



AMEN

A True Story



Chuck Trunks

What Would Jesus Do?

Just when I thought I was home free, I heard it—the sickening sound of an “Excuse me!” laced with palpable contempt and unwavering self-righteousness. Although it was directed at my back, I knew exactly who hurled it like a chalkboard eraser at a middle schooler caught dozing in the back row. For a split second, I thought I could just keep walking away, pretending not to have heard what sounded more like an insult than polite discourse. But after a second, even louder, “Excuse me!” I knew she wasn’t the type to demur and read between the lines, since that would require a modicum of emotional intelligence, a shred of femininity. There were no two ways about it; she would have her pound of flesh—even if it meant climbing down from the stepmill and chasing after me to get it. I stopped in my tracks, letting out one of those long sighs that make your shoulders go up as you breathe in and drop dramatically on the exhale. I kept my eyes on the gym exit—a pair of double doors situated between two mounted white boards adorned with inspiring handwritten Bible quotes like, “I can do all this through Him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:13)” and “Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes (Ephesians 6:10).”

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

But did I really have a chance? Of course, I didn’t. Having spent a large portion of my life in and out of gyms, I’ve accepted that I’m no match for female gym rats between the ages of 35 and 55 whose insufferable bravado says, “I’ve got one, too, and it’s bigger than yours.” They’re self-appointed boss ladies hellbent on patrolling the free weights, group classes, and cardio machines, sniffing for the slightest male infraction like a shark honing in on a drop of blood. But I’m never impressed with their willingness to create confrontational scenes with men two or three times their size or their fearlessness to go toe-to-toe with them. Their

pathetic brand of boldness is fueled by a pathological need to cut men down to size, knowing they can act with impunity from behind a convenient double standard. Personally, I make it a practice not to tell other men to restack their weights or to stop hogging the cable machine because, like most guys, I'm aware of my place in the pecking order—somewhere between “fragile” and “do not bend.”

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

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

I knew I was in the wrong for having missed sopping up two puddles of sweat on the base of the console's support post—a location near the bottom of the contraption, a place not even the soles of her Adidas would ever come in contact with. I had wiped down the machine's handrails, console, and both heart rate monitoring handles using disinfectant sheets from an adjacent wall-mounted dispenser, but I was still technically wrong for having left evidence of my earlier workout—and the “blonde belittler” would see to it that I was summarily

admonished. I hated the way she looked at me even more than how she spat the rhetorical question. Her air of superiority contrasted sharply with the smiling 70-year-old woman carrying two-pound weights on a neighboring treadmill while watching a man in bib overalls install a storm door on HGTV. The etched conviction on my adversary's face looked totally out of place—especially in the midst of low-key octogenarians lumbering from one machine to the next, secretly relishing their independence from assisted living.

“I think you know the answer to that,” I countered, suddenly noticing a “What would Jesus do?” poster behind her and thinking she had not one but two better options than her current poor choice. She could have used the stepmill and focused on something other than my two coaster-sized pools of sweat or opted for an unoccupied treadmill, elliptical, or stationary bike. Instead, she *had* to have the stepmill and to position herself as judge, jury, and executioner.

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

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

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

By mid-huff, I had already turned around and started heading toward the gym exit, putting an end to my unwanted participation in this woman's incessant need for personal vindication via unladylike boldness. However, she did manage to shout something mean, mostly unintelligible, at my back before I made it out of earshot. I picked out words and sentence fragments one would expect to hear from someone who couldn't forecast the awkward discomfort that'll ensue every time

we cross paths in the foreseeable future. “So rude,” “disgusting,” and “reporting you” hung in the air like unpleasant smells in a truck stop bathroom.

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

The Cutest Little Things

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as I stepped out of my truck, I heard what sounded like music to my ears—a cacophony of shouting, squealing, and laughing coming from behind a wall of shrubbery and a wrought iron fence. It was the sound of children in perpetual motion—pleasing peals of happiness—that made me walk across the parking lot to see what all the commotion was about. If they weren't climbing on something, they were riding three-wheelers around a rubber track that included a

pretend rest stop and gas station. A four-year-old girl with wild blonde hair was riding her bike against the flow of oncoming tricycles, causing the biggest disturbance in the outdoor romper room. By the expression on her little face, she looked positively pleased with the resulting mayhem. *Apparently, the Christian Life Center operates a day care service, too.*

Even though every license plate in the parking lot was bordered in navy blue with silhouettes of crescent moons and palmetto trees, I still found it startling to think I had moved to Columbia, South Carolina, a week earlier from Nampa, Idaho. From inside, an older lady raised a finger at me from behind a large concierge desk as soon as I attempted to pull on the heavy glass entrance door, the universal sign indicating I needed to be buzzed in first. *Apparently, the Christian Life Center has reasons for controlling who enters the facility.* The lobby was warm and welcoming despite two imposing screens: the video display unit above her head and the desktop monitor obscuring half her smiling face. From the way she dressed, wore her hair, and applied make-up, I could tell the 70-year-old valued respect over attention. A pair of wire-framed glasses hung loosely around her neck, held in place by a delicate silver chain, making her eyewear look like jewelry.

