridgette, I'd be relegated to the sterile confines of the windowless basement—a far cry from the sun-drenched rolling hills of the 650-acre Ardrossan Estate!

The premise of my job was simple. At the end of each aerobics class, some of the ladies—about a quarter of the class size—would come down to the Nautilus room to supplement their cardio routines with resistance weight training. Besides the cam-based machines, the basement included free weights, mats, and, of course, the mat room. During these high-traffic hours, Anthony and I could be assisting as few as four and as many as a dozen women at the same time. There were seat heights to adjust, straps to buckle in, resistances to set, and lots and lots of required touching. On my first Saturday at the West

End, while a class was going on upstairs, Bridgette explained and demonstrated the art of guidance and corrective touch. But instead of relating it to factors like proper form, motion control, or muscle group isolation—things I actually knew about—she emphasized that her members simply liked being touched. She went on to say that it makes them feel sexy, desired, and, above all, youthful, which is why they came to her studio in the first place.

“So, you want me to put my hand on their thigh when they’re doing leg extensions to *feel* that they’re doing it right? I asked.

Bridgette was clasping her hands behind her back and rotating her shoulders while looking at herself in the mirror. “Yes, exactly,” she answered.

“And I should feel their triceps when they’re doing arm extensions?”

“Yes.”

“Same with their biceps, calves, and shoulders?” I continued.

Bridgette turned to face the mirror and opened her stance. She doubled over, practically bending in half, and put her palms on the floor. “Yes, Chuck, put a guiding, corrective hand on whatever muscle they’re working.”

“Okay, but what if they’re on the vertical chest press or ab machine?”

Satisfied with her hamstring stretch, Bridgette stood up straight and adjusted her red, white, and blue headband. As she sailed past me toward the stairs, smelling like the makeup counter in an expensive department store, she replied with an arched eyebrow, “They’ll let you know.”

My fourth Saturday began as usual and included the typical four to six groups of sweaty women descending the stairs, expecting to get pumped—and felt up. Of course, Anthony would be in the thick of it, making me look like an uptight choirboy in a strip club compared to his smoldering boldness. It wasn’t like the ladies were behaving badly or anything; I was stuck between doing what the boss lady told me to do and having to compromise personal ethics reminiscent of Ritchie Cunningham from *Happy Days*. Although I was an 18-year-

old who had grown up fast in a house terrorized by a brooding and unpredictable alcoholic, I was still unworldly and inexperienced when it came to anything not aligned with my goal of graduating college with a biology degree. Plus, this situation occurred years before the unveiling of the internet and social media, where I'd come to find out attractive older women had acronyms. The summer of 1983 was still a time of innocence—at least for me. Like most teenagers, I was only interested in girls who were closer to *my* age—not wives and mothers!

It wasn't until I hopped into the cab of my truck for the second time that evening that I realized I wouldn't be returning to the West End Workout. Bridgette and Anthony were nowhere to be found when my shift ended, so I said, "Enjoy the rest of your weekend," to a couple of aerobics instructors as I walked out the door and into the nearly vacant parking lot. Once inside the truck, I quickly realized that I didn't have the keys; they were in my backpack, which was still tucked away in the mat room. The two ladies were standing in the same spot when I reentered the studio. As soon as they looked at me, I gave them the universally known "I could've had a V8" slap to the forehead, indicating that I had obviously forgotten something.

I flew down the stairs, turned right, and walked between the reception desk and the upper body machines. Then, suddenly, just before having reached my destination, Bridgette and Anthony emerged from the mat room.

The ensuing awkwardness was so palpable that nobody said anything right away. Anthony removed his hands from the waistband of his shorts as fast as Bridgette removed hers from the bottom of her crop top. Whereas my fellow trainer looked as neat and put together as he always did, Bridgette appeared downright disheveled. Her trademark headband was askew, her underwear peeked out above her tights, her cheeks were flushed, and the area around her mouth looked chafed. Neither of them glanced at me as they scooted past. Upon entering the defiled mat room, I felt compelled to break the ice. “I can’t believe I left my backpack in here.”

“Chuck, you shouldn’t be storing your personal belongings in there,” huffed Bridgette while looking at her reflection in the mirror at the bottom of the stairs and pulling up her tights.

I didn’t answer her, choosing instead to linger within the alleged crime scene until I was certain they had gone upstairs.

When the coast was clear, I grabbed my backpack from behind a stack of extra step platforms and went up the stairs as fast as I could, taking three at a time. I bolted past her office and noticed the lights were on behind the closed door. *They must've gone in there. Perfect.* I left the building for the second time, but now I was thinking about a possible part-time job that could replace the one I had with Bridgette—a job that couldn't be more of a departure from what I was doing at the West End. I was thinking about a little antique furniture shop and the always-smiling 78-year-old owner, who sat two church pews behind me every Sunday morning.

Bella

“Boy!”

I heard his bark but pretended like I didn't.

“BOY!”

I definitely heard it again, and this time, he knew I did. I shut off the noisy weed whacker and gazed up toward Peter in the distance, shielding my eyes from the late morning sun. Like

always, he was standing with his hands on his hips and looking annoyed. His expression rarely changed either, always appearing as if he had just swallowed something that didn't agree with him. However, it was a different story if he were talking to a Montgomery—or anyone else he thought could advance his social standing. He was the kind of man who belittled those he ruled over to compensate for not living the life he felt entitled to.

The derogatory name change from 'Charlie' to 'Boy' came soon after I started working for Peter, who, days before, had the nerve to tell me, "It's not Pee-Ter; it's Pee-Tah." *What is it with these people and their portentous name pronunciations?* I set the weed whacker on the lawn and began walking up the manicured slope in front of the mansion's conservatory toward Mr. Irrelevant. I choked back the bitter taste of contempt laced with self-loathing and, as brightly as I could, asked, "What can I do for you?"

Peter was standing next to a wheelbarrow of red and white petunias and was now holding a potted orchid. He wore dusty penny loafers, a pair of light-blue seersucker shorts, and an untucked faded pink dress shirt that stretched across his

expansive belly, making him look like a bloated Robin Leach from *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. “I need you to plant these petunias in the gazebo flowerbed and take this dreadful orchid to the greenhouse before I throw it on the compost pile.”

“Okay,” I said, carefully taking the damaged succulent. “I’ll finish weed whacking around the pond after lunch.”

“One more thing, boy,” he added. “I need you here at four o’clock on Saturday to work as a valet. The Montgomerys are hosting a rather large party for the corporate sponsors of the Devon Horse Show.”

I suppressed the urge to violently grab my boss by the collar, get in his face, and remind him of my given name. But instead of doing something I’d instantly regret, I took a deep breath and thought about how Mr. Montgomery was paying me 10 under-the-table dollars an hour and giving me free use of a vehicle for the entire summer. “I can’t because I have that other job on Saturdays,” I explained. “But I can definitely be here by six.”

“Oh, that’s right. You work at that ridiculous little gym in Ardmore.”

“No, I don’t work there anymore. I picked up another part-time job refurbishing antique furniture in Wayne.”

Peter turned his back to me and began walking toward the conservatory’s side entrance. “Whatever. Then be here at eight, boy. You won’t get to have any dinner, but you’ll still have a chance to make some good tips retrieving cars.”

Who was this groundskeeper to tell me if and when I’d eat *anything*? All I had to do was knock on the back door of the kitchen, and Bella, who had worked for my grandfather for many years and who looked old enough to be Mr. Montgomery’s mother, would rustle up anything I wanted. The family employed a large kitchen staff, but I believe they kept their old Irish cook, Bella, around because she was more than just a longtime employee. She had a long history with the family, and she was naturally endearing, making her easy to like. She’d shuffle around in a pair of clunky black oxfords, wearing an apron over a housedress, giving everyone in her

path a hard time in a thick Irish brogue accent—including me.
Hmm . . . And here I thought I was the golden boy!

Bella never answered the door; instead, a staff member would open it and deadpan, “I’ll go get her.” It didn’t take long for everyone to notice my sweet friendship with the feisty old relic.

“And what does the horse’s ass want this time?” she’d crow as soon as she came to the door.

“Hi, Bella. It’s pretty hot outside,” I’d say. “Do you have any more iced tea?”

She’d immediately spin around and walk back to the kitchen. “Oh god, you’d think he was dying out there,” she’d complain to no one in particular. “This lad thinks the world revolves around him!” Then she’d come back with an egg salad sandwich, a bag of chips, a couple of homemade cookies, and a big thermos of iced tea.

“Thanks, Bella!”

“Don’t bother me anymore!” she’d say with the slightest of grins.

A shadow fell over me just as I was finishing planting the petunias in front of the gazebo. I looked behind me and saw Peter. He was wearing aviator-style Ray-Bans and holding the keys to his 10-year-old Subaru. He usually left early, but not this early in the afternoon.

“Boy, I need you to come to the grocery store with me,” he commanded. “Just leave everything where it is. We won’t be gone too long.”

I stood up and looked down at myself. “But I’m covered in dirt. Are you sure you want me to go with you?”

“I wouldn’t ask you if I wasn’t sure, boy. I don’t have all day. Let’s go.”

As Peter turned his car around in the lot behind the mansion. I saw Bella watering the flowerpots outside the kitchen door. She wasn’t smiling or waving at me. She was shaking her head.

The Junkman

Sitting in the car with Peter wasn't anything like sitting next to Mr. Moylan in his bouncy two-tone Chevy Suburban. The silver-haired old man had met my inquiry to work for him with a response that came as easy as the smile on his face: "Sure. I could use the help." When he wasn't showing me how to strip, sand, stain, or paint an eclectic array of antiquities in his cozy workshop behind his house in St. Davids, Mr. Moylan had me accompany him as he picked up and delivered furniture. He was a true Renaissance man who quoted Marcus Aurelius, hummed Broadway musical show tunes, consumed books about world history, collected impressionistic art from obscure 19th-century French painters, and loved his family. He held a Ph.D. in chemistry from Columbia University and authored numerous patents for Wyeth Laboratories in Radnor. He built his house himself using salvaged bricks, lumber, windows, doors, and even furniture. But what impressed me the most about my accomplished boss was his appreciation for things and moments most people would overlook.

From the way he meandered about his property, it was obvious that Mr. Moylan, despite his wealth, preferred simple

pleasures over extravagances. He would stop and marvel at the hummingbirds fluttering around the feeders hanging from the red maple tree outside his kitchen window. When he'd walk to the mailbox, he'd caress the nearby rose blossoms with his hand as gently as you would if you were touching the cheek of a sleeping baby. Along with the workshop, he had several storage sheds in the large, heavily wooded backyard—each one full of distressed and damaged furniture, lamps, picture frames, and various odds and ends. He'd often return to the cramped workspace in his stained overalls after having retrieved something from one of the sheds, saying, "Gosh, I never get tired of smelling musty old furniture." On Saturdays, Mr. Moylan insisted that I eat lunch with him, where he'd ask me questions about what I was studying in college while he made our grilled turkey and cheese sandwiches and pepper pot soup on the stove.

If you exchanged his 20-year-old bib overalls for a ratty old raincoat and his dented Chevy for a rusty Peugeot and changed his job title from furniture store owner to detective, you'd be looking at Lieutenant Frank Columbo—except he'd have a full head of white hair and a potbelly, and he wouldn't be holding a cigar. Like the famous TV detective, Mr. Moylan

was a master at disguising his overall brilliance and business acumen behind an untidy, rumpled exterior and an act that could only be described as bumbling and unprepared. When I'd ask him about it, he'd say, "Never reveal how much you have or how much you know. That way, you'll always retain the upper hand."

"Yes, I guess that's true," I'd tell him. "But it seems like you give the upper hand away when you sell your furniture for a lot less than what you *could* get."

It was times like these when he'd stop what he was doing and turn to face me. "That's true, my friend, but where's the fun in that? Money isn't everything. I charge high enough to keep the store open and low enough to ensure that I get to see a few happy customers every single week," he'd say. "Plus, you of all people should know that I get most of my inventory for free!"

That was true. More often than not, while delivering or picking up furniture, Mr. Moylan detoured through neighborhoods known to pile up unwanted junk on the curbs in front of grandiose homes with magnificent landscaping. If he saw

something that caught his eye, he'd pull over and wait for me to drag the item from the pile so he could get a better look at it. If he liked the piece, he'd get out of the Suburban and do a little jig as he approached it, singing, "Here comes the junkman. Here comes the junkman." You would've thought he discovered a fortune in a buried treasure chest by the bounce in his step and the twinkle in his eyes. Nothing seemed to make the old man happier than finding something he could bring back to life and sell in his store.

"Would you look at that?" he'd begin while gesturing toward a broken lamp, an entryway table missing two of its legs, or a brass headboard tarnished by copper sulfide and neglect. Then follow up by saying things like, "There's a 20-dollar bill!" "That's a 100-dollar bill all day long!" and "Who would throw away a perfectly fine 50-dollar bill?"

Peter abruptly pulled into the same Acme grocery store where my grandfather had gotten me a job as a checker when I was in high school. Before he passed away, he'd come by on Saturdays to watch me work for a half hour or so, telling shoppers, most of whom he knew, "That's my grandson. He's only 16, and he's in the union!" For a big man in loafers, Peter

exited the car in one smooth motion and began striding toward the entrance, leaving me behind. I grabbed a stranded shopping cart while chasing after my dismissive boss, who had moved his Ray-Bans to the top of his head and was spinning his car keys around his finger like a frat boy on a beer run.

