

FLOAT ABOVE IT

The Cleveland Floaters Part One

Admiral Jim Kukral



LET'S GO CLE

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Coming to Cleveland? Admiral Jim is ready to help your group sink their worries to the bottom of Lake Erie. Contact for private charters, dock parties or any other type of event you want to have on the water.

CONTENTS

Preface - Hold the Line	1
1. This is the Start, Not the End	5
2. Anyone Can Get a Laugh	8
3. The Thunderbolt	18
4. She Hated the Name	26
5. Big Swing	34
6. The Nightmares Started	35
7. The Part Where It Gets Real	46
8. Are You the Admiral?	56
9. Five Dollars and the Truth	67
10. The Reason You Can't Quit	76
11. End of Part One	86

PREFACE - HOLD THE LINE

In 2016, a man named Jesse Cole bought a struggling minor league baseball team in Savannah, Georgia.

The stadium was rotting. Attendance was near zero. The franchise was hemorrhaging money and the city had stopped caring.

He renamed the team the Savannah Bananas. He put his players in kilts and had them dance between pitches. He wore a yellow tuxedo to every game. He gave away bananas. He invented a version of baseball that nobody had seen before and nobody asked for, and he turned it into a global phenomenon with a waitlist in the millions and a touring show that sells out arenas from Cleveland to Tokyo.

When he named them the Bananas, people told him it was undignified.

When he put the players in kilts, people told him it disrespected the game.

When he turned the whole thing into a touring variety show, the purists went "bananas".

He held the line. Every time. On every single thing.

And the thing he built became something nobody can fully explain but everybody wants to be part of.

That is what this book is about. Well, at least the first part of that. The struggling idea part.

This is not Jesse Cole's story, he has written his own books and told his own story better than I could. What this book is about is the common thread underneath his story and every other story of someone who built something genuinely new. The thread that connects the founder standing in an empty stadium in a yellow tuxedo to the founder standing on a dock in Cleveland in an Admiral hat, talking to a camera in February with numb fingers and a show that hasn't opened yet.

The thread is this: at some point, someone experienced and credible and well-meaning told them it wouldn't work. And they had to make a choice.

Bend the vision toward what the room could already imagine, and build something that gets polite applause.

Or hold the line, absorb the doubt, and build the thing only they could see.

Jesse Cole held the line. Every person who ever built something worth remembering held the line at the moment it mattered most, which is almost always the moment before anything had worked yet.

This book is written from that moment.

I am building something in Cleveland. An immersive theatrical river experience that nobody asked for and nobody had imagined before I showed up on a boat one evening and watched a sunset do something unreasonable to the sky over Lake Erie. The show has a dock and a boat and characters and a ceremony where sixty strangers write their worries on dissolvable paper and watch them disappear into the river together.

People have told me it is too weird. Too emotional. Too much for a boat. Too Cleveland. Not Cleveland enough. Too ambitious for the resources.

I have held the line.

This is the record of what that costs.

If you are building something right now, something original and difficult and completely yours, something that the people who love you look at with that particular expression that is equal parts concern and confusion, then this book is for you.

One

THIS IS THE START, NOT THE END

A quick note about what you're about to read.

Most books about building something are written after it worked.

The founder sits down with the benefit of hindsight and a successful outcome and tells you the story of how they got there. The struggles feel manageable in retrospect. The doubt feels quaint. The moments where they almost quit read like tension in a story you already know ends well, which is to say they don't really feel like doubt at all.

This is not that book.

I wrote this from the middle of it. I'm here, now. The show has not opened yet. The tickets are not sold. The

dissolvable paper has not touched the water. I do not know if sixty strangers will stand on a boat in Cleveland and feel what I believe they are going to feel, or whether the whole thing will fall apart in ways I haven't thought of yet.

I chose to write it this way on purpose.

Because the part that is hardest to capture, the part that is most useful to anyone trying to build something original and difficult and theirs, is not the victory. It is the period before the verdict. The months of work in the absence of proof. The mornings when the reason has to be enough because the results aren't there yet.

That is what this book is about. Not how to succeed. How to keep going when you don't know yet if you will.

What you are holding is Part One. It ends in the spring of 2026 with the snow just thawing and the first shows sixty days away and the outcome still genuinely unknown.

Part Two comes after the season. After the paper hits the water. After I find out if I was right.

I think that book will be worth reading too. But I believe this one, the unfinished one, the one written from inside the uncertainty, is the one that will be useful to you right now.

Because if you are building something, you are probably right here too.

In the middle. In the winter. Waiting for the thaw.

Admiral Jim

Cleveland, Ohio

Spring 2026

Two

ANYONE CAN GET A LAUGH

Friday, April 16, 2026.

I'm standing on the dock on the Cuyahoga River at Collision Bend.

It's a beautiful, sunny, Cleveland afternoon in April, the kind that feels like the city is apologizing for February. It was a cold, cold winter and now it's showing welcome signs of Spring.

The river is moving, slow and deep as it always is. The skyline is doing its thing. The Terminal Tower and the new Sherwin Williams building stare down at me with approval. The tower was built about 100 years ago and the Sherwin building just last year. I look up inspired and re-

minded that Cleveland just keeps growing and innovating and I decide that my little fun project on the river is the next Cleveland icon that will become part of our dna.

Somewhere behind me a boat is tied to a dock that I've spent the last several months of my life trying to fill with strangers who want to feel something.

A reporter is asking me questions. Real questions, from a real outlet, about a real show, that I made up in my head last Summer. Sixty days from now the first guests will walk through that gate and step into something I can only describe as a world I invented on a bet against my own doubt.

The reporter wants to know how it started. They always want to know how it started.

I give them the version that fits in a quote. The short one. The one that sounds good and doesn't mention all the times I almost quit, or the people who told me I was wrong, or the time I sat across from someone I'd hired and trusted and he looked me in the eye and said that what I was building wouldn't work.

The real answer is longer. It starts before this dock. It starts in the gap between the thing you're trying to make and the thing everyone around you can imagine.

This book is that answer.

• • •

A few months before that April afternoon on the dock, I was sitting across from the person I'd hired to lead the show.

He said it like he was doing me a favor. Maybe he was; I guess we'll find out.

I had spent the better part of an hour walking him through everything. The dock. The rituals. The characters. The dissolvable paper going into the river. The Harbor Tree. The dog tags. The whole world I had been building in my head for months. I laid it all out, every piece of it, because I believed in it and because I needed him to believe in it too.

He listened. He nodded in some of the right places. And then he told me it wouldn't work.

"People don't want therapy," he said. "They want to laugh."

He wasn't being cruel. He was being experienced. He had the track record, the years of professional comedy on stage,

the crowds behind him. He knew what worked. And from where he was standing, what I was describing had too much feeling in it. Too much weight. Too much of the thing that makes people uncomfortable when they've paid good money to have a few drinks on a boat.

I was devastated of course. He knew it. I could see it in his face. I could tell he felt terrible about it. I did. When somebody you respect tells you honestly what they feel, and backs it up with their earned authority, experience and data... you listen.

So I sat with that for a week or so and honestly took it in and considered it. A seasoned professional who has been entertaining people for 40+ years, just told me my idea isn't going to work. Even though, in my heart, I knew it would.

The next day I toured the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame with my wife. This couldn't have come at a more perfect time. I walked through the halls inspired by all the musicians who were also told how what they were doing wouldn't work. I felt the creative energy of people who had a vision and a narrative who just wanted to be understood, and heard. It was inspiring to say the least.

When I left the Rock Hall I was sure of something.

The next morning I woke up, and I told him he was wrong.