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

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

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

Feeling like it was okay to joke with her, I stepped back from the desk and said, “Really? What gave it away? Was it the orange and blue Boise State Football polo? Or the ball cap with the words ‘Idaho’ and ‘Gem State’ on it?”

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

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

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

“Are you ready?” I asked.

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

Signs, Signs, Everywhere a Sign

It wasn't until Annabelle steered us toward the elevator that I noticed a splint wrapped around her left thumb and that she had a slight limp. I gestured toward the clump of white tape on her hand and asked, "Are you sure you're up to this?" while wondering how she could still grip an oversized iPhone with it. She began telling me every detail that led to her falling off a step stool in the kitchen two weeks earlier, including why she had to rely more on her ex-son-in-law for help rather than her more than capable daughter. As she transitioned into medical speak, parroting back verbatim what her doctor had to say, my eyes drifted over her shoulder and into the gymnasium where three raucous pickleball games were going on simultaneously. At first, I thought it must be a lady's league until I spied a couple of older gentlemen in the mix. They were twice as big yet much slower than their counterparts, who showed no signs of their advanced ages—darting and dashing like the day care kids I'd seen earlier.

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

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

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

up to this?” She ignored me and pulled out a wad of keys from her jacket’s front pocket.

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

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

“How do you know? You haven’t even seen it yet,” she cautioned. “You might find it under-equipped and too small. Our little church gym can’t begin to compare with those big fitness clubs up there in Forest Acres.”

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

I should have known better than to go off like that. I followed Annabelle through the door, immediately regretting what I had just said, since most people would rather play it safe and banter about weather, sports, or vacation plans. My guess is that, by now, most everyone knows Rome is burning—and reminding them of it only serves to sour their mood and make me look even more like a Debbie

Downer. Luckily, my self-loathing didn't last but five seconds. While tapping her left ear, Annabelle said, "I'm so sorry, Chuck. What did you say? I don't hear so well out of this one anymore."

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

While Annabelle straightened stacks of brochures, pamphlets, and flyers on the plastic folding table next to the doors, I caught a player looking up at me. When I met her gaze, she frowned and quickly looked away, making me aware of my voyeuristic vantage point. I stepped back into the middle lane to fight the urge to antagonize her further and spotted cardio machines positioned along the painted cinder block wall on the two shorter sides of the running track. *Uh-oh. Is this all they have—two stationary bikes, three recumbent bikes, a couple of row machines, and a lone elliptical trainer?* Once again, my angst was short-lived when I noticed an alcove on the other side of the track. "Is that the main part of the gym?" I asked, motioning toward the dim recess.

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

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

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

"What's that? Who makes it about themselves? Remember? My ear?"

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

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

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

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

Old Folk Heroes

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

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

“That she is; but I was referring to the French doors letting in all that natural light,” I replied, striding closer to the paperback-sized window panes and noticing a bricked terrace on the other side with three unoccupied redwood tables placed equidistant from one another. Each possessed two matching chairs and a maroon canvas umbrella sprouting from their centers like imprisoned little trees. “Do people from the gym sit out there sometimes?” I asked, already envisioning myself quietly reading, meditating, or outlining my next writing project in the secluded space. When I didn’t hear an answer, I turned around and found Annabelle talking to a man sitting on a leg extension machine.

“Chuck, this is Stewart. He’s 85 years old and practically never misses a day at the Christian Life Center.”

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

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

Stewart appealed to me instantly—as does anyone who appears incongruent with mainstream conformity. His pale blue eyes had a pleading quality about them, like he had a lot to say yet couldn't find the words. He wore a sweatshirt over a sweatshirt and still looked emaciated. Surprisingly, he thought it best to wear shorts, revealing translucent legs so spindly that I was reminded of the skinny wiffleball bats I used as a kid to swat tossed acorns into the De Palma's front yard across the street. Out of politeness, I waited while he and Annabelle exchanged pleasantries. He spoke in wheezed sentences of no more than three to six words at a time, as if his lungs weren't capable of delivering enough juice for more. And though I had only been around Stewart for less than a full minute, I already felt like I could impersonate him—especially since he whistled his esses. When I watched him speak, I was oddly transfixed by his remarkable full pink lips, making me and other straight men admonish ourselves for inexplicably wondering how soft they were.

