

PROLOGUE

The phone in Frank Zimbalist III's empty office kept ringing.

One female caller, pleased with the Zimbalist Holistic Recliner, offered to perform a number of potentially pleasurable acts on Frankie.

There were a few inquiries about buying the Recliner for institutions, and whether wholesale rates were available.

But most of the messages were from the same people: Dr. Gary Huff, or the representative from BeWell Enterprises, or that lady Frankie had met at the Sober Living Solutions conference in Tucson, or half a dozen other people who had Zimbalist Holistic Recliners.

The first message from each party was polite and professional. Some of the callers spelled out their names or repeated their phone numbers slowly, to make a busy man's job returning phone messages that much easier.

They were certain, after all, that selling the remarkable Zimbalist was a demanding job.

But as the number of unreturned messages from each party increased, the politeness and professionalism fell away.

By the fourth attempt, the callers barely contained their frustration. Some threatened that Frankie would be hearing from a lawyer. Some pleaded tearfully for him to please call them back.

All wanted to understand what the Recliner was telling them. They wanted to know what it was designed to do and whether they were using it in the right way.

One whispered, menacingly, that the Zimbalist had revealed his

true purpose in life. If he fulfilled that purpose, it would be very unfortunate for Frankie.

But then there were the calls from Dr. Gary, who always remained calm, evenly modulated, patient. Dr. Gary did not believe in getting angry over the phone. He left the same message every time.

When Frankie nervously called in for his messages at the end of each day, he never knew what craziness he might hear on the other end of the line.

But Dr. Gary's voice was always professional and kind.

Because of this, even though Frankie Zimbalist was on the run from a bunch of patent lawyers and ex-wives and other bloodsuckers, Dr. Gary was the only one he considered calling back, the only one whose number he had written down. Once he could be somewhere for a few days and just think. Once he could get himself together and away from all the revelations the chair that bore his name had given him, he swore, he promised, he included in his prayers every night before he started drinking, he would "call that Huff guy back. Out of all of those sonsabitches, God, he's the one who deserves to know the truth."

Imagine that the mystery of your existence was revealed, your life laid out clearly before you, every decision already made, every success and failure illuminated.

Would you then have a purpose?

Why do we long for the knowledge that will ruin us?

From *A Lifebuilder's Journal*, Dr. Gary Huff

CHAPTER ONE

“No, Ezekiel, I’m afraid there’s simply no evidence at all that you have ever, or will ever, be attractive to anyone. But you will have a very long life indeed. It says so right here on this graph.”

Dr. Patel pointed to an ascending green and blue line on the report. “This axis represents your age potential. As you can see, you may make it past a century, maybe longer. Barring unforeseen accidents, of course.”

“But . . . no love?” his wheezy little mother wheezed. Bebe was short, not quite stout. If only she’d had red hair and blue eyes, and a higher voice and less chapped lips. If only she tried a little harder, her mother said. But Bebe was trying as hard as she could.

“Afraid not. Not a pinch. But look, if you want to know the truth, most of my patients are in the reverse situation, and they aren’t happy.”

Thirteen-year-old Ezekiel had faked every answer on the Longevity Assimulator and picked random responses on the Life/Love Experience Multiple Choice. He had thought, while taking these tests, that he didn’t want to know a) whether he would live long, b) whether he would find love, or c) whether science could measure either of these things.

But now, he was not so sure.

A teeny part of him, a part he didn’t even know he had, rose up like a snowdrop into the cold light. Ezekiel saw in a flash the life that would stretch out around him: an endless boring shade of blinding white, forever unbroken by a bright green flash, the frenzy of affection for which he so desperately longed.

His mother knew his lovelessness couldn't be something genetic, because even though she and his father were divorced, they had loved each other. Once.

But perhaps these results did explain why she had such a hard time understanding her son.

“Not find love? You? Those tests sounds like a load of malarkey,” Ezekiel's father Joe, who lived in Vermont, said to him over the phone later that night. “Nobody knows what's happening next week, son. No one knows what's happening tomorrow. I'm sure you'll live a long, happy life.” Joe settled back and put his feet on an ottoman covered in fake tiger fur.