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Note for any comedian reading this. I respect what you do, immensely. I'm mean, I can't do it; won't even try to pretend I could. I am NOT saying what you do is not valuable. I am not saying you can't create meaning from your work. You can, and you do. I have been going to improv and comedy shows for 30+ years. I believe in comedy.

I don't really mean "anyone can get a laugh". It makes for a good headline in a book, that's all. I'm simply saying... in my opinion, a thoughtful moment can carry a memory deeper than a comedic moment. This is my opinion. If you disagree, great. But don't read this and think I'm crapping on comedy. Far from it. We good?

• • •

Here's the thing about getting a laugh.

It's not hard. Not really. Not if you have good instincts and a decent room. A skilled comedian can make a crowd laugh fifteen times in an hour. Twenty. More. And when it's over, people will say they had a great time. They'll mean it. They'll tip well and drive home happy.

And then three weeks later they won't remember a single thing that happened.

The jokes are gone. The punchlines, the callback, the bit that killed in the second half. All of it filed away under "that comedy thing we did" and forgotten before the weekend is over.

I wanted something that wouldn't file away that easily.

The kind of night somebody describes to a stranger at a dinner party two years later, stumbling over the words because they still can't quite explain it. I wanted people to drive home, look over at the person in the passenger seat, and just go quiet for a second because they were still inside it.

That's what epic actually is. A laugh that makes beer come out of your nose is funny, and valuable, and hard to get. Epic is when something shifts inside a person and they feel it move. Even a little. Even just for one night on a boat on a river in Cleveland that the rest of the world has spent half a decade making fun of.

• • •

When you have a vision for something new, experienced people will tell you it won't work. And here's the thing

that makes it hard: they're usually right about everything except the specific thing you're building. They know what works. They've been in the rooms. They've watched things land and watched things die. Their experience is real and their instincts are good.

The problem is their experience is a map of the past, and you're trying to build something that doesn't exist on any map yet.

The conversation ended the way a lot of those conversations end when two people have fundamentally different visions and neither one of them is actually wrong. He believed in one thing. I believed in another. And I had to make a decision.

I could bend. I could sand down the emotional parts, lean harder into the comedy, build the kind of boat show he was describing. It would probably be good. He was talented enough to make it good. People would laugh. They'd have a nice time.

Or I could hold the line.

I held the line. And I lost the actor.

What I didn't lose was the show.

• • •

Standing on that dock in April, with a reporter asking good questions and the river doing exactly what it always does, I thought about all the moments between that conversation and this one.

The people who said it was too much. The people who said it was too weird. The family members who asked the practical questions that had no good answers yet. The nights I sat alone with a laptop and a version of the show that still wasn't right and had to decide again whether to keep going.

I kept going.

Sixty days from now I find out if I was right.

But here is what I already know, from this dock, on this afternoon, with the river moving behind me:

The show exists. It is real. It has a dock and a boat and characters and a ceremony that makes strangers dissolve their worries into a river together. It has a name. It has a world. It has a soul.

None of that would exist if I had listened.

• • •

This book is about that decision. And the hundred versions of that decision that come after it.

It's about what happens when you decide to build something that doesn't exist yet, something weird and original and yours, and then have to survive the process while everyone around you is asking reasonable questions you don't have answers to yet.

It's about the family members who look at you with that particular expression that is somehow both concerned and disappointed at the same time. The partners who are talented and wrong. The gap between the thing in your head and the thing you can currently afford to build. The moment you realize that holding your vision means disappointing people who were genuinely trying to help.

I'm writing this from the middle of it. I don't know yet if I'm right.

But I know this: the people who told me it wouldn't work were describing a different show than the one I'm building. And somewhere along the way I had to decide whose show this actually was.

That's the only decision that ever really matters when you're trying to make something.

• • •

I hope you'll recognize your own version of it somewhere in these pages.

The ridiculous, or serious, thing you keep telling yourself you'll start but are too frightened to do. The idea you've been keeping quiet because you're not sure it'll work. The version of yourself that knows what epic feels like but keeps listening to the room instead of the voice that's been there longer than any room has.

Anyone can get a laugh.

Build the thing they remember.

Three

THE THUNDERBOLT

I have seen a lot of Cleveland sunsets.

I grew up here. I've stood on enough patios and piers and parking decks to know what this city looks like when the light goes gold and the lake catches it and the skyline goes quiet for a few minutes before the dark comes in.

I thought I knew what a Cleveland sunset looked like.

I was wrong.

• • •

Last summer I was working as a deckhand on the biggest commercial sightseeing boat in town.

I want you to sit with that sentence for a second, because I know how it sounds. I have a long career behind me. I've built businesses, written books, spoken on stages. I have done the kind of work that comes with a title and a business card and a LinkedIn profile that makes you look like you have your life organized into a series of intentional decisions.

And there I was. On a boat. Handling lines. Mopping up kid barf, emptying trash cans, and making sure people didn't fall into Lake Erie, for basically minimum wage.

Here's what I'll tell you about that: it was one of the best decisions I ever made, and I didn't even fully understand why I was making it at the time. I just knew I needed to be near the water. I needed to be outside. I needed to be around people who were having a good time, and I needed to be part of making that happen in the most physical, immediate, unglamorous way possible.

Some part of me was looking for something. I didn't know what it was yet.

• • •

It happened on the top deck.

We were out on the water and I was standing up top doing what deckhands do, keeping an eye on things, being useful, being present. And then I turned toward the west and the sky had done something I can only describe as unreasonable.

It was the kind of sunset that looks like it was generated by a computer because no natural thing should be that precise, that layered, that committed to being beautiful. Orange bleeding into pink bleeding into purple bleeding into the kind of deep blue that makes you feel small in a good way. The lake was holding all of it, doubling it, throwing it back at the sky like it was in an argument about which one was more impressive.

And I started crying.

Not dramatically. Not in a way that anyone around me would have noticed. Just the kind of tears that show up when something is so unexpectedly beautiful that your body decides it needs to respond and doesn't ask your permission first. The kind that come with a feeling of gratitude so specific it almost has a name. I was grateful to be standing there. I was grateful to be allowed to have that moment. I was grateful to be a person alive in Cleveland on that particular evening when the sky decided to do that.

And then, inside that feeling, something else arrived.

• • •

I've had ideas before. A long entrepreneurial career will do that to you. You develop a feel for them, a sense of their weight when they arrive. Some ideas are light. They float in and out in a day. Some are heavier, they stick around and ask you to do something with them, and you either do or you don't.

This was neither of those.

This was a thunderbolt.

Standing on that top deck, watching that sunset over Lake Erie, I understood three things at the same time with a clarity that felt almost violent in how certain it was.

The first thing was that I wanted to spend the rest of my life making people feel what I was feeling right now. Actually feel it, in person, on the water. I wasn't interested in performing it for them or describing it to them. I wanted to put people on a boat, on this lake, and let it do what it was doing to me right then.

The second thing was that it had to be all Cleveland, the most human city in America. The grit and the pride and

the sarcasm and the weird beauty of a city that has been knocked down so many times it has developed a genuinely unique relationship with joy. This city knows how to celebrate in a way that comfortable places never will, because this city has earned it. I didn't want Cleveland as a backdrop. I wanted it as the whole point.

The third thing was the name.

It appeared in my head fully formed, the way the best names do, without negotiation or workshopping or any of the labored process that usually produces something you eventually settle for.

Cleveland Floaters.

I didn't choose it. It chose me, right there on the top deck, with the lake on fire and my eyes embarrassing me.

• • •

Here is what I want to tell you about the thunderbolt, the real one, the kind that sticks.

It doesn't leave.

I have had plenty of ideas that felt important in the moment and faded by the following Tuesday. You probably have too. You get excited, you tell a few people, you open

a notebook, and then something else comes along and the idea quietly files itself under "someday" and someday never comes.