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

The alcove's fitness area, a rectangular space illuminated by the brightness of the adjacent gymnasium and the aforementioned French doors, felt cozy—thanks, in part, to the nylon Berber carpeting that appeared worn but well taken care of. If the fitness area was a football field, Annabelle and Stewart would be catching up on the 50-yard line. To the right of them, there were dumbbells, kettlebells, mats, exercise balls, a chest press, and a universal multi-function weight machine, featuring a lat pull-down station. To their left, I counted four treadmills, each of a different brand, and one hulking stepmill—its menacing height and black matte finish making it look like the alpha machine of the lowly treadmills. Once again, laminated signs dominated the wall space throughout; however, they shared it with several disinfecting wipe dispensers mounted strategically near the cardio

and weight machines. There were the usual “Limit your exercise to 30 minutes” and “Please wipe down machines after use” signs, but I especially liked the yellow placard underneath the suspended flat screen: “Do not change channel from HGTV.”

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

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

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

“No, thanks. I’m good.”

Suddenly, Annabelle began waving at someone behind me. *Huh? Other than Stewart, I hadn’t seen anyone else in the alcove.* When I spun around to see who was there, it all made sense. A diminutive older lady, probably in her early 80s, stood in a brightly lit storage closet underneath the loft. While one hand clutched a tattered *People* magazine with a younger Pierce Brosnan on the cover, the other waved back at Annabelle. She wore a pair of glasses whose angular frame matched both the color and severity of her Prince Valiant hairstyle—a mixture of black, gray, and silver, the color of gravel. Almost immediately, my eyes gravitated to bold lettering underneath her oversized navy-blue cardigan. She had on a white t-shirt featuring a cartoon graphic of an open book and the words, “Read a book.” I watched her hastily return the magazine to a stack of similar periodicals on a shelf in the closet and shuffle past me to greet her friend.

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

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

“Chuck, I’d like you to meet Jean,” said Annabelle, lifting her injured hand, palm side up, as if she was presenting a freshly baked soufflé and saying, “Ta da!” “She’s another fixture in the Christian Life Center.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That would’ve brought the house down.

Little Caesars

By the time I returned to the alcove's quiet mishmash of exercise equipment, a space that smelled and sounded like the waiting area at my dentist's office, Annabelle had reseated herself on the lat pull-down bench while Stewart held what appeared to be the smallest kettlebell of the bunch in front of a mirror midway between the chest press and French doors. He held the modest weight with both hands in front of him like a husband relegated to purse-holding duties outside an Ann Taylor dressing room. As I watched him lower himself repeatedly from the knees, his back stiff and straight, he looked more like someone detonating dynamite with one of those old-timey mine blasting plungers.

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

We both said goodbye to a grimacing Stewart, who vapidly ignored us, acting as if *we* were the targets to be blown up for disturbing his concentration. Despite his hot and cold nature, I had to hand it to him. How many rail-thin 85-year-olds were doing routine kettlebell sumo squats without a personal trainer, physical therapist, or geriatric nurse in sight? I wanted to tell Annabelle that I hoped to be as dedicated as Stewart when I'm his age but thought better of it. We both knew I was just as regimented and had been for as long as I could remember—a militant lifer among the other insufferable gym rats, mile loggers, calorie burners, and waistline watchers.

Just when I thought we were leaving the alcove, Annabelle abruptly stopped in front of a waist-high cabinet, whose countertop organization wasn't to her liking. From the posted signage on the two cabinet doors, I made a mental note to remember where to look should I or anyone around me need first aid—anything from Band-Aids to baby aspirin to the electrified paddles of an emergency

defibrillator. While she dutifully gathered, sorted, and stacked what looked to be duplicates of the same reading material collated on the folding table near the exit, I had time to notice that the church had installed an above-average number of conspicuous surveillance cameras throughout the gymnasium and fitness area. As my head swiveled from one smoke-colored dome to the next, I imagined a sleepy monitoring officer suddenly springing to life to capture screenshots of a dubious guy in bright orange and blue garb looking like he was casing the joint for security blind spots.

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

We retraced our steps along the suspended polyurethane track, moving slow enough for me to grow increasingly agitated by its unearthly color—an irksome amalgam of unnatural shades of jade and teal. Since no one was using the track or the cardio machines against the walls, I turned my attention to the spirited pickleball games on the gymnasium floor below. On the far court, a kindly old grandpa just completed an aggressive overhead smash, sending the orange plastic ball careening off the shoulder of an open-mouthed grandma before ricocheting toward a small group of onlookers gathered underneath one of the half-dozen basketball hoops. I watched four gray-haired seniors politely tap their pickleball racquets over the net on center court, prompting a new foursome of elderly matrons to commandeer the coveted playing space. However, the real action was on the near court, where I listened to shouts of “I got it!” “Let it go!” and “Nice shot!” Adding to the theatrics, I also heard fits of dramatic self-deprecation: “What’s wrong with me today?” “Sorry for playing so badly, Monica!” and “What are you doing, Candice? Get your head in the game!”