Besides the fact that his son was miserable, and his ex-wife was a loon, so far, 1979 had been a great year for Joe. He lived with his beloved second wife Charlotte. He managed a small inn, and he liked his job, mostly. It was quiet there, no matter what time it was.

He tried to offer some fatherly advice, but Joe's consistent physical absence from Ezekiel's life rendered it worthless.

“Dad said those tests were a load of malarkey,” Ezekiel told his mother.

This was the longest string of words that Bebe had heard from her son in months.

“Oh, really?” she coaxed, folding old winter coats for the swap meet.

“He said no one knows what will happen.”

Bebe knew her ex-husband was wrong; he had to be. He had made so many poor decisions over the past ten years that nothing that came out of his mouth could be trusted.

How could he doubt Dr. Patel's predictions or the power of their insight?

Certainly, Ezekiel was progressing. Here her son was actually talking to her.

Something must have thawed in him, or righted itself to continue on its path. Something must have stopped growing or started. He must have changed.

He just had to.

Principal Nine: You can only give so much!
Don't exceed your budget for sacrifice. Understand that everyone (you included!) has a forfeit tolerance. Never go beyond it. Life is a casino: enter with your budget fixed. Once you've met your limit, walk. Give and give but do so within reason, and know that disappointment is just a roll of the dice away.

From *The Fourteen Principals: Getting What You Want When You Want It*, Dr. Herman Wentz

CHAPTER TWO

Early in adulthood, Bebe believed she had known almost every type of person in this world. She once had a petite and appealing roommate who could not swallow a pill to save her life. Her delicate throat closed painfully around the tablets, and her coughing woke Bebe, an already light sleeper.

Bebe had also once known a tall, handsome man who claimed a single superpower: to dry-swallow pills of any size. He was prone to sudden anger, making her both drawn to and frightened by him.

But then, in 1967, she met Joe, a youngish, below-average hotel and leisure management student who attended the local community college almost accidentally, as though the school were a deep hole into which he had fallen. It would take him years to have the courage or skills to climb out.

Both sets of in-laws generously called Bebe and Joe a “handsome couple”, though she was shorter than anyone would have liked. She had a flat wide face, and an ample nose. But she did have character.

Joe's beard was robust, unlike the rest of him.

The wedding ceremony happened.

For Bebe, one of the perks of being married was that she now had a normal last name. She was glad to be rid of “Schmuckler” and did not return to it even after the divorce.

The day they were married, Joe realized his ring was loose. He fiddled with it throughout the ceremony and reception, and most of the wedding night. He continued to fiddle with it for a month, then finally took the ring to be resized.

Months later, after Bebe hounded him to retrieve it, he'd returned to the downtown jeweler's shop in Hardy, Pennsylvania, only to find it had closed quite some time before.

He stood at the window looking through the faint outlines of the store's name. He scanned the dusty empty cases, imagining he had been propelled forward in time by fifty years, and all of the problems of the present day had slipped from his life. In fifty years, all he would have to worry about was falling down and breaking his hip, or eating something that disagreed with him in a fatal way.

But now he was faced with the steadily growing notion that he had made a terrible mistake. Could it be that after all of the fuss and expense of the wedding ceremony, during which most of the uncles were not quite drunk enough, and the women and kids plowed through the desserts early, dropping custard on the clothes bought specially for the occasion, where platters of this and that floated like parasols above the heads of waiters both efficient and effete, could it be that after all of this, that he really didn't care for Bebe at all? Could it be that they had gravely miscalculated the result of Joe + Bebe = lifelong happiness?

It wasn't possible, no.

So Joe went home. That very night, partly as an apology to his wife for losing their sacred bond of love embodied in the thin band of gold, and partly to prove that his growing suspicions couldn't be true, he impregnated her in three thrusts. The smallest cell in the body met the largest and both of their lives were changed.

When Ezekiel popped into the world, it was night and snowing, and the whole hushed city was like a big church. The few people who braved the streets walked with heads bowed as though ashamed.

Bebe's labor was much easier than she ever let on, but as Ezekiel grew up she did not let him or his father forget how it felt to have

his head push out of her, his big, pumpkin-sized head.

