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THE FUNNERCISE HANDBOOK

by Gregory Hill

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER -1

Cordon Pruitt was a man of improper proportions. He was all torso, especially at first. Consequently, his limbs seemed slightly undersized. He could not touch his toes without squatting. And no matter how slowly he walked, his legs had to hurry to catch up with the rest of him.

This is not to suggest that he was a freak. He was not. To the casual observer, he was simply another person one would choose not to sit next to on the bus.

At the moment, Cordon Pruitt was seated on a vinyl recliner wearing a pair of boxer shorts, his arms opened wide as if in the midst of a morning stretch. On the upturned palm of each hand he held a copy of The Funnercise Handbook.

The windows were open and a February breeze blew from one end of his garden-level apartment to the other. His outstretched arms, veins blue from the cold, muscles bulging from the burden, jittered. Breath hissed in and

out of his flared nostrils. Crystals of frost grew round his lips, nose, ears and eyes. Snow fluttered through the windows.

His heartbeats widened. The blood, almost slush, crept through his arms, legs and torso. A car honked its horn on the street outside. A woman shouted.

Cordon's eyes dilated, his jaw closed. His hair, thick, black, straight and frozen, clattered like tiny windchimes. His arms slid out from under the books and they tumbled to the floor, flinging icy dust into the air.

Cordon raised himself off the recliner. Bits of skin and hair remained. His joints made grinding noises. He walked, then lurched to a desk where he lifted a pen and scratched upon a notepad, yielding indentations but no lines. The ink was frozen.

He tugged. Punched the desk over and over until the ice around it cracked and the drawer slid open. Within it he found handfuls of pencils embossed, "From the Desk of Cordon Pruitt." They were all brand new. None of them had been sharpened.

There was no pencil sharpener in the apartment, only a pocketknife on a string hanging from the desk. The knife had been given to Cordon by his stepfather who had gotten it, in turn, from his father. Over the years, the blade

had been honed to a narrow wisp but it was sharp and, fortunately, open.

With creaking tendons, Cordon pushed away all the objects on his desk. A computer, stacks of paper, a wire basket, two cans of soup, and a pair of headphones landed on the floor, raising whirls of ice dust. It was getting hard to see from one side of the room to the other.

Cordon dug the knife into the top of his desk. His face was very near the wood. His breath came in thick tugs.

Given enough time, this is what he would have written:

I have no sympathy for anyone who walks into a cold, windy, snowy day without a hat. I saw dozens today. Why would any person of means walk through winter weather in shorts, tennis shoes and a cut-off tee-shirt? People like this should spend the night outdoors and understand what it truly means to be cold.

Give them everything, they beg for more. Give them nothing, they beg for more. Look at them. They're freezing themselves so they can lose a couple of pounds. Idiots. That little girl? She's dead because she made a mistake. But those people out there? They don't deserve to live.

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This is how far he got:

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CHAPTER 0

Cordon Pruitt's Funnercise Handbook is a comprehensive guide to affecting good health. With his simple message of, "Do just a little more," Mr. Pruitt has stripped the very idea of self-improvement to its most honest essence.

Unlike most health improvement types, Mr. Pruitt doesn't offer a miracle cure. He offers sensible advice. This advice is not scary and it's not intimidating. It's fun and it's easy. You can be healthy. You can be strong. You can be yourself. And all you have to do is avoid shortcuts.

I give this book my full endorsement.

--Robin Flowerdew, MD

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"Wipe my eyebrows," said Jeffery Towner.

The make-up girl complied, dabbing sweat and shaking her hips to the beat of "I'm Walkin'" as performed by the Night on the Towner Septet.

"Anything in my teeth?" Towner smiled, revealing a pencil stub wedged in the famous gap where his upper right lateral incisor had been dislodged by a poorly aimed juggling pin on the debut of his show.

The assailant had been a young girl, added to the program at the last minute to fill a slot originally scheduled for a British director notorious for his shocking films and reclusive nature. Said director arrived at the studio too drunk to stand and, although Jeffrey begged to bring him on anyway, the producer was unwilling to risk a "fuckin' 'ell" on live TV. The interns were sent to Washington Square with a slap on the ass and a promise of \$100 to the first person who could find a busker capable of performing in the 11:00 slot. At 10:35, a lisping six year-old juggler in a ballerina costume was led into the building. Without any rehearsal, she found her mark on the stage and juggled four pins at once while singing "You Are My Sunshine." For her final flourish, she threw one of the pins as high as she could while performing a pirouette.