Cleveland Floaters did not do that.

From the moment it arrived on that deck it has been the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thing I think about before I fall asleep. It has lived in my head the way a song lives in your head, not annoying exactly, but insistent. Present. Asking to be made real.

I have thought about the dock. The characters. The rituals. The worries written on dissolvable paper and dropped into the river. The dog tags. The Harbor Tree. The moment the music cuts and sixty strangers stand in silence together and feel something shift. I have thought about all of it, relentlessly, in the shower, in the car, at two in the morning when I should be sleeping.

That is how you know the difference between an idea and a calling.

An idea asks you to think about it.

A calling won't let you stop.

• • •

I need to say something about originality, because it matters to this story and it might matter to yours.

There is no shortage of boat events. There is no shortage of comedy shows, or immersive experiences, or theatrical productions, or Cleveland pride merchandise, or any of the individual ingredients that go into what I was building. Someone will always be able to point at a piece of your idea and show you where it already exists.

Originality is not about inventing components that have never existed.

It's about the combination. The specific gravity of this particular thing assembled in this particular way by this particular person in this particular city at this particular moment. That combination has never existed before. That is what I was protecting when I sat across from my lead actor and told him he was wrong. The whole thing. Every piece of it together.

The thunderbolt doesn't give you permission to be derivative. It gives you permission to be completely, stubbornly, uncomfortably yourself.

Which, as it turns out, is the hardest thing in the world to stay.

• • •

I think about that sunset a lot. Every day, actually.

It might be the best thing I've ever seen. But what I really think about is what it gave me. The clarity. The certainty. The name that showed up uninvited and immediately felt like it had always been there.

I think about it when things get hard, which they do, which they will, which I will tell you about in detail in the chapters ahead. I think about standing on that deck with my eyes embarrassing me and understanding for the first time, in the most physical and immediate way, what I was supposed to do next.

What I have to keep doing... NOW.

If you have ever had a moment like that, you know exactly what I mean and you didn't need me to describe it.

If you haven't had it yet, I want you to know it's real. It exists. It can arrive on any deck, at any sunset, in any city that the rest of the world has been underestimating.

And when it does, I hope you cry a little.

It means you're in exactly the right place you are meant to be.

Four

SHE HATED THE NAME

The first person I told was my wife.

This is what you do when you've been married long enough to know that the person who shares your life is also the person who holds the mirror. You don't go to a friend first, or a business partner, or some stranger on the internet who will tell you it's brilliant because they don't have skin in the game. You go home. You sit across from the person whose last name is attached to yours, whose reputation is tangled up in yours, who will be at every family dinner where someone asks how things are going.

I told her the name.

She did not love it.

• • •

Her concern was specific and it was reasonable and I want to be fair to it here, because it deserves that.

People are going to think about poop, she said. That's the first place anyone's mind goes. You're going to put our family name behind a brand that makes people think about poop, and you're going to attach it to Cleveland, a city that has spent decades trying to shake off the jokes about a river that caught fire, and you think this is the right move.

She wasn't wrong about where people's minds go. That's the first place most people land when they hear the name. Floaters. Ha. Bathroom joke. Move on.

What she was missing, and what I could not fully articulate yet in that conversation, because I was acting defensive, was that this was not a bug.

It was the whole point.

• • •

Sixteen years ago I wrote a book called Attention.

The premise was simple: in a crowded world, the ability to capture someone's attention is the most valuable

thing a brand or a person can have. Get the attention and you've won half the battle. Everything else, the product, the service, the experience, gets its chance to work only after you've solved the attention problem.

That was true then and it is still true now, but the game has changed underneath it in a way that matters.

Sixteen years ago, getting attention was harder. The channels were limited. You had to earn your way into someone's awareness because there simply wasn't that much noise competing for the same space.

Now the noise is infinite. Getting attention is easy. Anyone can get a moment. A video, a post, a headline, a stunt. The algorithm will hand you eyeballs if you know the right moves. Attention is no longer the scarce resource.

What's scarce now is what comes after.

Keeping it. Converting it. Making someone care enough to stay, to come back, to tell someone else. That is the hard part now. That is where most things fail. Getting noticed is the easy part. What comes after the notice is where everything either earns its keep or quietly disappears.

Cleveland Floaters was designed from the thunderbolt moment with both of those problems in mind.

• • •

Jesse Cole went through the same thing.

If you don't know Jesse Cole, he's the founder of the Savannah Bananas, the baseball entertainment phenomenon that turned a struggling minor league team into a global brand with a waiting list of millions and a touring show that sells out arenas. He wears a yellow tuxedo. His players do choreographed dances between pitches. People who have never watched a single inning of baseball in their lives will drive four hours to see the Bananas perform.

When he named them the Savannah Bananas, people hated it.

It's undignified, they said. It's silly. It doesn't sound like a real team. It doesn't command respect. Baseball is a serious sport with a serious history and you're going to call your team the Bananas.

He held the line. The name stayed. And the name became the first signal to the world that this was not a normal baseball experience. That something different was happening here. That if the name made you do a double take, the show would make you a believer.

The name was not despite the experience. The name was the first piece of the experience.

Cleveland Floaters works the same way.

Yes, your mind goes to the bathroom joke first. That half second of "wait, did they really call it that" is not a mistake. It's the hook. It's the thing that makes you stop scrolling. It's the moment of contact that creates enough friction to make you curious.

And then, once you're curious, the second meaning arrives.

Float above it. Rise above the nonsense. Let the worry dissolve. Float through life instead of sinking under it. That's the whole show in three words, and it lives inside a name that most people dismiss in the first second and can't stop thinking about in the second.

That is not an accident. That is design.

• • •

Let me be clear, though, because this book is not a victory lap and I'm not interested in making myself look like I had it all figured out from the start.

When the doubt comes from your wife, it lands differently than when it comes from anyone else.

A skeptical investor, you can dismiss. A jealous peer, easy to move past. Even a talented collaborator with the wrong vision, as we covered in Chapter One, you can separate from cleanly if you're willing to make the hard call.

But your spouse is not a skeptic in the ordinary sense. She is not rooting against you. She is the person who has watched you build things and watched some of them not work, who has held the family together during the seasons when the entrepreneurial dream was more dream than income, who has earned the right to be protective of the name you share and the life you've built together.

Her concern about the name was not really about poop jokes.

It was about all the times before. All the ideas that arrived with the same energy this one did, that same impossible certainty, and then met the wall of reality and changed shape or fell apart. It was the reasonable fear of a person who loves you asking: is this the one that works, or is this the one that costs us something.

I understood that. I still understand it. I'm not going to stand here and tell you she was wrong to feel it.

What I'm going to tell you is what I told her, or tried to (poorly), in that conversation and the ones that came after it.

This one is different. Not because I say so. Because I can't put it down. Because it's been in my head every single morning since that sunset and it hasn't faded by a degree. Because I have been in this entrepreneurial life long enough to know the difference between the ideas I'm excited about and the ideas I'm called to, and I have never been called to anything the way I am called to this.

That doesn't guarantee it works. Nothing guarantees it works.

But it guarantees that I have to try.

• • •

Here is what I have learned about names, and about the people who hate them.

The names that make people uncomfortable are almost always the ones that are doing the most work. Safe names don't create friction. Safe names slide past without catch-

ing on anything. You can forget a safe name the same afternoon you heard it.

The names that make you do a double take, that make someone at a dinner party say "wait, say that again," those names are already in the room working for you before you've said another word.

Getting attention is easy now. Keeping it is everything.

A name that makes someone stop and say "wait, what is that" is not a liability.

It's the beginning of a conversation.

And in 2026, a conversation is the most valuable thing you can start.