“We won’t be needing that,” he said as I came up from behind. “Put it back, boy.”

As soon as we walked inside, I saw Lorraine, a cashier whom I had flirted with even though she was five years older than me. I walked toward her register to surprise her while Peter disappeared down the frozen food aisle. After not seeing her for more than a year, she looked a little heavier, but her radiant smile hadn’t diminished a single lumen. Although our first and only movie date ended with her making fun of me for tearing up at the end of *ET*, we managed to stay friends.

“See any decent movies lately?” shouted Lorraine, who saw me approaching when she flagged the floor manager for a price check.

“Not lately,” I laughed, opening up my arms. “Not since I ran out of tissues.” Oddly, she felt smaller in my arms than the last time I hugged her.

“God! You’re covered in dirt. Are you digging ditches now? I thought you were going to college down south.”

“I am,” I explained. “I’m just here for the summer working as a landscaper on an estate in Radnor. It’s owned by this really rich family who employed my grandfather for over 50 years.”

“Oh, he was a landscaper, too?” she asked, turning her back to me as she began to check the groceries for an elderly lady clutching a handful of coupons.

“No way. He was their butler.”

Lorraine turned toward me to say something, but she, along with everyone else near the front of the store, was distracted by the sound of someone bellowing, “Boy! Where are you, boy?”

“Oh god,” I sighed. “I have to go.”

Lorraine looked toward the source of the blatant disrespect and then back at me. “Wait. Is that guy looking for you?”

“It’s complicated. I’ll come back later in the week and explain it to you, okay?”

Then, when it seemed things couldn’t possibly get any worse, *it* happened.

Peter saw me from three registers away and shouted over the din of grocery store commerce, “Boy! Come!”

Did that really just happen? While avoiding eye contact with everyone else, I sheepishly looked at Lorraine and mumbled, “I promise this’ll all make sense once I explain it to you. See you later.”

As soon as Peter saw me begin to approach him, he spun around and, once again, disappeared down the frozen food aisle. By the time I entered the same aisle, Peter was at the end of it—holding one of the freezer doors open as if he expected me to get inside.

“Boy, pick up that frozen turkey.”

“This one?” I asked, reaching into the freezer.

“No! I want *that* one,” he replied, pointing to a 26-pound Butterball on the crowded lower shelf.

As I picked it up, he took off down the aisle. I scurried along behind him with the frozen bird in tow, thinking we did need a shopping cart after all. But when he made a beeline toward the front of the store and approached a register with his wallet in hand, I suddenly thought there was no reason for me to be here other than to carry this man’s turkey like a lowly porter. *The nerve!* Thankfully, my walk of shame was nearly over and wouldn’t include a humiliating curtain call with Lorraine since she was swamped with customers five checkout lanes over. While Peter retraced the route back to the estate, I listened to him dictate my duties for the rest of the day along with the strict dress code for Saturday night’s valet job.

“If you show up without black shoes, black pants, and a white dress shirt, I’ll send you right home, boy.”

When he didn't see me nod, acknowledging his Mussolini-like decree, he hissed, "Did you hear me?"

"Yes, I nodded."

"Use your words, boy."

I looked out the passenger-side window at the dairy farm that operated on the east side of the Ardrossan Estate. To dissipate the murderous thoughts racing through my brain, I took in a deep breath and held it in, reminding myself of the kinds of jobs I could get with a biology degree. When I let the air out, ever so slowly, I was smiling—but not because of what seemed like a bright future. I was thinking about Mr. Moylan singing, "Here comes the junkman! Here comes the junkman!"

Chapter 4: Axiom

Flop Sweat

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

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

To my left, two men, somewhere between the ages of 25 and 30, sat hunched over, preoccupied with their phones. One wore earbuds; the other had on a pair of expensive-looking headphones. Like me, they were both wearing running shorts and flip-flops. A barefoot man around my age sat on the bench to my right. He had a gray bath towel wrapped around his waist and looked to be in his mid-50s. Like the other two, he seemed disconnected from the present moment. His gaze went

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

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

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

I made a mental note to recycle that line the next time I was in the sauna, or any sauna for that matter. As George would excitedly say to his best friend, “It’s gold, Jerry! Gold!” I returned my attention to the young man wearing the expensive-looking headphones because my eyes had adjusted to the low level of amber light emanating from an LED above the room’s heating element. At first, I didn’t believe it, but after he moved his head a few times, I was positive they were the same pair of high-end headphones that I had purchased a few weeks earlier. Whereas he would subject his pair to exactly what Sony explicitly warned against—temperatures above 100 degrees—my headphones were safely nestled inside a microfiber pouch on top of a folded face towel on my nightstand because I didn’t have a satin pillow, velvet ropes, or a glass case. Although I couldn’t understand why anyone would treat a pair of 400-dollar headphones so carelessly, I had to admit I wasn’t too surprised—especially since he looked young enough to have been raised by the internet with a phone in his hand.

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

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

Mr. Green Shirt

“Man, I need a friend,” I sighed as I floated upward from the bench, stopping when the lat pull-down bar could go no further. I let go of it and plopped back down after having

finished my last set. From my position in the middle of the bustling gym floor, I surveyed the perpetually moving after-work crowd. Arms pushed and pulled. Legs squatted and pressed. With time-constrained people far outnumbering the weight machines, the climate felt more competitive than motivating and reminded me of the stress and tears that came from playing musical chairs at elementary school birthday parties. Above me, along all four railings in the mezzanine, rows of cardio machines hummed, vibrated, and beeped. On each one, a human being waged a personal battle. They huffed and puffed with scrunched-up faces expressing both misery and determination. The sound of moving parts mixed with the energy of moving bodies created a thunderous cacophony that filled the gym on Parkcenter Drive, ruining any semblance of calming, meditative thought.

Most sane people try to avoid going to the gym during peak hours, but not me. I didn't particularly like the frenetic atmosphere either, but with this many people, I statistically had a much better chance of having a conversation and possibly making a friend. The real question I had to ask myself was why, after having worked out at all three of its locations in Boise's Treasure Valley for five years, I hadn't acquired a

single friend at Axiom. I had a few lady friends to go out to lunch with, but they just liked to complain about their exes and try to convince me why it was okay to have three glasses of white wine in the middle of the day. I needed a wingman—someone close to my age who was also interested in meeting women, staying active, and having a male friend to talk to about guy stuff. There was no doubt about it; I was in serious need of male bonding—the kind that many of us enjoyed and appreciated earlier in life. But now it seemed like I'd have to win the lottery twice before I'd ever meet male friends for a group hike or for breakfast at the local pancake house.

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

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

After I was shooed away from the lat pull-down machine by a fit 35-year-old boss lady in yoga pants, I settled into the nearby bicep curl machine, giving me an even better view of my potential sidekick. Not in my wildest dreams could I have

imagined crossing paths with another unicorn—a fellow rarity in that he had no visible tattoos, was clean-shaven, and wasn't wearing audio equipment or carrying a phone. But the most promising commonality by far—the one attribute that truly gave me hope—was that he was by himself, making me think he was capable of dealing with a toxic gym culture without the need for distraction. If I wasn't feeling 100-percent confident that he was my next best friend, I most certainly was after I watched him interact with people he didn't know. He effortlessly acknowledged those around him by smiling, nodding his head, or simply saying hello if they weren't wearing earbuds or headphones.

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

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

I knew which one of the two spoke to me because he was already putting his earbud back in with an arm completely

covered in indistinguishable tattoos. He had on a black tank top with the Boise State logo on the front and gray shorts, while his workout buddy was wearing the inverse: a gray tank top over black shorts. They both wore their ball caps backwards and donned audio headgear. The only differences were the buddy's bulky headphones and his neck and calf tattoos.

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

unsuspecting insect—er, I mean Mr. Green Shirt—in seemingly by-chance discourse. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized I was going through the exact same gyrations as if Mr. Green Shirt had been a curvaceous blonde with long legs.

With the resistance set so low, I was able to do sets of 30 repetitions with relative ease. I continued to fold and unfold my body on the low ab machine while my mind took a step back to assess the situation. If I wanted to have a realistic chance at making friends with another dude, I'd have to approach Mr. Green Shirt in a way that wouldn't make him feel suspicious—like I was trying to sell him something or, worse yet, to ask him out on a date. If I went with a direct approach and said something like, “Hey, we're both working out alone. Want to be friends?” or “I've been coming here for years and haven't made a single friend. Want to be my first friend?” —I'd be creeped out by me, too. But even the scenarios where I'd approach Mr. Green Shirt in a less obvious manner all played out the same way in my mind. I could imagine saying, “Are you new? I haven't seen you around here before,” or “Would you mind spotting me over here?” or “You look pretty fit. Are you training for anything specific?” —and

coming off like a worm angling for money, information, or a date.

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

The Kick is Up

In the 1970s and 80s, making friends came easily for me in classrooms, on teams, and at work, but as someone in their mid-50s, that's certainly no longer the case for me and most older men who were indoctrinated at an early age to stereotype, embrace stoicism, and fear anything perceived as gay. Not only are these beliefs passed down from generation to generation, but women have also come to expect *real* men to behave this way. But what if you drank the Kool-Aid like all the other boys and it didn't have the same effect? Life would be very different for the boy who retained his ability to think and act on his own terms, where the Golden Rule

discerns what is right from wrong. And what if that boy imagined there were others like him—boys who could blaze new trails and men who managed to free themselves of a dehumanizing doctrine that serves only its authors? Despite an overwhelmingly low probability, that boy would mature into a man who could find it within himself to trust that it's still possible to make friends past the age of 50.

One would think finding a male or female friend in a commercial gym would be a lot easier than, say, at the grocery store, in a coffee shop, or even online. Whether I'm at a Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, or Walmart, it's always the same vibe—on-task shoppers subordinating acknowledgement of fellow human beings to getting in and out of the grocery store as quickly as possible. Thankfully, salutations *do* take place in coffee shops; however, the caffeinated patrons reserve them for whoever pops up on their screens. Online dating to the rescue, right? I've never ordered food through DoorDash, but it must be similar to using online dating apps because they, too, are overpriced, take too long, and lower expectations. I was thrilled when these same intrusive apps expanded to include friendship categories for opposite- and same-sex relationships. But that was short-lived after I learned that a lot

of the men I encountered online referred to themselves as “bears seeking cubs” and vice versa. *Um, no, thanks.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hot Tub Surprise

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

actually knowing what I was talking about, said otherwise. I reluctantly pressed the pause button on the treadmill, hopped off, and walked toward the row of stair climbers to save the big man from injuring himself.

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

“Huh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I work mostly in Seattle,” he replied.

“Okay, but what do you do there?”

“I play football.”

I tried not to gush like a smitten schoolgirl, but from his smile I could tell I was failing miserably. He continued to watch me as I connected the dots, frantically rifling through a mental Rolodex of current Seahawks players while stalling for time.

“Defensive player, right?” I asked.

“You got it.”

“Defensive lineman?” I pushed.

“That’s right.”

“Cornelius Kennedy!” I blurted.

“Almost. Cortez Kennedy.”

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

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

“Chuck,” I said, shaking his hand.

“Chuck what?”

“Chuck Trunks.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Operation Bromance

The gym was unusually busy for a late-afternoon Friday, but then again, it was the day before an extended July Fourth weekend, where toned bodies were most likely to be put on

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

With the main gym floor crowded with members squeezing in last-minute workouts before the big three-day weekend, I knew it would be difficult to spot Mr. Green Shirt. Besides, he probably had plans for the weekend and had already left town. But just to be certain, I meandered around the free weights,

strolled past the weight machines, and hung out in the stretching area. Instead of finding the retired Seahawk, I watched two young women with bulky headphones, whose attire left nothing to the imagination, film themselves exercising as if it were perfectly natural and acceptable to do so in a public space crawling with people. One squatted with a 20-pound dumbbell while the other worked her glutes doing single-leg kickbacks. In both instances, tripods held their cell phones, which, of course, hindered access to nearby equipment and frustrated those around them.

“I should check upstairs,” I sighed, thankful for the opportunity to distance myself from such blatant displays of unapologetic self-centeredness. Just before I started climbing the open staircase in the middle of the gym floor, a very attractive young lady, a girl I’d seen many times at Axiom, jumped in front of me on her way up to the mezzanine. I can appreciate beauty at any age, but what struck me most about the pretty brunette was what she was doing—what she always did—as she climbed the stairs in front of me. Whether she was walking into the gym, leaving it, lifting weights, using the machines, stretching, or buying a smoothie at the in-house juice bar, she never looked away from the screen of her

iPhone. I understand that that's not so unusual in 2025, but for pre-Covid 2019, it looked downright crazy. What made it even weirder was how she'd hold the phone up to her face as she walked from one exercise station to the next. Even back then, I had already figured out that the more attractive a woman was, the more likely she'd be preoccupied with a phone in public—but this Axiom girl took it to a whole new level.

