

# Silver Linings



In a Mad World

**Chuck Trunks**

Silver Linings in a Mad World

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Columbia, South Carolina

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For more information or additional copies, please contact Chuck Trunks at [chucktrunks@gmail.com](mailto:chucktrunks@gmail.com).

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Six true stories comprise *Silver Linings in a Mad World*. I specifically chose these confounding and disappointing personal events because they reflect my feelings about today's public space, where an elite ruling class forces the working slaves of America to exchange their humanity for basic needs.

But is it really fair to place all of the blame on our corrupted government, monopolizing corporations, and billionaires with more wealth than the pharaohs of Ancient Egypt? While some of us will exercise free will to rise above the dystopian gloom, others appear unaffected by it. What's their story? Are they merely robots programmed by mainstream indoctrination? Or are they simply ignorant, lost within a new America whose constitution begins with "I, the Person?" That may be true for the majority, but I discovered a different reason, a silver lining that affords a fortunate few happiness, purpose, and love despite living in a mad world.



*For the Jackson Family (and Barbara)*

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

—Chuck Trunks

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## Preface

Like so many of us aging baby boomers, who were fortunate enough to have grown up without the lure of brain-numbing phones, computers, and profit-driven everything, I've often asked myself, "Is it all gone? Have the most precious aspects of being human been erased from our lives because they can't be manufactured, crushed into pills, and sold as prescriptions?" I know I'm not the only one who's noticed that things like kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity are on the fast track toward extinction, that a sense of community seems relegated to storybooks and childhood memories, and that avoiding homelessness is the new American Dream. I worry that I've allowed the cold indifference of our society to unhinge me from my own humanity, causing me to see only what's wrong with post-pandemic America. I hide my over-sensitivity and near-constant heartbreak behind a wall of aloofness—the disguise of choice for the thin-skinned empath.

From the safety of detachment, I spent many years observing the world around me, searching for what we've lost, perhaps forgotten. And in some cases, like the six true stories in this

book, I didn't always have the luxury of wearing a pristine lab coat, latex gloves, and safety goggles to protect myself from the inevitable splatter of real life. I wrote *Silver Linings in a Mad World* to share what I've discovered to be an unpopular yet sobering truth about the world we live in: There is no benevolence in the public space. Even if you disagree with that harsh sentiment, a significant number of people—especially those who have rejected mainstream indoctrination in favor of authenticity—stand behind it for their own reasons. But, of course, my message doesn't stop there. Just because I can't seem to stumble upon qualities like honesty, integrity, loyalty, respect, courage, fairness, patience, humility, and love in the public space doesn't mean they no longer exist. So, my question shouldn't be, "Is it all gone?" but rather, "*Where* has it all gone?"

I thought by now, in 2025, we'd be living like *The Jetsons*, Hanna-Barbera's 1960s animated sitcom about a futuristic American family. But instead of flying cars, homes in the sky, and robots doing housework, I live in a world where cars sit in traffic on crumbling roads, home *prices* are sky-high, and robots steal paychecks. What I do see is nothing like the modern utopia I had hoped for since watching one of my

favorite Saturday morning cartoons in pajamas. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Longer exposure times inside a myriad of today's public spaces have reminded me of iconic books like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Dave Eggers' *The Circle*, whose dystopian tales accurately predicted the covert transfer of wealth and power to an elite ruling class, the obliteration of the nuclear family, and the systematic reduction of personal freedom.

In *Silver Linings in a Mad World*, I intentionally chose stories from my recent past where the outcomes support my feelings about the public space. Whether you find yourself nodding in agreement, fully relating to each one of my stories, or thinking I must somehow be deserving of such disregard, *Silver Linings in a Mad World* offers a positive message to whoever is reading this book. For those who've amassed as much disappointment and heartache as me, I offer empathy and insight as to where to find the most satisfying reasons to cherish being alive despite living in a world that prioritizes greed over human need. But if you happen to be one of the lucky ones who already know where rare attributes like acceptance, inspiration, encouragement, and support reside,

then this book's conclusion will serve as validation, reminding you of your smart choices in life.

## Introduction

More often than not, after sharing my story, people will shake their heads and tell me, “Boy, Chuck, you sure have had a lot of terrible things happen to you.” And in response, I quickly remind them that I’ve taken more than my fair share of risks and that not all uncertainty is a guarantee for catastrophe. But no one wants to hear about my sporadic successes. Despite being a lifelong risk-taker and having collected a few wins along the way, I’m no different from anyone reading this book. Like most people, I’ve amassed enough poor outcomes to fill a dump truck and a sufficient number of victories to still leave room in a shoebox. And that makes my book, *Silver Linings in a Mad World*, completely relatable.

If people aren’t interested in hearing about events that *did* go right for me, I’m certainly not winning them over by touting, “There is no benevolence in the public space.” Yet that is the reality for most Americans, who, in increasing numbers, are forced by the world’s richest economy to seek assistance from this same callous and unsympathetic space for the most basic of needs. Sadly, for many—including veterans, laid-off workers, and even those with full-time Amazon and Walmart

jobs—they won't receive any assistance, either through flat-out denials, by-design process inefficiencies, or simply being driven away by sheer frustration and humiliation. Lucky for me, I'm not in search of life-sustaining support. Instead, I'm here in the public space looking for the ghosts of things like collaboration, empathy, foresight, cordial discourse, and even manners.

Six true stories that support my feelings about the public space comprise the first six chapters of *Silver Linings in a Mad World*. In Chapter One, you'll experience the mind-boggling dismissiveness of Mayor Brennan and Marriott General Manager Shannon Miller in "Almost Famous." An epic betrayal is mere collateral damage in Chapter Two, where you'll come to know the duplicitousness of love-struck Pat in the aptly named "A Tale of Two Pats." In Chapter Three, I'll take you to "Edgehill Court" to feel six months' worth of icy, unwarranted contempt from Walter and his two brothers, Dumb and Dumber. "Manfred," the destroyer of all things serendipitous, makes his short-lived debut in Chapter Four only to do what he does best: pull the plug on a rare and wonderful opportunity and call it a night. Next, I'll introduce you to a pajama-clad barista and some of the other cast

members at “Starbucks” in Chapter Five, where nobody remembers your name. And finally, in Chapter 6, I’ll bring you along with me as I struggle to find a place to live in “Columbia Bound.” In this last story, you’ll meet a southern lady and her family, whose selfless support not only outshines the arrogance of people like Pastor Bob and Miss Stella; it gives me something I haven’t felt for years: hope.

At the conclusion of the book, I attempt to defend each one of them—even rationalizing their behavior—by blaming their lack of humanity on the abject toxicity of our warped society. In other words, “The devil made them do it.” And when I turn my attention toward those who I’ve yet to encounter—strangers at a coffee shop, grocery store, or restaurant—they don’t seem as affected as I am about the state of the world. What’s their story? After years of quiet observation, I finally discovered how these middle-class slaves, like me, manage to keep going despite living in the dystopian United States of Corporations. It’s more than just a secret; it’s the antiserum to a poisonous snake bite, eye protection during a solar eclipse, or a lifeboat after the ship capsizes. It’s the silver lining in a mad world.

## **Chapter 1: Almost Famous**

### **Have I Got News for You!**

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

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

With the windows of my truck rolled up, I could easily distinguish the familiar sounds of Bob’s print shop coming through the phone: the high-pitched hum of the large format printer, the rattle of the overhead fan, and the nostalgia of 70s classic rock emanating from two Bluetooth speakers—one situated on a shelf next to rolls of paper and canvas, the other on top of a wooden stool nobody uses. While Bob was

checking the calibration of his expensive inkjet printer in the cozy little workshop on Main Street, I sat patiently in my idling truck four miles away, underneath an enormous Ponderosa pine two blocks north of Boise City Hall—a modern yet utilitarian-looking building housing the offices one would expect, including the mayor’s. I still couldn’t believe it. Within a few months after spending two years creating a series of Boise- and Idaho-themed art compositions, I was selling cards and prints in a half-dozen stores around the city, including the gift shop in the State Capitol Building. And now, I had just presented my work to the mayor, no less! I couldn’t wait to tell Bob that our partnership was about to pay off in a big way, finally separating us from the mildly successful wannabes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Hello Darkness My Old Friend**

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

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

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

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

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

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

*took one email? Did I unknowingly travel to an alternative universe through an invisible wormhole?* Normally, I would need to wear down my targets through incessant emailing, endless cold calling, and, at times, even succumbing to cyberstalking.

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

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

“I do.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

As I hung up the phone, I felt a familiar shadow begin to creep over my momentary elation. “Not again,” I sighed, feeling the cloud of pessimism do what it does best: wreak havoc on the dopamine coursing through my body, like a sadistic killer bent on murdering anything resembling hope. “But my artwork is perfect for what I have planned for this city,” I said to no one.

I got off the bed and walked over to the window. I liked looking at Albertson's Stadium, home of the Boise State Broncos. The venue was so close to my apartment building that I could see a little bit of the iconic blue turf whenever the maintenance guys opened the gate to the field. "Even the reason for doing all these compositions is a great story," I continued, doing my best to forget the number of doors slammed in my face, emails never acknowledged, calls never returned, and appointments cancelled at the last minute. "LA's art scene was probably just too big for me," I reasoned. "But that's all behind me now. Boise seems like the right size for my brand of art, and, hopefully, Mayor Brennan will think so, too."

## **Mayor Brennan**

I was right about the mayor's personal secretary. Not only did she have a voice that belonged on the radio, she had the face for it, too. Instead of encountering a 30-something in the tailored dress and heels I had imagined over the phone, Stephanie turned out to be in her late 60s and appeared comfortable in a pair of flats and an ill-fitting pantsuit. Her hair style reminded me of Aunt Bea's bun from *The Andy*

*Griffith Show*—the yellow and white strands serving as evidence that she was once a natural blonde. “Okay, Chuck. He’s ready to see you now,” she whispered, looking at me with big gray eyes through oversized wire-framed glasses. “Follow me, please.”

To recall an office as spacious and well-appointed as Mayor Brennan’s, I’d have to go back almost 30 years to a meeting I had with the bishop of a Mormon Church in Southern California. While sitting on one of several couches in his shockingly opulent church office, surrounded by heavy furniture supporting more delicate things, like vases, antique clocks, and picture frames, I remember disappointing Joel, telling him that the Mormon faith wasn’t for me and that he wouldn’t be baptizing me that day. Mayor Brennan’s office was different from Joel’s in that it was long enough to accommodate two couches spaced end to end and still have enough room for an end table between them. *Was this the mayor’s office or United’s first-class lounge in Dallas-Fort Worth’s Terminal C?*

A stocky, gray-haired man wearing slacks and a long-sleeved dress shirt, who looked to be 10 to 12 years older than me,

reached for my hand and introduced himself. “Hi, Chuck. I’m Bill Brennan. It’s so good of you to come.” He let go and gestured toward the large portfolio I was carrying. “I’m looking forward to seeing what you’ve brought. From what I’ve seen online, it looks like good stuff.”

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

“Chuck, did you hear me?”

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

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

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

“Nice to meet you, Silvia.”

“Likewise,” she replied.

Mayor Brennan positioned himself between his massive desk and an equally heavy-looking conference table, surrounded by

six chairs. “So, how do you want to do this, Chuck?” he asked, eager to get the show on the road.

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

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

I placed my portfolio on the table, unzipped it, and began arranging the 15 or so art samples in a way that would support the story I was about to tell them. Each time I did one of these dog and pony shows, I’d relish watching the faces of my audience light up when they saw my work in person—a direct reflection of my skills as a graphic artist and Bob’s mastery at reproducing it in all its glory. Thankfully, Mayor Brennan’s

and Silvia's reactions were no different from those of supportive friends, business owners, and various other civic leaders.

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

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

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

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

"I bet you can guess what the name of that one is," I deadpanned. "To me, it's fascinating that the earliest prisoners

of the old penitentiary quarried sandstone from the nearby foothills to help build the foundation of the State Capitol building and used that same sandstone to finish constructing the prison.”

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

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

“I’m glad you mentioned that,” I replied, maintaining eye contact with the mayor and moving to the other side of the table so I could better address him and Silvia. “For as long as I’ve been doing graphic art, I’ve always incorporated hearts into each of my compositions, which basically signify my gratitude for that particular subject—and the state of Idaho and its capital city are no exception. I was so blown away when I moved here two and a half years ago. I love that there are so many trees, city parks, and bike paths—and that the downtown

areas are totally walkable and safe at night. Plus, the people are friendlier here. And they don't seem to miss an opportunity to boast about their 'City of Trees.' In some ways, Boise reminds me of Boulder, Colorado, in the 1990s."

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

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

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

"Me, too," added Silvia.

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

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

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

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

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

like to think that I can do it all, I simply can't. That's why I came to see you—to see if my style of art and the message behind it align with yours.”

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

“No, I haven't.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Second Strike**

As is the case from time to time, albeit rarely, good news can materialize for the deserving in bunches—and at exactly the right time. On Thursday, following my meeting with Mayor Brennan, my once-every-ten-years good fortune officially

became an embarrassment of riches when I received an email from Marriott International. Of course, my first impulse was to delete it as spam, or, as I like to refer to it, false advertising designed by law firms allowing companies to legally lie to your face—in writing, no less! But something made me hesitate. Rather than finding the usual scam promising free stays at one of its properties in exchange for signing up for a predatory line of credit, I suddenly remembered an email I had sent weeks earlier.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, yeah,” he replied. “Now I do.”

Needing some fresh air, I closed my laptop and stepped out of the cramped room that served as my office, art studio, and bedroom and out to the apartment's tiny fourth-floor balcony.

Besides having a sweet view of the football stadium, I could also see a tiny portion of Boise's downtown skyline. "Oh, *now* you do?" I teased. "It's almost as if you've forgotten that I'm about a week away from being a pretty big deal around here."

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

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

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

"Ha ha. In all seriousness, Bob, I couldn't have made this happen without your help. I know you already know this, but

my wins are *our* wins,” I said, fully aware of his discomfort with anything remotely sappy.

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

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

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

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

“What’s that?”

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

“Okay. Anything else?”

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

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

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

## Shannon Miller

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

As soon as I walked in, a young woman greeted me with a chipper-sounding “Good morning. How can I help you?”

Caitlyn—as her name tag indicated—looked nothing like someone named Caitlyn. Shoulder-length black hair framed one side of her face and matched the color of her nail polish. On the other side, a buzz cut allowed for an unobstructed view of a gauged earlobe. She stood behind a white granite reception desk that wasn't much larger than a hostess stand at an upscale steakhouse, making me think Marriott International was only one or two steps away from mandating self-check-ins.

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

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

With so many varied seating options, I told her that I'd wait over by the fireplace. A quick nod of her head confirmed her approval, releasing me to serpentine through a myriad of comfy-looking couches, loveseats, and oversized chairs

expertly paired with end tables, coffee tables, and floor lamps. But I wasn't looking for a place to sit down. I was busy scanning for two things: a surface large enough to accommodate everything in my portfolio and complimentary lighting. As luck would have it, there were two large conference tables on either side of the lobby's central fireplace. Each had a smooth, polished finish and matched the cookies n' cream color of the reception desk—a perfect contrast against the primary colors of my artwork. And since both tables were unoccupied, I quickly laid claim to the one without any direct sunlight, preferring its softer ambiance of diffuse illumination.

Without looking, I could tell from the quick tempo of footfalls emanating from around the corner that they belonged to Shannon Miller. *Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack.* She was right on time, emerging from behind the fireplace, looking at her watch with a furrowed brow. The five-foot-two Boise native walked with both efficiency and purpose. And from the way she walked, I had no trouble seeing her as the boss. In the time it took for her to reach me from across the lobby, I knew I'd be pitching my artwork ideas to a no-nonsense little general whose every minute seemed accounted for.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

After a few more high-ranking staffers paraded through to lavish either me or their boss with compliments about my artwork, the lovefest finally came to an end. When the last one left, Shannon turned to me and said, "Here are my thoughts, Chuck. I can definitely see selling greeting cards and prints in our gift shop. And I can certainly see hanging a few of your

larger canvas prints around the hotel, including back in our management area. I love that they evoke such positivity. But I have a question for you. Can you paint murals?”

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

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

“I’ve always wanted to paint a mural,” I gushed. “It would be an honor, Shannon.”

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

“No, I don’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Gimme a Break**

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

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

As usual, Bob was on the phone, so he did what he always did to buy himself a few extra minutes—pointing at me, then lifting that same finger into a number one position, signaling, “Hang tight. I’ll be right with you.” Not only did I not mind waiting, I relished the uninterrupted freedom to peruse Bob's current collection of jobs-in-progress while listening to music that reminded me of much simpler times, before society began monetizing everything. Even the smell of acidic ink cartridges

and musty canvas rolls added to the satisfying nostalgia. I often wonder if writers feel the same way as I do when they walk into an old book store or a seldom-used wing of a city library. Having free reign to move about Bob's noisy printers and art-strewn workbenches meant that, while under Bob's watchful eye, I'd need to put him at ease by clasping my hands behind me, thereby avoiding hearing him grumble things like, "Hey, don't touch that," or "Be careful. That's still drying," or "Are your hands clean?"

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

excuses for others, hoping for the best, and planning for the worst.

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

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

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

“Right.”

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

I stood up to begin collecting the brightly colored and happy-themed greeting cards and prints, thinking how disconnected

I felt from my own artwork. Of course, a civic and business leader had blown me off countless times before, but not in the same week—especially after receiving such high praise from both of them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, thanks a lot, man. God bless!”

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

## **Chapter 2: A Tale of Two Pats**

### **When One Door Closes . . .**

“I’m sorry for listening in, Chuck, but I might be able to help you out,” whispered Pat. Like the rest of the Sunday morning riding group, she was straddling her bicycle in the crosswalk and waiting for the traffic signal to turn from red to green. Spirits were high that day, but not for me. I was in the throes of a betrayal that rattled me to my core—an out-of-the-blue zig when I was expecting a zag.

“Okay, let’s roll!” shouted Thomas when the light turned green. “Remember to ride single file when you get to the greenbelt!” Nobody questioned or challenged Thomas when he’d assume the leadership role during our group outings. Not only was he a highly accomplished cyclist, he was also the owner of the bike shop where our rides started and ended. Plus, he was a friend of mine—someone I could confide in.

“That blows, dude,” he offered while keeping an eye on the group’s frontrunners.

“Tell me about it,” I said. “I’ve never felt more used in my life.”

Thomas surged forward, removing the gap between Pat’s bike and mine, putting us side by side. “Where do you think you’ll move to?” he shouted, looking back. “I hope you’ll stay around here.”

While focusing on the back of Thomas’ orange and blue jersey—colors matching the home uniforms of Boise State’s football team—I answered, “I have no idea. I already gave notice to the two-faced liar that I’m moving out at the end of the month. Now the clock is ticking.”

Despite the relatively short distance from Thomas’ bike shop, the 11-mile ride to Lucky Peak State Park isn’t a bike trip I’d attempt alone, as the last three miles involve a steep climb along a winding, two-lane highway, full of trucks towing boats to and from the park’s popular reservoir. With 15 other cyclists accompanying me on such a fine, crisp morning, I couldn’t help but agree with the adage that there’s indeed safety in numbers. It wasn’t the first time the weekend group grinded up Highway 21 toward the park’s entrance on Arrow

Rock Road. I always liked riding past the big welcome sign and through the open gates because of the immediate mile-long downhill that led to the park's tree-lined parking lot and adjacent boat ramp. Having been at the park numerous times, I was looking forward to eating my lunch under the swaying Ponderosa pines, enjoying some spirited conversation, and taking in the tranquil setting. For a mid-October day, the weather looked and felt more like summer than autumn with its cloudless blue sky, warm breeze, and more trees *with* leaves than without.