“Did you know the doctor said I might never walk again?” Bebe said one Sunday morning. Six-year-old Ezekiel cut his waffles into precise squares and pushed them around the edge of his plate. He saw the waffle squares as cars racing, and then as boats racing, and then as camels racing. He ignored his parents.

“And I almost didn’t.”

“Didn’t what?” Joe said, distracted, turning the page of the Hardy Gazette and going right back to reading the story on A12.

“Didn’t walk, Joe. Don’t you remember?” Bebe had been cooking for Joe and Ezekiel for years, but, she thought, neither of them appreciated it. Joe read the paper, or intently studied a racing form, until the food got cold and then he shoved it down. Ezekiel played with it, making odd noises, and only ate a few bites after she poked him.

Bebe knew if she didn’t poke him, Ezekiel would certainly starve to death.

Joe did not remember his wife having much trouble giving birth, but then his thoughts were always elsewhere. He had been at the hospital, he remembered that, and he remembered the queer whiteness through the windows. It looked like daylight when it was three o’clock in the morning.

As Bebe struggled and strained in a far part of the hospital, Joe watched a rerun of a football game on the Sports Classics channel on the TV perched high up in the waiting room. He watched the young men crash into each other like mountain goats, and then jump on each other in a pile. He wanted to cheer at the fumbled play, but even he knew that was inappropriate. A middle-aged woman with red eyes sat across from him, rocking slowly back and forth. A child whined somewhere.

The hospital served a whipped dessert in the cafeteria that Joe wished he had the recipe for.

The next day he bought a box of “It’s a Boy” cigars with blue bands. Each time he gave one out, the recipient would pound him playfully on the back and say “Nice work!” or “Attaboy!” even though Joe hadn’t really done much at all.

He would spend the next six years trying to figure out what the answer to Joe + Bebe = meant. It was such a simple sum, how could the figuring be so difficult?

But then, six years after Ezekiel's birth, he would see Charlotte, and the answer would come to him instantly.

Zero.

Ezekiel continued to play with the waffle squares, ignoring the storm surge of his mother on one side, and the sinkhole of his father on the other. Ezekiel was nothing more than the land between them.

Trying a new tactic she had read about in Dr. Herman Wentz's best-selling book, *"The Fourteen Principals: Getting What You Want When you Want it,"* Bebe hovered over them and fumed, and then snatched up the plates from both of them and hustled to the sink.

According to Dr. Wentz, this "Like it or Lump it" technique made people take notice. Dr. Wentz wrote:

"If you give someone something you've made with love and this person does not show you the respect and appreciation you deserve, just take it back and destroy it right in front of them.

"That will show them."

Joe was a practical man. He took everything his wife said and did at face value. The hidden signals and blatant body shouts she directed at Joe were wasted on him.

She ferociously scraped their plates, as Joe turned the pages, as Ezekiel fingered the ragged stitching on his seat cover, wondering what he could hide in there.

Joe met his second wife, Charlotte, at half past midnight on February 4, 1974, when she checked in to the hotel that he managed. He would remember the date for the rest of his life.

Joe had finally received a degree in Leisure Studies, and worked his way up in the hotel business from shift supervisor to manager in a remarkably long time.

Charlotte's graceful, perfect neck was the first thing he noticed

about her. The second thing he noticed was her huge breasts. The dichotomy between these parts of her created an instant sexual tension that closed around Joe's heart like a cat's cradle.

She filled out the registration form, yawning, covering her mouth as she did so. Her handwriting was exquisite, the most legible and graceful he had ever seen. She was traveling back to Pittsburgh, she said, an hour away. She was so exhausted it was no longer safe to drive.

From the moment he saw her, Joe could think of nothing but Charlotte, the photo on her driver's license. She was ten years his junior, twelve years his wife's. He could not not have her. He incubated the obsession for two days.

When he returned home from work the next night, Bebe asked him about his day, and if the catering company had brought the shrimp even though they promised not to, and why he hadn't taken his galoshes in this horrible rain. She complained about the neighbors in the adjoining apartment, how they scream-sneezed at odd hours. Joe didn't respond, but instead put his hands on the kitchen table, leaned across it, and glared at Bebe from across the room.