At the top of the stairs, the phone addict turned left and headed toward a cluster of stair climbers without tripping once while I went to the right. It didn't take long for me to pick out Mr. Green Shirt, who was actually wearing the infamous green marathon shirt and looked to be near the end of a session with an elliptical trainer that overlooked Parkcenter Drive. "Today's the day," I declared, happily retreating downstairs to wait for him. If he were like me and knew that it was best to save resistance training until after a cardio workout, he'd most likely come down to use the weight machines or do some light stretching. In either case, I had both areas covered and was ready to put "Operation Bromance" into motion by casually telling him an abbreviated version of my Cortez Kennedy encounter.

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

Wide Right

Even with numerous signs and pictures indicating that cell phone usage in the bathroom, shower, and changing areas in the men’s locker room was strictly prohibited, guys—young and old alike—brazenly disregarded what should’ve been

thought of as a common courtesy. There was a time when I would've been outraged had I caught someone secretly filming or taking pictures of me, but now I could care less. According to multiple sources across the internet, cameras are ubiquitous in the public domain and capture the movements of the average American more than 30 times a day. To me, what additional harm can two or three covert cell phone cameras in the locker room do that the first 30 image captures didn't cause already? I'd rather focus on living a clean and decent public life instead of worrying if someone saw me spit out my gum on the sidewalk, not return a shopping cart, or stare too long at the bustline of the girl making smoothies behind the juice bar. Believe me, it's the smarter move—especially in a society where a public misstep attracts immediate negative attention like flies to manure and good deeds go unnoticed. *Do you want to disappear from society without having to build a shack in the woods? Be a nice guy!*

Compared to the frenetic activity on both gym floors, the men's locker room felt more like a creepy bus terminal after midnight. Three men, in various stages of undress, occupied the space. Each was holding a cell phone. Two sat slumped on benches beside open lockers, scrolling through their phones,

while a third performed in a make-believe Mr. Universe pageant in front of the bathroom mirror. Interestingly, he had the foresight to bring a mini tripod to position his phone on the sink counter. I took off my shirt and changed into the black running shorts and flip-flops I always carried with me to the gym. I grabbed my towel, shut the locker, and made my way toward the sauna, past the two electronically induced dopamine addicts and the cringe-worthy orgy of self-love going on in the mirror.

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

“So they finally fixed this thing, huh?” I said as I entered the blistering hot sauna. Mr. Green Shirt was sitting where the gray towel sat a month earlier, so I chose a seat against the back wall, facing the door. Now that I had established that friendly discourse was welcomed, the ball was in his court.

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

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

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

“Speaking of non-moving parts, what do you think of this watch?” he said, extending his left arm to give me a closer

view of what looked like an old-school analog Timex—the kind my seventh-grade math teacher wore.

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

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

Mr. Green Shirt scooted to the edge of his seat and turned to face me. He opened his legs, leaned forward, and dropped an elbow on each knee. I slid back, thinking he was either going to confess an uncomfortable truth about himself or ask me to pray with him. “Believe it or not, this prototype has only one moving part and doesn’t need a battery. My buddy and I have been working on it for about four years.”

“Working on what?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 5: Body Tech

In The Name of Science

“You can do this,” I said aloud while stepping out of my 12-year-old Nissan. “You *have* to do this.” From the other side of a wall of eucalyptus trees, the roar of the 101 Freeway not only drowned out the sound of my shaky voice but also my thumping heart. Unlike the cars hurtling toward Hollywood or flying in the other direction toward Santa Barbara, I still had a choice. I could forget about this weird little experiment and avoid the discomfort altogether or go through with it. I grabbed my canvas gym bag from the backseat, shut the door, and pressed the barely visible lock icon on my key fob. In my nervous anticipation, the ensuing horn chirp sounded less like a confirmation that my car was locked and more like a pistol launching the start of a race—a race that could either be as short as a lap around the park or as grueling as a marathon across the Santa Monica Mountains. In less than a minute, I’d introduce a persona that was totally opposite of who I was simply to confuse people—all in the name of science.

A few weeks after a devastating end to a seven-year relationship, I joined the upscale gym in Camarillo, California, in the summer of 2010. I figured the change of scenery would expose me to new people and lift my spirits. The gym was unique in that it was affiliated with an exclusive physical therapy center, catering to the affluent, who could afford weeks, if not months, of higher-end one-on-one rehabilitation. In my first two months at Body Tech, I'd become chummy with the gym staff—most of whom were still in school for various careers in physical therapy—and on a first-name basis with a dozen or so members, some of whom were former colleagues at a company I was laid off from a few years earlier. But something was eating at me—something I couldn't help noticing each time I went to the gym. Pretty soon it became the elephant in the room that only I could see. I realized that if I didn't initiate acknowledgment or conversation, I'd spend an hour or so working out in awkward silence, feeling invisible and unworthy. I found that odd, if not troubling.

I drew a deep breath as I pulled the handle of the heavy glass door and stepped into the gym's narrow reception area to begin the experiment on the first day of my third month at Body Tech. To my right, I was expected to check in with my

membership card as well as add my signature and date to the sign-in sheet on top of the six-foot-long countertop. Typically, on the other side of it, two to four staff members would either be typing or shuffling papers behind four desks, always making me question whether I was in a gym or a small accounting office. *What were these people doing?* As usual, Jake and Walter were behind computer monitors in the back. Katie, a husky 21-year-old woman who split her time between taking classes at Cal State Channel Islands and assisting physical therapy patients, was attempting to remove a coffee stain from her white Body Tech polo shirt.

Out of everyone behind the counter, Jake was the most engaging, but that didn't come as a surprise since his name tag indicated he was the gym manager. Plus, he was hard to miss. He was around 30 years old, stood two to three inches above six feet, and, as a muscled powerlifter, weighed between 220 and 240 pounds. He was completely bald, clean-shaven, and appeared to have no body hair—a guesstimate on my part since his forearms were baby smooth. Jake was so white that if he angled himself just right in the sunlight cascading through the gym's skylights, I swear I could see muscles, tendons, and ligaments under his translucent skin. Most

noticeable—at least to me—were his delicate John Lennon-style spectacles. The lightweight, rust-colored wireframes contrasted sharply with his Lou Ferrigno size, making him look like he'd rip a book in half with his bare hands if he didn't like the ending.

Normally, I'd walk in and immediately acknowledge the staff with a spirited "Good morning, everyone!" followed by a customized greeting to the manager like, "How's it going, Body by Jake?" or "Time to Jake and Bake!" Many times, I'd take a moment to share something odd or funny I had witnessed while out running or cycling. And I wasn't shy about telling them about an upcoming art show I'd be in, joking that they'd be VIPs at the event just for knowing me. But today was a new beginning. I still acknowledged everyone; however, I simply nodded at them, saying nothing after attempting to make eye contact. If my experiment were to have sound scientific merit, I'd have to give everyone a fair opportunity.

Jake reciprocated my nod. Katie continued dabbing the hem of her shirt without looking up. And Walter rose to his feet and started walking toward me as if he had something to say,

which would've been surprising considering he rarely spoke to anyone. I liked Walter—especially after buying an hour of his time a month earlier to show me how to exercise around chronic tendinitis in my shoulders and hamstrings. He appeared to be the same age as Jake, about 15 years younger than me, and of Hispanic descent. I chose Walter over the other trainers because his approach matched his perpetual facial expression: serious and intense. I watched the five-foot-seven, anatomically correct Mexican-American flash a half smile at me before bending down and reaching for something underneath the counter. He popped up with a folder and headed back to his desk.

I obediently filled out the sign-in sheet and placed my membership card underneath the wall-mounted card reader. After hearing the audible click, I yanked the unlocked door toward me and proceeded to enter the gym area. But just before passing through the threshold, I was shocked to hear Katie—of all people—saying, “Have a good workout!” However, despite her surprising engagement, the experiment wasn't over—not by a long shot. I turned around and gave her a quick smile and an emphatic thumbs-up. I wasn't taking a vow of silence at the gym until someone simply spoke to me.

That would be too easy. I was planning to stay silent until someone asked me *why* I was no longer speaking. Since everyone had seen two months of my friendly and talkative personality, I figured the experiment would last a day or two—three at the very most. If I tried the same thing at a coffee shop, grocery store, or a new gym—places where people didn't know anything about me—I'd basically be starting a second career as a Tibetan monk. And because I needed to hear a specific question, I knew the awkwardness would be particularly unsettling once a staff member or gym-goer decided to look past my facial expressions, hand gestures, and body language to engage me directly.

The door closed quickly behind me, practically catapulting me toward the men's locker room, which was where I was headed anyway. While putting my keys and membership card into my gym bag, I heard someone from the cardio area shout my name, "Chuck!" *How weird! First Katie, and now this? Unbelievable!* I looked up and saw Andy waving me over from a humming elliptical machine. I slowed down but maintained my trajectory toward the locker room. I smiled at Andy and answered him with three movements of my left index finger. I pointed toward the ceiling, then at the locker

room, and then back at him. Andy nodded and offered a thumbs-up. Our conversation basically went like this:

“Hey, Andy! Give me a sec to drop off my bag in the locker room, and then I’ll come over,” said my finger.

“Sure thing, Chuck. I’ll be right here,” replied Andy’s thumb.

I walked into the empty locker room and set my gym bag on a bench close to the bathroom to wash my hands in the sink—something I did regularly after handling community pens and grasping public door handles. While drying them off, I looked in the mirror and thought about Andy’s chatty nature. I wondered if my experiment would end even before I broke a sweat on the very first day. I threw the wad of paper away and kept my left hand extended—palm side down with my fingers splayed. I rocked it from side to side, thinking my odds were 50/50.

Andy

Andy’s legs were still churning away on the elliptical when I came out of the locker room, but his hands were no longer

grasping the moving handlebars. Instead, they were holding his iPhone up to his face. The contrast between his fast-moving lower body and his motionless upper body made him look odd—like he was trying to run away from what was on his mind. But I knew that wasn't the case. Early in my now-defunct manufacturing career, I collaborated with Andy on projects that demanded an engineering mind, someone who could think creatively and be willing to take risks. As a project manager, I got along wonderfully with Andy, but not because I was as brilliant as he was. He was on another level. Unlike the other managers, I could tolerate his talkative high energy, his instant visible boredom with whatever it was you were telling him, his abhorrence of deadlines, and his tendency to think out loud. I simply stepped back, took orders from him, and reaped the benefits over and over again.

Although I admired Andy's intelligence and liked who he was as a person, we never crossed the line from colleagues to friendship, mutually opting to keep the successful relationship at work like a personal coffee mug used only while at the office. When he saw me approaching, Andy put his phone down on the elliptical's console and began talking excitedly even before I was within earshot of his voice. *Same old Andy,*

I thought. Other than thinning salt-and-pepper hair and 15 extra pounds around his midsection, he hadn't changed very much since I last watched him climb on top of bioreactors 18 years earlier. At 55, Andy's face was wrinkle-free and dominated by expressive brown eyes that betrayed his innermost thoughts. His was a baby face that aligned with an almost childlike exuberance over anything that interested him. Although he had a wife of 30 years and two kids in college, Andy seemed more like a real-life Peter Pan singing "I Won't Grow Up" than a husband and father.

"Hey, Chuck," he said as I walked up. Without the phone, his hands, once again, found the handlebars. I stopped in front of the elliptical and watched his arms go back and forth. "Have you ever heard of a wine called Obispo Oaks? You might have seen some of their bottles in Trader Joe's. They're a relatively new operation based in Carmel Valley."

I furrowed my brow earnestly and shook my head.

"There was an opportunity to buy a stake in the company, and I jumped at the chance. I know what you're thinking: 'What do I know about wine?' Well, let me tell you—I've been

learning so much about the science and business of winemaking. It's fascinating! Do you like the heavier red wines? They have a terrific Petite Sirah and an even better Cabernet."

I nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah, me too," he admitted while patting his stomach. "Between the new wine venture and organizing this year's Greek Festival, you probably won't see me here at the gym for a while. I'll have to get my workouts in during the evening hours. I think I remember you coming to the event last year, right? The festival will still be held at the Camarillo airport, but instead of the first weekend of September, it's scheduled for the second. I hope you'll come. You'll be there, right?"

I took a step back and gave Andy a thumbs-up. Then, I tapped my watch and pointed toward a row of stationary bikes. "If he was going to ask me why I wasn't saying anything," I reasoned, "now would be the time." Instead, he looked at the elliptical's control panel and said, "I hear you, Chuck. I need to get a move on, too. See you at the festival if not before!"

I left Andy with my experiment's clock still ticking only to come face-to-face with another dilemma. Two women occupied the outside stationary bikes, leaving two open bikes between them. Both appeared to be around my age. One lady was slim and gorgeous; the other was chunky and sweaty. Each woman wore earbuds plugged into personalized MP3 players that facilitated their mental exodus from the current surroundings. *Hmm . . . Which bike should I choose?* If I chose the bike closest to the more attractive lady, she'd probably think I was some kind of opportunistic creep. If I chose the bike closer to the other woman, she might see me as someone who, like her, also views the bold and beautiful as toxic and insufferable. But on the other hand, she might interpret my bike choice as a "pity alliance." If that were the case, I could imagine her saying, "Get over yourself, jerk. You're not doing me any favors." *Sigh . . . If only these stationary bikes were urinals, my decision would be so much easier!*

I sailed past the bikes toward a bank of treadmills while attempting to make eye contact with both ladies, not because I wanted to, but because I'm hardwired to acknowledge people around me—a genetic flaw in today's society. I don't really want to ask, "How are you?" or "How's your day going?"