“I overheard you telling Thomas you're moving at the end of the month,” said Pat, taking a seat across from me at the picnic table. She was one of those people who ate a handful of nuts and raisins and called it lunch. “I thought you were the property manager of the place you're living at.”

“I *was* the property manager.”

Pat pulled the tab of a diet Dr. Pepper wrapped in aluminum foil and asked, “Really? What happened?”

“It’s a complicated story, but here’s the gist of it. The property owner, who pretended to be my friend for the last three years, asked me to write a job description of all the things I did to keep his 12-unit building occupied and running smoothly. When I asked why he needed it, he said it would help him justify giving me a second rental property to manage along with a salary increase. Then he went behind my back and used my eight-page description to shop around for a cheaper property management service.”

“That’s terrible of him,” offered Pat. “How could he do that to you? You’ve always spoken so highly of him.”

“I’m not upset with being replaced. It’s not like he owes me guaranteed work or anything. He’s just your typical, greed-driven businessman, putting profit above all else. What bothers me is *how* he went about ending our successful arrangement, acting like our relationship was anything other than transactional. I’ve seen guys like him before. I just didn’t think he’d turn out to be the worst of them, professing we were partners while on the scoring end of the deal, then betraying me when it was his turn to reciprocate. I hate to say it, but this

whole episode has made me lose what little faith I had in people.”

“Don’t worry about it, Chuck. It’s his loss.”

“Thanks, Pat. But what makes you think you can help me out? Do you know someone who could rough this guy up? Break his kneecaps, maybe?”

“Oh, in that case, I can help with that, too, since my proposal involves my 240-pound son, Luke,” teased Pat, who understood my sarcastic sense of humor. “Actually, he just moved out, leaving an open bedroom, office, and bathroom on the second floor. My bedroom is on the first floor at the other end of the house. So, you’d have lots of privacy.”

I stopped chewing on a stale Oreo cookie as I listened to Pat, not quite believing what I was hearing. “Are you asking if I’d like to move in with you?”

“I am,” she replied. “If you’re interested, you’re welcome to come check it out tomorrow after I get home from work. Would 7:00 p.m. work for you?”

*Huh? Was the universe wanting to make amends with me, seeking forgiveness for ending a job that made me feel part of the community of Southeast Boise?* “Could I bring my own furniture?” I asked.

Pat suddenly stood up from the picnic table. She gathered her helmet and insulated lunch bag and began walking toward the quiet boat ramp, presumably to use the bathroom. “Yes, you can,” she said, sounding as if a deal had been struck. “Will I see you tomorrow evening?”

“Sure. It can’t hurt to see what kind of setup you have,” I replied. “Can you send me your address?”

She didn’t stop walking toward the water, which was oddly glassy despite the steady breeze. Instead, she waved her arm without turning around. “I already did.”

## **Daniel is Traveling Tonight on a Plane**

Having known her for as long as Thomas had been maintaining my bike with twice-a-year tune-ups, I wasn’t surprised to see that Pat lived in a traditional mid-century

house at the end of a modest, middleclass cul-de-sac in conservative West Boise. Ours was a friendly relationship based on two mutual interests: group rides and five- to seven-day cycling excursions throughout the Pacific Northwest. To Pat, I was a trusted cycling friend who could be counted on to plan routes, navigate workarounds when bike trails disappeared, and perform MacGyver-like fixes on the fly should someone's bike start acting up. Admittedly, I wasn't always as cool as a cowboy hat at a Kenny Chesney concert in moments requiring stoic grace. Whereas I can get somewhat anxious and flustered when the inevitable problem rears its ugly head during a 50- to 70-mile bike leg out in the middle of nowhere, Pat would remain calm and seemingly unfazed, wisely choosing not to heap more drama onto a precarious situation already laden with wild-eyed panic and thoughts of worst-case scenarios.

We had no history of abandoning respectful and cordial discourse, even when challenges arose. Whether participating in group rides around Boise's Treasure Valley, traversing unforgiving terrain in Idaho and Utah, or sloggng up the coastlines of Washington and Oregon, Pat and I, for lack of better words, simply got along. So it wasn't that much of a

stretch to find myself knocking on her door, thinking that this 40-year-old house could be my next home.

“Hey, Chuck. Come on in,” she said, stepping back to give me room to walk inside. “Sorry if it smells. I microwaved some bacon about an hour ago, and it still hasn’t gone away. I’ll have to have my oven vent checked out.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” I replied while walking past her. “It’s hardly noticeable.”

Already we were off to a good start, exchanging polite conversation as if we had run out of water and daylight on mile 45 of a 60-mile ride on a logging road in southern Oregon. I wasn’t too concerned with the layout and condition of the house, opting instead to base more of my decision on the interpersonal dynamic between Pat and me. After all, water heaters and garbage disposals can be replaced, but you’re stuck with a housemate’s personality. We had a solid history. We had an easy rapport. What could go wrong? Sexual attraction—that’s what could go wrong.

Thankfully, Pat wasn't my type at all. At five-eight, she was too tall for my liking. And as far as feminine curves go, Pat was on the heavy side and built like a slab of marbled beef carrying more fat than muscle. She looked less like a long-distance cyclist and more like a defensive end who led the team in tackles and portion sizes. If Pat were a candle, she'd look half-melted, as gravity was clearly winning the war against skin elasticity. And speaking of skin, Pat's ashen pallor matched the color of her pale-blond hair, which she wore in a less-than-enthusiastic bob cut. In addition to preferring to wear frumpy, earth-toned clothing, Pat seemed to blend into the background wherever she went.

Other than a quasi-alarming number of knickknacks and framed placards paying misplaced homage to her deceased pets, Pat's home was quite comfortable looking, with dark wood floors, bulky furniture, and spaciousness, giving it a more masculine feel than feminine. Any concerns about privacy, sunlight, and storage quickly evaporated as soon as the tour reached the second floor. The upstairs space was just as she described—a perfect place to settle into and start a new art series I had planned on doing at my soon-to-be-vacated apartment. When I mentioned that to Pat, she responded, “So,

you're an artist, too. Let's go back downstairs. I want to show you my craft room."

While descending the stairs, I couldn't help but think the worst. *A craft room? An entire room dedicated to crafting? I thought only cat ladies made crafts. Did I miss seeing a litter box somewhere? I made it a habit to never look directly into the eyes of a craftsperson, so how was I going to live with one?* As we sailed through the tidy L-shaped kitchen with teal-colored accents, I teased Pat by saying, "So what kinds of crafts are we talking about? Crystal passage bracelets? Sock puppets? Soda can airplanes? Wait! Don't tell me! Painted rocks with glued-on googly eyes?"

"Actually, it's way better," laughed Pat, leading me into a 10-by-12-foot room between the kitchen and the enclosed backyard patio. She awkwardly gestured like a showroom model and announced, "Say hello to the world of scrapbooking!"

Immediately, the industrial-grade worktable in the center of the room caught my attention. *Was she scrapbooking or shaping sheet metal with a hammer on that thing? God knows*

*she was strong enough to be an ironworker.* A heat press, glue gun, and two die-cutting machines dominated the bulk of its surface area. Surrounding the table were six tall cabinets with a dizzying number of little drawers, each with some kind of cryptic label that only hardcore scrapbookers could decipher. I later learned they were filled with nifty little things like shims, die wafers, scoring tips, and rubber embossing stamps. This wasn't grandma's little scrapbooking nook; this was a freaking cottage industry!

“Holy Crap, Pat! Where do the elves sleep?” I joked. “Wow! I had no idea that scrapbooking had a North American headquarters! I remember putting a few scrapbooks together back in the day and only needing double-sided tape and a pair of scissors. But this place is on a whole different level. This isn't just a hobby for you, is it?”

“You're funny, Chuck. I actually have online stores on e-commerce sites like Etsy, eBay, and a few others,” answered Pat, pulling a padded swivel shop chair out from under the worktable.

I walked toward a towering stack of colorful cardstock on top of what looked to be a repurposed night table between two of the cabinets. “No offense, but who buys premade scrapbooks?”

Pat sat down on the chair and swiveled until she was facing me. “You’d be surprised, Chuck. I sell mine for as low as 50 dollars and as high as 95, and I still can’t keep enough scrapbooks in stock.”

“Huh? Oh my god! I’m in the wrong business! Way to go, Pat!”

She turned her gaze from me to her hands. While rubbing the armrests of her chair, she asked, “So, what do you think? Can you see yourself living here?”

At first, I thought it was a shadow on her upper lip. But after a few more glances, I was certain that Pat had a mustache. It was one of those faint blonde ones that didn’t always catch the light, which explained why it didn’t draw my attention until that moment. Now, my decision was clear: I was going to move in. Not only was she organized, easygoing, and a neatnik

like me, Pat didn't attract me in the least—with or without a lady mustache. “Would you be willing to commit to 12 months?” I asked. “I'll need that much time to find a new gig and a permanent place to live.”

“Absolutely!” she beamed, getting up from her chair. “I've never done anything like this before either, but I can tell this is going to work out.”

“Me, too, Pat.”

I felt especially hopeful as I drove back to my apartment that evening, opting to take slower surface streets instead of the interstate so I could relish my good fortune a little bit longer. To make the moment more memorable, I drove with the radio on and all four windows rolled down, making my hair and music swirl in every direction. I reveled in the unseasonably warm air—evidence that Boise was indeed in the midst of an Indian summer—unaware of the message the setting sun had left behind in the darkening sky. Had I noticed the crimson streaks against menacing shades of black, blue, and purple, I would have interpreted the ominous scene as a warning: blood spilling across something hurt and badly bruised. Instead, I

was too busy planning a move and singing “Daniel” with Elton John. When the omen finally delivered on its promise with a global pandemic a few months later in the spring of 2020, it wasn’t an incurable virus that turned my life upside down; it was a dating app called Tinder.

## **We Need to Talk**

“Good morning,” I announced as I came downstairs. Pat was sitting at the dining room table, facing me from behind her laptop and an insulated coffee tumbler. Stacks of curled and dogeared papers covered the rest of the table, making me think that she’d be working from home today. “It looks like the COVID thing finally caught up with your school.”

“I’m in a meeting right now,” she whispered.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I whispered back, walking past her and into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee.

“Who are you talking to?” purred a female voice from Pat’s computer.

“Yeah, what’s going on over there?” teased a second female voice. “Inquiring minds want to know!”

“No. It’s not what you think,” replied Pat. “That was my son, Luke.”

“I thought he moved out,” said the first voice.

“He did. He came over this morning to do his laundry,” lied Pat, stealing a glance in my direction and catching my eye.

Without saying a word, Pat slid a note across the table as I walked out of the kitchen and through the dining room, coffee in hand. In penmanship one would expect from a primary school teacher, the note read, “I’ll be done in five minutes. We need to talk.” As foreboding as the last sentence sounded, I wasn’t worried in the least. Pat and I had been getting along splendidly ever since I moved in. We were well into our second month of cohabitation—both of us feeling relaxed and productive. Whereas Pat was churning out more scrapbooks than she had in the last few years, I was already starting to work on the fourth of 12 art compositions centered around the most mind-boggling principles of theoretical physics.

I replied to her note while continuing to head upstairs. Using hand gestures and a series of exaggerated facial expressions, I conveyed to Pat that I'd come back down after I finished my coffee and changed into my cycling clothes. With the slightest of nods, she correctly interpreted and acknowledged my wordless response. But I wasn't surprised. From the beginning, things were simpatico between Pat and me. Not even an overhyped viral contagion could stop us from riding our bikes together, sharing an occasional meal, or walking to a local restaurant. On Wednesday evenings, we watched *Survivor* from two recliners, discussing team strategy and making fun of the show's shameless participants. Outside, the world was rapidly descending into pandemic madness; inside, Pat and I were in sync, immersed in platonic harmony.

Pat was still sitting where I left her when I came into the dining room with my shoes in one hand and an empty coffee cup in the other. I put my shoes down and set the cup on the table. I pulled out one of the heavy chairs and asked, "So, what did you want to tell me?"

“Actually, it’s two things,” she replied from behind her laptop. “My school has opted to close the classrooms, and they want me to teach online from home until there’s a vaccine.”

I reached down and started putting on my shoes. “I’m not surprised. It seems like you’ve been working more from home than at school.”

“Yeah, but now it’s official.”

I felt certain Pat was going to ask me about going on a long ride this weekend. “What else did you want to tell me?” I pried.

“I met someone on Tinder, and I’d like to invite him over for dinner this weekend if it’s okay with you. There’s really nowhere else for us to get together. I know you already know this, but most restaurants are only offering takeout options, while the ones that still provide inside seating have too many weird COVID restrictions,” explained Pat before closing the lid of her laptop.

“What? Really? I have to admit; I didn’t see that coming,” I stammered. “Can you tell me a little bit about him? What’s his name? Have you already met him in person?”

Pat leaned forward and put her folded arms on the table in front of her, making her look both serious and invested in our conversation. “So, you won’t mind if he comes over? Aren’t you worried about getting the virus? If you are, I won’t bring him here.”

“C’mon, Pat. You know me better than that. I stopped believing anything the news media had to say about COVID-19 a long time ago. They’d report that 3,000 people died from the virus yesterday without mentioning that about 8,000 people die every single day in America from things like car accidents, heart attacks, cancer, old age, and the flu. I read that if someone drowned but was later found to be infected with the virus, they’d classify the victim as having died from COVID. Our government is only concerned with controlling the masses through fear-based propaganda. That’s why news reports always begin with the number of COVID-related deaths. And to maintain the desired level of mass hysteria,

those numbers need to keep going up and up. So, yeah, I don't mind if he comes over."

"Gee, Chuck, why don't you tell me how you really feel?" joked Pat. "I've known Brian for almost two weeks now and met him for the first time last weekend at his place. Since then, he brings me a coffee and a breakfast sandwich almost every morning—either that or a bouquet of flowers."

Thinking I didn't hear her correctly, I repeated, "He actually shows up at your school with food and flowers."

"Yes, but he's come here, too."

Immediately, I sensed Pat's new love interest might be one of those guys who bombards women with over-the-top attention way too soon after meeting them—an obvious smokescreen attempting to conceal insecurities or ulterior motives. Despite the unhealthy vibe I felt, I tried keeping an open mind while continuing to ask more questions. "Why haven't you mentioned him before? And how did I miss seeing or hearing him when he was over here?"

“You were still in bed,” she replied. “I haven’t told anyone about Brian, but he knows about you living here.”

“And...?”

“He wants to meet you,” said Pat, pushing her chair back and getting up from the table.

*Oh, I bet he does*, I thought. After looking at my watch, I stood up and pushed my chair under the table. If my instincts were correct—and they usually are—Brian most likely viewed my presence as a hindrance to whatever it was he had planned for an unattractive woman in her late 50s who would do just about anything for a chance at love.

“Sure, I’ll be around this weekend,” I said. “Right now, I’m going to ride over to Thomas’ shop and pick up some extra tubes and a patch kit.”

From the kitchen, I heard Pat say, “Okay, I’ll let Brian know.”

Like storm clouds, the 2020 pandemic had its own silver lining—at least for cyclists. Roads, typically choked with cars

and trucks, were mostly empty, giving riders who could remember a chance to revisit and relive childhood memories when the world was much less frenetic. Instead of hiding behind tinted car windows, the people of Boise hid from each other in their homes. Vehicles lined either side of quiet neighborhood streets, occupied driveways, and filled lots in apartment complexes. Once again, the streets were mine. I could ride my bike in the middle of the pavement without worry, like I was nine years old again, when stingrays with banana seats, ape hangers, and sissy bars were cool. But on that particular morning, I wasn't feeling the usual nostalgia. Even before I turned right out of the cul-de-sac onto Five Mile Road, I knew my days at Pat's place were numbered.

## **Candy Crushed**

From my bedroom, I heard the distinctive chime of my phone. *Ding!* I walked down the short hallway and into the office already knowing who the text was from. Pat had said she'd let me know when Brian arrived and that I should wait 15 to 20 minutes before coming downstairs to meet him. When I asked her why, her response was, "Brian isn't all that comfortable

with you living here, so I want to ease him into the situation, okay?”

*Okay? How can you expect me to give a flying you-know-what about the insecurities of a random dude you've only known for a few weeks? No! It's not okay!* But instead of telling Pat I didn't want to meet him or know anything about their budding relationship, I played the role of the supportive friend: “Sure. It's not a problem. I can do that.”

Brian looked similar to what I had imagined. He was a little taller and heavier than me, but still appeared to be in decent shape for a guy who just turned 60. He wore what all mid-level managers seem to wear in Corporate America: a light-blue, long-sleeved button-down shirt neatly tucked into a pair of tan khakis. His belt matched his shoes, and his hairstyle matched his outfit—a salt and pepper fade cut cropped close to the scalp. He was clean-shaven and—if I had to guess—probably smelled like Aqua Velva and Listerine. He had the right mannerisms, said the right things, and asked the right questions, yet I got the impression he was executing a performance for Pat's benefit, never venturing too far from her side. I could tell he wanted me to like him. He smiled with his

mouth, but not with his eyes. He was quick-witted, self-deprecating, and eager to please, all of which probably helped him become a senior manager at Hewlett-Packard—and most likely the reasons why he didn't advance any further at the iconic company.

“Hi, Brian,” I said while extending my right hand. “I’m Chuck. It’s nice to meet you.”

Brian let go of Pat’s hand and got up from the couch. His handshake, though firm, was negated by a sweaty palm. “Nice to meet you as well, Chuck. I hear you’re an artist. What kind of art do you do?”

Normally, I’d jump at the chance to talk about my creative work, an increasingly rare pleasure in a society fractured by rampant phone addiction, but Brian seemed as interested in the arts as I was in watching Fox’s *The Masked Singer*. So, instead of boring him with an explanation about how my current art project connects theories like gravity, entropy, and time with consciousness and enlightenment, I simply replied, “Graphic art.”

I've often thought about the nature of politeness between strangers. To me, it's a universal set of actions and dialogue chosen by those who want to assess unfamiliar people without revealing anything about themselves. The exchange between Brian and me reminded me of a conversational French class I attended in my junior year of high school, where the script was both predictable and unsatisfying. "Bonjour, comment vas-tu?" said Monsieur Thibaut. "Je vais très bien!" replied Monsieur Laurent. Thankfully, Pat excused herself and went to the kitchen to check on their dinner, giving the two of us a welcomed opportunity to end the forced pleasantries and go our separate ways.

Over the next month, Pat and Brian spent more and more time together. They hiked, biked, and went on picnics. On weekends, they'd fill an ice chest, put it in Pat's RV, and explore Idaho's backcountry. If Brian wasn't having dinner at the house with Pat, they'd be at his place, which meant there was a fifty-fifty chance I wouldn't see my housemate until the next day. When I asked Pat about the overnights, predictably, she said, "Brian's not comfortable staying over when you're here." And when I asked her if he was still delivering breakfast and flowers, she shook her head and made excuses for him.

But it wasn't until I came downstairs for coffee one morning that I knew things weren't going to end well for me or the happy couple. I found her curled up on her recliner, still wearing pajamas—like she'd been there for hours. She was playing a game of Candy Crush on her phone, tears streaming down her face. Sniffles mixed with the sound of casino floor slot machines made the scene appear even more pathetic and alarming.