Five

BIG SWING

Six

THE NIGHTMARES STARTED

I have been telling you about a show I made up in my head.

Now I need to tell you where it actually comes from. How it came.

In 2020 I was diagnosed with colon cancer.

I did the chemo. I did the work. I got through it in the way that you get through something like that, which is to say not gracefully, not with a clear head, not with any of the composure you imagine you'd have before it happens to you. You get through it by getting through it. One day at a time in the most literal and unpoetic sense of that phrase.

And then two years later came the AFib. And at the start of all of that came the pandemic, which arrived like some-

one turned off the lights in a room everyone was already struggling to navigate.

And, to add to it all, I all of a sudden got old and turned fifty.

Look, you remember those COVID years. The world, the actual shared world that all of us live in together, went completely sideways in ways that are still not resolved and may never be.

Oh, and did I mention my aging Mother had full blow dementia and forgot my name and was so far gone that when I visited sometimes she would try to claw my face and bite my fingers off?

Total mind F\$%#. All of it. Combined into a couple year span of what seemed like, at the time, some kind of cruel punishment or joke passed down by some celestial being either trying to make me see something, or just wanted a good laugh.

I am the type of person who takes trauma and sinks it.

I don't mean that as a boast (or a bad pun). I mean it as a description of a coping mechanism that looks like strength from the outside and is something else entirely from the

inside. You compress it. You file it somewhere deep. You go back to work, back to the family, back to the calendar full of things that need doing, and you tell yourself that functioning is the same as healing and that moving forward is the same as moving through.

It is not. I know that now.

• • •

The nightmares started.

The same one, over and over, with the relentless consistency of something trying to get your attention through the only channel you haven't managed to close off because it lives in your subconscious. I was in a building, old, institutional, the kind of place with long fluorescent corridors and stairwells that go down further than they should. Remember the old movies from the 80's where the guy with knives on his fingers was chasing the young teenager through the steam filled, dark school basement? That was the dream.

In that basement there was something behind me.

A figure without a face. Chasing me through this building, through the dark, and what it wanted was not just me. What it wanted was to take me away from my family. That

was the specific terror of it. Not death in the abstract. The particular horror of being separated from the people I love before I was finished being with them.

I would wake up soaked in sweat with my heart hammering, in the dark, needing a moment to locate myself back in the actual world. In my bed. In my house. Still here.

I am a person who studies how humans think. I understand persuasion and behavior and the mechanisms underneath why people do what they do. I have read the research and taught the frameworks and built careers around understanding the gap between what people say and what they actually feel.

I could not figure out what was wrong with me.

My therapist could.

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What she helped me understand was simple and it was devastating in its simplicity.

The trauma was still in there. All of it. The cancer, the chemo, the AFib, the pandemic, the mom full of dementia, the accumulated weight of years of hard things that I had compressed and filed and buried under productivity

and forward motion. I had never acknowledged it. The body requires acknowledgment before it will agree to let something go, and I had skipped that part entirely.

The faceless monster in the basement was not a mystery. It was the bill coming due.

She did not tell me to fix it. She told me to name it. To stop moving past it long enough to look directly at it and say: this happened. This was real. This cost me something. And I am allowed to know that.

Thank you, Holly.

That was the beginning of something I now think of as the most important work I have ever done. More important than any business, any book, any show. The work of actually processing the things that happened to me instead of outrunning them.

There is a body of research and a growing movement around something called post-traumatic growth. PTG for short. Think the opposite of PTSD, which is very, very real.

The idea of PTG is not that trauma is good, or that suffering builds character in some tidy motivational poster way. The idea is that the process of genuinely confronting

hard things, rather than avoiding them, can open doors inside you that the comfortable life never reaches. That on the other side of acknowledged pain there is sometimes a clarity about what matters that you could not have found any other way.

I became a believer. A book didn't convince me. Living it did.

• • •

And then I looked around.

I skipped the research and the trend reports, although all of those confirmed what I was seeing eventually. I just looked at the people around me. Friends. Family. Strangers in line at the coffee shop. Faces on the street. And I started to recognize something I knew from the inside.

Everyone was carrying something. Everyone.

Cancer and nightmares weren't universal. But the pandemic had done something to the collective nervous system of this country that we are still nowhere near finished processing. Five years of fear and loss and isolation and rage and grief, and most people had done exactly what I had done with my own trauma: compressed it, filed it, gone back to work, called it fine.

It was not fine. The nightmares were just wearing different faces.

And I thought: I found my way out of that basement. What if I could give people a few hours of what my therapist gave me. No intake forms, no worksheets, no twelve-step framework. Just permission. Permission to name the thing. To look at it directly. To hold it in your hands for a moment and then, in the most literal physical act I could design, watch it disappear.

• • •

I was walking through the Flats one afternoon trying to get my steps in.

Ryan Holiday was in my ears. The Obstacle Is the Way. The Stoic idea that the thing standing in your path is not your enemy. That the impediment to action advances action. That what blocks the road becomes the road.

I was thinking about the show. About DelGaudio's ending. About the question I had been carrying for weeks: what is the one moment, the truest moment, the one that earns everything before it and justifies the whole evening.

And I was thinking about what my therapist had given me. The act of naming the thing. Of taking it out of the dark

basement where I had been running from it and holding it in the light long enough to say: I see you. You are real. And you do not get to chase me anymore.

And then, somewhere along the river, it arrived.

What if they wrote it down.

What if, in the middle of the river, the music stopped and the boat went still and someone stood in front of sixty people and said: you are allowed to put it down. Just for now. For tonight. Write the thing you've been carrying and watch it dissolve into the water.

Dissolvable paper. The kind that disappears on contact with water. You write your worry on it. You hold it in your hand. And when the moment comes, you let go.

The paper curls. It dissolves. It is gone.

And you watch it happen.

I stopped walking.

That was it. That was the moment the whole show had been building toward without my knowing it. An act of physical acknowledgment, witnessed by strangers, in the middle of a river, at the exact moment when the evening has done enough work to earn it.

• • •

I want to explain why this works, because I am a person who studies these things and I cannot help it.

I am a certified trainer of Dr. Robert Cialdini's principles of influence. I have spent decades studying how humans think, why they buy, why they believe, what makes something land and what makes it slide off. Ethical persuasion, the kind that works because it is true and resonant and aligned with what people actually need, is something I understand at a structural level.

The dissolvable paper ritual works for reasons that go all the way down.

Writing something down externalizes it. The worry moves from inside you, where it is shapeless and enormous, to outside you, where it has edges and fits on a small piece of paper. That act alone is therapeutic in a way that talking about it is not. You can see it. It is smaller than you thought.

Doing it collectively changes the chemistry of the room. When sixty people perform the same vulnerable act at the same moment, no one is exposed. Everyone is equally seen. The social risk disappears because the social risk is shared.

Strangers become, for that ten minutes, something closer to witnesses for each other.

And watching it physically dissolve does something that no amount of talking or journaling or cognitive reframing can fully replicate. The brain believes what the eyes see. The worry is gone. Literally gone, not just in a manner of speaking. You watched it leave.

This is not therapy. It does not pretend to be. It is one moment of relief, on a boat, designed with everything I know about human beings and what they need. That is enough. That is all it needs to be.

• • •

I have told you this because you deserve to know where the show actually comes from.

It comes from a man who had cancer and nightmares and a therapist who finally convinced him to stop running and turn around and face what was behind him. A business plan didn't produce it. A market analysis didn't produce it. The realest thing I have produced it.

And I believe, with everything I know about human beings and what we share underneath all the noise, that when sixty strangers stand on a boat in Cleveland and watch

their worries dissolve into the river together, something true is going to happen in that silence.

Because I designed it honestly.