What I truly want to say is the translated version of what many African tribe members say to each other in passing: “I see you.” Then, in my dreams, they’d say in return, “I see you, too.” Asking a perfect stranger to tell me how they’re feeling has always seemed intrusive and archaic. No wonder nobody asks me that anymore. I don’t blame them. I could see myself saying, “I see you,” to my fellow shoppers in Walmart as my next social experiment, but I don’t think it would go over too well.

“I see you,” I’d say to the young lady in pajama pants putting a 12-pack of Diet Dr. Pepper in her cart.

“What are you? Security?” she’d ask. “I didn’t steal anything! Check the tapes!”

“I see you,” I’d say to a bearded guy wearing a dirty trucker hat with a carton of coffee K-cups under his arm.

“Back off, queer!” he’d reply.

“I see you,” I’d say to an elderly couple comparing prices of pot pies in the freezer section.

“Let’s go,” she’d whisper to her husband. “No, just leave the cart where it is. See? This is why I hate coming here!”

Predictably, neither bike rider met my eyes. I settled onto a treadmill that not only gave me a view of the entire gym floor but also a glimpse into the adjacent physical therapy treatment area every time its connector door swung open. Inside, I saw a middle-aged man lying on a spinal decompression machine and an older lady with white hair sitting on an exercise ball with her arms stretched out in front of her. Like them, I, too, was trying to remedy something on the inside. While their sources of pain emanated from battered joints, my affliction resided in my heart. A staff member closed the connector door just as Andy shuffled past it in the direction of the gym’s exit, momentarily disrupting my train of thought. His legs were on their way to an emergency while his arms steadied his phone under his chin. Again, I couldn’t help but notice the contrast between his upper and lower body. It made him look odd.

Closed for Business

I looked up from my work table and noticed the time. The glowing red numbers on the digital alarm clock indicated it

was close to lunchtime. I quickened my pace. Years earlier, I found out the hard way to never split the embellishment process into two or three sessions when working with a thick gesso; otherwise, it dries funny on top of the canvas. I learned about the technique by watching other artists on YouTube explain how the gooey sealant can add texture and pop, as well as up to several hundred dollars to the price tags of art reproductions. “It certainly won’t look as good as the original art piece,” they said, “but it’ll come close!” By the time I finished the hours-long application of the sticky goop to “Beam Me Up,” an art piece featuring an astronaut leaving Earth with all the things that mattered to him, I was ready to eat something light and unwind at the gym. I dropped my gesso brush into a repurposed jelly jar of warm water and transferred the artwork from my work table to an easel to dry. A mother of two young children—a girl and a boy—bought the oversized piece to hang in her son’s bedroom. I wasn’t planning to tell her the astronaut was me—a lone figure blasting away from a self-sabotaging species hellbent on destroying each other and the only home they have.

Shockingly, my experiment was entering its fourth week—and not because I was acting surly, ignoring people, or

working out at odd times around folks I'd never seen before. Other than that first day when Katie shouted, "Have a good workout!" and Andy attempted what could pass as discourse, the next three weeks were uneventful. Other than Body Tech, I had no other social outlets besides picking up orders from my art reproduction guy or the occasional art show. The layoff in 2007 came out of nowhere, stripping me of a paycheck, health insurance, and friends. Perhaps it was naivety on my part, but I thought I could resuscitate my drowning social life if I started a commercial art business—but quickly found out that solo enterprises are all-consuming and isolating. The indefinite silence was getting louder and louder—almost deafening—as the experiment dragged on.

For 15 consecutive 75-minute workouts, I was able to sign in, access the gym, store my personal belongings in the locker room, exercise, and leave without uttering a single word. I was so ready to end the experiment that I would've called it quits even if someone simply asked, "What's your problem?" Apparently, Jake, Walter, and the rest of the staff behind the counter were satisfied with head nods, finger gestures, and facial expressions. It was strange because they all knew about my community art projects and cycling excursions. I thought

Walter would have at least asked if my tendinitis was any better from the exercises he'd shown me. At times, it felt like they went out of their way to avoid asking me anything, as if doing so would risk establishing rapport—making me feel like I was more than just an upsell opportunity or a monthly credit card transaction.

For obvious reasons, I could understand why my experiment had little to no chance of ending in the men's locker room, where unsolicited chitchat and eye contact can sadly be interpreted as “homo behavior.” What troubled me the most was the total lack of engagement on the gym floor. *What's up with these people?* I'm sure if I asked each one of them if they'd like to meet new people, make friends, and feel a sense of community, they'd all say the same thing: “Of course!” And yet, at the same time, rather than venture beyond themselves, they'll choose to stay in their lanes—behind screens, earbuds, playlists, and private thoughts—contributing nothing but detached indifference to the public space. In the months leading up to the experiment, I had sown enough social seeds to reasonably expect inquiries about my abrupt vow of silence.

I met Christine soon after I joined Body Tech. We were both angling toward the same leg extension machine from different areas of the gym. I got there first but insisted we take turns. “Ladies first,” I said. She told me she was recovering from a knee replacement and that she’ll probably have the other one replaced in 18 months or so. I thought Christine was at least 10 years older than me but later learned she was actually two years younger. “I let myself go for too long,” she admitted while gingerly lifting her surgically repaired leg. “So, is the leg work part of your physical therapy?” I asked. “Oh, no,” she replied. “I finished with that last week. I guess I caught the motivation bug to get in shape again. I just don’t want to make the mistake of overdoing it.” Christine and I would see each other from time to time—and when we did—she’d ask about my latest art project, and I’d ask her about her knee and fitness progress.

Phillip was a man on a mission. I watched the gangly 30-year-old labor on the treadmill and correctly guessed he was training for an upcoming running event. His form was terrible, and he appeared to be suffering. At the end of my first month at Body Tech, I took a chance and approached Phillip as he was stepping off the machine.

“Hi there,” I said. “I’ve seen you grinding it out on these treadmills for the past month. If you don’t mind me asking, are you training for anything specific? I’m Chuck, by the way.”

“I’m Phillip,” he replied while extending his right hand. “I signed up to run a marathon through the Leukemia Society.”

“Which one?” I asked, shaking his hand.

“The LA Marathon.”

“Isn’t that in March?” I asked.

“It is,” he replied. “I still have seven months of training left.”

After finding out that Phillip had only been training for a month, giving him a measly eight months to prepare for a 26.2-mile marathon, I didn’t have the heart to tell him that if he completes it, he’ll earn a finisher’s medal along with two extra parting gifts—at least one lifelong injury and a burning hatred for running. Over the following four weeks—prior to going silent—I shared my first marathon experience with

Phillip, even going as far as offering training tips I had learned from veteran coaches in my former running clubs. To his credit, he never hit me up for a donation to support his efforts for the Leukemia Society.

Phillip and Christine weren't the only members I regularly approached to say hello to. There was Monica, the 70-year-old grandmother getting in hiking shape for a two-week stay in Yosemite National Park with a group from her church. Buster and Julia, a retired married couple, were regulars at the gym, too. They were easy to spot since they always opted to pedal side by side on a pair of recumbent bikes. Jonathan, a music teacher at the local high school, was recovering from back surgery and spent most of this time stretching on mats outside the PT treatment area. Silvia was an aerobics instructor who liked to work out somewhere where she wouldn't run into the people who participated in her classes at the YMCA and other commercial fitness centers. When I asked her why, she replied, "Sometimes, I just need to feel like I'm off the clock for a while—like it would be great if I had one of those little signs in the window that I could spin around from 'open' to 'closed.' You know what I mean?"

Of course, I knew what Silvia meant, but I had to shake my head at the irony of her admission more than two months later. Back then, despite having a well-lit “open for business” sign around my neck, I still had to be the one to make the first move for any acknowledgment or dialogue. Now that I had purposely closed the shop without explanation in the middle of the day—when customers expected it to be open—I wondered why no one was banging on the glass door shouting, “Yoo-hoo! Anybody home?” Unlike Silvia, I wasn’t trying to hide from those who knew me. Instead, *my* customers could actually see me on the other side of the glass door, and still nothing—no acknowledgments, no inquiries, no anything.

Birds of a Feather

“Did I really go nearly five weeks without saying a single word?” I asked myself the rhetorical question out loud while sitting in my car in the gym’s parking lot just to hear how crazy it sounded. More than a month ago, I had predicted that the experiment wouldn’t last more than three workouts. Instead, it ballooned to 23 and probably would’ve blown past 200 if I didn’t put it out of its misery. From the start, I felt hopeful someone would eventually ask me why I had stopped talking,

but now I couldn't even imagine that happening. What was painfully obvious to me seemed routine and mundane to the confounding people of Body Tech. But just because I didn't get the results I wanted didn't mean the experiment was a failure. I gained a valuable lesson about the nature of people, and in less than a minute, I was about to put the experiment into overdrive and flip the script.

I stepped out of the car and opened the rear door to retrieve my gym bag and quickly realized it wasn't there. Panic set in, but it didn't last long after remembering I had put it in the trunk to keep it out of sight while I ran a couple of errands earlier. I reached back into the car and popped open the trunk with the push of a button. It was then, after closing the trunk, that I noticed flocks of birds flying around the swaying eucalyptus trees on the other side of the fence. Had there not been an eight-lane freeway bisecting what was once pristine farmland, I would've heard the sounds of bending branches, fluttering leaves, and chirping birds. Instead, I walked to the gym's entrance, listening to the steady roar of engines, preparing myself for what should come as a shocker to Jake, Walter, and whoever else was behind the counter in the reception area.

“Hey, guys!” I beamed as I walked into the rectangular vestibule, acting as if the weirdness of the last five weeks didn’t happen. “I hope these gusty winds go away before the weekend. I’m planning to ride from Ventura to Santa Barbara this weekend.” I was mildly shocked to see Jake, Walter, and Katie behind the counter—the same three people I began my first experiment with. *What are the odds?* Now, they’d be the ones to start the clock on my second social experiment—a test to see how long it would take for someone to notice that I was suddenly talking again.

“That sounds awesome, Chuck,” chimed Jake. “If you’re riding through Carpinteria, I heard they’re having a big festival this weekend.”

“Avocados,” blurted Katie.

Jake peered over his flat-screen monitor at Katie. “Avocados?”

“It’s the avocado festival,” she clarified without looking away from her screen.

I signed in, scanned my membership card, and pulled the door open, but before I walked through it, I added, “Hey, Walter. Thanks again for all the stretches and exercises you showed me. My shoulders and hamstrings are so much better now.”

“No problem. I’m glad I could help,” he replied as he began to make a call on his desk phone.

On my way to the locker room, I saw Phillip running awkwardly on one of the treadmills and approached him. “Hey, how’s the training going? I think I saw you running on Lewis Road last Sunday. Was that you?”

“Yeah,” he gasped. “I was doing my long run. I’m up to eight miles now.”

I pressed Phillip for additional training metrics, like his weekly mileage, and invited him to a Friday morning workout on the track at Camarillo High School. After he declined, saying he had to work, I sauntered over to Buster and Julia on the recumbent bikes to say hello. “All is right in the world when I see you two putting in the miles. Do you guys ever miss a day?”

“Well, I guess we’re creatures of habit,” laughed Julia.

“We don’t come here on the weekends,” added Buster. “We walk on Saturdays and take Sundays off.”

I made sure to verbally acknowledge as many people as possible, hoping to create opportunities where someone would say something like, “What? He speaks?” or “I noticed you weren’t your usual self. You seemed so withdrawn.” By the time I reached the locker room, I had spoken to 10 people directly, and not one of them so much as raised an eyebrow. “But it’s only the first day,” I told myself. My behavior was so radically different from the past five weeks, someone—at least one person—would be bold enough to call me out on it. Maybe it wouldn’t be Jake, Walter, Katie, Phillip, Buster, Julia, or anyone else at the gym that day, but I knew someone would eventually step up. *Someone had to notice, right?*

After two weeks of initiating acknowledgments and conversations like a glad-handing politician, I knew the experiment was over but decided not to make it official until it had reached 23 workouts or five weeks—whichever came first. I figured if I were to ever write about this experience, the

mirrored timeframes would make the experiment sound more robust, elegant even. Plus, it satisfied my obsessive-compulsive need to weigh and balance most everything. The extra weeks would not only allow me enough time to engage with everyone at least twice, but they would also extend my dream of sounding like Gene Wilder's Willy Wonka at the end of the memorable 1971 movie should someone actually notice I was talking again. "You've won! Don't you see? The chocolate factory is yours! You've passed the test!"

I continued going to Body Tech long after the experiments were over. No one ever did ask me why I was or wasn't speaking over those 10 weeks. I simply went back to existing among the staff and gym members from behind a smile, a wave, and lighthearted banter, knowing I'd always have to be the one to initiate acknowledgment and engagement to prove to myself I wasn't invisible. In a way, after months of experimentation, I could imagine how the birds and eucalyptus trees must feel as the drivers race past them on the 101 Freeway—sometimes seen, rarely appreciated, and silenced by a frenetic society too self-involved to slow down and say, "I see you," and too preoccupied to hear, "I see you, too."