“Hey, Pat. What's going on?” I asked. “Everything okay?”

“No. I hardly slept last night,” she replied, setting her phone down on her lap. “Brian and I had a fight. I don't know if I can see him anymore.”

I walked into the living room from the kitchen and sat down on the couch, trying my best to act like I didn't care whether or not they stayed together. Deep inside, buried beneath feigned empathy, I was secretly elated. “What happened?” I asked.

“He doesn't want me socializing with my teacher friends outside of school hours or continuing to bike with you.”

“Wow,” I said sarcastically. “Is that all?”

“No. He also wants you to move out,” added Pat, avoiding my eyes.

I leaned back on the couch, wishing this conversation wasn't happening, especially before my morning coffee. “I don't care what this guy wants or doesn't want, Pat. Like a lot of men, Brian is insecure, but instead of dealing with his insecurities in a healthy way, he's opting to go the other direction: he needs to control you. And his controlling nature won't stop after he's removed all the men from your life. It'll extend to things like your wardrobe, diet, weight, and hairstyle. Haven't you watched NBC's *Dateline* before? Who cares what this guy wants? I'm only interested in knowing what *you* want. Do you want me to move out?”

“No, I don't,” she answered, whimpering as she did so. “I told him we agreed to a 12-month lease and that you'll be moving out in seven months.”

I couldn't believe what I just heard. Pat had already counted the months until I was moving out. I stood up from the couch,

albeit a little too abruptly, and said, “Tell Brian you’ll stop biking with me and that I’ll move out at the end of August, two months early, okay? That ought to make him happy and smooth things over for a while. Right now, I need to make some coffee.”

“Thank you for understanding, Chuck. I’ll let him know when I see him tonight. It’s all for the best, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” I lied. “I really do understand.”

I went into the kitchen and grabbed my favorite coffee mug from the dishwasher. I slid it underneath the Keurig’s dispenser and pushed the button to begin brewing the life-giving elixir. As the machine began heating up, I could hear the sounds of Candy Crush emanating from the other room.

## **Let Me Be Perfectly Clear**

The dynamic between Pat and me had changed drastically. Gone were the bike rides, shared meals, and walks to a favorite Vietnamese restaurant. I still kept up with *Survivor*, but I watched it alone, upstairs in my bedroom. What was once

comfortable and relaxing had become heavy and burdensome. Now, I sensed sharp edges in our exchanges. Civility, in the form of over-the-top courtesy and politeness—resurrected behaviors we previously said goodbye to a month after meeting years ago—softened those edges in the house and made it less obvious that a deadly cancer was killing our friendship. Brian still came over to the house, but not as often. If I happened to run into him—usually in the kitchen or dining room—we'd both pretend that he wasn't a textbook sociopath disguised as a mild-mannered guy who was simply looking for love.

I was practically giddy as I zipped up my tattered but still-functional suitcase. I turned off all the upstairs lights and headed down the steps, taking two at a time. I had never been to Coeur' d'Alene in northern Idaho before and figured 10 days of cycling would be more than enough to explore the mountain city and surrounding areas. Plus, it would give me a much-needed break from Pat's and Brian's doomed and off-putting relationship. Maybe I'd get lucky and she'd send Brian packing while I was away. It wouldn't save the friendship between Pat and me, but at least I could move out when I wanted to. Like most weekday mornings, Pat was sitting in the

dining room behind her open laptop. I acknowledged her by forcing a smile and nodding my head before going into the kitchen to make a cup of coffee and pack a few snacks and drinks for the 8-hour drive. I couldn't even pop a coffee pod into the Keurig before hearing Pat whine from around the corner, "Chuck, can we talk?"

Her eyes were red and swollen, like she had been crying for hours. She was hugging her lower legs, her feet on the chair, her knees crushing her chest. If Pat were playing Candy Crush on her phone, it would've been a repeat performance from a month ago. I had to think quickly since I was about to spend an entire day in my truck. Pat's continuing drama was the last thing I needed to accompany me on the trip. "Is this about Brian?" I asked. "If it is, I really don't want to hear about it. Don't you have a girlfriend you can talk to? I'm about to drive up to Coeur d'Alene."

"He wants you to move out now," she blurted, pulling her legs even tighter against her, like she was trying to hide behind them.

“Are you serious right now? We already talked about this,” I huffed, not believing what I just heard. “I don’t have time for this, Pat. If you want to discuss throwing me out of the house, then you’re going to have to wait until I get back from my cycling trip—a trip your so-called boyfriend banned you from going on.”

Never having heard me speak harshly toward her, Pat unwrapped her arms from her legs and placed her feet on the floor. She closed her laptop and leaned forward on her chair. “I don’t want you to go. I just don’t know what to do. Do you think I should break up with him?”

“Can I be blunt? I mean, really blunt?” I asked. “I’ll understand if you say no, but if you say yes, you’re not going to like what I have to say. In fact, it’s going to make you feel awful about yourself.”

“I think I know what you’re going to say, but I need to hear it,” she said, looking as if she was bracing herself for 20 lashes across her back.

“I thought I knew you, Pat, but I don’t. You’re so desperate for attention that you’re willing to abide by and enable the insecurities of a grown man with boyhood problems. At this point, your head is so far up your backside you can’t even see the harm your low self-esteem is doing to yourself and me. Oh, and by the way, thanks for doing something I’d never do to you in a million years—put you in harm’s way by bringing a psychopath into the house. Thanks a lot, Pat!”

A fresh set of tears escaped Pat’s eyes. “I’m so sorry, Chuck.”

“Personally, I don’t think you have what it takes to walk away from a guy like that. Eventually, you will—when he’s finished with you—after he’s hollowed you out. Remember, Pat, your lack of self-worth made this mess for all of us. When I get back in a week and a half, I’ll start looking for a new place. Hopefully, I’ll find someone who won’t dump me in the trash as soon as I become an inconvenience. Later, Pat.”

I didn’t wait for a response, especially when I was talking over the sobs of a grown woman. “How ironic,” I mumbled while climbing into my truck. “Pat had rescued me from a betrayal only to betray me herself.”

## How Could You Do This to Me?

When I saw Brian standing in Pat's driveway, any thoughts of discussing what had transpired prior to leaving the house 10 days earlier quickly vaporized. He looked agitated when he saw my truck rolling up just before the sun dropped behind the Owyhee Mountains. Instinctively, I reached for my two-foot-long ice scraper should Brian succumb to his inner demons and attack his imagined adversary. Thankfully, I didn't see the problematic drama queen while I was unloading my bike gear. For the time being—until I went inside to put a few things away in the kitchen—I wouldn't feel his menacing presence or watchful eyes.

He was beginning to show signs of an impending meltdown. His practiced and polished mannerisms could no longer conceal what was behind the mask: a man so opposed to forgiving and accepting himself that he'd choose to fight the world instead. I had already eaten dinner on the road, so there wasn't a reason for me to hang around downstairs, stomaching forced small talk laced with mutual resentment. Again, I got lucky when I walked into the house. Pat and Brian were behind the closed door of her bedroom, giving me precious time to

finish what I needed to do before retreating to the relative safety of my upstairs sanctuary.

Hours later, I switched off the TV, grateful for having watched a fascinating documentary about the Hubble Space Telescope. Not only did it give me an idea for a new art piece, but it also made me forget about the two selfish people downstairs. When I was about to get into bed, I took one last look outside to see if Brian's car was still in the driveway. Surprisingly, it was. "Oh, no," I muttered. "He's staying the night? He never stays over." Once again, my instincts kicked in. I reached into one of the tubs I brought in from my truck and retrieved a weighted military-grade baton and a can of pepper spray. I couldn't shake the feeling that Brian was close to unhinging, and I needed to be ready if tonight was the night.

I tossed and turned in the dark, thinking about where I was going to move to and wondering if a showdown with Brian would happen sooner rather than later. The guy was far from rational, so it was hard to predict when he'd finally decide to take matters into his own hands. I woke up earlier than usual, eager to start looking for the equivalent of a halfway house to serve as a temporary layover between the asylum I was

currently living in and a permanent address in the Boise area. His car was still in the driveway, but he'd most likely leave soon, since both he and Pat had jobs to report to. With no sound emanating from downstairs, I figured I'd have enough time to make a cup of coffee, toast a bagel, and bring it back upstairs before the couple from hell made their way into the kitchen to resume making each other miserable.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw in the dining room as I descended the stairs wearing nothing but a robe. Brian was sitting at the head of the table, his back turned toward me. Pat had pulled a chair out from the middle of the table and positioned it so that she was facing Brian, her face lit up with dawn's early light. Her face was red and puffy, and she looked like she had been crying for hours. Both wore the same clothes I saw them in the day before. While Brian sat upright and stiff, Pat slumped back in her chair, staring at a stuffed animal on her lap. It was in the shape of a dog, and she wasn't just holding it; she was petting it, lost in thoughts only she could understand. Whereas my soon-to-be ex-friend's hands stroked an inanimate object for comfort, Brian's rested on top of the table—clenched into fists of fury. If they were

holding a knife and fork, he'd look hungry for breakfast instead of a fight.

“When are you moving out?” he barked, never taking his eyes off Pat.

“What? No, ‘good morning?’” I joked, hoping levity would calm the uncomfortable situation.

When Brian repeated his question in an even more authoritative voice, I was less inclined to humor him. “Ask my landlord,” I deadpanned while adding water to my Keurig’s horseshoe-shaped reservoir.

Brian’s mood went from brooding control freak to antagonizing bully. “I’m your landlord now. We got engaged last night.”

“Congratulations,” I lied, adding a yawn to make sure they knew I couldn’t care less. “I guess you need to read up on Idaho’s landlord and tenant rights. It sounds like Pat didn’t tell you I was a property manager in Boise for the past four years.”

Brian pushed his chair back, making a high-pitched screech nobody wants to hear early in the morning. “Tell him to move out!” he yelled, leaning toward Pat, who continued to pet her stuffed animal, looking as if she wanted to run away with it. “You need to choose between me and him!” he continued, pushing his chair back further and standing up.

I replaced the Keurig’s reservoir, waiting to hear what Pat would say to Brian’s childish ultimatum. Not only did she not have an answer, she also didn’t have an engagement ring on her finger. “Brian, I think it’s best if you leave and cool down,” I said. “This is heading in a direction that we’re all going to regret.”

In two big strides, Brian put himself directly in front of me, intensifying an already bizarre scene. “Is that so?” he sneered while gesturing like he was about to strike me—making me flinch and step back.

Oddly, I felt calm. Brian had overplayed his hand. Now I had him. While tightening the belt of my robe, I said, “I’m going upstairs to change. Then I’m going to come back down to finish making my coffee. If you still want to attack me in my

own home unprovoked, be assured that I will involve the police and lawyers. I know where you live, where you work, and the legal problems you've had in the past. It's your choice."

I stepped past Brian, his posture still on the cusp of starting World War III, and into the dining room, where Pat showed every sign of someone who not only couldn't deal with reality but who also looked ready for men in white coats to come take her away to a place called Shady Acres Mental Institution. Surprisingly, she met my gaze. Could she tell what my eyes were saying—that I was asking, "How could you do this to me?" She must have because her eyes quickly left mine, dropping down to her lap, where her hands never stopped stroking her stuffed animal.

### **Alone Again, Naturally**

While changing into clothes I wouldn't miss if torn or bloodied, I could hear distinctive noises coming from downstairs: heavy chairs sliding across the dining room's wood floor, a kitchen cabinet slammed shut, a utensil thrown into the sink, and the sound of the front door opening and

closing. From my bedroom window, I watched Brian throw his jacket and a small canvas bag into the backseat of his car. He hopped inside and closed the door with a swift yank. I held my breath as he rocketed out of the driveway, his car nearly hitting the pad-mounted transformer on the sidewalk, which would've left the cul-de-sac neighborhood without power for much of the upcoming July Fourth weekend. I finished dressing, feeling relieved that the immediate crisis had driven away, but the source of the insanity was still downstairs, no doubt whimpering in some corner.

Somewhere between the top of the staircase and halfway down, I came up with a plan that would put this toxic drama behind me once and for all. I found Pat in her recliner, her feet tucked underneath her, her stuffed animal on the floor. Having grown weary of seeing her weepy face, I was glad she didn't look at me when I came into the living room. I took two deep breaths to get my adrenaline under control and approached her.

“Okay, Pat. This is how it's going to go,” I began. “Over the next three days, I will pack up all my belongings and store them upstairs. On Tuesday, I will drive back up to Coeur

d’Alene to find a place to move to. It could take me a few weeks, but I will be back with movers no later than the end of the month. However, if your psycho boyfriend comes over here—anywhere on the property while I’m packing—I will call the police as soon as I see him. When they arrive, I’ll tell them what happened this morning before they ask him to leave the premises. That way, I’ll have a documented record detailing his stalking and menacing nature and how you allow it. It’ll come in handy if I need to take legal action against the both of you.”

Miraculously, as if she suddenly came out of a month-long catatonic state, Pat said, quite lucidly, “But, Chuck. I can’t control what he does. Brian is the type of person who—”

“We’re done, Pat,” I interrupted. “End of discussion. Oh, and by the way, don’t expect a July rent check.”

It wasn’t long before I heard the rumblings of the garage door, causing me to drop a pile of folded t-shirts on my bed. Outside, I saw Pat backing out of the driveway—not as wildly as Brian, but still with urgency. Was she going to warn him? Or egg him on? It didn’t matter to me. Nine months ago, I was a successful

property manager awaiting a promotion. Three months ago, I was cohabitating with a cycling friend who enjoyed watching *Survivor* with me and who'd laugh at all my jokes. Now, I was packing to move to a city I had been to only once before, where I had no friends, family, or history. Somehow, instead of feeling sad and lonely at the idea of living among strangers eight hours north of Boise, I felt oddly comforted by the thought. Before all this happened, I would've dreaded becoming the next invisible man shuffling around Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, swept aside and deemed irrelevant. Now, I wouldn't have it any other way in a mad, mad world.

## Chapter 3: Edgehill Court

### Overcooked

“Dude! I said I got it!” yelled Ross from the other side of the portable gas grill. Letting go of it, I watched the six-foot, barrel-chested 35-year-old lift and carry the bulky three-burner Weber from the carport to the side yard. A light midsummer rain was falling, making his mop of wavy black hair look longer and greasier than usual. Standing under the carport, I continued watching my hot-tempered housemate and the still-warm grill with both dismay and amazement. It was like I was witnessing a real-life version of the Incredible Hulk, anger and all. The sound of a clanging propane tank, rattling grates, and swear words made the scene feel even more traumatic for the thin-skinned.

Earlier in the day, Ross had announced that he was planning to fire up the grill at the start of the Carolina Panthers’ preseason game. Knowing that the battered rust bucket was safely located in the backyard on a crumbling cement pad surrounded by weeds and empty vape cartridges, I didn’t give his Sunday plan a second thought—until I walked out to the

carport hours later to retrieve something from my truck. As soon as I opened the kitchen storm door, my eyes seemed to dart everywhere at once. I wasn't expecting to see the mother of all poor decisions. Like the hero of a cheesy movie who saves the day in the last possible moment by defusing a ticking time bomb, I immediately sprang into action.

“Hey, Ross, do you really think it's a good idea to barbecue under the carport?” I asked while gesturing toward my truck and the dilapidated storage cabinet in the corner, whose doors could no longer close properly.

“It's fine,” he huffed from behind the open lid. “What am I supposed to do? Grill in the rain?”

I had only been living in the modest split-level brick house on Edgehill Court in North Raleigh for two weeks. Now, I was about to get into it with a pimply-faced bully prone to mood swings, most of them somewhere between sulking and brooding. “No, but this isn't the place to do it either,” I countered.

“Oh, really? And why is that?”

“Well, first of all, I don’t think my truck’s paint job is going to respond well to being within a meter of a 500-degree grill,” I replied, stepping closer to Ross. “Plus, that cabinet is full of oil cans, fuel additives, and gas-soaked rags.”

“Fine!” he bellowed, slamming the lid shut.

“It’s the right thing to do, Ross, and you know it,” I said, trying to be both his parent and the voice of reason.

“Whatever!”

Although he was already dragging the grill toward the stairs that led to the side yard, I couldn’t stop myself from pointing out that even the rug underneath the gas cooker was covered in oil stains. “You already made your freaking point, Chuck!” he hissed in between violent jerks of the hefty grill.

Realizing it would be up to me to steer the situation toward something resembling civility, I quickly stepped forward and lifted one end of the grill. “Let me at least help you carry this thing down the steps,” I offered, getting an up-close look at a red-faced man with anger management issues.

“I got it up here by myself. I’ll get it back down by myself,” he proclaimed, making me believe that he thought of himself as some kind of martyr when, in reality, he was nothing more than a manboy having a hard-to-watch temper tantrum.

Like any exasperated mommy or daddy, I found myself actually negotiating with Ross after repeatedly warning him that he’d wrench his back if I didn’t help him. “It’s not like you can’t grill the burgers in the kitchen,” I suggested, feeling both disgusted and fascinated by his behavior. When two of the grill’s casters snagged on the filthy carport rug, I again took hold of the grill and began lifting it.

“Dude, I told you that I don’t need your help,” he spat, double-downing on a herculean effort that only men twice his size should attempt. “Just go back inside!” He then lifted the grill in a way that made me wince and suck in air, sensing I had just witnessed the complete obliteration of a lower back.

After yet another attempt to help the wannabe King Kong, followed by his over-the-top insistence that I leave him alone, I backtracked into the house, choosing to observe him from the safety of my bedroom window on the second floor. Below,

I watched Ross make his way to the backyard, pushing and yanking the grill toward the cement pad, his caveman strength emanating from what could only be adolescent fury. Then, as suddenly as it erupted, his demeanor noticeably changed as soon as he returned the now-wobbly gas cooker to its natural habitat. *Had Mr. Hyde turned back into Dr. Jekyll right before my eyes?* And just like that, Ross sat down on one of the three mismatched patio chairs, leaned back against the side of the house, and started vaping, leaving me to ponder what the rest of my six-month lease would be like on Edgehill Court.

## **Dumb and Dumber**

The world is unkind to dreamers. Even after having swallowed that bitter truth hundreds, if not thousands of times before, I still moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, in the midst of a pandemic, hoping to rekindle a handful of 40-year-old friendships from my college days. I found the house on Edgehill Court through Craigslist and sealed the deal over the phone with Walter, a gay chef living with his husband in New York City, who I later learned is the older brother of Ross. It wasn't the first time (and it certainly wouldn't be the last) that a homosexual feels the need to volunteer his or her

sexual preference to me. *Hmm, maybe I should stop wearing French cologne and talking with my hands!*

The five-bedroom house, situated on one of eight quiet lots in a tree-lined cul-de-sac, was home to Ross, his younger brother, Jason, Eric, a 39-year-old computer technician, and Roland, a heavily tattooed 28-year-old project manager who drummed for two different bands on the weekends. Joe, a frail-looking, recently divorced 44-year-old lawyer, was the only occupant of a separate, yet attached, one-bedroom apartment. And lastly, Dolores, the big sister to Walter, Ross, and Jason, who I'd be giving my rent checks to, lived next door and rounded out the list of characters for this week's episode of the *Twilight Zone*.