Unaccustomed to working indoors, she failed to account for the stage lights suspended from the ceiling. The pin caromed off a light-can and buried itself into the smiling face of Jeffrey who fell unconscious to the floor with a fountain of blood squirting from his mouth.

The little ballerina gathered her juggling pins and turned to the camera to say in her tweety voice, "Do I thtill get paid?" This filled the room with applause and provided a perfect opportunity to cut to commercial. Two interns carried Towner to the green room where he spent the next half-hour punching a couch cushion while the drunken British director tried to pour vodka down his throat. The Night on the Towner Septet finished out the show's final segment with an extended medley of Benny Goodman songs.

As a result of the injury, Towner picked up a hint of a lisp. Would-be comedians never tired of doing the pre- and post-juggling pin Jeffrey Towner impressions. He never replaced his missing tooth and, using all the good humor at his disposal, appropriated "Do I thtill get paid?" as his catchphrase. Night on the Towner would eventually run for twenty-three years. The little girl was never a guest on the show again but she did grow up to attend cosmetic school.

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The make-up girl pulled the stub out of Jeffrey's teeth. Wiping her hand on her apron, she left the set while the producer counted down from four. The band hit the final chord and Towner leaned over his desk to speak into the camera.

"You might know him as the guy who never does things the easy way...I like to think of him as the jerk responsible for making my wife throw away the remote control (laughter)...Ladies and Gentlemen, Cordon Pruitt!"

The studio audience applauded. Cordon, carrying a can of kidney beans in each hand, emerged from the curtain on stage right. Waving the beans like a windmill, he bunny-hopped toward the overstuffed couch he was going to share with the previous segment's guest, emerging starlet, Emma Stroller. Stroller, stoned as a scarecrow, nipples begging for liberation from her mostly unbuttoned cowgirl shirt, dragged a finger across her belly while Cordon hopped past and, with a 180-degree bound, he landed violently on his side of the couch. The audience rewarded this act with hearty applause. Emma Stroller rolled her eyes. Cordon sat upright on the chair and stuck out his left leg as if it were on an invisible foot stool.

Towner drummed his fingers on the desk until the audience quieted down. Stroller sighed, sexily. Cordon said nothing; he was catching his breath.

Looking at Cordon's leg, Towner deadpanned, "Careful, Emma, I think he likes you."

The applause resumed. Emma slid to the far end of the couch.

Cordon remained still.

"How are things?" said Towner. "Enjoying New York?"

"I like New York very much." Applause, whoops. "Lots of places to walk."

"That's our motto, 'I walk New York.'" Tepid laughter. Towner sensed that the crowd liked Pruitt. He made a note not to care.

"Before we get too far, I have to confess that I haven't read your book--"

"It's not very long."

"--yet. I also have to confess that I find this whole Funnercise thing a little goofy."

"It's only goofy if you are."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've invented an exercise program that doesn't actually involve exercise. It's kinda like an all-beef vegetarian diet, dontcha think?"

Cordon spoke with the tired confidence of someone-who-has-been-through-this-before. "Funnercise is not an exercise program. It's not a religion. It's not a new way of thinking. It's not a cult. It's not a lifestyle. It's not a diet. It's not a philosophy. It's all of these things." He lowered his left foot to the ground and lifted his right.

Someone in the audience shouted, "Yeah!"

Towner spoke directly to Cordon. "I'm kind of a dimwit, see? Could you explain for me, and any other dimwits out there, exactly what it is people get when they buy your book for thirty dollars?"

"First of all, they get a book that weighs twenty-eight pounds. The very act of lifting it burns calories."

Towner lifted his complimentary copy. "It's hefty, all right. Of course, you could walk outside right now and find yourself a brick for free."

"Sounds fun. Let's." Cordon leaned forward.

"You're missing the point. I mean, your whole exercise program--excuse me--your holistic-life-health-system--" Tower finger-quoted each word "--sounds like an excuse to sit in front of the television all day."

The crowd acknowledged Towner's attack with a collective oooooooh.