Chapter 6: Crunch

East Nampa

I went to bed knowing it wasn't necessary to set an alarm. Whether I called it a night at nine o'clock in the evening or two in the morning, the sun would, most assuredly, rouse me awake at six-fifteen each and every day—and I didn't like it. To accomplish its diabolical mission of putting an end to my peaceful rest, the sun radiated waves of luminescence piloted by gung-ho kamikaze photons, who could steer the shards of early morning light directly at my closed eyelids—no easy task since the intrusive light had to follow a very specific path to find its targeted paydirt. First, it had to reflect off my neighbor's house and then bounce off the white pebbles in my backyard with enough speed to pierce the dark window film on my *west-facing* bedroom window. But that's not the end of its journey. As if possessed, the evil rays—with what juice remained—managed to exploit every gap in the blinds above my bed.

Normally, within moments of waking up, I'd lie there, listening to the sounds of Nampa, Idaho—a high desert

hellscape of soul-crushing urban blight, agro-industrial factories, and street corner signs touting “New Family Homes Starting in the Low 400s.” But this morning was different. I wasn’t dreading a morning running route that would take me past 200 densely packed houses in three different neighborhoods—where the only people I’d see were the ones sitting behind steering wheels, sunglasses, and tinted windows. Nor was I hyperventilating about having to drive to Costco—a store where every day feels like the last shopping day before Thanksgiving. Instead, I woke up feeling 50 pounds of regret pressing down on my chest and lamenting the bitter taste of buyer’s remorse. *What was I thinking? How could I have been so impulsive?*

A month earlier, after completing a 10-month writing project, I moved from Raleigh, North Carolina, to Nampa because I couldn’t locate a reasonably priced rental space 15 miles to the east in Boise. With my next writing project well underway, I didn’t feel guilty taking time away from my laptop to see if I could locate a local gym to augment a home-based, daily regimen that included running or cycling after 30 minutes of stretching. The around-the-clock solo act had finally grown stale. Although I already knew I wouldn’t find friendship or

romance or appear on anyone's radar screen inside a commercial gym, I still felt I needed to be around others—even if it was only for a few hours a week. As it turned out, my best option was not only less than three miles away, but it was also close to a Starbucks and a half-decent grocery store—all on the same side of Interstate 84. I could already envision myself grabbing a coffee or picking up a few items for dinner on my way home from Crunch Fitness. For a man who detests the fact that all of us in the slave class have to own, maintain, and drive a car to fetch even the most basic of needs, I was practically giddy imagining how efficient my future gym runs would be.

From where I lived in East Nampa, there was only one way to drive to Crunch Fitness—the same depressing route I'd have to take for coffee, groceries, or gas. I start by winding through my blue-collar neighborhood of hardworking tradesmen who look like they'd rather die than sit inside an office cubicle. Then I head east for a mile on Birch Lane past subdivisions and apartment complexes, rarely seeing people out and about on either strip of sidewalk. At the traffic light, I can see several new construction projects on the College of Western Idaho's main campus and wonder why anyone would pay to go to

college these days. The fun begins when I turn right onto Garrity Boulevard. For a mile, I drive past corporate-owned strip malls, a Walmart Supercenter, gas station convenience stores, and a few car dealerships before traffic inevitably bottlenecks a quarter mile from an always-choked interstate underpass.

I realize, as I finally emerge from underneath the interstate, that this short stretch of aggravating roadway consumes over half my travel time. I wait at yet another traffic signal before turning left onto East Flamingo Avenue, a street ironically devoid of anything pink or exotic. I quickly approach a more aptly named road at the next intersection of car-centric shopping zones. If I turned right onto East Commerce Street, I'd be able to pull into a dismal five-acre parking lot in front of my preferred grocery store, where jacked-up pandemic pricing remains undaunted in 2022. Instead, I turn left and roll past a Starbucks sandwiched between a Jimmy John's and a Popeye's Chicken. According to Google Maps, I only need to drive a half mile further to reach my destination. East Commerce Street parallels the eastbound lanes of Interstate 84 and climbs one of the few hills on this side of Nampa.

Although Crunch Fitness sits atop a rise overlooking one of the most congested traffic areas in the state of Idaho, it faces north, offering its gym members sweeping views of even more suburban sprawl in the distant cities of Middleton and Star. The building itself doesn't look like it was built to house a full-service gym, including a swimming pool. With its opulent facade and majestic position on top of a hill, I could understand how people might mistake the Crunch building for Nampa's City Hall. But to me, the two-story glass behemoth reminds me of the corporate offices of insurance companies that prioritize the greed of their executives over the services they promised their premium-paying customers. Despite my disdain for anything governmental or corporate, I liked Crunch's location and its clean, professional exterior—so much so that I completely forgot about the other gyms I had planned to visit that afternoon.

What About the Pool?

The sun beamed directly into my face as I walked from my truck toward the front entrance of Crunch Fitness. Since the late-morning sun was behind the building, I was rewarded with a respite of shade for the last 20 yards, allowing me to

remove my sunglasses and tuck them into my backpack. Without the glare, I could clearly see several members exiting the building as I approached. The first person who caught my eye was a young lady in compression spandex carrying a toddler wearing a pink and white romper. Mother and daughter looked so much alike I momentarily forgot that men weren't supposed to speak to women in public anymore and blurted, "My god . . . If there ever was a more obvious mini-me!" I watched her stony expression morph into a smile as she continued past me and heard her tell her daughter, who was focused on her mother's necklace, "See that? I told you . . . We're twins!"

The next two people I saw emerge from the front of the building looked like they, too, could've been twins. One followed the other out, but I could tell they didn't come to the gym together—not a difficult assumption on my part since it seems most adult men do everything alone these days. The lone wolves appeared to be around 25 years old and looked like they were harboring secret fantasies of starring in their own post-apocalyptic action movies as gritty anti-heroes. The Terminator, complete with wraparound sunglasses, tattoos, and bulk, walked past me with his chin jutting forward and his

gaze riveted on the horizon. He made no attempt to acknowledge my existence, yet I didn't feel put off by the snub. The cyborg assassin was obviously sent from a future war-torn world to kill Sarah Connor, whose unborn son will lead the human resistance against the machines, right?

Mad Max was just as friendly. Before passing me, the lanky young man, wearing a loose-fitting tank top over jeans and boots, veered toward a gray monster truck with blacked-out windows taking up two spots next to the building. I envied his spiky, rockstar hair and Coppertone tan but not his air of self-importance or the amalgam of illegible hieroglyphics scrawled on his neck, chest, and arms. Of course, I assumed the tattoos had something to do with him being an ex-police officer and having to fight for survival in a dystopian landscape ravaged by resource scarcity and general lawlessness. Or, he was simply getting in a workout before his swing shift began as a driver for UPS. But I could be wrong.

The building's lobby couldn't have been more unwelcoming. Everything was black. Black flooring. Black walls. Black ceiling. Even the four-sided reception desk was black. The initial space was too cavernous for a gym reception area,

convincing me the building wasn't built with a fitness center in mind. Four private offices lined the right side of the empty lobby. Three were dark inside. One was occupied with the door slightly ajar. A big man in black sweatpants and a black t-shirt came out from one of the dark offices carrying a backpack. He walked toward me while slipping his right arm through one of the shoulder straps and asked, "What can I do for you?"

Suddenly, I felt conscientious about *my* backpack and put it down near my feet in front of the unmanned reception desk. "I'm here to check out the place," I said. "I've never been inside a Crunch gym before."

He looked at his watch and sighed before stepping behind the messy counter to pick up a grimy iPad. It was obvious the big man was on his way out. "What's your name?" he blurted from underneath a black baseball cap with a silver Chevy logo on the front.

"Chuck Trunks."

"Okay. Sign there."

“Where?”

“There,” he instructed, pointing to a flat electronic signature pad on the counter to my right.

“What am I signing?” I asked brightly, hoping my annoyance wasn’t noticeable.

He set the iPad down on top of a pile of scattered papers and replied, “It’s just a waiver so you don’t sue us if you fall or something.”

Ah, yes . . . It’s always a pleasure doing business with Corporate America. I drew a squiggly line in the shape of an infinity symbol above the signature line on the pad with my finger, thinking I should wash my hands as soon as possible. “What’s next?” I asked.

The big man put on his sunglasses and exited the reception desk. “You’re free to check out the gym. When you’re finished, come back here. Someone will be here to help you.” He angled toward the double glass doors I had walked through moments earlier. “The locker rooms are over there,” he said

while pointing somewhere behind the reception desk, “and the gym is upstairs.”

“Okay,” I acknowledged. I removed my keys from my pocket and squatted down to put them inside my backpack when I remembered something. I spun my head around and blurted, “What about the pool?”

But the big man didn’t hear me. He was already on the other side of the glass doors, leaving me to fend for myself inside what was beginning to feel like a post-apocalyptic gym. Still, against a cacophony of red flag alarms going off from deep inside my gut, I swung my backpack over my shoulder and proceeded toward the door of the men’s locker room.

Go Greyhound

There was nothing remarkable about the locker room at Crunch Fitness. A handful of sullen men, interspersed among industrial-grade particleboard lockers, sat or stood equidistant from one another in the dimly lit space. They were of various ages and states of undress as I walked in. While inspecting the area, I made sure to avert my eyes from their increasingly

suspicious glances. As I peered into a couple of empty lockers and checked out the bathroom and shower areas, I noticed that a few of the men had stopped looking at their phones to see what I was doing. Since none of the walls displayed any signage, I entered a corridor between the changing area and restroom facilities, figuring I'd eventually locate the advertised sauna, steam room, and lap pool amenities.

With the smell of chlorine growing stronger the further I walked down the tiled hallway, I knew I'd chosen the correct path. To my left, a glass door separated me from what I hoped was a 25-yard pool with at least four divided lanes wide enough for two people to comfortably share. I opened the door, stepped inside, and immediately liked what I saw. To my astonishment, the three-lane pool had most everything I was looking for; plus, it was illuminated by natural light streaming through rooftop skylights and windows along adjacent walls. Except for two senior citizens floating atop two of the lanes, the pool looked refreshing and inviting. Since the old woman in the lane furthest from where I was standing appeared to be mimicking the movements of a 100-year-old sea turtle on muscle relaxers, I decided that the elderly gentleman in front of me would be a much better source of information. Although

he was on his back, flailing his arms and legs like an *upended* turtle, I could at least make eye contact with him.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said while bending over with my hands on either knee. “Is the pool normally not crowded this time of day?”

“I wouldn’t know since I come here sporadically,” he replied unhelpfully without pausing his reptilian-like exercise. And then he added what I was hoping to avoid at the Crunch Fitness pool. “I do know that a swim team practices here, and I’ve seen people conducting swim lessons too.”

“Oh, that’s good to know,” I said sincerely. “Thanks for telling me. I’ll be sure to ask for a pool schedule before I leave.” I stood up, avoiding direct eye contact with his enormous pink belly, and asked him where the sauna and steam room were located.

“They don’t have a steam room here, but the sauna works pretty good when it’s not broken,” he replied. “It’s behind that door over there next to the rack of kickboards.”

“That seems to be a given these days,” I said before thanking him for his time and telling him I’d see him around.

I was tired of slinging my backpack over my shoulder every time it slid down my arm, so I slipped it over both shoulders like a third grader and walked toward the sauna. I wanted to pout over the absence of a steam room, but if I did, then I’d *really* look like a third grader. After verifying that the roomy sauna was indeed in working order, I retraced my steps through the locker room, thinking how the lack of aesthetics, inadequate lighting, and shuffling men reminded me of all the sad times I’d spent in Greyhound bus stations back in the 1980s. Since I didn’t see another set of stairs other than the black ones in the lobby, I returned to the Dark Lord’s welcome center only to find it deserted along with the reception desk. I climbed the two flights, turned to my left, and immediately recalled the famous line uttered by Tina Turner’s character, Aunty Entity, in the third installment of the Mad Max movie series:

“Welcome to the Thunderdome!”

Inside the Thunderdome

None of us have lived in a post-apocalyptic world, and yet, Hollywood producers and directors seem to be in agreement over what we'd look like if those dark days ever came. Would I emerge from a hole in the wrecked landscape months after a nuclear war with designer stubble, tattoos, and a trucker hat? Would I greet a brave, new world with a roofer's tan, ripped muscles, and an alpha male aura? Would my clothing appear distressed, dirty even, but still offer teasing glimpses of my pumped biceps, pecs, abs, and quads? But that's only half the story. What about the women? Can I expect them to be tatted up and sun-kissed, too—fit and sexy on the outside, masculine on the inside? Could I imagine me and my Armageddon angel running the gauntlet of nuclear fallout on Garrity Boulevard in search of water and gasoline? Absolutely—especially after scanning the second floor of Crunch Fitness, whose slogan “No Judgments” begged me to do just the opposite.

Like many unfortunate souls who had yet to wake up and reject the shameless hypocrisy of Corporate America, I, too, have spent my fair share of time slowly dying in a lifeless cube farm, the parallel and perpendicular gray half-walls reminding

me of mazes where the chance of escape is on par with winning a game of tic-tac-toe. But I've also seen what an office floor looks like before the perimeter offices and interior cubicles are put in place. Despite floor-to-ceiling windows on three of the four walls and a massive amount of square footage, the incomplete space still felt confining and claustrophobic. That was my first impression of Crunch's gym floor, a vast space with windows along only two of the four walls. The precious natural light was more than sufficient for those members exercising near a window but practically nonexistent for others working out elsewhere in the gym.