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

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

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

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

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

While Annabelle rifled through the drawers of her desk, removing forms and a little tin box with the words “front desk petty cash” scrawled over peeling masking tape, I saw an opportunity for redemption. A fresh crop of buckled-in two-year-olds lumbered toward me; their over-engineered carriages looked straight out of Ancient Rome if they were painted gold instead of red. The same two mask-wearing girls pushed the future emperors from behind, like trusted slaves of the reigning aristocracy.

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, shiver me timbers! Thar they be!” I bellowed. “Ahoy there, lads and lassies! Remember to keep all hooks and peg legs inside the cart until the ride comes to a complete stop!” Their dead-eye stares and overall lack of empathy reminded me of DMV employees and most customer service representatives. Soul-crushing as that was, I still sang the last line: “Yo-ho, yo-ho, a pirate’s life for me!” Again, the stone-faced mini monarchs left me high and dry. Without a single smile or wave to reward my willingness to play the fool, what else could I deduce? The verdict was in: I was either guilty of being wildly pathetic or the little judges were high on Capri-Suns and Pop-Tarts and couldn’t appreciate comedy gold even if it was delivered on a silver platter.

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

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

“Brutal crowd,” she deadpanned.

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

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

Senior Class

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

As I drove out of the parking lot of the Christian Life Center, I felt different. Even the sound of my keys rattling against the truck’s steering column sounded

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

What once was a welcomed sanctuary away from the frenetic and taxable world of profit-driven everything—a respite from the near-constant ping-pong of needy cell phones—public gyms have become the equivalent of an inert, soulless Starbucks, where a sense of community means having access to the Wi-Fi password. Gone are the days when actual friendships materialized on the gym floor through shared interests and goals—a time when we could interact and even look at one another without being labeled as threatening or creepy. If anything should be deemed creepy, it’s the remote worker crowd and social media addicts who migrated from their tables at Starbucks to the cardio and weight machines inside public gyms. Together, they brought their exclusive bubbles of self-isolation, plugging themselves in with earbuds, eyewear, and phones with front-facing cameras and playlists—their faces masked behind muted expressions of indifference.

Unlike the deserted play area shrinking in my rearview mirror, the gyms I used to go to were always full of bodies; yet I felt like I was the only one present—where I’d have a better chance of acknowledgment from the overhead TV than the person on the treadmill next to me. But that was all about to change. My time with

Annabelle, Stewart, and Jean offered hope that it was still possible to find community and fellowship while investing in health and fitness—and that I wouldn't have to trade one for the other. The Christian Life Center was less like a church gym and more like a senior center full of people who could remember when friendships began serendipitously and organically—a golden age when one's reputation and intuition weren't reduced to an online footprint and a background check. Like most people born in the 40s and 50s, they're not only excellent rule followers, but they're also good at ensuring that others follow them, too. And as a consummate believer in the metaphorical adage “When in Rome, do what the Romans do,” I like this underappreciated characteristic of the salt-of-the-earth types—it keeps the riffraff out.

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

Just when it was time to punch the gas, a 2006 Lincoln Town Car pulled in front of me and promptly gathered and maintained a speed of no more than 25 mph. As is customary when someone drives 15 mph or more below the speed limit, I tailgated the clueless driver mercilessly, hoping he or she would get the message and speed up so the free world wouldn't come to a grinding halt. Up ahead, the Gingerwood Road intersection would offer an opportunity to get an up-close view

of the yo-yo driving the beige four-door sedan with the distracting floral-patterned tissue box on the rear deck. If they continued straight on Sylvia Drive, I'd be in business, since I'd be making a left from a separate lane at the three-way stop. Sure enough, as soon as I pulled up to the stop sign and looked to my right, I saw an ancient relic behind the wheel—a bony octogenarian wearing a blue runner's cap with a Nike swoosh on the side and a bright yellow polyester t-shirt. He wore a bulky black watch with a digital face and appeared to be traveling with a small canvas gym bag on the passenger seat. On the other side of his car, beside a flowering lilac bush, I noticed a posted speed limit sign I hadn't seen before—it said 25 mph, reminding me of another memorable maxim: *Be careful what you wish for.*

The End (of Chapter 1)