Seven

THE PART WHERE IT GETS REAL

At some point the vision has to meet the spreadsheet.

This is the part of building something that nobody puts on the vision board. The part where you sit down with real numbers and real costs and the specific, merciless arithmetic of what it actually takes to make the thing exist in the world rather than just in your head.

I ran the numbers.

Charter costs. Supplies. Marketing. The infrastructure of a real event operation with real liability and real people counting on tickets being sold. I mapped it against the break-even, against the sellout, against every scenario in between, including the one I didn't want to think about

too hard: the one where the seats don't fill and I am standing on a dock in the Flats having spent real money on a dream that turned out to be just that.

I have been an entrepreneur long enough to know the difference between excitement and demand. People will tell you your idea is brilliant. They will say they love it, they would totally do that, they can't wait. And they mean it, completely, in the moment they say it. But there is a gap between "I love that idea" and "here is my credit card," and that gap has killed more promising things than bad ideas ever have.

The gap has a name. It's called the price.

The moment you name a number, enthusiasm becomes decision. And decisions are a completely different thing than enthusiasm. I have watched it happen in sales rooms and on product launches and in conversations with people who swore they were in until the invoice arrived. The price is not just a number. It is a test of whether the thing you built is worth what you believe it is worth.

I knew all of this. I had lived it many times over. And I was still afraid.

• • •

I want to name the specific fear because I think it is one most people building something will recognize.

Losing money isn't the real fear. Money is recoverable. The real fear is public failure. Being the person who announced something big and then had to quietly explain why it didn't work. Watching the people who said "I told you so" with their eyes even when they're generous enough not to say it with their mouths.

The fear of nobody showing up is really the fear of confirmation. Confirmation that the voice in your head that calls you an idiot was right all along. That the thunderbolt was just a feeling and feelings are not business plans and you should have known better.

I know that voice. I suspect you know it too.

That voice is what stops 99 out 100 dreamers, or just people with a cool idea, from taking action.

Here is what I have learned to do with it after a long career of listening to it and sometimes obeying it and sometimes not: I let it talk. I don't argue with it. I don't try to convince it that everything is going to be fine. I just let it say its piece and then I go back to work.

The fear doesn't go away (I wish). You just stop waiting for it to leave before you move.

It's imposter syndrome. It's your limbic brain system telling you this is dumb, this is stupid. It's not safe. "You are a dumb, stupid head, Jim. Do not do this. It's too risky. Danger, danger!"

Sound familiar? Here's the thing about imposter syndrome.

You have to be able to live WITH it, hovering over you like a guillotine, waiting to drop and detach your dumb, stupid head from the rest of your dumb, stupid body.

You have to be able to tell it to STFU.

It's the only way forward. The Obstacle... is the way.

• • •

I needed a boat.

Someone who would let me transform their vessel and their dock into a world, who would hand me the keys to their operation and trust me to build something neither of us had seen before. Who had the crew and the liquor license and the machinery of a real marine operation, and

who was willing to be something more than a vendor taking my money and wishing me luck.

I looked at the options on the Cuyahoga. The biggest boats. The most established operations. The ones with the polished websites and the long client lists and the professional event infrastructure. I went on the boats and experienced them as a customer, or as a deckhand. I showed up at Coast Guard meetings just to see what they were talking about and to learn who the players and captains in town were.

I went to the big boat that I worked on last summer, pitched the owner and we tried to make a deal. I was all in but they balked when things got real. I get it; I'm this new guy with big ideas and no real proof that I could pull it off. They were a proven Cleveland legacy operation who wasn't about to entrust their brand to some guy calling himself The Admiral, with the big idea of maybe making people cry on a boat.

And then I found Holiday Boat Charters.

A private dock tucked in along Collision Bend, right in the heart of the Flats below Tower City operated by people who had been on this river for years, who knew every bend and current and mood of it, who were salt of the earth

Clevelanders running a real operation without pretense. On paper they weren't the obvious choice. They turned out to be the only one.

• • •

We met at Collision Bend Brewery, a restaurant just up the river from both my office and the Holiday dock.

Bill Bratton and Donna walked in. The owner and day-to-day face of the business. Bill is probably the most experienced mariner on the Cuyahoga. A man who has been on this river long enough to read it the way other people read a room. He knows every turn and every current. Those big boats you see navigating through the bends that looks impossible? He can drive those.

He sat down. And then he barely said a word.

I went on and on. The vision, the show, the characters, the rituals, the dissolvable paper, the Harbor Tree, the whole world I had been building in my head. I laid out everything because that is what I do when I believe in something, I give it everything I have and I watch the other person's face and I try to read what's landing and what isn't.

Bill gave me nothing. Quiet. Still. Just a few sips of his beer. The kind of stillness that could mean anything and

so means everything. I could not read him and that is a rare thing for me.

I found out later what was actually happening.

He was just making sure I wasn't full of it.

He was letting me talk long enough to find out if I was the kind of person who says things or the kind of person who means them. He and Donna had seen plenty of both come through that dock with big ideas and smaller follow-through. He was not going to hand over even just the association of his operation to someone he hadn't properly evaluated.

I respect that enormously.

What I didn't know until after we shook hands was that Bill Bratton is best friends with my cousin Mike Kukral. They were fraternity brothers at Ohio University. The Cuyahoga River is a small world and Cleveland is smaller than it looks.

I don't think that connection is why he said yes. I think he said yes because the missions aligned in the way that the best matches do. He needed new energy on that dock. A reason for people to find it, to come back to it, to tell other people about it. He needed someone with a vision

and drive to come in and do what needed to be done. Clean it up, rebrand it, and sell it.

I needed someone who would let me go all in, who understood that what I was building required more than a transaction, who had the patience and the roots to be more than just a vendor.

We were right for each other. The river knew it before we did.

• • •

We agreed to join forces for the 2026 season.

And that is when things got genuinely, properly, keep-you-up-at-three-in-the-morning scary.

Because before that conversation, Cleveland Floaters was a vision. An idea with a name and a world and a ritual and a whole architecture of meaning. It was mine in the way that things you haven't risked anything on yet are yours, completely and safely and without consequence.

After that conversation it was a business.

There were costs on a calendar. There was a dock with my name attached to it. There was a boat owner who had taken me at my word and was now counting on me to

produce the thing I had described so confidently at that brewery table.

The vision in your head doesn't protect you from any of that. The thunderbolt doesn't protect you from any of that. The belief, the design, the years of studying human behavior and persuasion and what makes people buy and stay and come back, none of it protects you from the moment when the thing becomes real and the question stops being "will this work" and starts being "what happens to me if it doesn't."

I sat with that question for like thirty-seconds.

And then I went back to work.

• • •

Here is something I want to say to anyone who is standing at the moment I was standing at when Bill and I shook hands.

The fear you feel when something becomes real is not a warning. It is a confirmation.

It means the thing matters. It means you have put enough of yourself into it that losing it would cost you something

real. You cannot feel that kind of fear about something small. You can only feel it about something worth doing.

The right team, by the way, can also help.

Find the one whose mission fits yours, whose values you can feel in the room, who lets you talk long enough to make sure you mean it and then, when they decide you do, gives you everything they have.

Find that person. Find that dock. Make the handshake real.

Then let the fear remind you why it matters.

Then get busy.

Eight

ARE YOU THE ADMIRAL?

A 21-year-old stopped me on the street last week.

"Are you the Admiral?"

He said he loved my videos on Instagram and Youtube. He said he had been following along. He wanted to know when the shows were starting and how soon he could buy a ticket?

I have been in business a long time. I have had wins that looked bigger than that moment on paper. But I am not sure I have felt one more.

This chapter is about the work that made that moment possible. The work nobody pays you for. The work that

happens before anyone shows up and validates it. The work that looks, from the outside, like nothing at all.