Despite living in the main house with four others, I rarely saw them, giving me free reign over the kitchen, pantry, laundry room, backyard, and other shared spaces. Unfortunately, all of those places were unkempt and filthy—the worst being the nest of cockroaches living in the skylight above the kitchen table, the oven whose interior looked like the entrance to a coal mine, and a dryer vent screen that collected what a bathtub drain typically gathers. You know it has to be pretty bad if you

need to wipe down the washer and dryer interiors with isopropyl alcohol before dumping your clothes inside. I later discovered that the two brothers warmed their dirty clothes from the previous day in the dryer before going to work. *Yuck!*

Whereas Eric, Roland, and I inhabited bedrooms on the second floor, Ross's and Jason's rooms were on the lower floor—hovels they had occupied since they were in elementary school. On any given evening—since Eric spent most nights at his parent's house in an adjacent neighborhood, and Roland spent his at his girlfriend's apartment—the two brothers and I would typically be the only ones spending the night on Edgehill Court. As someone who naturally picks up on the behavioral patterns of others, it didn't take long to figure out and predict the daily routines—and moods—of my new housemates. For the most part, everyone kept to themselves—a sad yet winning mindset for those choosing to live with strangers in post-pandemic America. Since Eric and Roland rarely prepared and ate a meal in the house, let alone slept there, I didn't get much of a chance to get to know them. However, Ross and Jason were a different story. Within a few weeks of living in the house, I quickly realized that if I wanted to leave at the end of my lease without wearing a pair of

handcuffs or being stuffed inside a body bag, I'd have no choice but to become a reluctant expert on the two brothers.

By the time I finished drinking my morning coffee at 7:30 a.m., both Ross and Jason would've left for their Monday-through-Friday jobs at an insurance company and tire shop, respectively. Ross seemed to like his role as a mailroom clerk, and Jason looked every bit like someone who could rip tires off cars and trucks all day. They would arrive home within 30 minutes of each other, beginning at around 6:00 p.m., each carrying a six-pack of beer and a drive-thru bag from places like Popeye's Chicken, Burger King, or Taco Bell. If I had lost track of time and didn't vacate the kitchen before the backdoor swung open in the evenings, I'd have to endure a half-hearted, "Hey, Chuck," as they'd shuffle past toward their bedrooms for a typical night of drinking, gaming, and vaping. These were men who didn't chase dreams—or women—acting like they had no choice in the matter, resigning themselves to what looked like self-imposed prison sentences without the possibility of parole.

If I wasn't walking the footpath around Shelley Lake, exploring Raleigh on a bicycle, or picking up food at the

Harris Teeter grocery store on the other side of Crabtree Valley Mall, I was sitting on a plastic swivel chair in front of a dented steel desk in the corner of my bedroom, which served as my writing nook. From my perch on the second floor, I could see and hear everything that went on in the backyard. Despite a near-constant intake of beer and nicotine vapor, the two brothers surprised me with their cordial and intelligent discourse, talking about a variety of subjects, ranging from quantum physics and climate change to politics and sports. The more I eavesdropped, the less inclined I was to keep referring to them as “dumb and dumber”—vindictive nicknames I had assigned to them since the “grill episode” and discovering that they had no interest in learning why I had moved to Raleigh from Idaho, what I did in my bedroom all day, or why I was alone all the time.

Their brand of genius was more in line with autistic savants than stuffy know-it-alls. Somehow, they had acquired knowledge in varied subjects, like thermodynamics, computer technology, and horticulture, while repeatedly locking themselves out of the house, forgetting to turn the stove off, and thinking that it was okay to wash dishes without dish soap. If I was unsure whether or not I was living with two manboy

prodigies, I became more than convinced soon after Ross lost control of his 2007 Dodge Caravan, smashing the backend against a tree in a neighbor's front yard. Having witnessed the event from the carport, I could overhear him telling the confused neighbor that his brakes had failed and that he'd buy them a new mailbox. After the brothers made several trips to multiple salvage yards to collect a junk pile of replacement parts, I watched Ross and Jason completely restore the backend of the minivan and replace the front disc brakes using nothing more than YouTube videos as their guide. I thought that by showing genuine interest and applauding their efforts, I'd build some kind of inroad where they'd feel more inclined to extend themselves beyond just saying, "Hey," "What's up?" and "Later" as they sailed by me in the kitchen and carport. Instead, they merely tolerated me, making me believe that my monthly rent check was the only reason they acknowledged me at all—either that or they were simply incapable of anything more.

## **A Death in the Family**

I knew something was up. Neither Ross nor Jason had come back to the monastery, and it was nearing eight o'clock on a

weeknight. Thinking they were most likely at a sports bar—an activity I heard them talking about in the backyard from time to time—I figured I’d have enough time to make and pack a lunch for the following day’s 30-mile bike ride to Durham, then retreat to my room before they returned. Somewhere between cutting apple wedges and bagging a peanut butter sandwich, I heard the lock rattling on the kitchen door, sending a sickening flow of dread throughout my body, like flop sweat on a bombing comedian. I expected to see both brothers stumbling into the kitchen, displaying the ramifications of having mixed alcohol with Asperger’s syndrome. Instead, it was only Ross carrying a case of Budweiser and wearing the kind of sad face a seven-year-old makes when they want everyone in the room to notice and ask, “What’s the matter?” Knowing there wasn’t a reasonable excuse to exit the scene without giving him exactly what he wanted, I succumbed and asked, “Hey, Ross. Everything okay?”

And then it happened. Ross sighed, complete with an overly demonstrative shoulder shrug, and replied, “Dad died,” in a cadence and voice I had never heard from him before. It was a long, drawn-out reply that sounded like *The Wizard of Oz’s*

Cowardly Lion if he were speaking while underwater. To this day, I can still hear the “Dad died” response when I close my eyes and think about it.

“Oh, I’m sorry for your loss,” I offered, admonishing myself for not preparing my lunch earlier and flirting with the idea of being a jerk to him. I imagined saying to Ross, “That’s crazy! My dad died a week ago, and instead of seeking comfort from a transient housemate who’s no more than a stranger, I sought sympathy from friends and family—you know—from people who actually know me.”

In what sounded like a return to his normal voice, Ross said the following without a hint of sarcasm or self-awareness: “I’m going to be doing some heavy drinking tonight, so if you hear any crying or wailing, you’ll know why.”

There’s cringing, and then there’s outright disgust, which is what I was feeling when I turned back around to fill a sandwich baggie with raisins. After a moment of awkward silence, a sigh of relief escaped me as soon as I heard Ross shuffle past me toward his bedroom, presumably to begin a night of uncontrolled sobbing and howling, fueled by none

other than the King of Beers. By the time I returned to the relative safety of my upstairs corner bedroom, I had resigned myself to the arduous task of having to somehow find sleep despite Ross's weird proclamation. Surprisingly, sleep did come that night. But it wasn't my clock radio that woke me up in the morning. That would've been a luxury. Instead, that job went to four smoke alarms whose incessant, mind-numbing siren blasts awakened me in the middle of the night.

## **Fire in the Hole**

It wasn't until I moved into the house on Edgehill Court that I realized sound wasn't the only thing that could rip a person away from a peaceful night's rest—smell can be just as intrusive. Within days of moving in, I was rudely roused from a dead sleep at 1:30 in the morning by the smell of pizza. As far as smells go, pizza certainly isn't an unpleasant one. I'd put it right up there with warm cinnamon buns and sizzling bacon. But this wasn't the kind of pizza smell you'd salivate over on boardwalks in New Jersey or on street corners in New York City. What had wafted up from the kitchen in the middle of the night was a bastardized version of pizza—a chemically synthesized concoction created in a corporate food laboratory

and dumped into the freezer sections of discount grocery stores. But what made this particular pizza smell uniquely intolerable was that it was laced with the nauseating scent of ancient grease from an oven that clearly hadn't seen a sponge or wire brush in a decade.

Even if it smelled like John's Pizza on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village, nobody in their right mind would trade hours of precious sleep for the aroma of arguably the greatest invention in the history of mankind. Sadly, not only was I subjected to the smell of food I wouldn't serve to a starving homeless drifter, but I soon learned that that wouldn't be the last time my sleep would be disturbed by the noxious odor from hell. Ross and Jason, for reasons only fellow creepy-crawly night owls would understand, established a routine where they'd toss a frozen pizza into the oven between 1:00 and 2:00 a.m., each time selfishly contaminating and choking the house with their horrendous dietary choice. Through strategic fan placement and rolled-up towels, I was able to circumvent the worst of it and resume sleeping within five or ten minutes after damning the two brothers to a scorching inferno for the rest of eternity.

On the night that Ross informed me that his elderly father had passed, I was, like always, awakened in the middle of the night. But the disturbance didn't emanate from the sound of Ross's crying and wailing. Nor did it come from the nightly assault on my olfactory senses. This time, besides being jolted awake, I was flung wild-eyed into utter mayhem as a quartet of shrieking smoke alarms wreaked havoc on my brain and shaved months, if not years, off my life. The smell of smoke, pizza, and rancid grease filled my bedroom, causing me to race downstairs, still not knowing which way was up. When I reached the kitchen and saw fumes seeping from the oven, I knew exactly what had happened. According to my favorite detective, *Columbo*, this was clearly an open-and-shut case. The brothers had transformed my worst fear into reality: They threw the pizza in the oven at 425 degrees and forgot about it.

Still bleary-eyed, I turned the oven off and grabbed a filthy oven mitt from the drawer next to the sink. In one swift move, I opened the oven door, reached inside, and snatched the charred remnants of what remained of a Totino's party-sized pepperoni pizza. While still holding my breath, I threw the blackened mess into the sink and turned on the water. After discarding the mitt and closing the oven door, I turned on

lights, opened every downstairs window that wasn't nailed or painted shut, and switched on the ceiling fans in the kitchen, living room, and den. Figuring the brothers were passed out in their rooms from a night of heavy drinking, I retraced my steps up the now smoke-filled staircase, opened more windows, and quickly cranked up the ceiling fans in rooms I had access to. When two of the smoke alarms stopped spewing their lobotomizing frequencies, I could finally sense a light at the end of the tunnel, giving me pause to return to my bedroom and plop down on the still-warm bed. I was relieved no one would die this night; however, I still wanted to kill two people.

### **Circle the Wagons**

For the next four hours, until 6:00 a.m., I laid on my bed, staring at the ceiling, rehashing how I came to live in such an unnerving and unpredictable madhouse. Despite hours of open windows and a ceiling fan set to “helicopter liftoff,” my bedroom not only still smelled like the oven carnage, it was freezing cold. By the time I finished thawing out my extremities in the shower, I had figured out how I was going to address Ross's and Jason's not-so-little blunder. Ranting and raving, my preferred and most satisfying method, wasn't

going to help—especially in front of two large men whose levels of emotional maturity still eluded me. Ross had already shown that he was capable of morphing into a raging alter ego at the slightest inconvenience, and Jason was too quiet for my liking. While his brother had no problem expressing each and every emotion that passed through his mind, Jason seemed to hold it all inside, as if waiting for the perfect moment to go nuclear, most likely landing on the national evening news as the lead story. If I wanted to make it to the end of my lease without help from law enforcement, confronting Ross and Jason directly was simply out of the question. No, I had a better idea. I was going to tattle on them.

The entire downstairs was exactly as I had left it nearly five hours earlier. The smell was still there, but it wasn't as strong as inside my bedroom. The open windows and whirling fans made the place feel and smell like an indoor ice rink whose Zamboni had caught fire the night before. Even the back door was still wide open. When I went to close it, I noticed that both of the brothers' vehicles were no longer on the property. *What? Did they leave for work, pretending that the house wasn't an active warzone? Did they think they could ignore the situation and absolve themselves of any wrongdoing?*

*Doesn't anyone think of me—the paying customer on the other end of this lame business deal?*

Prior to calling Walter in New York City, I reminded myself to offer condolences for the loss of his father first before telling on his two brothers. After explaining what had happened the night before, I waited for his response, feeling both justified and satisfied from having unraveled the unacceptable events from the very start—beginning with Ross's startling meltdown over the gas grill incident. Instead of hearing anything resembling an apology or a pledge to make things right, I listened to Walter verbally arrange his family's wagons into a tight circle where I was, of course, on the outside.

As if he were admonishing a telemarketer for interrupting his supper, he said, "Chuck, we just lost our father. Your timing couldn't be any worse."

"Yes, I know, Walter. That's why I offered my condolences up front. And to top it off, they left this morning without even checking on me or shutting the back door when they left for work."

“That’s because they stayed at our sister’s place last night,” huffed Walter in a tone that did nothing to mask his growing annoyance with me. “I’ll speak with them at the funeral. I need to go.”

“So they put a frozen pizza in a preheated oven and just leave the house?” I pressed, suddenly feeling the dam inside me beginning to burst from nearly five months of pent-up frustration. “That oven is so filthy, I’m surprised it didn’t catch fire, Walter.”

“Chuck, I said I needed to go. Bye,” replied Walter, ending the call and making it clear that we were now at war.

Like a soldier weary from near-constant battling, I needed to get off my feet at that moment. I put my phone on the kitchen table and sat down, my eyes shifting between the blank screen and out the dining room window. The heavy morning fog made it difficult to see past the neighbor’s new mailbox, but I wasn’t looking for anything in particular because I was lost in my own thoughts. *Had that phone exchange really happened? What did I do to deserve such blatant disrespect? I paid my rent on time, worked around the nasty habits of two disgusting*

*slobs, didn't complain when the water heater broke, kept a quiet and low profile, and always agreed, as a courtesy, to meet service people at the house since I worked from home.* Not only was Walter off his rocker like his brothers, Dumb and Dumber, but he was just as cruel and dismissive.

With hardly more than three hours of sleep, capped off by a disheartening phone call with the one person who had the power to remedy the situation, I suddenly felt so very alone in the chilly kitchen on Edgehill Court. Was anyone on my side? Could anyone see my point? I was coming from a position of logic, reason, and common decency, where everyone—not just an entitled bully of a landlord—could win in a shared living space. These people made no sense to me. What would they have to gain by ignoring and chasing away a rule-following loner with the living habits of both a monk and a ninja? There wasn't a doubt in my mind. It was time to go. It was anyone's guess what the following 30 days would look like after informing Walter that I wouldn't be renewing my six-month lease. Would that declaration get them to change their ways? Or would their circle of wagons tighten like a noose around my neck, choking me with even worse behavior?

I didn't need to consult my trusty Magic 8-Ball to find the answer. I already knew what it was: Outlook not so good.

## **Walter Has a Hissy Fit**

Other than receiving a perfunctory thumbs-up from Walter—imagery he most likely had to settle for since the iPhone doesn't offer a middle finger emoji—I didn't get any responses from Ross, Jason, or Dolores after I sent them a group text indicating that I would be moving out at the end of the month. Having secured my next shared housing space nearly 3,000 miles away in Nampa, Idaho—another shot in the dark via the internet—I felt a kind of relief knowing there was an actual expiration date to the madness on Edgehill Court. What used to be upsetting only triggered me to roll my eyes and count the days until my loaded truck was heading west on I-40 toward Greensboro. No longer did my blood boil at finding my dish towel streaked with dried tomato sauce carelessly tossed on the counter next to an empty Totino's pizza wrapper. I hummed while closing my bedroom windows to avoid the vape smoke emanating from the brothers' rooms below. I whistled while removing someone else's mildewy damp laundry from the washer so I could clean my own

clothes. Did they leave it in there for two or three days? Who cares! I didn't anymore!

With a little more than two weeks of eggshell-walking left to endure, I was reminded that every declared war needs its first battle. I received a text from the enemy commander, Walter, telling me that he'd need access to my bedroom so he could show it to prospective renters. After shutting down a Spotify playlist of Johnny Cash songs—a newfound appreciation for the man in black—and reviewing the six-page lease agreement, I replied to the self-serving bully, knowing that our text exchanges could very well be Exhibit A in a county courtroom. In my calculated response, I wrote, “Other than a medical emergency, there’s nothing in the lease that grants you access to my rented space. If you’re wanting a convenience that serves only yourself, what are you willing to give me in exchange?”

When his reply popped up on my phone in less than 30 seconds, I knew then and there that it wasn't going to be productive, since Walter had a habit of shooting from the hip without a modicum of gamesmanship. “What is your problem, Chuck? I’ve been renting to people for over 20 years, and this

is the first time anyone has reacted like you. What are you hiding in there? Did you paint the place? Did you break something? Are you growing marijuana plants?”

*Oh, boy. If he wants to get nuts, then let's get nuts!* “Well, maybe you and your brothers got to know the other tenants and became friends with them. That’s called a relationship—something we don’t have until one of you needs a favor from me. Within weeks of living here, you, Ross, and Jason have made it abundantly clear that this arrangement is strictly transactional. Last time I looked, rental transactions are dictated by a signed lease agreement—not one-sided conveniences.”

Once again, Walter returned my text in record time. “I’m so done with you, Chuck. I work too hard to put up with this crap.”

Who did this guy think he was? The more I thought about it, the more his reactions and responses reminded me of a resentful, spurned ex-lover. *Oh, God! Was he secretly in love with me?* I did meet him a couple of times when he flew down to visit his family—each time right after having finished a

workout where I was both pumped and glistening in sweat. To get to the bottom of why his behavior was more in line with a TV drama queen than a competent landlord, I picked up my phone and called him. When he didn't answer, I called him again. Finally, I simply texted him back. "Walter, can we please talk over the phone like two mature adults? I have no idea why you have such a problem with me. Maybe you have something going on in your life that's making you act disproportionately to the situation at hand. Please, let's talk this over."

"I said I'm done talking to you," replied Walter, who apparently wasn't through throwing his little hissy fit.

And then it dawned on me. I had already seen this temperamental behavior in his younger brother, Ross, months earlier. Was big brother Walter the original hothead? Maybe their whole lineage possessed personalities that resided somewhere within the spectrum of neurodevelopmental disorders. Either way, both were the petulant types who'd ruin the game for everyone by picking up their ball and taking it home if they didn't get their way.

Clearly sensing that I was dealing with an unstable psychopath, I opted to compromise by sending Walter yet another text telling him that I'd allow my room to be shown on two conditions: it would need to be scheduled at my convenience and that I'd need to be present. I also added that I didn't want to go to war over a stupid room rental.

Two seconds later, my phone chirped. "Nope. Too late. I'm done."

Two seconds after that, I was done with Walter.

## **Place Your Bets**

"Where the hell is he?" I grumbled, pacing back and forth between the plastic desk chair and the foot of the bed while repeatedly looking at my watch. We agreed to meet at 11:00 a.m. to do the room inspection walkthrough, and Ross was already 10 minutes late. Although we lived in the same house, texting was the preferred method of communication. "Hey, Ross. I'm waiting upstairs for you. What's the holdup? I have somewhere to be." A few minutes later, a rough-looking Ross dragged himself up the stairs and into my spotless bedroom

wearing what appeared to be an official Carolina Hurricanes hockey jersey. Even his choice of clothing annoyed me. I'll never understand why adult men choose to wear the name and number of another man on their backs. I don't get it. Plus, how could anyone in the hot and humid south become a fan of a cold-climate sport?

As soon as Ross came in, I switched on my phone's video function to capture him saying that everything looked clean and orderly. I knew it was unethical to record him without his consent, but after living with these degenerates for six months, I knew I couldn't trust him or the rest of them to do the right thing. Of course, I had taken all the before and after photos of my rented space, but the video would be the smoking gun of my court case should I need to force this bipolar family to return my security deposit.