Where the natural light ended, recessed lighting took over. However, the painted black walls and dark flooring absorbed much of the light, leaving most of the second floor and its inhabitants shrouded in shadows. For some inexplicable reason, the owners of this particular Crunch franchise thought it best to paint the 20-foot ceiling black as well, creating the same lighting effect I'd suffered through in the homes of people who oddly preferred watching movies underneath a weak fan light rather than turning on a couple of table lamps. From what I've experienced and seen on TV, nothing good ever happens in rooms where the light source emanates from

a naked bulb hanging from above. Although Crunch had installed dozens of canister lights in the ceiling, their effort was dismal—and so was the gym floor.

50 or so gym members between the ages of 25 and 35, who looked like they could've been co-stars alongside the two young men I saw earlier in the parking lot, pushed, pulled, and lifted weights in virtual silence. Most wore earbuds or headphones, so piped-in music wasn't necessary. I left my backpack looped around both shoulders, figuring I already stood out as a nerd in my bright orange shorts and white t-shirt with a waving Mickey Mouse on the front. All I needed was a juice box in my hands to complete the look. I began my cursory tour of the space, quickly noting that the gym offered what I had expected. However, I was more interested in the men and women I saw working out around me than the condition of the cardio machines or the popularity of the dumbbell racks.

The banging of weights and the drum of cardio machines weren't the only sounds I heard that Tuesday morning. There were voices, too, but not between two present people. These were mostly one-way instructional words directed at phones

either attached to tripods or propped up against nearby equipment. As a modest introvert who avoids the spotlight as much as possible, I'll never understand how people can knowingly choose to annoy everyone around them by having the audacity to film themselves working out. What are these people thinking? Don't they know they're telling everyone in the gym—who expect some modicum of privacy and reasonable access to equipment—that their delusional sense of significance and entitlement comes first? Where do they get the nerve?

From my experience, it's usually women who film themselves in gyms. I've toyed with the idea of asking them to stop what they're doing, but I wouldn't dare. Even if I was polite and appealed to her sense of decency, I can't imagine a boss lady interpreting my request as anything other than an act of war. With a camera in her hand and access to social media, what's stopping her from wanting to go toe-to-toe with me? Women are no longer intimidated by men—and they certainly won't take orders from them either, opting instead to manipulate something as simple as being held accountable into a personal attack on her gender. No, thanks.

As I snaked my way around the gym floor, I couldn't help but feel conspicuous. While I might have appeared to be searching for an ice cream truck on my way to story time at the library, the individuals surrounding me resembled what I'd expect to encounter at a Black Sabbath concert. An occasional pink, purple, or turquoise crop top broke up the homogeneity of black- and charcoal-colored clothing. Predictably, the uniformity didn't stop there. Like many of the gyms I'd been in since the internet, smartphones, and social media replaced actual discourse, the members of Crunch Fitness—men and women alike—looked as if they were competing against one another to see who could look more disinterested in the people around them. I felt hemmed in by a room full of superiority complexes requiring a steady influx of equal parts dopamine and validation. I know they wanted me to look at them, but of course I didn't because I'm either too petty or too analytical. To me, if a man sees me looking at him in the gym, I feel like I'm supporting his wannabe alpha male persona with beta envy. Similarly, if a woman sees me looking at her in the gym—or anywhere else for that matter—I get the sense I'm feeding her insatiable ego with simp adoration.

With nothing more to see in the Thunderdome, I angled toward the black stairs to return to the black lobby. My mind churned as I descended each step. Despite a dozen or more red flag warnings overruling what I liked about the pool and cardio equipment, I still wanted to talk to someone about the membership process and costs. If I wasn't feeling so desperate and lonely, I would've walked through the glass entrance doors and made a beeline for my truck. Instead, I walked across the lifeless lobby and around the abandoned reception desk to knock on the door of the one office that appeared to be occupied by an actual staff member.

“Yes?” a voice echoed, carrying the annoyance of a college professor who hoped no one would bother him during his open office hours.

I pushed against the slightly open door and saw another big man in black behind a cluttered desk. From the door's threshold, I explained that I had just walked through the gym and wanted to talk to someone about joining. “Is there a manager on duty?” I asked.

“I'm the manager,” he announced without getting up.

We both stared at each other for a second or two before I said, “Um . . . Are you coming out here? Or should I come in your office?”

“Come in,” he said, pushing backward on his cheap, all-mesh desk chair. “So, do you have any questions?”

I walked inside and stood in front of his desk. Oddly, I felt like I had just been called to the principal’s office. There were two other chairs, but they were pushed against the wall with boxes piled on top of them. He didn’t offer me a seat; instead, he remained seated and began telling me all about the wonderful benefits of hydromassage that, of course, only come with a top-tier membership package.

Derrick the Manager

My mind drifted to past thoughts as I stood listening to Derrick. I find it strange that people who could do something well in the workplace were often promoted to supervise their less inclined coworkers. Many times, these same individuals not only went on to manage departments but also direct entire organizations. Just because someone is exceptional at doing,

say, accounting work, doesn't automatically mean they'd be as competent managing the careers of other accountants. Accountants, like anyone having to work within a hierarchical organization, deserve to be managed and led by individuals who've been specifically trained to handle the inherent complexities of human beings who are more than just replaceable cogs. But I wasn't standing in the manager's office of an accounting department; I was in an unwelcoming room that perfectly matched the uninspired personality of Crunch's manager. Even if I had not seen or heard Derrick, I still would have felt confident he wasn't promoted because of his people skills just by looking around his office.

As my gaze shifted from the dust-covered clutter in the back of his office to a black computer desk that looked like it hadn't been wiped down in months, I interrupted Derrick, telling him I was interested in the cheapest membership tier at the advertised \$21.99 per month. "I would rather not commit to any timeframe," I added. "I'd like a month-to-month arrangement."

"That price comes with a 12-month commitment," he replied. Although seated, I could tell he was a large individual—

especially when he folded his tatted arms across the front of his black t-shirt. “It’s \$26.99 if you want a month-to-month plan with a base membership.”

“Got it.”

Derrick, who appeared to be in his late 20s, scooted under his desk and began typing on a dusty keyboard. While his eyes scanned the flat-screen monitor, he offered, “I recommend going with the peak membership package. It’s a month-to-month plan that gives you access to any Crunch Fitness, and it’s only \$29.99. Would you be interested in hearing about the peak *results* membership tier? It’s only \$10 more per month and grants you access to everything the gym has to offer.”

“Thanks, but no, I wouldn’t. I think the \$29.99 membership will work for me.”

“Okay. Let’s get you signed up,” replied Derrick, who suddenly seemed motivated to get me out of his office as quickly as possible.

I watched his fingers move about the keyboard, taking note that he had a bald spot in the middle of his blonde buzz cut and that he wore a black wedding ring. *Oh my god! What's with all the black around here?* “Would you mind if I move those boxes off that chair so I can sit down?” I asked.

“No. Go for it,” he said as he pushed an electronic signature pad like the one on the reception desk closer to my side of the desk.

For the next 10 minutes, Derrick and I played a game where he'd summarize a section of the nine-page contract and I'd ask, “What does *that* mean?” After a few back-and-forth exchanges, I'd inevitably draw a squiggly line on the signature pad with my finger and then press the green OKAY button. *But nothing was okay! What was I doing? Have I lost my mind?* While I compliantly signed documents that served every stakeholder but me with heartwarming titles like “binding arbitration,” “consent waiver,” and “release of liability,” I attempted to look through the one window in Derrick's office for momentary comfort only to be denied by a disgusting buildup of dust, dirt, and pollen. From the appearance of the window, windowsill, furniture, clutter, and

carpeting, I figured I was sitting in a room that hadn't seen a sponge, cleaning rag, or vacuum in at least a year.

“Okay. That about does it,” blurted Derrick while abruptly standing up.

I started to get up but stopped when I saw him turn toward the door. He walked out, but I could still see him from where I was sitting. He entered the reception desk and began typing something on another computer without sitting down. I felt foolish sitting alone in his office, so I followed him into the lobby and asked, “So, are we finished or what?”

“Almost,” he replied without looking away from the monitor. “I just need to collect the five-dollar enrollment fee. After that, you're free to use the gym.”

Ahh, yes, of course, the all-important enrollment fee—Corporate America's endearing way of welcoming its new customers by charging them for choosing their business over another. What's next? Pouring fees at coffee shops? I removed my wallet from my backpack and obediently handed Derrick my credit card. “I almost forgot to ask you for the pool

schedule,” I said. “I’d hate to show up and find out I can’t swim laps.”

I was tempted to ask Derrick if there was a fee for processing my enrollment fee but thought better of it.

“We don’t manage the pool,” he announced as he handed me back my card. “A third-party company manages it for us. Check back with me next week. I should have a schedule by then.”

Great. The right hand doesn’t know what the left is doing.
“Okay. I’ll check with you then,” I said while sliding my credit card into my wallet.

Derrick nodded at me and began walking toward his office.

“So that’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it,” he replied.

“Can I have a copy of the contract?”

“I already emailed it to you.”

“Okay, thanks.”

Derrick disappeared into his office, most likely thinking about what he was doing before I interrupted him. I disappeared from the lobby, walking across the parking lot toward my truck and thinking about how uncomfortable the last 30 minutes were. *Did I see anyone smiling? Would the pool hours for lap swimming be a source of constant frustration? Did the big man or Derrick say my name even once? Was this the price I'd have to pay to do something I enjoy around other people?*

I slid into the driver's seat and pulled out my sunglasses from my backpack. In the distance, far beyond the cities of Star and Middleton, I could see a lone mountain in the shape of a squished gumdrop rising from the horizon. At its base, the city of Emmett, too, couldn't escape the cancers of urban sprawl and cookie-cutter strip malls. I started the engine and drove out of the parking lot, thinking that since I'm on this side of the interstate, I might as well grab a coffee at Starbucks and pick up a few groceries.

Same as it Ever Was

It was six forty-five when I finally peeled the sheet back and kicked the comforter to the foot of the bed. After having spent the last 30 minutes imagining the worst possible scenarios at Crunch Fitness, I completely forgot about my morning caffeine addiction. Instead, I was hopped up on a bitter cocktail of remorse, regret, and shame. I bounced out of bed feeling like a trapped animal who had only himself to blame for taking the bait. How could I have done this to myself? Am I *that* desperate and lonely? I've written *books* warning readers to stay as far away from Corporate America as humanly possible—and yet here I was breaking my own rules!

I left the cramped bedroom wearing a threadbare t-shirt and a pair of boxers and trudged toward my cozy writer's nook in the den with only one thing on my mind. "It had better be there," I said out loud as I flipped open my 10-year-old laptop. I frantically scrolled past the daily scourge of junk e-mail and found a correspondence from Crunch Fitness with a draconian "Your Document" across the subject line. I swallowed hard and opened the attached PDF. And there it was—the

undeniable proof that I had indeed gone insane the day before. If I were committed to the psyche ward of an insane asylum, my contract with Crunch would be paper-clipped to my intake papers as Exhibit A.

It didn't take long to zero in on contract entries that justified my suspicions. The first thing I noticed was that I'd be paying \$33.79 per month instead of the discussed \$29.99. Apparently, monthly dues are subject to taxes and, of course, a processing fee. Next up, I came across an annual membership fee of \$63.59. *Huh? That's like an insurance premium that doesn't apply to the deductible. The nerve!* The contract went on to state that the month-to-month agreement doesn't go into effect until *after* the second month—and that I wouldn't have access to every Crunch Fitness as Derrick had declared. I pushed back on my chair and stared at the screen. I wanted nothing to do with this corporation, its members, its staff, or its self-serving contract. There had to be a way out.

I don't know how I missed it the first time, but I discovered the phrase “Buyer's Right to Cancel” on the first page of the contract. It went on to state that I could cancel the agreement without penalty if I notified Crunch Fitness within five

business days in writing—through written correspondence or by email. I wasn't going to take any chances. Since I didn't have a printer, I went straight to pen and paper. If I had to camp out in front of Derrick's storage locker of an office, then so be it. My day wasn't going to amount to anything if I didn't come home with documented proof that Crunch acknowledged my cancellation within the five-day grace period. My sense of urgency was fueled by the fact that I actually gave Derrick my bank's routing number to my checking account—a cringe-worthy act I had vowed never to repeat. Again, if the good people of Nampa were hellbent on sending me to a mental institution, my giving Crunch the freedom to withdraw money from my checking account would, without question, serve as Exhibit B in the case: *The People vs. Chuck Trunks*.

Luck was on my side when I walked into the lobby. Not only was the big man in black standing behind the reception desk, but also Derrick's office door was wide open—and Mr. Personality himself was behind his desk.

“Excuse me, Derrick. Yeah, it's me again. Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Derrick sat up, his big hands motionless but poised over the keyboard. “What’s up?” he asked.

“I’ve changed my mind about joining the gym,” I said while handing him my written notification.

“Okay,” he replied.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it.”

I looked at Derrick and thought about how he possessed just about every quality I didn’t like in a person: dismissive, detached, and devoid of anything resembling warmth or kindness. “May I please have a printed confirmation of my written cancellation?” I asked while noticing that the boxes and empty chair were where I had moved them the previous morning.

“Sure,” he replied, pushing back his chair and standing up.