Cordon spoke evenly. "Funnercise does not encourage people to sit in front of a television. It says that if you must sit in front of a television, why not sit inefficiently?" He balanced a can of kidney beans on his head. "Mr. Towner, your whole job is to encourage people to sit in front of a television." Cordon placed the second

can upon the first. "If anything, Funnercise acts as an antidote to a disease you're spreading."

Sections of the audience laughed. Cordon continued, "Perhaps the conflicting nature of our respective careers has led you to feel insecure in my presence."

Towner pointed a finger. "Let's be civil--"

Someone shouted, "You go Cordon!"

Emma Stroller lit a cigarette. Towner squeezed his coffee cup and turned to her. "Kiddo, that's bad for your health."

Stroller exhaled a cloud. Towner passed his cup to her via Cordon. "Don't ash on the floor, Sweetie."

Stroller took the cup, looked inside and handed it back. Cordon placed it on top of the bean cans on his head. Emma Stroller ashed her cigarette on the floor. Jeffrey Towner laughed a phony laugh and slapped his desk. "All right allrightallrightallright. Moving on. What's with the beans, Cordon?"

Cordon swiveled toward Towner without disturbing the objects on his head. "They're a demonstration of how easy it is to get a work-out. You can exercise with lot of things around the house. You don't have to buy The Funnercise Handbook."

"It doesn't take a genius to figure that out."

"It certainly doesn't. You, yourself, just pointed out how easy it would be to find a brick that would serve the same purpose."

Towner, to the camera, "I gotta stop setting myself up." Stroller drew on her cigarette and exhaled at Towner.

Towner blinked through the smoke. "Emma, if you weren't such a fox I'd pull the fire alarm."

Stroller shrugged into the couch.

"Can you do anything else with those beans?"

"I'll show you." Cordon removed the objects from his head, placing the cup back on Towner's desk. Then he stood, holding a can in each hand, and began waving his arms like windmills. "This is an exercise I invented. It's good for the heart. If you jump"--he jumped--"it helps. Anyone can do it." He continued jumping and waving his arms.

"But would anyone want to do it?" asked Towner.

Cordon stopped waving and jumping. "Hard to say. I do it because I want to. You do what you want. That's the whole idea. Just as long as you don't do nothing."

"So your whole exercise program is based on a double negative? Brilliant."

The crowd made hissing noises. Sympathy leaned toward the underdog.

"Everything is relative. The lazy man who does Funnercise is less lazy than he was before he started Funnercise. That's why I call it Funnercise. It isn't exercise. It's fun."

"If swinging beans is your idea of fun, then this town is wasted on you."

General booing.

"I'm on this show right now and I'm having lots of fun," said Cordon. "If I hadn't started swinging cans of beans, I wouldn't be here right now." The crowd shouted with rebellious intensity.

To Towner's relief, a stage-hand signaled ten seconds remaining.

Towner swirled his finger in the air. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Cordon Pruitt! We gotta take a break. Stick around 'cause Night on the Towner will be right back with our musical guests, the Steppes."

Applause. The band played a jump version of "Happy Talk".

The make-up girl approached from the wings and dabbed Towner's forehead.

Cordon turned to Emma Stroller. "Funnercise is not just for weight loss. It's a whole body improvement program."

Stroller flicked her cigarette towards the front row of the audience.

Cordon pinched Stroller's bicep. "Your arms are unhappy. You need to eat and move and live a little."

Emma Stroller gave an irritated snort and strolled out of the studio. Cordon followed her, waving beans and hopping.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

There's a new disease in our country. It kills more people than alcohol, guns, motor vehicle accidents, illicit drugs, and sexually transmitted diseases combined.
It's a disease that's caused by nothing and whose cure is so simple that the very act of reading this book is putting you on the road to wellness.

The name of this mysterious disease? Sedentary Death Syndrome. Sedentary Death Syndrome is death by lack of movement; in other words, death by nothing.

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Before Funnercise and before late night talk shows, Cordon Pruitt transcribed remote recordings of dictated medical histories at a wooden desk in his garden-level apartment on 1431 Fillmore Street in Denver, Colorado.

At first, Cordon used a manual typewriter. As the years progressed, he moved on to an IBM Selectric with deletion tape. Then to an electronic word processor that

deleted his transcriptions as quickly as he typed them. He worked his way through computers until he settled on a customized setup with an ergonomic keyboard, flat screen, and buttons that lit up when something went wrong.