"Hey, Ross," I said, trying my best to conceal the crime I was committing and the fact that I was about to leave this place and never look back. It wasn't easy since both thoughts were making me feel as giddy as a schoolgirl.

His nonchalant manner told me that he would, indeed, be a jerk to the bitter end. “Okay, I’m here. What do you want me to look at?”

“You’ve done a walkthrough before, right?” I said through gritted teeth. “Just check it out and let me know what you think.”

After Ross scoped out the bathroom, opening and closing the shower door and all the vanity drawers, he came back into the bedroom with his hands in his pockets, looking like he didn’t know what to do next. Instead of telling me that everything looked great—an assessment that I was expecting and used to hearing—he simply stared at me with his beady, bloodshot eyes. Since the withholding anal retentive didn’t deliver what I needed from him, I was forced to play my hand by asking, “And? What do you think? The place looks better than when I moved in, doesn’t it?”

“Walter has the final say.”

“What?”

“He’ll be here next weekend to look at the place.”

“Yeah, but he’s not here now,” I huffed while carefully positioning my video-recording phone closer to Ross. “Since *you’re* here, I’ll ask it again. Doesn’t the place look better than when I moved in?”

I watched him walk toward the windows and look down at the mess of a patio. Maybe he was wondering if I could hear what he and his brother had talked about over the last six months. “Walter will let you know,” he said without looking at me.

Unable to control my frustration, I tossed the house, bedroom, and shed keys on the desk and blurted, “Then why am I even doing this with you? And why would you agree to do a walkthrough inspection when you’re not the person to do it with? Thanks for wasting my time! Oh, and by the way, I have all the necessary documentation proving that I left this place in better shape than I found it, so I’ll be expecting my entire security deposit to be returned. Thanks for nothing!”

Without waiting for Ross’s response, I turned and left the bedroom. I went down the wooden staircase, through the filthy

kitchen, and out to the carport for the last time. I had anticipated a speedy departure full of welcomed relief from a time in my life I mostly wanted to forget. Instead, I hopped in my loaded truck and drove out of the cul-de-sac with the same heavy heart I had been carrying around for months. Had this been a gambling trip to Las Vegas, I wouldn't be driving to Idaho—I'd be hitchhiking. Edgehill Court was like a spin of the roulette wheel where the little white ball landed on black when I bet it all on red. I already knew the world was unkind to dreamers, yet I still believed I could walk away a winner.

I had moved to Raleigh, North Carolina, from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, hoping to rekindle a handful of 40-year-old friendships from my college days at NC State University. None of them panned out—not even a spark—making me feel like I had busted at blackjack, rolled snake eyes at craps, and bottomed out on slots. How could I lose at every game? I called Raleigh my home in the early 1980s. Now it was a city I couldn't wait to get away from, exchanging it for a new state, city, and climate, complete with another set of strangers in a mad, mad world.

## **Chapter 4: Manfred**

### **Please Take Your Seats**

“Maybe the second time around will be the charm,” I sighed to an empty passenger seat, idling five cars deep at a red light on Garrity Boulevard in East Nampa. It always amazes me how the same heavy traffic I slogged through on the Hollywood Freeway in Los Angeles for two decades could plague a largely forgettable agro-industrial town in the southwest corner of the Gem State. But it wasn’t just the seemingly never-ending congestion that made my spirit want to leave my body and soar among the clouds. The urban blight was just as soul-crushing. Through a dusty windshield, I saw what everyone else pretended not to see: call-to-action signage in every direction, crumbling sidewalks, weathered telephone poles, ubiquitous power lines, and gray, utilitarian buildings that made aesthetics sound like a dirty word. It was the second time in a month I had driven across town to Northwest Nazarene University, a beautiful and spacious private institution that appeared out of place amongst the sprawl of track homes, commercial farms, and rodeos.

Weeks earlier, after a solid year of daily writing, I decided that I needed to do something—anything—to jumpstart a social life that had flatlined since moving back to Idaho in 2022. As a self-inducted member of The Finer Things Club, a silly reference to an unforgettable episode of *The Office*, I thought I'd attend an event featuring the university's choir and orchestra, since country bars and Kenny Chesney concerts don't interest me. Now that I had a reason to shave, brush my hair, and tuck in my shirt, I figured I'd have a chance to meet people who've read a book or two since graduating high school. The 1,500-seat Swayne Auditorium is nothing you'd expect to find in a blue-collar town punctuated with smoke shops, thrift stores, and fast-food joints. The venue sits inside the university's Brandt Center, a building whose size and architecture make it look like a city hall that focuses solely on the arts. During my first visit, I was awestruck by the height and sheer magnitude of the heavily carpeted and draped music hall. If there was a bomb that discharged maroon fabric and plushness when detonated, then the Swayne Auditorium had to be at ground zero.

From my seat in the mathematical center of the mezzanine section, I determined that there were three types of groups in

attendance—none of which I belonged to. Old folks from the surrounding communities made up the smallest group. The stage performers' families were the next group and exceeded the number of in-house geriatric patients by only a few dozen. The largest group, by far, consisted of friends and schoolmates of the singers and musicians, whose overzealous support ruined the experience for me. To recall the only other time I had to stomach the same kind of maniacal handclapping and over-the-top shouting, I'd need to go back 15 years to an Arthur Murray dance studio in LA's San Fernando Valley. If you've ever attended one of their practice parties as an invited guest, you'll know what I'm talking about. I was there in support of a female friend who had joined the social club as a way to meet people after a particularly long and painful divorce. Sixty members of the dance studio, along with at least two hundred onlookers, filled the strip mall venue, making me nervously plan an exit strategy should I begin to smell smoke.

The premise was simple. Each studio member would dance three to four times, ranging from waltzes and quicksteps to merengues and tangos. This all took place years before there were TV shows like *Dancing with the Stars*, so I really didn't know what to expect. Little did I know that the friends and

families of the Arthur Murray dancers, as well as their fellow performers, would behave exactly like the overenthusiastic celebrity judges and studio audiences we've come to expect from these tired and stomach-churning programs. After an hour of incessant overstimulation, rapid-fire clapping, and shouts that sounded more like words of validation than appreciation, I had no choice but to excuse myself from the melee, thus earning a spot in my friend's dog house for several days.

“So, why did you leave so soon?” she asked after ignoring my phone calls and texts. “You didn't even get to see my cha-cha.”

“I saw you dance that first time, and I have to say you looked great. But after a while, it felt like I was trapped inside a self-help book.”

Needless to say, I wasn't invited back to another practice party at the Arthur Murray dance studio on Reseda Boulevard. But like everything unpleasant in life, there's always a lesson to be learned. In this case, I gained not one but two valuable insights, the first being that I wasn't a fan of ballroom dancing

and the second being that I'd choose a seat along the back row in the Swayne Auditorium if I ever went back to NNU for a second concert.

## **The Golden Hearts Club**

*Maybe my coworkers from 20 years ago were right, I thought, laughing as I pulled into the exact same space I parked in the first and only other time I came to Northwest Nazarene University. Maybe I did have a touch of obsessive-compulsiveness, like Detective Adrian Monk from the popular TV series. It was either that or great preemptive planning on my part, since I'd avoid the parking lot logjam once the house lights came on at the conclusion of the Great Hymns of Our Faith concert. By the number of people filing into the Brandt Center, I knew the evening's performance would live up to the university's online huckstering. The spring event would not only include both a chamber and symphonic orchestra but also the university choir and wind ensemble to boot. Not too shabby for a \$10 donation.*

A quick survey of the crowded lobby outside the Swayne Auditorium told me that, if I wanted to nab an aisle seat along

the back row, I'd need to get in there as soon as possible and stake my claim. Plus, I'd be able to exchange the bright overhead lights of the reception area for the dark recesses of the mezzanine, removing me from the awkward conspicuousness of having arrived alone. *Nothing to see here, folks. He's just a loveless, sad sack with no friends. Pointing and gawking will only make him feel worse.* I positioned myself at the back of the shortest line to enter the theater and soon discovered that the ticket taker was a frail-looking, elderly woman, making it the slowest moving of the six. Then, as the line inched glacially forward, bringing me within a few feet of the diminutive octogenarian, I suddenly became aware of a feeling that rarely ever happens to me. Sometimes, when I venture off my beaten path—and get lucky—I'll encounter a special person like Mildred once in a blue moon.

Three years prior, I met a grocery store cashier named Swati, a middle-aged Indian woman who immigrated from New Delhi, India, to Raleigh, North Carolina, four years earlier. For the 10 months that I lived there—no matter how long the line was—I never missed going through her register just so I could feel her radiating waves of positivity and appreciation and listen to her melodious Indian accent, lulling me into believing

that all was right with the world. A year later, while working on a book in Lumberton, NC, I met a widowed retiree who was not only a fan of my writing; she turned out to be the honorary homecoming queen of what I call my Golden Hearts Club. In the amount of time it took to drink a cup of coffee with Linda, I could tell that the well-dressed and perpetually smiling blonde with the ice blue eyes had spent time atop more than a few slow-moving convertibles, waving to her adoring fans without a shred of entitlement. Like Swati and the ones who came before her, Linda had something to teach me—life lessons I somehow missed while busy climbing the wrong ladders.

I watched Mildred collect paper tickets, scan e-tickets off cell phone screens, and hand out beefy-looking programs to jittery music lovers who were most likely worrying about the dwindling seat choices, like me. Although she moved in slow motion, I could tell she was at top speed, with a rhythm that included direct eye contact, a whispered “Thank you,” and a smile for each and every patron. Like the other dozen or so docents, she dressed like a cat burglar without the safe-cracking tools: black shoes, black pants, and a black turtleneck. The stark contrast between her uniform and skin

color made her face and hands appear almost bloodless, yet her shoulder-length, graying hair was surprisingly thick and full. When it was my turn with Mildred, I held up my phone for her to scan the barcode. Then, I watched her eyes move from the screen to mine.

“There are so many people here tonight,” I commented, noticing that she had the facial bone structure of a Hollywood screen actress. “I wasn’t expecting this.”

“I’m so happy to see such a big turnout. The orchestra won’t be performing again until after the summer,” she responded, her hazel eyes looking clear and lively from behind delicate wire-framed glasses.

After she handed me a program and said, “Enjoy the show,” it was confirmed. Mildred belonged in the Golden Hearts Club, as her kind soul and good nature filled our brief bubble of interaction. As I hastily entered the dimly lit theater in search of the best available aisle seat along the back row, I thought about Swati and Linda.

## Is This Seat Taken?

If the first concert I attended at NNU was like an NFL wildcard game, then tonight was shaping up to be the Super Bowl. Mildred was right. The place was already packed. With more people streaming in from the lobby, I knew I had to say goodbye to an enjoyable evening, mentally preparing myself for ill-timed shouts of support and way-too-vigorous clapping from the Arthur Murray crowd. *You look amazing, Sasha! Way to rock the cello, Caiden! We love you, Jennifer! Ugh.*

For the most part, my plan was working. But that would be short-lived. In the first 15 minutes, nobody chose seats near me. At the time, I figured my back row aisle seat either fell within the theater's version of the Bermuda Triangle or the sight of a solo concertgoer understandably frightened them away. Soon, the burgeoning crowd had no choice but to join me underneath the balcony in the right corner of the mezzanine. Luckily, two empty seats separated me from a talkative, multigenerational family of eight, who played musical chairs until everyone was happy with the arrangement. When the lights dimmed and the orchestra began

playing Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, I made a critical error. I started counting my chickens.

When all eight members of the Walton family to my left began standing up one by one, my heart sank. *Bye, bye, seat buffers*, I thought, readying myself like a window seat passenger just before fellow travelers wedge themselves into the middle and aisle seats. If confronted with actual or even perceived unpleasanties, I tend to adopt an air of indifference—a bubble of aloofness to protect me from strangers, who, by and large, ignore me while acting in their own self-interest. Without turning my head or shifting my eyes, I could reasonably make out who was shuffling toward me in the dark. What can I say? It's a skill I've acquired and honed while battling the general population since leaving home at the age of 17.

By the way they scooted, I could tell they were quite old and were most likely a married couple. Both were wearing comfortable, all-black attire. They were carrying dark jackets, which ended up on their laps as soon as they sat down. A glance at the two bloodless hands clutching a program beside me instantly lifted my mood, giving me a rare moment to call timeout in my private war with society. *What are the odds?* I

surmised, mentally running through statistical probabilities typically reserved for things like the lottery. *I can't believe it. I'm actually sitting next to the lady who scanned my ticket!* But that was only the first of three serendipitous moments I would share with Mildred—the next two taking place during the concert's extended intermission.

After the house lights came on, my seatmate and her presumed husband whispered something to each other before he got up to leave. Once he spun around and began navigating a forest of knees and feet from the nearby family tree, his wife and I turned toward each other at the same time, both of us practically pouncing on the opportunity to get acquainted privately.

“So, is this why you volunteer to be a ticket taker? So you can attend the performances for free?” I teased, thinking a lighthearted jab would be the perfect icebreaker.

As she detected my playful sarcasm, I watched her eyes widen and soften before replying, “Yes, it's a pretty good deal until we have to clean the theater and bathrooms afterward.”

*What? Did this 90-pound grandma just dish it back to me?*

“Ha ha, I deserved that,” I said. “So, why *do* you volunteer here at the university? Oh, and by the way, I like the black-on-black outfit. It’s very slimming.”

“Really? I just got over a month-long bout with the flu and lost a lot of weight. It’s that noticeable, huh?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. No, it isn’t. I was just being silly. If there’s a mouth that needs a foot in it, I’m your guy.”

“Ha ha. You’re fine. Believe it or not, I met my husband here more than 60 years ago when I came to NNU for school. After we graduated, we got married and started working for the university. Of course, we’re both retired now. Besides our careers, we raised a family and did over 40 years of ministry work in Africa and Southeast Asia.”

“Wow. So, what you’re basically telling me is that I’m sitting next to NNU royalty?” I joked, hoping she’d continue to appreciate my sarcastic sense of humor.

“Ha ha. You’re funny,” she replied, swiveling in her seat as best she could while extending her hand. “I’m Mildred, by the way, and my husband’s name is Manfred.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mildred. I’m Chuck,” I said, gently taking her hand and thinking it weighed as much as an empty tissue box. “Now it’s my turn to tell you a ‘believe it or not’ story. You’re the first person I’ve met since moving to Nampa a year ago.”

“I’m surprised to hear that. You seem so personable and outgoing,” she offered, taking her hand back and leaning further into the conversation. If anyone was watching us, they’d think we were planning a bank robbery. “What brought you to Nampa?”

“I moved here from North Carolina to write a series of books that I’ve been itching to put down on paper for a long time. In fact, I just published my last book two weeks ago,” I replied, matching her vested interest by leaning closer to her.

“How interesting. What’s it about?”

*Calm down, dude*, I reminded myself. *Do not—repeat—do not subject this nice lady to a one-sided dissertation just because no one ever talks to you or asks you about your books. Show some restraint and give her the 10-second answer.* “The book’s title is *It’s Not Your Fault: But It Could Be*, and it’s the sequel to *Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*. The first book describes my formula for finding happiness, and the second one offers a way to maintain that happiness despite living in such a corrupt and toxic society.”

“You may be sitting next to royalty, but I’m sitting next to a modern-day philosopher,” beamed Mildred with the kindest of smiles. “I’d like to read your latest book. Who knows? I might be able to get it and your other books into the university’s library.”

“Really? You have that kind of pull around here?” I asked.

“I think I do. I only worked there for over 40 years,” she deadpanned, while at the same time reigniting my belief that kindred spirits can still exist in the world—even in dusty, old Nampa.

Before I had a chance to ask this intriguing woman about her role at NNU's library, the family to our left suddenly began taking their feet again, signaling the return of Mildred's husband, most likely putting the kibosh on our spirited conversation. Once he returned to his seat, the two whispered something to each other as he discretely placed a bottle of water on her lap. While leaning back in her seat to give her husband a clear view of me, she gestured with her hand and said, "Chuck, this is Manfred." Then she turned to him and continued the introductions. "He's only been in Nampa for a year, and he's a writer."

"Nice to meet you, Chuck," he said.

"Likewise," I replied, extending my arm over Mildred's lap.

Upon taking Manfred's hand, I experienced the polar opposite of what I felt when I held Mildred's only minutes earlier. Instead of wanting to open myself up to let someone in, a chill went up my spine, making me feel vulnerable, measured, and judged. Gone were the feelings of connection, acceptance, and appreciation. When I let go of his hand and settled back into my seat to listen to the second half of the concert, I forced

myself to focus on the orchestra and choir. But when I glanced back down to look at Mildred's bloodless hands, they were nervously flicking the corners of her program.

## **Name, Rank, and Serial Number**

When the house lights flooded the theater for the last time at the conclusion of the performance's grand finale—a spirited rendition of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 in C minor—the three of us remained seated, wordlessly agreeing not to add to the spectacle of an impatient and slow-moving herd shuffling toward the exits. Once again, the situation reminded me of airline passenger behavior—this time how people tend to react as soon as the captain turns off the seatbelt sign. Most will immediately jump to their feet, as if Jeff Bezos is waiting to sign a deal with them at the Cinnabon in Terminal B, while others wait passively, having realized long ago that any effort toward a speedier exit was both futile and delusional. With the added illumination, I was able to collect my first hard glimpses of Manfred—especially when he stood up to put on his jacket.

He was taller than Mildred, but not by much. And for some strange reason, he reminded me of every bad guy in a James

Bond film, appearing cultured, dapper, and well-educated while giving off a sinister air of coldness bordering on cruelty. Maybe it was because he still had more blonde in his hair than gray. Or that I could imagine him being at ease in a tailored tuxedo while playing high-stakes Baccarat in Monte Carlo. I could even envision him working up a hearty appetite for a meat lover's lasagna after torturing a captured double agent for hours. To me, there was something duplicitous behind his icy blue eyes and mechanical smile. As I watched him help his wife to her feet, I knew that the path to an NNU library connection and a friendship with Mildred would require careful navigation around Manfred.

“So, how should I get in touch with you, Mildred?” I asked, my eyes bouncing from hers to his and back to hers again. Manfred's distrustful stare communicated what I expected: *Why the hell would my elderly wife need to continue this random conversation beyond the confines of the Swayne Auditorium's now half-empty mezzanine?*

Instinctively, Mildred spun around to face her husband, abruptly abandoning the process of putting on her coat. With only one arm inside the heavy garment, she quickly explained

that she wanted to read my latest book and that I had a copy for her. “Give him our number, dear.”

Without looking at me, Manfred whipped out his cell phone, indicating that his wife and I would indeed be moving forward with the book exchange. But it also meant that he’d oversee and control our communication. “What’s your number and where do you live?” he asked, jolting my hyperactive imagination into making me believe he had asked those questions many times before—the only difference being they were more like threats whispered in a heavy German accent inside abandoned warehouses far away from posh European casinos.

I obediently gave him my information and asked, “What’s *your* number?”

“I’ll text you,” he quickly replied while helping Mildred finish putting on her coat.

*Touché, Manfred*, I thought, knowing he’d probably Google me, hoping to find similarities between his wife’s new book friend and any of the homicidal monsters he’d seen on NBC’s

*Dateline.* “Oh, okay,” I said, doing my best to mask my disappointment and adding polite discourse as one would expect. “It certainly was nice to meet you both, and I look forward to seeing you soon.”

“Likewise, Chuck,” lied Manfred with eyes that never found mine.