I followed him into the lobby, where he mumbled something to the big man before typing something on the reception desk computer. 30 awkward seconds later, he picked up what rolled out of the printer on the other side of the desk and handed it to me.

I quickly scanned the confusing document in front of both men in black. “This confirms my cancellation?” I asked.

“Yep,” chirped Derrick.

“Could you sign and date it, please?”

“What for?” he challenged. “That’s all you need.”

I extended the piece of paper toward Derrick and said, “I hear what you’re saying, but this looks like something I could recreate on my computer at home in about 10 minutes. By signing and dating it, especially in front of your partner here, you’ll be validating my request to cancel the membership. What can I say? I watch a lot of Judge Judy.”

Neither man laughed as Derrick took the document from me. After doing what I requested of him, he handed it back, essentially ending our short-lived and unsatisfying relationship. I returned to my truck feeling vindicated but also emotionally exhausted. I exited the parking lot and turned right onto East Commerce Street. I didn't stop at the Starbucks, grocery store, or any of the gas stations. I just wanted to go home to stretch, do some exercises with my dumbbells, and go for a run. I drove over a set of bumpy railroad tracks across Garrity Boulevard and turned left onto Birch Lane, thinking, "Same as it ever was. Same as it ever was."

Chapter 7: Back to the CLC

Old Friends

From outside my truck in the Christian Life Center parking lot, I could see the children playing outside the adjacent day care but was denied hearing their mood-lifting shouts and peals of laughter—courtesy of two impossibly loud lawnmowers and a trio of equally noisy string trimmers. What is it with this country? Must everything that feeds the soul be obliterated by never-ending commerce, consumption, and efficiency? How much longer can we allow a revolving door of authoritarian regimes to prioritize greed over human need? When will we finally stop listening to a ruling class that publicly aligns itself with Christian-based values while privately kneeling before the god of profit? I grabbed my backpack from the passenger's seat and locked my truck, hastening my pace toward the CLC entrance to escape the deafening sound of gasoline-powered killer bees.

“Hi, Chuck,” drawled a smiling Annabelle from behind the well-built reception desk. “How are you on this fine morning?”

“Good morning, Annabelle,” I said as I walked into the lobby. “Do you remember the duck and cover drills we had to do way back in elementary school?”

I watched Annabelle lay her phone on top of the heavy desk while again noticing the giant diamond on her ring finger. In the eight months I’d known her, I never heard her talk about a husband. My relationship with the good-natured 70-something-year-old was casual and light, consisting mostly of me asking her random questions no one would expect, let alone a prim lady whose every utterance was geared toward predictable small talk.

“Huh? Yes, I do,” she replied. “I hated those drills! I was one of the tallest girls in my class, so it was difficult for me to get completely underneath those little desks. Plus, I didn’t want to get any of that nasty gum in my hair.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot about the gum under the desks,” I said. “Every time I walk in here, I look at this reception desk and can’t help but think it’s been carved out of a single piece of mahogany. If the Cold War were ever to start up again, I’ll be ducking and covering under this beast.”

Annabelle's phone chimed, and as she picked it up, she said, "Chuck, you say the cutest things."

With Annabelle reengaged with her phone, I told her I'd talk to her later and began walking toward the elevator. When I heard the sound of running feet and bouncing balls, I peered into the gym's basketball court through the open double doors on my right and smiled. *Great! Now I'll be able to watch and listen to a bunch of three- and four-year-olds chase beach balls while I do my cardio from upstairs in the mezzanine.* Who needs earbuds and a playlist when you can be entertained by rambunctious preschoolers still unspoiled by things like Instagram, Snapchat, or TikTok? I pressed the elevator button and waited—feeling no shame for not taking the nearby stairs up to the second floor. When anyone looked at me, I'd simply joke, "Um . . . I'm saving my strength for the workout."

In order for me to watch the kids from the mezzanine, I'd need access to either one of two stationary bikes or the one and only elliptical trainer overlooking the basketball court below. Of course, as luck would have it, I was denied across the board. All three cardio machines were occupied, which meant I'd have to use one of the ellipticals in the upstairs loft in the

alcove above the treadmills and weight machines. I saw my friend Stewart shuffling toward me on the track that circumvented the mezzanine and waited for him. Having known him for eight months, I knew the 86-year-old was close to wrapping up his workout when he was walking the track. Afterward, he'd go home and take a nap on his recliner.

“Hi, Stewart. How are you feeling today?” I asked as I began walking with him.

“Hi, Chuck,” he replied. “I feel a bit run down today, but I suppose it's because I did more than my usual exercises.”

“Don't tell me. You extended your kettlebell routine, right?”

“No, I did 20 minutes on the bike,” he deadpanned.

“You didn't use *my* bike, did you? That's only for professional riders like me,” I teased.

Stewart had a habit of walking with his head bent over—his gaze focused two feet in front of him as if he were

contemplating the mysteries of life. I looked over at him and saw that he was smiling.

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t think of touching *your* bike, Chuck.”

From below, high-pitched squeals of pure delight forced a change in the trajectory of our conversation, causing Stewart and me to share our mutual appreciation for the innocence of children at play. I peeled away from the gentle older man when we reached the alcove, saying, “Good seeing you, Stewart. Enjoy the rest of your day.” Just before ascending the stairs to the loft, I saw my other inspirational friend, Jean, trudging along on one of the four treadmills with both hands grasping the side rails.

“Hi, Jean,” I said to the self-admitted bookworm. “Are you working with your trainer today?”

Over the past eight months, Jean always welcomed my intrusiveness no matter what she was doing in the little church gym. The 76-year-old woman seemed to suffer from the same affliction that tormented me—the world didn’t see her.

“Hi, Chuck. No, she’s on vacation for the next two weeks, but she gave me a lot of homework, and I don’t want to disappoint her.”

“Well, knock it off,” I teased. “You’re making the rest of us look bad.”

Jean laughed and suddenly lost her balance before recovering just as quickly.

“Whoa! Take it easy, Tiger!” I joked. “You’ll hurt yourself and blame it on me when your trainer asks what happened.”

“You’re right! I would,” replied Jean, clearly wanting to tease me back.

I stepped toward the foot of the stairs and told Jean I was headed up to the loft to use one of the ellipticals, prompting her to ask, “Why not use the treadmill next to me, instead?”

“As tempting as that sounds, I need the elliptical to give my legs and lower back a break from all the running I’ve done this week.”

I braced myself when I noticed an arched eyebrow and a slight upturn in the corner of her mouth—telltale signs that Jean was about to unleash a playful zinger.

“You’re finally getting old like the rest of us,” she quipped. “Welcome to the world of aches and pains!”

I chuckled and smiled at her before ascending the steep staircase. However, by the third step, both my laugh and smile had evaporated. Above me, I heard the last sound I wanted to hear—especially on a beautiful day where I got to see the children, Annabelle, Stewart, and Jean. The unmistakable sound came from someone I most dreaded seeing at the gym, let alone sharing a cramped room with. That sound belonged to—The Huff.

The Huff

Oddly enough, my first encounter with The Huff occurred four months earlier in the loft—a small rectangular room with three elliptical trainers and an industrial-grade oscillating fan suspended from the upper right corner. Two ellipticals were positioned side-by-side in the rear of the room, while the third

was stationed in the front right corner. If the fan were turned on, the person using the elliptical beneath it would have to endure a steady stream of cold air blasting them in the face. There was simply no way to avoid it without having to unplug it. Obviously, it was best to use one of the ellipticals in the back of the room to avoid freezing to death. But because the rear ellipticals were so close together, you'd feel like the other person was invading your personal space. To me, it felt too intimate, and I wasn't comfortable with the arrangement. Thankfully, having to resort to an elliptical in the loft was rare.

Most times, I'd make do with whatever machines were available in the mezzanine or alcove so I could watch the old timers walk around the track or the pickleball games and kids on the basketball court below. It wasn't the most thrilling entertainment, but people-watching was always better than disconnecting from the present moment with smartphones and TVs. After a month at the CLC, on a day when hardly anyone else was there, I ventured up to the empty loft for the very first time. Besides the ellipticals and fan, the sparse room included a wall-mounted whiteboard with several Bible quotes scrawled across it, a dispenser of disinfectant wipes, and a sign threatening eternal damnation if machines weren't wiped

down after use. A singular flush window in the wall opposite the stairs perfectly framed a metal stand supporting a wooden cross on its sill, giving the space the look and feel of a church prayer room. As I began to descend the stairs to the alcove, I thought about returning to the loft and using one of the markers to write an old inscription on the whiteboard that I remembered from Disneyland's Pirates of the Caribbean attraction—"Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

My first real need for one of the ellipticals in the loft came a few months later in the middle of the summer when soaring temperatures and high humidity drove everyone indoors. Suddenly, I was competing with an influx of grannies and grandpas for the use of the CLC's cardio equipment. Fortunately for me, many of them were unable to climb the steep staircase leading up to the loft. I entered the space from the top of the stairs, and seeing that I was alone, I quickly unplugged the annoying fan and chose one of the ellipticals at the back of the room. 20 minutes into my 30-minute session, a five-foot-two-inch brunette in her late 30s popped into the picture and promptly plugged in the fan. I watched while she opened her miniature backpack and pulled out her phone and a set of earbuds. Although she was wearing a faded blue crop

top and black yoga pants, her pug nose, chiseled face, and muscular frame made her appear more masculine than feminine. From the way she didn't consider my thoughts about the fan to her air of self-importance and assertiveness, I instantly didn't like her.

Of course, the woman I'd never seen in the gym before chose the machine closest to me without so much as a hello or good morning. I glanced at the display panel on my elliptical—seven minutes and thirty-nine seconds to go. *You can do it, champ.* Less than a minute later, without warning, *it* began—the kind of dramatic huffing and puffing you'd expect from asthmatic chain smokers after having sprinted a quarter-mile in hot, muggy weather. “Six minutes and forty-five seconds to go.” *I'm not sure you can do it, champ.* While her arms and legs churned three times faster than mine, I took inventory of my undeserved pain and suffering. She had a vibe that rubbed me the wrong way from the get-go and a breathing technique that made her look and sound insane. The unpleasantness of her gasping and expelling was all-consuming and nearly deafening from eighteen inches away. Plus, the fan was blowing on me—and I hate that. I'd rather be exercising next to a cougher with tuberculosis while someone else sprayed

high-velocity ice water at me from a firehose than be side-by-side with this annoying boss lady. “Five minutes and thirteen seconds to go.” *Abort mission, champ!*

Despite the lack of space, I stepped off my elliptical, moving to the right like a contortionist just to avoid being in the direct line of fire from her mouth. I thought about pulling the fan’s plug on my way out but instead opted to break the eleventh of the CLC’s 10 Commandments, “Thou Shalt Wipe Down Machines After Use.” I’ll rot in eternal damnation for the indiscretion, but it seemed like a fair tradeoff to put a flight of stairs between me and The Huff fifteen seconds sooner. Unfortunately, I’d see her more often than not around the gym. When she wasn’t annoying everyone by loudly attempting to filter every cubic foot of air in the entire gym through her respiratory system, she’d selfishly inconvenience anyone who wanted to use the free weights by hogging the dumbbells and kettlebells for her weighted balance exercises. She’d lay a yoga mat in the middle of high-traffic lanes and surround it with multiple sets of hand weights. If an octogenarian were interested in using dumbbells or kettlebells weighing between 10 and 25 pounds, they were out of luck for at least an hour. *The nerve!*

It became standard practice to first locate The Blonde Belittler from Chapter One and The Huff before deciding what equipment I'd use for a workout, doing my best to avoid their general unpleasantness and any chance of a confrontation where I'd automatically lose no matter the circumstance simply for having a Y chromosome.

The Incredible Huff

From midway up the stairs, I looked back at Jean, thinking she *had* to be hearing the same huffing, puffing, gasping, and choking noises that were assaulting my eardrums. Instead of catching her staring back at me with an expression that said, “I have some duct tape in my purse,” she had already gone back to watching HGTV while maintaining a death grip on the side rails of the slow-moving treadmill. I had done well to steer clear of The Huff over the last several months, but I'd be as crazy as her if I believed I could avoid her forever. Our paths were bound to cross again. While contemplating my next move on the staircase, I thought about all the measures I'd taken—from preemptively using the free weights before she got to them to situating myself on cardio equipment as far

away from her as possible. I had to admit—the near-constant vigilance had worn me down.

There wasn't a doubt that The Huff posed a set of challenges against the Zen of my workouts, which is why I had opted to exercise wherever she wasn't. My philosophy was simple—take the path of least resistance and live to see another day. But that way of thinking wasn't always the case for me—especially in the late 90s and early 2000s when I was coaching adult newbies to run in their first marathons. Back then, I preached about the virtues of overcoming adversity, serving up worn-out platitudes like “What doesn't kill you makes you stronger” and “You can do anything you set your mind to.” To win their respect, I recounted some of the payoffs I experienced for having trained through stress, sickness, injuries, and inclement weather. I told them about the time I completed a half-Ironman in under six hours while suffering from the flu. I shared stories about running an entire marathon in mud, swimming in a long-distance ocean race in 64-degree water because nobody told me I'd need a wetsuit to protect myself from hypothermia, and cycling against a 25-mile-per-hour headwind for the last 30 miles of a 62-mile bike race in

95-degree heat. What have I become to allow a mere annoyance to steal my Zen?