"I want a divorce."

She almost dropped the green bean casserole.

"What's a divorce?" Ezekiel asked Bebe the next day at breakfast. He was six years old. She avoided the question.

"Ignore your father. He's an idiot. We aren't getting a divorce." This disappointed him. The way she had used the word "get" a divorce sounded special, like a puppy or a racing bike.

Bebe snapped the ends off the asparagus for that night's casserole, relishing the little pop, the easy surrender.

Ezekiel finger-painted in his oatmeal. He drew a hat, then he erased it and drew a tree with a pig standing beneath it.

The kitchen was quiet, except for the occasional scream-sneeze blasted from the neighbor's apartment.

That afternoon when Ezekiel returned from school, he brought two drawings, one for each of his parents. Asked to pick three words

about each of them, he watched as the teacher dutifully recorded them underneath his drawings. About his father, “hat hair man,” Bebe thought these words acceptable but not so the ones about her, “yells loves loud.”

Bebe was pissed.

She did not yell, at least no more than any normal parent with a crazy husband and a difficult son would. Under the words about Joe, Ezekiel had drawn a rhino, below Bebe’s, a plate, a spoon, a cup. Ezekiel looked up expectantly at his mother, waiting for the signal that he could hustle off somewhere, anywhere.

With this offense, Bebe’s rage cup overflowed. She shook the paper a few times in his direction, as if she could flick the very words off the page, her lips locked in fury.

This was good enough for Ezekiel, who ran off to his room to build homes for rabbits with guns.

She did not show Ezekiel’s drawing to Joe, and she did not include it in Ezekiel’s childhood scrapbook, which had up to this point been a complete chronological repository of practically every mark Ezekiel had made on paper. This one she tucked deep into the trash can.

Joe wandered the sidewalks of Hardy, scheming how to once again glimpse the precious outline of Charlotte’s neck. He circled the blocks around Hudson Hull University, and out by Bindy’s Sporting Goods, then passed the Garfinkel’s department store.

He had her name and address, but he couldn’t just show up at her doorstep. He considered driving to her home under the pretense of returning something she had left behind in the hotel room, but he could not figure out which object to bring. This lost and found item would say a lot about what he thought of her, but his feelings were already too complicated. He would have had to bring her a roomful.

Still, Joe had to convince her that he was not a putz, and spend as much time with her as she would allow. He would do her taxes for free. He would clean her gutters, change her oil, marry her dog. He didn’t care. As long as his name and her name appeared in the same sentence, Joe would be just fine.

Joe's obsession with Charlotte reduced his interest and attention in his family to a minnow, to a sliver. He checked himself in mirrors, convincing himself that his hairline, while receding, was not totally receding.

Joe's pharmacist at Hardy Drugs noticed that he was purchasing personal grooming products marketed to men ten years his junior. His dental hygienist observed that he had finally asked for his teeth to be whitened, and that he was wearing an awful lot of cologne.

At the rec center, the lifeguard noted that instead of just floating, Joe swam.

Joe knew that gossip has its own engine; it is the most economical system on earth. It feeds itself, it generates its own energy, it is self-sufficient. It ends when there is one person left on the earth, and even then, some postulate, it could live on. It would only take two peripheral people in Joe's life to chat about him before it was all over town.

But Joe didn't care.

His intense devotion to his cause pulled him forward, and pushed him into places he had never dared go in his life, like men's department stores, where he learned that the colors of his ties actually had meaning. He brushed his teeth much more frequently, and washed his hands every single time after using the bathroom.

"She is improving my life," he thought, "and she's not even in it yet." But, of course, she was. The Charlotte that Joe had created in his mind had become more real to him than the Charlotte that existed in the world.

Finally, he took a day off and drove to Pittsburgh.

He sat in his car, across the street from her apartment building. He listened to the radio half-heartedly. He was sick of hearing about Watergate.

But then, he heard a report about a Japanese soldier who had fought in World War II, surrendering in the Philippines. The war had been over for 29 years.

Joe knew he could never be that patient.

Then he saw her emerge from her building, and walk up the