“It was such a pleasure, Chuck. And I can’t wait to read your book,” chimed Mildred.

“I’ll be very interested in hearing what you think about it,” I said, taking care not to crowd them as I slid past toward the closer of the two exit doors.

Before stepping into the lobby, I took one last look at the two polar opposites and caught Mildred staring back at me. Manfred was still facing her, his back to me. She wasn’t smiling, but her eyes said otherwise. And by the time I reached the parking lot, I had already resigned myself to believing I’d never hear from either of them—especially since Manfred had positioned himself as the gatekeeper between me and his wife.

## In a Galaxy Far, Far Away

Six days had passed without a text or phone call from Manfred. Of course, I wasn't surprised. However, because I remembered most of my conversation with Mildred, I was able to do my *own* Google search on the two of them, quickly learning that I wasn't too far off when I joked they were NNU royalty. As it turned out, they had been pillars of the university's association with the Church of the Nazarene in Nampa for nearly 50 years, having continued their involvement well into their retirement. But despite their impressive online resumes, I was still disappointed in them for not following through. After all, it was Mildred who brought up the library, and it was Mildred who wanted to read a copy of my latest book. And even though the evidence stacked up against the spirited former librarian, I found it nearly impossible to think poorly of her. It was her husband's passive aggressiveness that drew my indignation.

Less than 24 hours later, while loathing myself for watching a TikTok video of two women trading punches over the counter in a Burger King somewhere in Florida, a text from Manfred popped up on my phone: Hi Chuck. Mildred and I are leaving

to visit family in the Midwest tomorrow morning. We'll be gone for two weeks. Could you meet me at the Flying M coffee shop on Second Street this afternoon? Mildred won't be there since she's busy packing.

*Well played, Manfred*, I thought, feeling the need to recognize his uncanny ability to continually zig when I thought he'd zag. But he's not the only one with clever gamesmanship. And my next move was not only going to require a perfectly placed drop shot over the net, but it would have to be for all the marbles: Good to hear from you, Manfred. Since you're both pressed for time, why don't I come by your house and deliver the book this afternoon? I'd love for Mildred to have it for the trip. How's 2:00 p.m.?

How could he pass this up? He doesn't have to drive. He can save his money for a coffee at the airport. And he can *still* block me from seeing Mildred. An hour later, I heard my phone chirp, indicating a text had just arrived. It was from Manfred: Okay. Let's make it 1:00 p.m. Our address is 704 Midland Avenue. Apparently, the old coot needed to put me on ice for a while and dictate the terms. And I could tell he was finished with the cordial pleasantries, making a

serendipitous collaboration feel more like a dismal transaction.

Nonetheless, I pumped myself up and vowed to show up on time, dressed nicely, and smelling good. In my hand, I'd have a copy of the book with an inscription that began with "To my first friends in Nampa." And it wouldn't stop there. I'd be mindful of showing gratitude, knowing full well that a chance to make new friends after the age of 50 is a miracle in and of itself. The drive was pleasant and interesting, as I had not yet ventured to the west side of town toward Lake Lowell. The agro-industrial dominance and crumbling infrastructure were the same as on my side of town but somehow appeared more historically significant than depressing. Older neighborhoods gave way to much newer ones. As my truck rolled along West Greenhurst Road, I noticed the changing landscape: small, ranch-style homes on larger lots turned into tiny lots with hulking, two-story residences—evidence that the steady infiltration of cash-heavy Californians wasn't limited to just Boise, Eagle, and Meridian.

I had imagined Mildred and Manfred living in a much larger and older house, so I was surprised to be pulling up to a small,

modern, single-story home in a brand new, sparkling-clean community with wide streets and sidewalks. But as I approached the front door, it made sense. What 80-year-old couple wouldn't want to downsize into a prettier, more manageable residence? The only things ruining the peaceful tranquility of the idyllic setting were the ubiquitous sounds of lawnmowers, weedwhackers, and leaf blowers, reminding me that the good people of the United States are truly at war with spring. To my relief, Mildred answered the door alone and greeted me as if she had been counting the minutes.

“Hello, Chuck! It’s so nice of you to come by on such short notice,” she beamed while closing the door behind me. “I’m sorry we didn’t get in touch with you sooner.”

“That’s okay,” I said, keenly aware of the blatant lie. “I’d be running around like crazy, too, if I were preparing to be away for two weeks.” Once we were standing face-to-face, I presented the book to her. “Well, here it is. You may or may not agree with my perspective, but I’d be interested in hearing yours.”

“Thank you!” she said with graciousness, opening the book and finding the inscription. “Oh, I like what you wrote. That is so thoughtful. You seem to have an old soul, so I’m sure we’ll agree on most things. Let’s go sit in the living room.”

I followed Mildred through the foyer and into the open floor plan, where the living room, den, kitchen, and dining areas were in separate corners. Large windows permitted enough sunlight to brighten the space, allowing me to notice that most of the furniture was old and antique-like, offering credence to my theory that they had recently downsized from a much larger home—most likely a place they had lived in for many decades. She settled down in the middle of the couch while I sat on the adjacent loveseat, leaving an empty wingback chair staring back at me from across the coffee table.

“I’m going to see my new great-granddaughter tomorrow,” she said brightly. “We wanted to go sooner, but I caught the flu, and our daughter is a nervous Nellie. But I don’t blame her for wanting me to be completely over it before coming to see little Vaydah.”

“Did you say her name is Vaydah?” I asked, barely containing my excitement for what would come next.

Mildred wore dark slacks and a long-sleeved, cream-colored blouse. She uncrossed her legs, scooted forward to the edge of the couch, and placed both hands on her knees. “Yes. Isn’t it pretty?”

“I guess it is—until a quick-witted seventh grader starts calling her ‘Dath Vaydah’—you know, from Boston.”

Mildred fell back onto the couch with a laugh that made me feel like I had delivered the perfect punchline with impeccable timing. “Oh my gosh! You are so funny! I can’t wait to tell my daughter that joke.”

“Think twice about that, Mildred,” I deadpanned, leaning toward her. “Once you hear ‘Dath Vaydah,’ you can never unhear it!”

“Ha ha! That’s so true!” she laughed, giving me a momentary glimpse into her past. Her terrific sense of humor made me think she must’ve been a wonderful young lady and mother.

Laughing along with Mildred, I told her, “I might have to come up with some other characters. How about ‘Luke Skywhackah’ or—”

“I can hear the both of you clear outside,” interrupted Manfred, stepping into the house from the backyard. “What’s so funny?”

The sound of the sliding glass door had a sobering effect on both of us. Mildred and I looked at each other after Manfred asked the question. But we weren’t trying to determine who was going to let him in on the joke. Instead, it was a silent resignation we both understood: The party was over.

## **And That’s That**

When I turned toward the patio slider, I saw Manfred stooped over, removing his grass-stained sneakers. He, too, was a soldier fixated on beating back nature with machines too big and too noisy for the job. “Hi, Manfred,” I said, standing up to properly greet the king in his castle. “I see you’re getting the yard all tidied up before the trip,” I continued, hoping he’d forget hearing Mildred and me laughing out loud.

“Come, sit down, dear. Chuck brought us his book, and he designed the cover himself,” added Mildred, making me think she didn’t want to revisit the ‘Dath Vaydah’ thing either.

Manfred strode toward the living room corner in his socks and sat down across from me in the wingback chair. He took the pastel blue-colored paperback with the big red heart on it from his wife’s outstretched hand and looked at it for two seconds before asking her a question about their morning transportation to the airport. Because he hadn’t pursued his earlier question, it was at that moment that I realized my silly *Star Wars* characters from Boston had transitioned from an impromptu punchline to an inside joke between just Mildred and me. Besides looking annoyed at himself for not hearing my truck pull up to the house so he could intercept me before his wife answered the door, Manfred sat pensively on the edge of his chair.

No longer did he have that suave, dapper look I was impressed with at the theater more than a week earlier. He looked disheveled. His mop of hair was uncombed. The salt and pepper stubble on his face appeared to be three or four days old. And he wore a washed-out t-shirt with the logo of a sports

team I had never heard of over a pair of filthy jeans. He looked nothing like the man honored in NNU's hall of fame. Instead, he looked tired, old, and ornery. Plus, he made me wonder why Mildred hadn't put plastic over the furniture.

With Manfred staring at me over the coffee table and Mildred looking like she'd rather be packing, I had to say something—anything—to break the awkward silence. “So, the book starts off explaining how Big Government and Corporate America—mere puppets of an elite class of invisible shot callers—work together to enslave Americans on a proverbial nationwide farm that produces two things: tax revenue and profit.”

“That sounds deep but very interesting,” chimed Mildred, while her husband surveyed me with what looked like disdain. “What makes you think Americans are enslaved?”

“Love the question, Mildred,” I replied, sitting up straighter and scooting forward on the love seat. “To answer it fully, you'd need to read the book and then give me the better part of an afternoon to give you even more examples—examples that are everywhere and in plain sight, no less! Let me just

summarize it by saying that the people who actually run this country want all of us to be overly obligated, overly responsible, and in debt before we're even ready for it. That way, they'll have us penned in on the farm our entire lives."

"Sounds depressing," blurted Manfred, putting an end to the silent treatment. His smug-like smirk did nothing to mask an obvious gaslighting tactic.

"I agree," I said. "Who wouldn't be depressed watching our government become the largest, most corrupt organization in the history of the world—putting corporate greed above human need?"

"I agree with you, Chuck," added Mildred, looking at me with eyes that wanted more. She reached over and took the book from Manfred's hands.

"Of course, the purpose of the book isn't to depress people," I continued. "It's really about letting people know that they can have everything they want in life—a well-rounded education, excellent health, a meaningful relationship, a spiritual connection, children, a comfortable home, a satisfying job,

enough money, and family vacations, for example. But there's a catch. They can't approach those pursuits in the way that Big Government and Corporate America lay out for them. Basically, it's a trap—a trap that's getting harder and harder to circumvent.”

“Do you talk about alternative approaches to the things you mentioned in your book?” asked Mildred.

“I do. I chose nine different—”

Manfred suddenly slapped his knees—the telltale sign that the conversation was over—before standing up and looking at his wife. “I think we'd better get back to preparing for the trip.”

“Okay, but doesn't this sound like the perfect book for Steven?” she said as she got up from the couch. Then she looked at me and added, “Steven is one of our grandchildren.”

“Let's not get into that right now. We have things to do, and I'm sure Chuck does as well,” he replied. “Thanks for stopping by, Chuck.”

Thirty minutes ago, Mildred welcomed me into their home as if I were Ed McMahon holding an oversized check from the Publisher's Clearing House. Now, I was bracing myself to hear Manfred shout, "Don't let the door hit you in the backside on your way out!" Still, I felt like I had done everything right at Manfred's and Mildred's home. I was presentable. I smelled good. I gave them a book with a heartfelt inscription, and I spoke passionately about a subject matter I feel more than qualified to write about.

Months later, after not hearing anything from either of them—even after texting Manfred the day after I met them at their home—I figured I never would. I was back to talking to the empty passenger seat in my truck, doing my best to accept the inexplicable midmorning traffic on Garrity Boulevard near Interstate 84 in Nampa. It's been almost a year and a half since moving to the dusty town of 110,000, and I've yet to make any friends here—a destination I can no longer recommend on the map of a mad, mad world.

## Chapter 5: Starbucks

### Table for One

You'd think that, after coming to the same Starbucks for nearly two years, I'd be tired of it. But that wasn't the case. And for a guy who's spent the majority of his life covering his tracks and metering what people knew and didn't know about him, you'd think I would have done a better job of spreading my writing time to more than just one coffee shop. Instead, I resigned myself to spending three to four hours in the bustling utilitarian space, three to four times a week. Like all the visits that preceded this one, I parked my truck in the Jimmy John's parking lot across the street from the Starbucks on North Happy Valley Road in Nampa, Idaho. Typically, I was able to pull into the same coveted spot, since most customers preferred to sit in their cars looking at their phones while inching closer and closer to the drive-thru window. As far as parking lots go, this one is right up there with the best of them. Other than a few raggedy sedans and battered compacts of the tattooed and pierced sandwich makers and delivery drivers, the lot was mostly empty. Ten-year-old Dogwood trees lined the east side of the lot, protecting my vehicle's interior from

most of the mid-afternoon heat and putting the bright Pacific Northwest sun in the rearview mirror by the time I emerged from the coffee shop.

The brief walk from Jimmy John's toward the only Starbucks in East Nampa offered an unobstructed view of the café's entire drive-thru operation and adjacent parking lot, providing me with enough visual data to predict the likelihood of landing one of the preferred tables inside. When I began my lonesome Starbucks visits two years earlier, there were four such tables. Now, there were only two. The best table, a two-seater against the back wall that somehow avoided direct sunlight no matter the time, was consistently occupied by a day trader who I refer to as "the mannequin." A four-seater, with a height and surface area that could accommodate more than one wheelchair at a time, was the second-best table—yet prone to attracting late-afternoon glare and a homeless man, regardless of the weather. Of course, the 50% reduction in desired writing spots bothered me, but with the omnipresence of these two men, I felt less self-loathing and guilty for commandeering a table for several hours for less than three dollars.

Had I informed my Magic 8 Ball of the small number of cars in the Starbucks parking lot and asked it what my chances were of finding vacancies at the other two preferable tables that day, it would have read, “It is decidedly so.” And since the Magic 8 Ball and I have always struggled to share the same wavelength, I wasn’t surprised by what I was greeted with as soon as I opened the tinted glass door. Not only were the four best tables occupied, but it looked like I’d have to share the long, 12-seat, skinny table with an older bag lady, whom I occasionally saw from time to time. There were no hospitable words or head nods between me and her. And, like all of my previous visits, there weren’t any forms of acknowledgement from the other customers or the four perpetually busy girls behind an overstocked counter that looked more foreboding than welcoming.

Gone are the days when you’d be recognized as a “regular” for repeatedly showing up and bringing your business to a local establishment. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, I had figured out that our country was already mired in worse predicaments—epidemics of separateness and loneliness—spurred on by self-serving political and economic systems that promote racism, intolerance, distrust, fear, and isolation

through false narratives that make me wonder if the United States Constitution begins with “I the Person” instead of “We the People.” Back then, I mistakenly took it as a personal insult when smiles, greetings, and acknowledgments weren’t reciprocated or initiated. But, on this day, in a sparsely populated Starbucks in a high desert community in Southwest Idaho, I no longer took the lack of common courtesy, social graces, or customer service personally. It’s not like our toxic society is out to get me or anything. It’s just what America’s become.

## **Where I Belong**

Having never sat this close to the blonde, green-eyed bag lady before, I could tell that I was older. Since I had chosen a corner seat that faced the counter, I had clear views of the cash register and my tablemate, who sat diagonally across from me, staring into an open computer tablet while mindlessly working herself through a bag of pistachios. Whatever was on the screen must have been fascinating, since most of the spent shells had missed the empty Popeye’s Chicken bag she’d arranged on the table in front of her. On her right, I saw what appeared to be the remnants of what originally came in the

plastic fast-food bag. On the other side of her tablet, amongst the strewn shells, a tray of colored pencils and several adult coloring books with the words “relaxation” and “stress relief” printed on the covers lay on the table. And for each canvas tote bag on the floor next to her, she had an equal number of drink containers on the table: a half-filled 20-ounce bottle of full-strength Pepsi and a pink, oversized water canister, complete with a straw protruding from the lid.

As I began emptying the contents of my shoulder bag—noise-canceling headphones, an iPad, a pen, and a notebook—the stocky nutcracker, who appeared to be in her early fifties, got up and headed for one of the two unisex restrooms near the café’s entrance. Little did I know then that she’d get up to visit the restroom every thirty minutes thereafter. While taking in her ensemble of turquoise stretch pants, running shoes, and an oversized yellow sweatshirt featuring each member of *The Simpsons* family on the front, my eyes caught sight of the human mannequin sitting in the best seat in the house—the always-shady two-seater against the back wall. No matter how many times I saw the *all-day* trader sitting as stiff as a board, I couldn’t help but marvel at how he could remain motionless for hours at a time. Since he always seemed to be in the same

position, I would give whoever was responsible for arranging him a failing grade for creativity but high marks for consistency. If you saw him, you'd understand why I think he looks like he's standing at attention while seated.

With his back angled at a near-perfect 90 degrees, head tilted downward toward a laptop screen at an efficient 45 degrees, feet set apart as wide as his shoulders, and fingers positioned over the keyboard in a way that would make a typing teacher proud, the expressionless day trader stared at a single chart with a dozen brightly colored vectors slowly producing outlines of jagged mountain ranges like a fancier version of an Etch A Sketch. From underneath the charcoal gray brim of his cotton military cap, small, piercing blue eyes never seemed to blink or veer from the screen. On either side of a neatly trimmed, all-white, push-broom mustache, two black earbud wires hang down, their terminal ends disappearing into a jack on the side of the laptop. Neither his mustache twitched nor did his earbud wires sway. Like I said, the day trader was virtually motionless.

Seated two tables away from the mannequin, with his back turned toward me, I saw the coffee shop's guaranteed human

fixture—the homeless man who, over the course of a little over a year, had literally moved into the second-best table. If tables at Starbucks could be compared to the interiors of cars, the vagrant’s handicap-accessible four-seater would be a 1970s Lincoln Continental. I had to hand it to him. Not only did he have good taste for choosing an upscale café to be his daily home from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m., but he also had a discerning eye for seating optimization. A month ago, I watched him assemble a trailer for his bicycle out on the terrace, just as I would if I were on the patio in my backyard. He even opened the box it came in, as if Amazon had just delivered it. And if that wasn’t brazen enough, he began leaving his bike and trailer in a parking space, presumably so he could keep an eye on them between rounds of Grand Theft Auto on his laptop and naps.

While fighting the urge to gather the errant pistachio shells and dump them into the fast-food bag before my tablemate returned, I instead focused on getting my iPad and headphones set up to begin the hours-long writing slog. Once I got started, I’d appear to have more in common with the bag lady, day trader, and homeless guy than the two older women at the third best table and the first date at the fourth best table. With the

electronic gadgetry accompanying my daily solo act, how could you think otherwise? I'm not delusional. I have a fondness for all things pistachio. I, too, haul stuff with my bicycle. And I live off of investments. I'm exactly where I belong.

## **Remember Me?**

To me, there's an unspoken rule that comes into play when someone at your shared table gets up and walks away, leaving behind belongings that could make their lives a living hell should anything disappear—especially if it's just the two of you. Since words are rarely exchanged these days with anyone who isn't a blood relative, significant other, coworker, pet, or friend since sixth grade, there's an assumed agreement, a nonverbal contract that trusts the one who remains at the table to not touch anything and to make sure no one else does either. Once my unchosen tag team partner returned, I quickly popped out of my seat as if she had slapped my outstretched hand, indicating it was my turn to venture away from the table. But I wasn't headed to the restroom. Instead, I walked the plank toward the counter to place the same order—a 12-ounce

drip coffee with three raw sugars and half-and-half on the side—for the 300<sup>th</sup> time.