He used the same headphones throughout his career. They looked like giant vinyl teacups clamped over his ears. New, they had been white. By the time he invented Funnercise they were a scum grey.

He applied for his job by phone, interviewed by phone and worked by phone. He was paid by direct deposit into a bank account that he rarely thought about. Every morning, he dialed into the transcription center and clapped on the headphones. Using a foot pedal linked to the phone line he was able to play, pause and reverse the transcription tape remotely. Cordon transcribed physical reports, clinic notes, office notes, operative reports, consultation notes, discharge summaries, laboratory reports, x-ray reports and pathology reports.

Early in his career, he stuffed his daily work into an envelope and mailed it to the transcription center. Later, he sent computer discs. Later still, he sent email attachments. He was paid twice a month on a per-page basis with a cost-of-living raise each January.

He was allowed to work as much as he wanted, so he did.

For years Cordon rose at first light and, after splashing water on his face, seated himself at his desk. He called in, typed in his code on the keypad, and heard a countdown. Then he would stomp the foot control and start typing.

Eyes closed and breathing short puffs, he would type and listen, occasionally reversing the playback to catch a missed phrase. The voices that entered through the headphones made blurs of his fingers. Over the years, his forearms grew from twigs to pistons. Giant, pulsing things which he massaged before he slept.

At first, Cordon seldom gave a thought to what he was typing. Even an experienced transcriptionist will pause during an autopsy report when he comes across such lines as, "The subject smelled of radishes and pork rinds," or "The left arm seems to have been gnawed by some sort of small-toothed animal. The right arm is missing altogether." But not Cordon.

Descriptions of death, evisceration, breast implants, the separation of cojoined twins, colonoscopies, skin grafts, knife wounds, and a thousand other unnatural acts piled upon one another and yet Cordon heard none of it.

The sounds entered his ears and exited his fingers without touching his brain.

Instead of listening to the causal relationship between the bumper of a '78 Chrysler and a 44 year-old Hispanic female's broken clavicle, Cordon's brain, at first, did nothing. During the manual typewriter years, he simply didn't think. His sole concerns were to free stuck keys every few paragraphs and to insert a new leaf of paper into the machine every twenty-three double spaced lines. His head hung low, half-lidded eyes focused blankly on his forearms.

Around the time of the transition to electric typewriter, Cordon's eyes closed. Mornings, before he began, he taped sheets of paper end to end so he could type all day without stopping.

On the back of his eyelids he began to replay his youth.

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Cordon's mother had been married three times. Her first marriage begat three daughters. It ended when her husband, Junior Pruitt, fell off the roof of the house, broke his neck and died.

After two years of mourning, Cordon's mother married again. The second marriage begat Cordon. It ended when

Cordon's mother found Cordon's father, Carl Hancocks, beating Cordon's half-sisters with sections of toy train track as they cowered in the corner of the basement. Cordon was two years old when Carl was taken away by the police.

As he grew up, Cordon's half-sisters became cruel. It was Cordon's father who had been beaten them, therefore Cordon must be punished. Cordon sat silently while the girls broke his toys.

Cordon's mother took a secretarial job at a logging company near Golden, Colorado. She quickly grew close to her supervisor, Troy Blankenship. The third time he asked her to marry him, she said yes. Troy was kind. He loved Cordon's mother. He adopted the children. Troy worked hard. He left at sunrise and returned at dusk, smelling of sap and sweat.

He was a good man. He kept the family fed.

All during Cordon's childhood, Troy beat him at arm-wrestling, laughing to Mother, "Look at the little twig, Ma!" The three half-sisters begged to arm-wrestle Cordon but Mother intervened, "You'll break his wrist."

During puberty, when other kids twittered about their pubic hair, Cordon slept. He earned a C- in every class he ever took, except for Typing, where he got A's. He could

type 93 words a minute. 5,580 words per hour. Upon graduation he moved into a basement apartment on Capitol Hill in Denver where he became a medical transcriptionist.