• • •

I show up at the dock almost every day since I shook hands with Captain Bill.

In the snow. In the rain. On the cold gray Cleveland mornings in late winter when the river is the color of chocolate milk and the whole idea of a summer boat show feels like something you must have imagined.

The dock needs work. A LOT of work. Imagine if you threw a bunch of your stuff on the deck out back at your house, threw a tarp over it, then ignored it for twenty-years. That was the Holiday dock when I first saw it.

Years ago, the dock was part of the old Jim's Steak House property, and at the time, Clevelanders sat there under the Terminal Tower and ate a porterhouse as big as your head while drinking Manhattans poured stronger than Lake Erie wind storms.

But the minute I saw it I knew it was perfect. It just needed some love and some attention. And I was just the Admiral to do it.

Nobody is paying me to be there. There is no salary attached to landscaping, no invoice for power washing, no hourly rate for junk removal and chainsaw work and the particular satisfaction of painting something that was ugly and making it less ugly. I am not there because it makes financial sense in any short-term accounting of my time.

I am there because the dock is the show. Because the physical space is the first thing guests will experience, and if it looks like someone cared about it then they will understand immediately that this is not just another boat night. And because there is something about showing up every day to do hard physical work on the thing you are building that connects you to it in a way that no amount of planning or strategizing or sitting at a laptop ever will.

I enjoy it, actually. That surprised me.

There is a clarity to manual labor that desk work doesn't offer. At the end of a day of power washing or hauling or clearing brush, you can see exactly what you did. The before and the after are right there in front of you. In a project with as much uncertainty as this one, that is not nothing. That is the closest thing to a guarantee the work provides.

And that is exactly the life I was trying to build for myself. One away from this damned computer and screen.

• • •

I started making videos on the dock for social media.

Raw ones. Just me, on the dock, showing Cleveland what was happening. The work. The progress. The river behind me doing what rivers do while I explained what I was building and why. No lighting rigs, no script, no social media manager hovering over my shoulder.

Look, I've been doing this kind of stuff before Youtube existed. Before iPhones. Before influencers were a thing. This isn't a boast. I'm just OG in that way. Making content is not new to me.

But I don't enjoy making content, usually. It feels performative to me. It feels like, "yuck", usually. However, I know that the world we live in now is different. Attention is earned through social media. And it was time to suck it up and point that camera at myself and get it done, even if I didn't want to do it.

Also, my experience tells me something that most businesses get exactly backwards: people follow characters and

stories. Logos don't have fans. Carefully managed corporate voices speaking in the plural don't have fans.

People follow people. Specifically, they follow people they can root for. And in Cleveland, we LOVE characters. Especially the underdogs.

So I made a character. I bought a baseball hat that says Admiral on it, and every time I make a video, I introduce myself as the Admiral. I don't explain the joke, I don't break the fourth wall, I don't wink at the camera and say "yes this is a bit." I just show up as the Admiral, doing dock work in Cleveland, building something ridiculous with complete seriousness.

It is working. I knew it would.

The audience is small. Let me be honest about that because this is not a story about going viral or cracking the algorithm or any of the things that get written about in marketing case studies. It is a story about a small and loyal audience that is growing steadily because something about what I am doing is real and people can feel the difference between real and performed.

The emails I get from people out of the blue start with, "Hey Admiral". The media, who are starting to call me

more and more, do the same. They get it. They like it. It's a story.

Summary: Nobody cares about Jim. Jim isn't a character.

The Admiral, on the other hand, well, he has a story to tell.

All it took was a \$20 hat and a commitment to the bit.

• • •

My wife still cringes at the Admiral thing. I don't wear it when I'm out with her because of that, even though I want to.

The cringe is the same as the name cringe I think. Same expression. The one that says I love you and I don't understand you and I am worried about you, all at once.

I want to be careful here because this book is not about my wife being wrong. She is not wrong about most things. She is one of the sharpest people I know and her instincts about the world are good.

Note: it is incredibly difficult to believe in something so deeply and have your partner believe in it "not so much." That's why writing this is and doing this is so hard.

What she is experiencing, I think, is the gap between where I am in the process and where she is. I have been living inside this thing for months. I understand the character strategy. I understand why the Admiral hat works and what it is doing in the mind of someone who watches the videos. I understand that building a character before you have a product to sell is not vanity, it is infrastructure. By the time the ticket link goes live, people should already feel like they know me. They should already be invested in whether this works.

She sees a grown man in an Admiral hat power washing a dock and putting it on the internet.

She sees her friends watching those same videos and maybe thinking, "What kind of a nut is Doreen's husband?"

Answer: Just a nut with a dream.

She transfers my strange dream and kookiness to her self image, and well, she didn't sign up for that. It's not in her dna like it is mine. I'm fine with the exposure and weird looks. She, is not.

So I get it. What I'm doing reflects on her. And where things have gone wrong in this entire thing is I didn't ask her for permission, I think. I'm sorry, Doreen. I really am.

At least you now know why I've done all this. Communicated to you in the best way I know how. A book. Ha!

I believe we are both looking at the same thing, me and my wife. She gets the why and the marketing at its core. It's the outcome and the exposure that she didn't sign up for.

This is one of the lonelier parts of building something original. The people closest to you are often the last to see it because they are seeing you, not the thing. They have context about who you are and what you have tried before and what it cost the family when it didn't work. They cannot fully separate the idea from the person pitching it, which means their love for you and their fear for you get tangled up in their assessment of the work.

It is frustrating. I will not pretend otherwise.

And I keep going anyway.

There is no other option.

• • •

Here is what the videos I'm making on the dock are actually doing, beneath the surface.

A story. Not like a marketing campaign exactly. A story with a character people can follow and a conflict they can

feel and a question they don't yet know the answer to: is this guy going to pull it off?

Or are we going to collectively watch this guy in a hat that says Admiral on it fall flat on his face and laugh at him?

Every video is another chapter. The Admiral shows up at the dock in February when it looks like nothing. He clears the brush. He power washes the concrete. He plants things and paints things and hauls things and explains, with complete earnestness, what this dock is going to become.

And people watch. The audience is small. But they're the right ones. The ones who grew up here and feel something when they see a person betting on this city. The ones who have their own version of the dream and need to watch someone else chase theirs before they can believe in their own. The ones who will be first in line when the ticket link goes live because they have been following the story long enough to feel invested in the ending.

When that credit card form appears, I want them to feel like they already know me. Like they have been part of this from the beginning. Like buying a ticket is not a transaction but the next chapter in a story they have been following since winter.

That does not happen from an ad. That does not happen from a well-designed landing page or a clever email subject line.

It happens from showing up on a dock in the snow with a camera and a hat and the specific kind of belief that looks like stubbornness from the outside and feels like certainty from the inside.

• • •

The 21-year-old on the street.

He had no idea he was giving me the most important piece of data I have collected since this whole thing started. No impression count, no follower number, no open rate could match it. A human being, on a sidewalk in Cleveland, who recognized a character he had only seen on a phone screen and wanted to tell him that it was working.

That is the signal you are looking for in the unglamorous middle. One moment of contact that tells you the story is landing. That someone out there is following along. That the work you are doing in the cold and the rain and the absence of any applause is reaching someone.

The unglamorous middle is where most things die. Running out of money, running out of time, those things

happen. But more often things die because the person building them runs out of evidence that the work matters. The feedback loops are too slow and the costs are too immediate and the silence between the effort and the result is just long enough to convince you that nothing is happening.

Something is always happening.

Show up anyway. Do the work no one is paying you to do. Wear the hat. Make the video. Power wash the dock in February.

One day someone is going to stop you on the street and ask if you're the Admiral.