I scrambled the rest of the way up the stairs and quickly saw that only The Huff and I were in the loft. She, of course, was huffing and puffing on the same elliptical I saw her on the last time. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she was wearing a pair of earbuds, a long-sleeve purple t-shirt, and gray stretch pants. I had two ellipticals to choose between, but there was no way I'd opt for one next to her. I walked toward the right corner of the room, and just before I reached the machine, I bent down and unplugged the fan.

I hadn't even stood up yet when I heard Her Majesty say, "Excuse me! Would you please plug that back in?"

I stood and turned to face her. She had stopped churning and was holding an earbud in her fingertips, looking at me and waiting for my response. Remembering the cardinal rule of limiting dialog with overbearing females, I simply pointed to the fan and said, "It's in my face."

“Then use this one,” she hissed with a look that said, “Are you stupid, or what?”

I knew I was poking the hornet’s nest when I said it. “I don’t know what you’re trying to achieve with all the heavy breathing, but it’s super distracting,” I replied while stepping onto the elliptical of my choice.

“I’m working on my VO2 max, thank you very much.”

I was shocked by her admission but chose to ignore her. *VO2 max? That’s crazy!* In all my years surrounded by gifted endurance athletes, I knew of only one to have had their VO2 max measured—and he set three American middle-distance track records! What records was *this* delusional woman chasing? *Give me a break!* As I started gyrating on the machine, my mind began compiling a list of all my potential responses should she take it upon herself to plug the fan back in. Instead, she remained on her elliptical and huffed and puffed even louder, making sure to let me know how displeased she was with me. After 15 minutes, my prayers were answered. Her machine slowed and then finally stopped. But rather than immediately stepping off and leaving like most

normal people would, she stayed on top of it and continued her heavy breathing for another minute or so. Then, from the corner of my eye, I watched her wipe down her machine and vanish down the stairs.

Jean was nowhere in sight when I came down from the loft. Another older lady was using the same treadmill, making me think it was the most popular of the four since the other three were still vacant. Up ahead, in the middle of the free weight area, The Huff was holding a warrior yoga pose with lightweight kettlebells in each hand. If I didn't see Linda, the unofficial mayor of the CLC, getting up from a rowing machine on the other side of the mezzanine, I might have given my nemesis a sarcastic golf clap while saying, "Yes, we all see you. Yes, we all think you're amazing." I waved to my friend of several years and indicated I'd come over to her. I walked halfway around the track and approached her while she was cleaning the machine's footplate.

"Don't forget to lube the chain," I teased.

She laughed and tossed the used disinfectant sheet into the wastebasket between the rowing machine and a stationary

bike. “I don’t want to get in trouble,” said the always-smiling octogenarian, who looked more like she was in her early 60s.

“That’s not the first time I’ve caught you cleaning where you put your feet,” I continued. “That’s totally unnecessary, okay?”

“Okay,” she sighed, frowning and acting like she was indeed in hot water.

Now it was my turn to laugh. “You’ll never guess who was upstairs in the loft with me,” I said.

“The Huff,” she replied.

“Nope.”

“But I saw her come down from there.”

“You’re right, but that wasn’t The Huff,” I explained. “That was The *Incredible* Huff!”

Special Delivery

There were many reasons why Linda was my best friend at the gym. Besides her easygoing nature and perpetual smile, the five-foot-four-inch, blue-eyed blonde was kind, down to earth, and shared my same wicked sense of humor. Plus, she was just as dedicated to health and fitness as I was. As we gained each other's trust, I began to share the secret nicknames I'd given to gym members who most irritated me. There was, of course, The Huff and the Blonde Belittler, but there was also the Ballerina Lady, Joe Cool, Melted Barbie, Ichabod Crane, Sniffler One, and Sniffler Two.

"Did you see Stewart and Jean?" I asked while we walked along the track toward the exit.

"I did. They both stopped by to say hello while I was rowing."

"Of course they did," I teased. "If the CLC were a high school, you'd be the most popular girl in the senior class. With all the visitors you get, I'm surprised you're able to fit in a workout."

Linda began to untie her warm-up jacket from around her waist. “That’s not true,” she laughed. “So, tell me, did something happen up in the loft?”

I replayed the whole scene for my inquisitive friend—even going as far as acting out some of it just for the comedic effect. Upon reaching the exit, I stepped past Linda and pushed the door open. While I waited for her to pass through the doorway, I looked out over the basketball court below and noticed that the scampering preschoolers had been replaced by much slower kids with gray hair, knee braces, and pickleball rackets.

“What’s VO2 max?” she asked as we entered the second-floor hallway.

I told Linda to hold on for a minute while I washed my hands in the men’s bathroom. “Even if a tarantula were crawling on my face in the gym, I wouldn’t bat it away until I’ve washed my hands. You never know what microbes are lurking on all that equipment,” I explained.

“Yes, I wash my hands as soon as I leave the gym, too,” she said, smirking while angling toward the woman’s bathroom.

“I just don’t feel the need to be as dramatic as you about everything.”

When we reconvened in front of the elevator and waited for it to come up from the first floor, I explained that VO2 max is a measure of how much oxygen your body uses during intense exercise. The higher your VO2 max, the higher your cardiovascular efficiency.

“Sounds complicated.”

“It is,” I said. “First of all, you need to have it measured in a lab with special equipment to get an accurate result. Secondly, if you’re not training for the Summer Olympics, you don’t need it at all. The Huff is just another pretentious validation-seeker.”

Linda stepped onto the elevator first and pressed the first-floor button with a curled knuckle while I silently approved of her germ-avoiding technique. “Boy, she sure gets under your skin. Are you sure you aren’t in love with her?” she joked.

“Definitely not my type,” I laughed, stepping onto the elevator. “This is a little church gym with mostly 70- and 80-year-olds, right? So, why does she work out like she’s at an intense CrossFit facility? That would be like me doing speedwork on the CLC track and startling the hell out of all the slow-moving stumblers, hobblers, and shufflers. They’d have every right to think of me as an annoying showoff.”

“Oh my god. You really *do* love her!”

Linda and I stepped out of the elevator together at the exact moment a little chain gang of two- and three-year-olds were passing by on their way to one of the day care romper rooms. It wasn’t really a chain gang, but it sure looked like one. A couple of day care aides held the ends of a 12-foot rope. 10 short leashes were tethered to it, like ribs along a backbone. 10 tiny humans—five on each side—followed the wobbler in front of them while gripping the loops at the end of the leashes. Without thinking, I immediately began singing “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” in an over-the-top baritone voice and asked, “What are you in for, guy?” to a bewildered little boy wearing a pair of bib overalls with the words “USC Gamecocks” stitched across the front. Once again, my all-star

comedy routine left me with the sound of crickets and blank stares. I looked at one of the aides and said, “At some point, they’re eventually going to find me hilarious.”

Just as I was dying at the mic on amateur night, Linda took the stage to save me from further humiliation and addressed the stunned chain gang. “Did you have fun playing in the big gym? Are you going to get a snack now? My, my, my, y’all look so sweet,” she said in her signature singsong lilt. 10 little faces not only smiled back at her, but they also beamed as if their favorite nana just showed up with shortbread cookies and juice boxes.

We walked toward the reception desk where Annabelle was talking to her boss, Emmit—the manager of the CLC, who not once attempted to introduce himself to me. The gangly 50-something-year-old stood in front of her desk with his arms folded across his chest. Annabelle said, “You two have a wonderful rest of your day,” as we exited the building. Emmit flashed an uncomfortable smile and resumed the conversation with his receptionist. Linda and I said our goodbyes, saying we’d see each other at the gym the next morning. She walked

toward her silver sports car while I headed in the other direction across the parking lot.

I liked parking in spots closer to the street so I could walk past the play yard behind the day care center. The kids weren't always outside, but when they were, they were fun to watch—even for a few seconds. But on this particular morning, something extraordinary took place. Just as I opened my truck's driver-side door, I noticed a little girl standing on a cartoonishly small scooter looking directly at me from behind a row of wrought iron pickets. The blonde three-year-old was wearing a white dress with a red sash tied around her waist. With all the activity, her matching red hair ribbon had slipped and was hanging off to the side. However, her true fashion statement was on her feet—a tiny pair of light blue Crocs. One mini croc was planted on the scooter; the other was pushing the whole ensemble toward me. I tossed my backpack over the console and onto the passenger seat without taking my eyes off of her, curious to learn what was on this little angel's mind.

When she reached the gate and could come no closer, she looked at the ground in front of her and stopped pushing. Like a gymnast finding her footing after landing a balance

beam dismount, the little girl collected her feet beside the scooter while holding it up by the handlebar with her left hand. Then, after reestablishing eye contact, she smiled and began waving at me with her free hand. I waved back at her—even going as far as positioning my feet like hers. A young lady, who I didn't see standing off to the side, looked at who her charge was waving at and said cheerfully, "Emma loves to say hi to everybody." I was about to reply by saying, "Well, she made me feel like it was a special delivery," but a lawn mower roared to life across the street, putting a kibosh on the sweet moment. Despite the disruption, Emma had brightened my mood with one thoughtful gesture, making me forget all about The Huff.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Spot Me

Had I shown you the scrap of paper summarizing the seven stories comprising the bulk of this memoir, you probably wouldn't have wanted to read it. If you were able to decipher handwritten scrawl, you might have concluded that my stories seem too mundane and ordinary—certainly not worth writing about. From a vantage point 50,000 feet away, you'd be right. On the surface, the stories are structured around events as innocuous as joining, attending, and quitting gyms—along with a couple of run-ins with boss ladies, of course. But now that you've read the accounts, I'm hoping you found them to be both entertaining and thought-provoking. My life, as well as yours, is a continuous string of stories containing rich moments that allow us to better understand ourselves and the world we live in—that is, if you're willing to be present and observant enough to recognize them. It is in these discernible moments that I live my best and worst life.

My gym-centered memoir presents a troubling reflection of today's America few people would disagree with. For most of

my adult life, I extracted a social life from my involvement with commercial gyms, running clubs, bike shops, and triathlon groups—and I’ve watched those relationships disintegrate into faded memories over the past 25 years. Wanting to replace those lost connections with new ones in my 40s, 50s, and into my 60s has proven to be more than just a challenge; it feels like an impossibility. There was a time when I believed I understood the purpose and direction of this country, but I was wrong—even back then. However, when I examine America through the multifaceted lens of greed, deception, corruption, and exploitation, it all makes sense to me. I no longer stumble about lamenting, “What happened to this country?” “How did we get here?” “When did it start becoming all about money?” I get it now, and I didn’t even have to leave the inside of a gym to figure out the answers.

To be fair, it hasn’t always been this bleak. Not only have I made friends with fellow gymgoers, but I also experienced my longest relationship with a woman I met at a Gold’s Gym in Los Angeles. Of course, those connections came about before the scourge of smartphones—before tech giant billionaires lulled us into believing that having ten thousand virtual followers is more satisfying than a handful of real tangible

bonds. “Why invest in building relationships in your community,” they self-servingly asked, “when you could be focusing on expanding your brand into *every* community?” Who isn’t sick and tired of feeling manipulated by screen interfaces that reduce us to mere data, where our personal information and supposedly private choices feed profit-driven algorithms?

I’d be wrong if I said we weren’t complicit in the greatest robbery of all time, gawking like bystanders while those who long ago won the Monopoly game convert our hopes and dreams—our life energy—into threadbare paychecks vaporized by mandatory monthly subscriptions for basic needs like housing, food, and medical care. So many of us now live without the hope of finding a permanent home, consistent employment, or even romantic love. I see them in the gyms. They’re untrusting, suspicious, and walled off. It wasn’t like people were always going out of their way to turn strangers into acquaintances or even friends before the internet, but it certainly was more of a possibility than it is today—especially in places like commercial fitness centers, where people share a common interest.

Today, I live in a highly polarized world divided by class, politics, gender, religion, ethnicity, and skin color—just to name a few. This dystopian reality of distrust, prejudice, and intolerance—though horrible for the 99% relegated to a lifetime of inescapable slavery—suits the ruling class just fine. After all, they don't eat the same food, drink the same water, drive the same roads, or shop at the same stores as us. They sit at the front of the plane and enjoy the best of everything by simply running the most successful scam in the playbook over and over again: divide and conquer. Through every media outlet, they've elevated racism, discrimination, and propaganda to new heights while knowingly stoking the fire of intolerance by bastardizing our country's constitution from "We the People" to "I the Person."

Women can convince themselves that they no longer need men, Christians can banish non-believers to hell, and Democrats can go to war with Republicans for all I care, but I *need* extroverts—all introverts do. How else will we be pried from our secret thoughts and pushed into social discourse? Extroverts light the fuse; they get the party started—at least that's how I made friends with people in gyms—before handheld validation machines destroyed any semblance of

community. Instead of serving as agents of inclusiveness, extroverted men and women have joined the silent majority on the gym floor, leaving the quiet and reserved, like myself, to fend for ourselves in relative obscurity.

Back when I was lifting heavier weights in my 20s and 30s, it was considered normal to ask someone who you thought could handle it if they would spot you as a safety precaution while attempting to lift a particularly heavy stack of plates. Ironically, now, decades later, all I want—whether I'm in a gym or not—is what that little three-year-old girl, Emma, on the scooter gave me at the CLC's day care. I just want someone to spot me.

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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