The dread I felt as I approached the cash register wasn't a symptom of social anxiety or the fear of drawing a blank after being asked, "What can I get for you?" It's a dread borne from the realization that no matter how much I try to be pleasant, funny, complimentary, or interesting to any of the 15 to 20 rotating Starbucks employees, none of them will act like they remember me. Conversely, I remember all of them, including tidbits about their personal lives, since they talk amongst themselves as if customers can't hear over the sound of coffee beans being pulverized inside machines seemingly too big and too violent for the job. As a totally reasonable and grounded guy, I certainly don't expect the hero's welcome or a collective "Hey, Chuck!" as if I were anything like the lovable loser, Norm, from the classic TV show *Cheers*. But I also don't deserve recycled first-time greetings from people I've seen hundreds of times who have all the warmth and sincerity of a corporate human resources department. Not only am I living in a sadder version of the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*, but, in my case, Tears for Fears' "Mad World" plays over and

over as the background music. And, of course, today will be no different.

“Hi. Welcome to Starbucks. What can I get for you?” asked the tall, blonde automaton from behind the same black facemask I’ve seen her wear for two years without exception—a cloth facemask with the same virus-fighting effectiveness as a cotton t-shirt.

Having abandoned all pleasantries a year earlier, I quickly deadpanned, “I’ll have a 12-ounce drip coffee with three raw sugars and half-and-half on the side,” making it sound like one super-long word.

When she stepped back to check the availability and freshness of the store’s default medium-roasted coffee, I was better able to see how she was dressed. It wasn’t like I was expecting to be surprised or anything, since she typically outfitted herself in oversized men’s flannel pajamas—the kind your dad would unwrap on Christmas morning in the 1970s. On that particular day, she chose pajamas with varying hues of forest green that made her blue eyes and alabaster skin stand out even more. The unbuttoned top draped lazily behind her left shoulder,

exposing the dark green t-shirt she wore underneath. Matching pajama pants, haphazardly tucked into heavy black boots that laced up over her calves, completed a get-up that reminded me of how someone would look if they had to rush out of bed in the middle of the night to see what made their car alarm go off. Basically, she looked more ready to hunker down on the couch and binge-watch the latest Netflix series than to serve overpriced premium coffee and pastries to the general public.

“Oh, it looks like I’ll have to brew another batch,” she mumbled through her mask while tapping the register. “That’ll be \$2.81.”

“How will I know when it’s ready?” I asked, holding a prepaid Starbucks card up to the register’s remote scanner and hearing the oddly satisfying beep-sound.

“I’ll let you know,” she replied, looking at me from a similar height through wire-framed glasses. “Will there be anything else?”

“May I have a receipt, please? I need it so I’ll know how much money is left on the card.”

“Oh, right. Here you go,” she replied, handing me the feather-light proof of purchase.

Normally, I’d tuck the receipt inside my wallet, but my better judgment told me to lay it on the table next to my iPad. I figured if she couldn’t remember me from one day to the next, how in the world would she remember the complexity of brewing a fresh batch of coffee, recalling the details of my order, and notifying me when it’s ready? In this case, there wasn’t a need to consult the Magic 8 Ball on the matter because me and my plastic childhood toy already knew the answer: “Outlook not so good.”

## **Déjà Vu All Over Again**

Having a long history of drinking late afternoon coffees, I wasn’t surprised that I’d have to wait for the caffeinated pick-me-up to brew. As a veteran of the coffee shop scene, I knew drip coffee orders slowed to a crawl after 10:00 a.m. and practically vanished after 2:00 p.m., with expensive, high-calorie concoctions, like Apple Crisp Oat Milk Macchiatos, Nitro Cold Brews, Pumpkin Spiced Lattes, and Vanilla Bean Crème Frappuccinos, taking their place from late morning to

closing. I also knew it only takes Starbucks six minutes to brew a batch of coffee. So, when 10 minutes had passed since placing my order with the 20-something-year-old, who still looked like she'd be on her way to an all-girl sleepover for pizza, pillow fights, and boy talk as soon as her shift ended, I began to seriously doubt any coffee would be coming my way.

“Calm down, dude,” I whispered to myself. “Have a little faith.” And with that, I removed my headphones and walked over to the counter’s pickup station to see if her definition of “letting me know my order was ready” meant secretly placing my coffee, cream, and sugar 25 feet away. “Nope. Nothing there,” I grumbled. “Just an array of frothy 20-ounce milkshakes marketed as exotic coffee drinks as opposed to full-blown beverage meals due to their caffeine content.” Strangely, as I defeatedly headed back to my table without the desired prize, I recalled the same, long-ago feelings that bubbled up from being shot down after asking a girl if she’d like to dance—a walk of shame of sorts.

Instead of stewing over the delay, I resigned myself to being patient and resumed my writing. But who was I kidding? I wasn’t just stewing with increasing malice. I was fighting the

urge to go around the counter and put together my own order. Why couldn't I? I knew where everything was. Plus, I'd be sending a strong message to the employees, bag lady, day trader, homeless guy, the two mature ladies, and the first date. Maybe one of them would capture my boldness on video, upload it to TikTok, and make me the overnight social media hero and phenomenon that I secretly craved to be. Aww, but those were merely the musings of a dreamer. In reality, I live in a world once reserved for crib babies—the world of here and now—where objects and people no longer in sight disappear from the universe.

At the 20-minute mark, knowing I'd be trashing whatever I had written since arriving at Starbucks, I picked up my receipt and strode toward the register like a smug trial lawyer who was about to present an open and shut case to the jury using a single piece of evidence. As I approached the counter, rather than dealing with the sleepwalker who took my order, I tried making eye contact with another employee, a rail-thin, frenetic girl with magenta-colored hair and eye makeup more akin to ancient Egyptian queens than present-day female Idahoans. However, she quickly became a blur when a drive-thru order suddenly chirped in her ear, sending her barreling away from

the register and leaving behind a trail of fading blue light emanating from her headset. Before I knew it, I was again face-to-face with the masked one, who was missing only a teddy bear and slippers to complete the look of someone off to la-la land. But instead of noticing the receipt that was extended toward her, she looked me straight in the eyes and said, “Hi. What can I get for you?”

In that moment, as if stunned by the sight of pigs flying across a solar eclipse, I felt the remainder of my faith in humanity evaporate like hose water on a hot sidewalk in July. So many thoughts came to mind all at once: *Did she really just ask me that? Does she not remember me from 20 minutes ago? Am I on a hidden-camera show? Have I entered the Twilight Zone?* Now, I was the one who needed the comfort of a teddy bear. Setting aside my disappointment and pretending I wasn't the last free-thinking human among a sea of brain-dead corporate slaves, I looked down at my receipt and replied, “I'm looking for an order I placed 20 minutes ago.”

“Oh, it's at the end of the counter.”

Without looking at her, I stormed off toward the pickup station while silently congratulating myself for resisting the urge to sardonically say, “Thanks for letting me know.” I learned a long time ago that it isn’t worth pointing out people’s mistakes. In my experience, they’ll respond in one of two ways. Either they won’t care and become even more annoyed by your existence, or they’ll take your criticism as an act of war. A quick inspection of the sleeveless paper cup resulted in three strikes: No cream. No sugar. Luke warm. “How hard can this be?” I huffed loud enough for Pepé Le Pew and his date to put down their phones and look at me. But I didn’t care. I was at war. My outer appearance may have been showing frustration, but my insides were longing for the days when they simply poured the coffee in front of you, handed it to you, and sent you on your way to the self-serve sugar and half-and-half.

“May I have three raw sugars and some half-and-half, please?” I asked, trying my best to sound unfazed by the flames as Rome continued to burn around me.

Above the black mask, I saw her blue eyes widen as she replied, “Oh, I already put it in there for you,” while removing the lid to prove her innocence.

“Yeah, but I asked for it on the side, plus it’s not very hot.”

“I’ll get you another one,” she said without an ounce of attitude.

“Thank you,” I replied, looking down and silently wondering if this young woman was even capable of delivering a 12-ounce drip coffee with three raw sugars and half-and-half on the side.

## **Mad World**

While the pajama-clad Starbucks employee went on a scavenger hunt to complete my order, I noticed a young Hispanic woman setting up a work space at the same table I was sharing with the bag lady. *Oh, great*, I thought. *As if there weren’t enough distractions already*. Even from a distance, I could see a plastic clip in her hair, similar to the ones I used at home to reseal bags of pretzels, potato chips, and cereal. Poor

little clip. It seemed overmatched, straining to hold a twisted pile of thick hair on top of her head. Needless to say, a third of the long black strands were losing the battle against gravity. Her face was round, covered in heavy foundation, and accented by a pair of heavy glasses with oversized frames that told the world she was both studious and annoyingly quirky. Like the bag lady, she, too, wore stretch pants, running shoes, and a sweatshirt, except her all-black choices made her look like a chunky jewel thief.

“Okay, here you go,” she said, as if a 25-minute wait time for a simple coffee order was standard practice.

As usual, at least since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I gawked at the array of items making up what looked more like a coffee combo-platter: a 12-ounce white paper cup, three cardboard-colored raw sugar packets, an 8-ounce white paper cup, a folded paper sleeve, and an unwrapped stir stick. Immediately, I removed the lid from the 12-ounce cup to check the coffee level since I’d been shortchanged too many times before.

“Excuse me, but could you fill the coffee cup to the top, please?”

“Oh, I left room for the cream.”

“Could you fill it up anyway?” I insisted, holding back the urge to tell her that Starbucks adds to its already high profit margins by disguising less coffee for the same price as customer convenience. That would be like me asking the company if they’d like the last \$0.50 of my \$2.81 order.

“Sure. Not a problem.” And with that, she whisked my coffee cup away and filled it to the brim without so much as an eye roll. “Okay, here you go,” she said again, carefully sliding the lidless cup toward me.

After replacing the top, I mumbled a less than sincere “Thanks” and gathered everything up, leaving behind the stir stick since it had touched the counter. By the time I sat back down with my coffee, sugar, half-and-half, sleeve, and new stir stick, I realized that a little more than 30 minutes had passed with only a cup of coffee and a mildly interesting tale of frustration to show for it. But as the moments passed, it

didn't take long for the world to return to normal. Despite the absence of any customers at the counter, the Starbucks girls went back to darting and dashing. The bag lady was coloring with a concentrated look of peaceful serenity. The day trader unloaded penny stocks without ever flinching or breathing. The homeless guy was cleaning his feet on the patio while the two older ladies talked over one another. Pepé Le Pew was convincing his date to take a selfie with him, and the jewel thief had all but disappeared.

No sooner had I gone back to writing on my iPad when I felt something brush against my left knee underneath the table. Startled, I pushed my chair back, thinking the bag lady was stretching her legs or something. Instead, I found myself looking into the eyes of a Hispanic woman with a butterfly tattoo on her forehead, putting an end to the mystery of the missing jewel thief. She was wearing wireless earbuds. I had on my headphones. No words were exchanged. Nor were they necessary. We both knew what was up. Rather than simply asking me to plug in her phone charger into the floor outlet near my chair, she thought it best to crawl on her hands and knees to do it herself, reminding me that it's a very, very mad world.

## Chapter 6: Columbia Bound

### Miss Linda

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

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

It wasn't Ed MacMahon and his film crew from the Publisher's Clearing House who knocked on my door to announce that I'd won the grand prize. There were no camera

flashes, slaphappy grins, or oversized million-dollar checks to speak of; instead, it came in the form of an understated email from a recently widowed retiree from Columbia, South Carolina. In it, Linda described how she came to read my first book, *Heart Appreciation: Stories of Gratitude*, and expressed how it made her feel after having lost her husband of nearly 60 years. After learning more about the native South Carolinian's family- and community-centered life through a series of email and phone conversations, I asked her if she'd meet me for lunch in Lumberton, North Carolina—the halfway point between where I lived in Raleigh and her home in Columbia. “Sure,” she told me, her answer sounding lively and high-spirited, excitedly adding, “I’ll bring my book so you can sign it for me.”

I watched her step out of a sporty-looking silver sedan, wearing a colorful print dress with matching sandals, and wondered if she confused my lunch invitation at Panera Bread with a three-day cruise out of Miami. She was quick to remove her aviator-style sunglasses as I approached her in the parking lot. And although she's close to securing the respectable title of octogenarian, Linda has the same hair color and eyes as Malibu Barbie, which prompted me to immediately think of

her as a living doll. A fluffy bob framed her face like two blonde curtains, revealing a perpetually warm smile and piercing blue eyes the color of glacial ice—the kind of eyes that made me want to be truthful and decent to her. Soon after we sat down to eat our exact same order of a spicy chicken sandwich, Caesar salad, and lemonade, I felt comfortable enough with Linda to want to go beyond the safety and boredom of measured and polite discourse.

For the first time in more years than I care to admit, I wanted to disclose my real story—the one not found on resumes, in social media posts, or in brokerage accounts. Everyone—and I mean everyone—is suffering. It's simply a non-negotiable fact that comes with being human in a world that seems hellbent on eradicating anything that can actually nourish a sense of community, cooperation, and compassion. When it comes to heartache and tragedy, I've experienced more than my fair share, and so has Linda. But in her case, after learning more about her story, she, without question, has lived through a myriad of losses that no decent person would wish on their worst enemy. Yet, despite carrying a set of crosses that make mine seem like trivial inconveniences, Linda maintains a

humble air of positivity and gratitude—an attitude anyone would want to aspire to, including me.

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

## **Hello, My Name is Chuck**

Most people think that I'm joking when I ask them if they have made any friends since seventh grade. I get it. It's a weird-

sounding question. But for me, it's a serious one. And yet, as expected, their levity quickly begins to diminish when I ask them if they made any friends after high school, college, or marriage. What was once lighthearted amusement at my line of questioning soon dissolves into dismissive chuckles when I continue to push: "How about after 30? 40? or 50?" Over the last several years, since befriending Linda, I've had to resort to posing these same questions to those who simply cannot wrap their minds around how two totally different people could become such good friends so late in life, let alone best friends. *Are you 'boyfriend and girlfriend?' Is she your sugar momma? Are you her home healthcare aide? Will I see you on a future episode of NBC's Dateline as Columbia's first-ever serial swindler who targets lonely older ladies with suspected deep pockets?*

Fortunately for me, I never felt the need to present any of these questions to Linda's surviving family members and closest friends. From the beginning, they wholeheartedly welcomed and accepted me into their inner circle based on what one would expect from God-fearing salt-of-the-earth types: I just had to be good to her. In a way, I enjoyed the teaching moments with nosy outsiders, meeting their terrible

assumptions about me with questions about their own ability to make friends that didn't have the same algebra teacher. It's a line of questioning that seeks to enlighten rather than shame, showing them how jaded one must be if they're willing to assume the worst in someone they don't even know over the possibility that miracles can still happen. And making a real friend, a platonic bestie, later in life, in a society that self-servingly promotes independence over relationships, *is* nothing short of a miracle.

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

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

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

*centered around people who mean the world to me, I will turn my attention to finding and procuring a permanent residence in the same area of Columbia.*

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

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

## Written in the Stars

To me, the best attributes of being human are like stars we can see in the night sky. If you were with me, I'd point at a cluster of stars just above the trees on the other side of the pond and say, "Look over there! You can see cooperation, generosity, and accountability." Then we'd walk for a bit, appreciating the soft breeze and silence, until I'd stop and point upwards again. "Can you believe it?" I'd ask. "If you look between those two clouds, you'll see humility, loyalty, and compassion." As luck would have it, we'd stumble upon an abandoned rowboat that's practically begging us to climb aboard. We'd quietly push away from the bank toward the center of the pond, the only sound coming from the water dripping off the lifted oars.

At some point, you couldn't help but notice three bright stars all in a row. "What are those stars over there?" you'd ask, gesturing your arm toward where we left the bank.

"Ahh, yes," I'd reply, relaxing the oars as I leaned back. "That's the *Belt of Positive Boldness*. Those are my three favorite stars: friendliness, interest in others, and seeking to understand."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Joann, who must have thought I was interviewing her for a story I was writing about her grandson, chose to believe that I had asked her about his track record with the ladies and how

good he looks in a suit. So, instead of just excusing myself from the one-sided weirdness, I suffered through more of what sounded like a late-night infomercial about the many talents and accomplishments of the amazing Mr. Jonathan. For once, I was happy about the distracting TV noise in the background. Somewhere between bragging about her grandson's recent trip to Greece and his IQ test scores, she paused to lower its volume, giving me the much-anticipated chance to end the call. "He's certainly lucky to have you as his grandmother," I interjected. "It's been nice chatting with you, Joann, but I have to go now. I'll call you if I have any more questions. Goodbye."

I was relieved to have rid myself of the president of Mr. Jonathan's fan club, but soon realized that Joann was only the first float to pass by the judge's table of what would end up being a four-month-long parade through the *Twilight Zone*. Days later, Robert, a single man who appeared to be in his late 60s or early 70s, emailed me a series of pictures of his Dentsville colonial-style home—a tidy, two-story brick house set back from the street. "Oh, this place looks promising," I said to no one while scrolling through the photos. However, after taking a closer look at the images, doubt soon replaced

hope. Either by design or a complete lack of self-awareness, Robert captured himself in a few mirrors while taking the photos for me. Normally, I'd notice the oversight and simply move on, but in his case, I couldn't because he was naked except for a skimpy pair of boxers. I shared Robert's pictures with a friend who was quick to defend him.

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

I might have agreed with her if there was only one picture to forgive, but there were three. For me, there was no amount of hypnotism, brainwashing, or electroshock therapy that could help me forget the skinny white legs, knobby knees, pronounced potbelly, scrawny arms, and the infamous threadbare underwear.

"I think I'm going to move on from Robert," I said. "Plus, I have a bunch of texts and emails I haven't checked yet."

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

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

“How so?”

“It’s written in the stars.”

## **Thanks, But No Thanks**

When you get down to it, looking for a place to live is a lot like shuffling through an absurd buffet line that limits you to only one item. “You chose *that*?” I’d tease, pointing at your plate, wondering if it was chicken or fish. I liken the late 90s buffet at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas to searching for a home to buy in an upscale neighborhood with blue-ribbon schools, sidewalks, and a Trader Joe’s. But in my case, I certainly wouldn’t feel like I was inside a posh casino. Since I was focused on finding a modest room to rent in a house with people who wouldn’t try to kill me in my sleep, *my* buffet line would be inside a Golden Corral next to the interstate. Even before I’d have a chance to survey all the entrees and side dishes, I’d imagine the cardboard-thin pizza, macaroni and cheese gelatin, and a soupy-looking three-bean chili calling me by name. *Hi, Chuck! The room comes with a minifridge*

*and hotplate—convenience at your fingertips! Look at it this way, Chuck. Sleeping on a twin-size bed leaves more room for a desk, right? Don't overlook this gem, Chuck! Even though the room hasn't been remodeled or redecorated since our daughter left for college 10 years ago, it has its own bathroom!* Unfortunately for me, since I have champagne tastes on a lite beer budget, I'd have to give each of these woeful buffet items serious consideration.

It wasn't clear to me whether Archie was looking to rent a room in his house or the RV sitting beside it. Either way, I was still interested, since the tree-lined property was shady, spacious, and less than 10 miles from Forest Acres. After a few email exchanges confirming the rental specifics and our mutual interest, I was surprised by his latest correspondence, which read, "I'm going to send you a picture of what I look like. It might make you change your mind." *Oh, boy. I knew it was too good to be true.*

"Okay . . . Sure, send it over," I typed, half-expecting to receive a photo of a shirtless, 400-pound Shrek-like creature. Moments later, I went from feeling like I had found my next housemate to counting the number of stainless-steel hoops

piercing his gauged ears and wondering if they'd exceed the number of metal studs protruding from his eyebrows, nostrils, and lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Okay, but where would I park?”