Nine

FIVE DOLLARS AND THE TRUTH

I want to tell you about the best five dollar offer I've ever made.

What it buys isn't the point. What it proves is.

When I designed the Founding Floaters program, which you can sign up for at CLEVELANDFLOATERS.COM, I made a deliberate and somewhat counterintuitive decision. I charged for it. Five dollars to join the waitlist, to become a Founding Floater, to get your membership number and your certificate and your place in the story before the story officially started.

People thought I should make it free. More signups, they said. Lower the friction. Build the list first and monetize later.

I have heard that advice before. I have watched it produce enormous lists of people who delete your emails without opening them.

I did not want a list. I wanted a crew.

• • •

Here is what I know about free.

Free has no weight. Free asks nothing of the person receiving it and so it means nothing to them. You can accumulate ten thousand free signups and have less actual demand than fifty people who paid for something, because the act of paying is not just a transaction. It is a declaration. It is a person saying with their wallet what they are not yet willing to say with their words: I believe in this enough to risk something on it, even something small.

Social media followers are not a business metric unless you are in the business of selling posts. I am not. I am in the business of selling an experience that costs real money to produce and requires real people to show up on a real night. The follower count tells me nothing about whether

those people will pull out a credit card when the ticket link goes live.

The five dollar payment tells me everything.

That credit card has already come out of the wallet. The mental transaction has already happened. The person has already moved from curious observer to invested participant. So when the real ticket price appears later on, they are not making a first decision. They are making a second one. And second decisions, for people who have already decided once, are dramatically easier than first decisions.

I would take 500 Founding Floaters over 5,000 Instagram followers without hesitation. Every time.

• • •

When someone becomes a Founding Floater, a few things happen immediately.

They receive a membership number. Their number. It counts up from one, sequentially, permanently. Founding Floater 47. Founding Floater 183. Founding Floater 326. Right now we are at 342 and counting, and each number belongs to exactly one person and always will.

They receive a certificate. An actual certificate (digital), generated automatically, official enough to share and specific enough to feel like it means something. Because it does mean something. Being early to something real, before the crowds and the coverage and the sold-out signs, is a genuinely rare thing and I wanted them to feel that.

And then they are invited to do one more thing.

They are asked to name their worry.

A simple question, no clinical language, no intake form: what is the worry you want to sink into the lake? They fill out the form, they submit it, and it appears on the public Worry Wall where anyone can read it alongside hundreds of others.

This does three things at once that I designed deliberately and one thing I did not fully anticipate.

It prepares them for what the show is about before they have ever set foot on the dock. It makes them part of the mythology before the first night happens. And it gives them a reason to share, because seeing your worry on a public wall alongside 300 others is the kind of quietly moving thing that makes people want to show it to someone.

The thing I did not anticipate was what they would actually say.

• • •

I expected the obvious worries.

Money. Work. Health. Relationships. The standard inventory of adult American anxiety that any pollster could have predicted. Some of those appeared, yes. The generic negativity about the world and people and social media. The political frustration. The ambient dread of living in a noisy and uncertain time.

But nearly eighty percent of what people wrote was something else entirely.

They wrote about their own heads.

Overthinking, fear of the future and stress. Those words appeared over and over in different forms, different handwriting so to speak, but the same essential confession: I cannot get out of my own way. My mind will not stop. I am exhausted by my own thoughts. I'm fearful of the world we're living in and have created. I'm stressed out about where it's going to go and my place in it.

This data. This realization of what people are actually thinking blew me away.

Because it reframed something I thought I understood about what I was building.

I had been thinking about Cleveland Floaters as an escape from the world. From the noise, from the algorithm, from the relentless external pressure of modern life. Get on the boat, get away from all of that for a few hours, float above it.

But the Worry Wall told me something more specific and more important.

People do not primarily need an escape from the world.

They need an escape from themselves, who are stuck living in that messed up world.

The enemy is not out there. It is the voice in the basement, the loop that won't stop, the thoughts that chase you through corridors at three in the morning. The world's noise is almost a distraction from the deeper and more exhausting noise that never actually goes quiet because it is coming from inside the house.

I knew that voice. I had spent years running from it before I learned to turn around and name it.

The Worry Wall told me that 342 people and counting knew it too.

• • •

This data is not just interesting. It is actionable.

It tells me that the Sink Your Worry ritual is not a novelty moment in the middle of a comedy show. It is the central thing. The whole reason to be there. The comedy and the characters and the polka dance and the glitter kielbasa and all the wonderful chaos of the dock and the boat, all of it is the architecture that makes the moment of release possible. But the release is what people came for, even the ones who don't know yet that they came for it.

They are not coming to Cleveland Floaters because they want to see a show with a comic telling Browns jokes.

They are coming because they are tired of their own heads and they need somewhere to put it down for a while.

And they want permission to do it from a guy wearing a \$20 hat that says Admiral.

I think.

• • •

I want to give you the business lesson I've realized that's inside all of this because it applies to anything you are building, or planning to build something.

Before you sell anything, find a way to ask your audience what they actually need. Skip the survey with multiple choice options you designed based on what you already think the answer is. Ask them an open question with no wrong answers and then read what comes back without filtering it through what you hoped to hear.

The Worry Wall was my open question. What I got back was a portrait of the people who are drawn to this, more honest and specific and useful than any focus group could have produced, because people tell the truth when you ask them about their pain and make the space feel safe enough to answer.

The five dollar barrier created that safety. It filtered out the casual and kept the committed. The people on that wall paid to be there. They were not passing through. They were telling me something real because they had already decided this was worth their time and their small investment.

What they told me changed the show.

The structure stayed. The characters, the rituals, the arc from the dock to the river and back again, all of that stayed. What changed was my understanding of what it is for. The knowledge of what people are carrying when they walk through that gate and say the word Float and step into a world designed to help them put it down.

They are not escaping the world.

They are escaping themselves. For a few hours. On a boat. In Cleveland.

Ten

THE REASON YOU CAN'T QUIT

It was March. Snow still on the ground. Cleveland still gray and frozen and unconvinced that spring was actually coming. It sure didn't feel like it. As it turns out; that was comfort to me.

I was sitting across from one of my best friends, Tim Demond (aka J. Thorn for those who know his writing). Tim is an experienced writer who has produced millions of words in popular books. He is also a professional story teller that teaches people how to craft stories. Most importantly, he's Founding Floater #1; the very first person to sign up. He's the guy who helped me think bigger about this entire crazy idea. In fact, that's exactly what he said to

me months ago during a previous breakfast. "Jim, you're thinking too small."

It was early morning, as usual. Old guy breakfast is what we call it. Tim & Jim OG breakfast is held twice a month at the ass-crack of dawn at some local dive near to one of our homes. We arrive when they unlock the doors, and before the coffee is even done brewing. These meetings traverse everything. Work, life, marriages, kids, you name it.

On this particular morning Tim mentioned, almost casually, how little time was really left until Memorial Day (my proposed launch day deadline). He was doing the math out loud. Weeks, not months. The season was no longer a concept on a calendar. It was a wall getting closer.

I was holding my coffee and I almost had a panic attack.

The real kind. The kind where your chest tightens and your thoughts start moving too fast and the room gets slightly wrong and you have to make a conscious decision to breathe like a normal person.

Because the thaw was coming. And when the thaw came, I would have to deliver.

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I want to tell you about the other voice that showed up in that coffee shop.

The panic I've already described. This was something else. The reasonable voice. The one that doesn't sound like fear because it dresses itself up in logic and patience and self-care language and sounds, if you're not paying attention, almost like wisdom.

You could punt the season, it said. Push to 2027. Nobody would blame you. The dock isn't fully ready. The cast isn't locked. You haven't sold enough tickets yet to know if the demand is real. You could take the pressure off, spend another year building, come back stronger with more time and more resources and more certainty.