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The word processor era was Cordon's worst. The people at SoundInk gave it to him as a Christmas bonus. "This will make your life so easy," they said. The machine resembled an electric typewriter except it had a separate monitor that displayed, in amber, every character he typed. The machine couldn't keep up with his fingers so it compensated by deleting every third sentence. Cordon tried to return the gift but the people at SoundInk would not accept it. All submissions had to be made on a computer disc from now on. They had let him use the typewriter longer than they should have. Typewriters were inefficient. It was the twentieth century, after all.

Cordon was forced to type more slowly, eyes open, watching for errors. His mind was no longer free to wander around itself. He began to hear the voices he transcribed, primarily that of an emergency-room physician named Robin Flowerdew.

Once or twice a week he recognized her voice and his heart would swell. She held the microphone close to her lips; he could hear the moisture on her tongue between

consonants. Her descriptions of diseases soothed Cordon. Never a word about herself. Still, Cordon learned to sense her mood. "The patient, a thirteen year old male, was ascending a flight of stairs when he was struck twice by an assailant," sigh, "wielding a baseball bat. The patient suffered massive injuries, including a fracture at the base of the skull and a contusion over his right eye. The scalp was split and blood...The poor kid was awake but he didn't know where he was...There was a herniation of the brain, compounded by intracranial hypertension which we attempted to relieve via an IV of barbiturates, osmotherapy, and introduction of steroids. Patient entered coma and died."

Not all of Robin Flowerdew's patients died. Many recovered. Cordon wished to speak to these people: the nine year-old female who ingested bleach or the 82 year-old man who broke his pelvis falling out of a speedboat. But the patients came and went from Doctor Flowerdew's histories anonymously. Cordon imagined them sending her thank-you letters. Robin, in her office full of foil balloons, leaning back in her chair, watching the ceiling fan while speaking into her handheld recorder. Luxurious hair.

His eyes lost focus on the amber screen. The word processor beeped a warning and he reversed the tape.

Cordon rarely left his apartment. He had pizza or Chinese food delivered every other day. He drank water. He paid his bills. He didn't have friends. He didn't read. He watched his black and white TV late into the night.

Cordon did not miss the word processor when it was replaced by the computer.

The computer fulfilled all the promises the word processor had broken. Once he learned how to operate it, he was able to type faster than ever. It calculated his WPM at 117.2. The keyboard was easy, silent, effortless. He learned to relax. Instead of pounding the keys, he brushed them. As the months passed and he listened to Robin, he floated above himself. There, with Robin's voice passing over her glistening lips and his own heart pulsing like surf, he could see his hands whirring. He watched the tendons twitch beneath the skin of his forearms.

His forearms!

It took him a moment to register the change. No longer massive, they were shrunken. His mighty forearms, gone. Robin Flowerdew's voice vanished. He crashed back into his body, threw the headphones to the floor, and raced to the bathroom mirror.

His face was bloated, his eyes were couched in black bags. His hair was stringy and thin. He unbuttoned his shirt to reveal his torso; a collapsed chest and bloated belly. Sweatpants off, he stood naked on simian legs. He had never been strong and he had never been attractive, but he had never been unhealthy either. Now he resembled a malformed snowman. He was breathing heavily after the short dash to the bathroom. And his forearms. Where they were once pistons of industry, his only physical feature he cared about, they had become once again the brittle things his siblings weren't allowed to wrestle. The computer had weakened him.

He held tightly to the sink until his heart slowed and then he dressed. He splashed water on his face and returned to the computer. No longer floating above his body, he typed for hours, pausing for neither food nor water nor bodily function. He pushed his body to unknown limits staring always at his forearms, wishing them larger for the very first time in his entire life and realizing that his entire life was empty. He was empty and he didn't like it one bit.

Twenty-one years removed from high school and twenty-six miles from his childhood home he languished at his wooden desk and pictured himself in the wilderness hacking

at an evergreen tree. To wrestle with nature. To feel his joints strengthen with each passing day. To come home after work like his father, exhausted and black with sawdust instead of muscles rubbery from disuse.

Ridiculous. He was a medical transcriptionist put on earth to type 117.2 words per minute.

He was a big shitty deformed nothing who had fallen in love with the voice of a woman he'd never met. His body was melting and he needed to stop it. Eyes fogged like milk, he typed through a rainstorm, police sirens, phone calls, the haze of exhaustion, and as the hands spun around the clock he felt the blood pool in his feet, the sweat glue his back to the chair. Aware of his flesh and beholden to the keyboard he lifted his right foot.