“In the backyard.”

“On the grass?”

“Yes.”

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

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

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

Nathan’s text went on to tell me that he was gay, along with some of the specifics behind his troubled relationship with Kyle. With the idea of having found a nifty writer’s nook in a cool-looking studio apartment now a fleeting memory, I clumsily exited the budding transaction. “It sounds like you

still have some work to do on the rental space and your personal life. In my experience, it's better to iron out all the wrinkles before bringing in a tenant. As for disclosing personal details like political leanings, religious affiliations, or sexual orientation, I think it's best to keep them to yourself. It just makes things easier. Thanks again for the consideration. Good luck with everything.”

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

since she likes to nap in a room other than her *own* bedroom?  
*Umm . . . Earth to Laura! Check out the name of the website  
you're on. It's called Furnished Finder—emphasis on the  
word "furnished!" Crazy!*

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

the madness standing between me and my new life in South Carolina.

## **Swings and Misses**

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

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

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

After successfully fighting the urge to share Pastor Bob's email with his superiors, peers, and congregation, I redirected my efforts toward organizations whose missions are to attract new residents and businesses to the city of Columbia. Surprisingly, I received only three responses from 106 email solicitations to management-level employees of four well-known and well-established organizations. Two responses were the equivalent of hearing, "Good luck with that," after

telling someone you recently discovered a strange lump in your neck. But the email I received from Stella was on a whole different level: “Get a freaking life! Get a job! Stop trying to scam people! I am reporting this! You sent one to my coworker yesterday, so it’s being discussed in our offices! Get a life and a job!” Unfortunately for Stella, I was no longer in a forgiving mood like I was with Pastor Bob. I added my thoughts to her baseless and senseless tirade and forwarded them to the company’s executive team.

Shockingly, I received a very apologetic email from the president of the company, Mark, who informed me that Stella would be reprimanded for her unprofessional behavior and that I should expect a written apology from her by the end of the day. *Wow! Who knew tattling could feel so good?* When her email finally showed up in my inbox, I was prepared with a fresh cup of coffee and a trio of Pepperidge Farm Milano cookies. “This is going to be awesome,” I said, pulling my chair closer to my laptop as if it were a coveted ringside seat. “So let’s see what a freshly-spanked Stella has to say for herself.”

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

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

to the list of swings and misses in my efforts to find a home base in Columbia. Now that it feels like the bottom of the ninth, I'd have no choice but to rely on my last two bench warmers: real estate agents and Facebook.

## **Back to the Buffet**

“I’m sorry, LaTasha. I still can’t hear you. Could you repeat that?” I asked, doing my best to tolerate a cacophony of background noise emanating from my phone. It was a mixture of swishing wiper blades, AM talk radio, and the crinkling of heavy paper. Since it was noon in Columbia, I figured she was driving in the rain with one hand and eating lunch out of a drive-thru bag with the other. And given the urgent cadence of the wiper blades, it must have been a heavy rainstorm.

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

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

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

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

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

Now it all made sense to me—why I was able to string a series of coherent sentences together. She had muted her phone’s

speaker, thus eliminating the list of audible distractions—allowing me to think more clearly. “I really appreciate you reaching out to me, LaTasha, but it seems like you have a lot going on at the moment. Why don’t you give me a call when you’re not so busy?”

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

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

With May rapidly approaching, I found myself back in line at the Golden Corral buffet, revisiting the en suite bedroom fit for a 10-year-old girl who dreams of ponies, rainbows, and crushes. The homeowners, a married couple from Scotland, said the space was still available and that a May move-in from

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

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

### **The Devil Made Them Do**

You've just read six true stories that didn't end well for me. I have plenty more to share, but who wants to read a 900-page crybaby book? If these and similar stories were likened to airplanes hurtling across the sky, all of them would have found final resting places against steep mountain slopes, their mangled and charred fuselages serving as sobering wakeup calls to future pilots. For years, I used to think it was my fault, that I was doing something wrong to attract such disappointing outcomes into my life. But that doesn't mean I think everyone else is to blame. It's more complex than that. Something terrible has happened to our society. Treasured attributes, like benevolence, trust, charity, empathy, compassion, tolerance, consideration, cooperation, and civic pride, have all but vanished from the public space. In their absence, a new America—complete with its own self-serving constitution that begins with “I the Person” instead of “We the People”—has emerged, making daily life more disturbing than ever before.

Although I am nowhere near becoming a citizen of any version of America where minority group interests can outweigh what's best for the majority, I, too, have begun to project an aloof, unapproachable nature simply as a means of protecting myself from such troubling public discourse. Maybe that's what other people are doing—retreating within themselves to limit the exposure to a society where negative boldness trumps positive outreach? Like me, do they feel hopeless and beaten down by a corrupt and immoral culture fueled by government lies and corporate greed? Is that why Mayor Brennan and Marriott General Manager Shannon Miller stopped communicating with me after our promising meetings—because they're saddened, even insulted, by the obvious manipulation and exploitation going on around them? Are they aware of the systematic reduction of their current freedoms by a so-called government that prioritizes an elite oligarchy and double-dealing lobbyists over its own citizenship?

Is Corporate America to blame for Pat's willingness to betray our friendship—for its shameless and illegal monopolies that make a mockery of choice and fair market practices? Is she, too, weary from never-ending ad campaigns that ruin most, if

not all, experiences in the public space and everything that involves a TV, laptop, tablet, or phone? I feel that, while I'm busy trying to protect myself from soulless corporations competing with each other for my attention, eyeballs, pennies, and livelihood, elected officials at every level are seizing the opportunity to push in the walls of my already shrunken prison cell. I wonder if Walter and the manboys on Edgehill Court acted the way they did because they feel like they're trapped in the same penitentiary as me.

While standing in the "place order here" line at Bernie's Chicken Restaurant, a local favorite in Columbia, South Carolina, I imagine that I'm joined by the pajama-clad barista, Manfred, and Pastor Bob. Was she unable to see me in Starbucks because she feels the same way about post-pandemic America as I do—that the American Dream is a hoax for most people born after 1980, that the nightly news is a propaganda machine at its finest, and that over 75 percent of Americans are forced to live paycheck to paycheck? Was Manfred motivated to push me away from Mildred because he's outraged that war-torn Ukrainian officials and their wives are buying luxuries with American taxpayer money, while the richest country's roads and infrastructure crumble before our

eyes? And did Pastor Bob cast me aside like a wretched beggar because he finally lost it after being badgered by an iPad for the umpteenth time if he'd like to give a 22-, 25-, or 30-percent tip for a lousy cup of coffee?

Is it possible I was treated unfairly by the people in the six stories because they're also able to see the real America—a country whose government kneels before the god of profit and cares nothing about its fellow countrymen and women? Can I attribute their lack of conscientiousness, empathy, and civility to the fact that oppressed societies eventually turn on themselves, on each other, giving the powers that be exactly what they want—a fractured country divided by color, ethnicity, creed, politics, and even gender? Is our society so sick, so morally and spiritually bankrupt, that I'm merely dealing with people who are too broken and desensitized to realize what they're doing to me? When it comes to Mayor Brennan, Shannon Miller, Pat, Walter, Ross, pajama-girl, Manfred, and Pastor Bob, I don't think so. In each circumstance, they had the choice to either rise above the dystopian fog or succumb to it.

But what about the people I haven't met—the strangers sitting at the table beside me, waiting in line with me at the self-checkout, or living across the street from me? What's their story? To me, they don't look particularly defeated. They're not acting like they're carrying the weight of the world or even worried for that matter. Have they discovered a silver lining in the madness that weighs heavily on my mind every single day? Since I can't ask them, I'm relegated to a life of data collection through countless hours of quiet observation. Do I think my subjects have found a silver lining—a safe haven from a world that chews most of us up and spits us out? I do, but I don't think they realize it—or the price they're paying for it.

## **The Bubble**

They stream into the coffee shop by themselves or with others—but mostly alone. From a corner table, I can see the counter, sitting areas, and all the comings and goings. As each customer walks inside, I search for any expression or behavior that tells me they're feeling what I'm feeling—a certain fatigue that comes from having to constantly stay vigilant against things like predatory corporations, for-profit healthcare providers, false narratives from every news media

outlet, and general unkindness in the public space. Surprisingly, I never seem to see the signs of chronic heartbreak etched onto their faces or the brokenness of the world influencing their actions. How can that be? They live in the same America that I do, and yet they go about their day as if there's nothing wrong—as if the lack of character and community in this crowded coffee shop is perfectly normal.

They sit at tables or make themselves comfortable on the couches and cushioned chairs in the opposite corner—their eyes rarely leaving their screens whether they're with someone or not. Those waiting for their orders without a phone look fidgety. They fold and unfold their arms. They shift their weight from one leg to the other. Their eyes search for a safe landing spot, averting them from nothing except another set of eyes. Others breeze in, empty-handed, leaving just as quickly with their online orders, acknowledging no one, including the staff. Again, I search for signs of mutual knowingness of an upside-down world rich with iniquity and hypocrisy—hoping for a subtle head nod, wave, or glance. But they never come. Instead, I can only scratch my head, knowing that only two theories can explain what I'm witnessing—they're either ignorant or choose to be.

Studying and writing about people that don't know any better doesn't interest me. Other than a brief fascination with their complete lack of self-awareness and understanding of the world at large, ignorant folks simply don't hold my attention. However, I'm intrigued by those who willingly choose to ignore the fact that Rome is burning—and has been for decades. They purposely pretend that AI-powered algorithms aren't dictating the human experience, that our government isn't obsessed with tyrannical control over the American people, and that the young men of this country have little to no hope of finding meaningful work or having a family. They seem to take no notice of the lack of conversation or fellowship in this very coffee shop, opting instead to bury themselves in a screen or quickly move on to the next task on their to-do list. How are they insulating themselves from a societal toxicity that consumes most of my thoughts in the public space? What is the difference between me and them—the ones who can still hope, laugh, and love?

It took years to figure out their secrets—years of observation and analysis in places like the DMV, grocery stores, post offices, and banks. I watched them at gas stations, department stores, and sporting events. I listened to them in restaurants,

bars, coffee shops, convenience stores, and gyms. Simply put, they possessed what I lacked: a significant other, children, parents, siblings, extended family, friends, employment, coworkers, a permanent home, and community standing—all of which seem to encase them inside a bubble, a sort of shield, insulating them from the madness I can't escape. Some bubbles are more insulated than others—providing even more distraction from clear acts of corruption, such as congress members amassing tens of millions of dollars of personal wealth despite earning less than \$200,000 a year, a government that can track every penny of your \$60,000 income but can't account for billions sent to Israel, Ethiopia, and Ukraine, and healthcare company CEOs collecting salaries of more than \$20,000,000 annually while their premium-paying customers' insurance claims are routinely denied.

But back here in the coffee shop, as the well-heeled caffeine addicts shuffle in and out through the double glass doors, I know there's more to their insulated bubbles than the friends and families who require their attention, the jobs that demand their time, and the homes that need constant upkeep. Other things, like school schedules, church calendars, and national

holidays, offer an additional layer of protection from the greed-driven atrocities plaguing what was once a God-fearing nation. Those who chose ignorance obey traditions and dates as well. Birthdays, graduations, engagements, weddings, anniversaries, reunions, backyard barbeques, and the like also line the inside of their padded bubbles, keeping them hopping from one event to the next, oblivious to the fact that corporations are buying tens of thousands of single-family homes to rent to struggling American families too weary to seek less exploitive options. They are the over-responsible, over-obligated, and indebted taxpayers whose myopic lives follow an indoctrination script that defines happiness, success, and fulfillment for them.

## **You Got a Friend in Me**

If you still need further clarification regarding the significance of the bubble, don't worry about it. Miss Linda, my dear friend from the previous chapter, posed the same question while joining me for another weekday lunch at Bernie's.

“So, let me get this straight,” she said. “You’re saying the worst aspects of society won’t affect the people inside bubbles?”

I shook my head and rearranged the fried chicken, fries, and coleslaw in the basket in front of me. “Not quite,” I replied. “I’m saying they’ll be *less* affected. Tell you what, let me try another analogy that’ll help you better understand what I mean by insulated bubbles.”

In her patented southern lilt, she responded, “Sure,” while taking a sip of sweet tea without smudging her lipstick.

Using the edge of the table and a set of salt and pepper shakers, I began to explain what I believed to be the perfect analogy. “Imagine there are two types of people on a beach. This pepper shaker represents people whose lives include the types of attributes I described earlier for bubble dwellers: friends, family, work, bar mitzvahs, birthday parties for dogs, date nights, play dates, and the like. Conversely, the salt shaker represents those who lack the protection and distraction of a bubble and who can’t avoid feeling that America is on the brink of devolving into class warfare, that the bottom 50

percent of America's population shares less than 3 percent of the country's wealth, and that an insatiable evil empire is controlling the entire world. Are you following me so far?"

"I am," she replied. And when she asked if the salt and pepper shakers were walking hand in hand on the beach, I laughed out loud.

"What? No! This isn't a romantic story about you and your beloved Harold in the Bahamas," I teased. "Can you please focus? I'm almost done. Plus, my chicken is getting cold."

"Do you want my coleslaw?"

"Huh? What?"

Linda slid her little tub of coleslaw to my side of the table, avoiding the salt and pepper shakers as she did so, and added, "I can't eat this. It has too much pickle in it."

"Are you even listening to this awesome analogy?" I huffed, pretending to be outraged. "Notice that I placed the pepper shaker further from the edge of the table than the salt shaker.

That's because the edge of the table represents where the beach meets the turbulent surf, where crashing waves represent the poisonous and soul-crushing aspects of our society. The breakers relentlessly pound the salt shaker with toxic untruths, such as 'equal opportunity results in equal outcomes,' 'taking on huge school loans at age 18 to go to college is a smart investment,' and 'teams with diverse skin color make better decisions.' However, the pepper shaker is not nearly as affected."

Linda put two chicken wings and half her fries into a to-go bag and asked, "How can the breaking waves affect the pepper shaker when it's so far back?"

"Ahh, but it *is* close enough," I countered. I bit into the still-warm chicken breast in my hand and continued with my mouth full. "It's like this—the waves crash onto the beach, causing seawater and foam to lap at the feet of the pepper shaker. Despite leading busy lives within their respective bubbles—inner sanctums that thwart most sobering truths about our corrupted nation—people who've opted to be uninformed still can't avoid everything. Can they really tell themselves that the pharmaceutical industry isn't a legalized and heavily

advertised drug cartel and that owning an overpriced vehicle is the only way to get around America? How long can they pretend that near-constant road work and traffic are normal and that inflation isn't simply another manufactured tool to control the masses?"

"You make it sound like the breakers pound the pepper shaker as much as the salt shaker," interjected Linda.

I put a few fries and a sporkful of coleslaw in my mouth and sat back in the booth. "Good catch. I may have overstated what the lapping seawater and foam represent. I should've toned it down to things like fewer smiles, greetings, and manners in the public space. Wait! I know how I can explain this better. Don't you think we make an excellent example?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Can't you see that you're the pepper shaker and I'm the salt? Whereas you have a significant other, a loving family, lots of friends, church obligations, a private home, and community standing, I don't have any of that. Your extensive network of longstanding relationships keeps you humming along a busy

social calendar that has no time for the heartbreak, disillusionment, and outrage that comes from discovering what our elected leaders are doing to us behind our backs. I, on the other hand, have nothing *but* time to angrily peel back layers of sham after sham, each one revealing the depths that compromised government officials and greedy corporate executives are willing to go to for more money than they could ever spend, stuff that they'll never need, and power they will no doubt abuse."

Linda, who for some reason can remember song titles better than anyone I know, stuffed her to-go bag with extra napkins and ketchup packets and sang, "You got a friend in me."

I laughed loud enough to make two guys wearing "Palmetto Plumbing" shirts at an adjacent table turn to look at me. They were eating the same lunch specials that Linda and I had ordered. I looked at my friend of several years and said, "I know. And I appreciate you for it. Although quite special, your friendship can only deflect a small fraction of what the thunderous surf brings down on my heart and soul each day. Did you know that Walmart, the richest company in the U.S. for the past 11 years, is selling donation bags filled with food

and other supplies for the poor to their customers and then donating them under their own name?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Did you know that the iconic American company, Kellogg’s, has two formulas for each of its breakfast cereals—one with healthier ingredients to ship to other countries with stricter consumer safety laws and another with cheaper, cancer-causing components to sell to its own countrymen and women?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“See that?” I deadpanned. “You’re making my point.”

## **Last Words**

It’s been almost five years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and, at this point, who wouldn’t agree that our government isn’t a government at all—that it’s a perverted behemoth executing some kind of evil-based agenda to establish a new world order? When the ruling oligarchy of

billionaires strips most Americans of basic needs, like a living wage, healthcare, affordable housing, healthy food, and a sense of community, who wouldn't think there's a master plan in place? What's most insidious is they've managed to convince many of us in the slave class that they aren't the enemy—that the real enemies are those who don't think like you, agree with you, or look like you. They've told us it's “survival of the fittest” and that present-day human beings are the direct descendants of the most aggressive who came before us—the winners of “kill or be killed.” But their claims are unfounded. According to Ashley Montagu's 1976 book *The Nature of Human Aggression*, there's much more evidence proving that human beings are not only more prone to cooperative behaviors than aggressiveness but that we most likely descended from those who got along well with others.

But if we're such naturally harmonious and cooperative creatures, then why are most experiences in the public space so troubling, disheartening, and demoralizing? If people aren't innately violent, discriminatory, intolerant, dishonest, competitive, exploitive, and aggressive, then how did we become this way? I'm not suggesting that we don't have free will to choose our actions in any given situation or

environment. However, I do believe that the ruling class—a combination of Corporate America, Wall Street, the 800-member billionaires' club of America, and all levels of government—supports any initiative that promotes separateness, disagreement, and hatred among those relegated to the bottom 95 percent. To put it another way, the ruling class bears a significant portion of the blame for the conditions we face in public spaces. They divide and conquer, knowing we'll direct our outrage at one another. They pit women against men and look the other way as the nuclear family disintegrates. They limit the resources and watch us destroy ourselves. The enemy is clear, but where is the silver lining in all this madness?

For the purpose of this book, the silver lining is that the best aspects of being alive have not and can never be destroyed by those who exchanged their humanity for obscene power and wealth—that it will always exist within the interpersonal relationships we build with others. The quicker we learn to invest in our relationships instead of the lies we are fed by the ruling class, the sooner we'll break the chains that bind us from appreciating the gift of life, ourselves, and each other. I may sound like just another slave attempting to rationalize his

or her dystopian fate with tiresome platitudes, but this one rings true for me. No longer am I angered or disheartened by what I cannot find in the public space—especially since realizing what I was looking for can only be found within the preciousness of meaningful connections with others.

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.

He can be reached through his website or email:

[www.trunksart.com](http://www.trunksart.com)

[chucktrunks@gmail.com](mailto:chucktrunks@gmail.com)

## **Additional Books by Chuck Trunks**

(Available on Amazon)

Fiction:

*A Rationale for Being  
Pillars of Society*

Nonfiction:

*Heart Appreciation: Stories of Gratitude*

*Must Love Dogs: A Tragedy of Sorts*

*Being Happy: The Pursuit of You*

*It's Not Your Fault: But it Could Be*

*Physics from the Heart: A Quantum Story*

*Be Still My Heart: A Code for Love*

*Silver Linings: In a Mad World*

*Spot Me: A Gym Memoir*