It is a seductive argument. I have heard versions of it at every difficult moment in my career. And it is almost never actually about being ready. It is about being scared. The readiness is the excuse. The fear is the reason.

I knew that. And I still had to fight it.

Because 342 people had paid five dollars and given me their worry and were waiting. Because a boat owner had shaken my hand and believed me. Because a reporter had asked real questions on a real dock. Because a 21-year-old had

stopped me on the street. Because I had said, out loud and in public, that this was happening.

You cannot make promises like that and then not deliver.

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I need to back up a little.

For twenty-five years I sat in front of a screen.

That is not a complaint. It is how I built everything I have built. Books, businesses, a career in the digital world before most people understood there was a digital world to have a career in. I was good at it. I am still good at it. But twenty-five years is a long time to live primarily inside a rectangle of light, and at some point the body starts sending memos about the arrangement.

The cancer was the first memo. The AFib was the second. The nightmares were the third.

After all of that, I made a vow. Quietly. No announcement, nothing written down, just a private understanding between me and whatever version of myself was going to show up for the second half of this life.

I had to find a way out of the screen and into the real world.

That's how I ended up on the top deck of that boat last summer.

And what I mean is something different from a graceful exit like retirement, which is never going to happen. I needed something that required me to be present in the physical world. Among people. On a dock. In the weather. Doing work that exists in three dimensions and cannot be completed by staring at a laptop in a quiet room.

Cleveland Floaters is that vow made visible.

Every cold morning on the dock, every chainsaw and paintbrush and power washer, every video made in February with numb fingers and a hat that says Admiral, every conversation with a boat owner and a reporter and a 21-year-old on a sidewalk is me keeping that promise to myself.

You do not quit on a vow like that. When the snow is still on the ground. When the panic arrives in a coffee shop. When the voice of reasonable retreat shows up dressed as wisdom.

You breathe. You put the coffee down. You go back to work.

That's the life I'm trying to create for myself. Away from the computer desk and zoom call.

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Around the time I was sitting in that coffee shop fighting the voice, I was also finishing a book about Tim Misny.

If you're from Cleveland you know Tim Misny. Personal injury attorney. The billboards. The television ads. The voice that has been part of the fabric of this city for decades. "I'll Make Them Pay." Four words that have become, in Cleveland, something close to a civic motto. If you want to read that book, it's really good, go grab a copy at MISNYBOOK.com.

Writing that book meant spending real time with him. Learning how he thinks. Understanding the engine underneath the billboards and his fame and success.

What I found was something I already believed but needed to see confirmed in another person's life at exactly the moment I needed the confirmation.

Hard work and grit and refusing to quit are not personality traits. They aren't distributed at birth to certain lucky people. They are fueled. There is always something underneath them, a reason specific enough and personal enough

and non-negotiable enough that it makes the quitting genuinely impossible.

For Misny it is the client. The person sitting across from him who has been hurt and needs someone who will not stop until the wrong is made right. That is not inspiration. That is obligation. And obligation is a more reliable fuel than inspiration because it does not require you to feel like going on. It requires you to go on regardless of how you feel.

I understood that. I had my own version of it.

The vow. The 342 people on the Worry Wall. The body of work I had spent twenty-five years building and the nightmares that had earned me exactly one conclusion: the screen was not enough anymore and I had run out of time to pretend otherwise.

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I want to make a distinction here that I think matters.

Most of what gets written about persistence talks about willpower. Toughness. The grind. The hustle. The motivational vocabulary of pushing through.

It all sounds very motivational. I don't believe in motivation actually. I believe in inspiration. Because in my view, a human being is going to do whatever they want to, when they decide when they want to do it. You can't motivate them to the point. THEY have to decide. Inspiration though? You can inspire something to start thinking about making that choice.

I am skeptical of willpower as a primary panacea. Willpower is finite. It depletes. On the days when you are tired and scared and sitting in a coffee shop in March holding a coffee while the clock runs, willpower is often exactly the thing you have least of. You can't just "motivate" yourself out of that, IMO.

What does not deplete is the reason.

The reason is not motivational. It does not ask you how you feel about continuing. It simply makes certain options unavailable. You cannot quit because quitting means breaking a promise to yourself that you made while sitting in a hospital for nine days after aFib and deciding what the rest of your life was going to look like. You cannot punt the season because punting the season means becoming the person who says things and doesn't do them, and you

have spent too long becoming someone else to go back to that now.

The reason doesn't require courage. It simply removes the alternative.

That is what I mean when I say quitting was not an option. This is what Tim Misny taught me and proved to me.

I considered quitting, yes. Fully. In a coffee shop in March with snow still on the ground and a panic attack pressing against the inside of my chest. Brave had nothing to do with it. Motivation wasn't going to help me work through that.

And then I remembered why I started; The reasons behind it.

And the option closed.

Back to work.

• • •

Before you build anything worth building, you need to find your reason.

Skip the goal you put on a slide deck and the mission statement you wordsmithed for an hour. The actual reason.

The one that lives below the business plan and below the vision and below even the thunderbolt. The one that is personal enough to be embarrassing and true enough to be non-negotiable.

For me it is a vow made to myself after too many years at a screen and too many close calls with a body that was trying to tell me something. It is the specific weight of a life spent building things in rectangles of light and the decision, made in a hospital and confirmed on a top deck at sunset and reconfirmed every cold morning on a dock in the Flats, to build something real this time.

Something you can stand inside. Something that exists in three dimensions. Something that requires you to show up in the weather.

Find your reason. Write it somewhere private. Return to it on the March mornings when the snow is still on the ground and a friend is doing math out loud and the panic arrives uninvited.

The reason doesn't chase away the fear.

It just makes the fear irrelevant.

Eleven

END OF PART ONE

The snow thawed in Cleveland.

The dock is almost ready. The boat is real. The characters are finding their way into the world. The Founding Floaters are waiting with their membership numbers and their worries and their five dollars of skin in the game.

This is where Part One ends and Part Two begins.

By the end of Summer 2026 I will be able to tell you what happened when sixty strangers stood on a boat in Cleveland and watched their worries dissolve into the river together. Whether the silence lasted the full ten seconds. Whether anyone cried. Whether my wife forgives me for dragging her down this path.

Part Two will tell you what I got wrong and what I got right and what surprised me most about the distance between the thing I imagined on a top deck at sunset and the thing that actually exists on a dock in the Flats.

This story ends here. In the spring. With the work unfinished and the verdict still out and the Admiral standing on the dock in a hat that his wife thinks is ridiculous, looking at a river that has been waiting his whole life for him to show up.

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If you have a thing you are building, here is what I want to leave you with from Part One.

Find the thunderbolt. Protect the name. Hold the vision when the experienced people tell you it won't work. Build the one moment worth building and earn it with everything that comes before. Charge five dollars and mean it. Show up in the snow. Wear the hat. Make the video.

Find your reason. Not the goal. Your reason. The one that makes quitting genuinely unavailable.

And when the panic arrives in a coffee shop in March with the clock running and the snow still on the ground, put that coffee down.

And get back to work.

See you on the water, Cleveland.

Admiral Jim

Float Above the BS!

P.S. If this story resonated with you. If you felt something in these pages. If you want to be involved in some way. I want to hear from you.

There are a lot of ways to be part of this. You could become a Founding Floater at clevelandfloaters.com. You could help me build the world, for real, as a performer, a volunteer, a connector. You could book the boat for your crew and make it yours for a night. Or you could just come have a beer with me on the dock some afternoon and talk about Cleveland.

Any of those works. admiraljim@clevelandfloaters.com or 216-272-4383.