

Beer Belly BLUES

What Every Aging Man and the
Women in His Life Need to Know

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Abundant Health Systems Inc.

This book is dedicated to the memory
of my father, Allan, who died from complications
associated with cardiovascular disease
and prostate cancer.

I wish I knew then what I know now.

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INTRODUCTION

The Invitation



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I knew this day was coming. *I'd parked it in the back of my mind, which is what I do with those things over which I have no control but nonetheless dread, like property taxes and prostate exams. Lately though, every time I went out to the mailbox I'd felt a sense of impending dread, because deep inside I knew the much-prophesized moment of truth was drawing near. I realized this could be the day, and if it wasn't, tomorrow was suddenly even more likely to be. More than an envelope showing a return address from my ex-wife's attorney, even more than the once-a-year life insurance premium notice that reminds me I haven't yet changed my beneficiary, nothing, and I do mean nothing, strikes complete and utter terror into the heart of a recently divorced man than the arrival of this one singularly inevitable and terrible thing: an invitation to your 25th high school class reunion.*

Talk about a wake-up call. Or in my case, yet another wake up call.

Somehow, with that life-changing envelope clutched in my trembling hand, I managed to make it back to my front door without throwing up on the bougainvillea bushes that lined the way. Not that I'm all that into bougainvillea – I can barely spell it – it's just that since my divorce I live in a condo complex covered with the stuff.

For most of us, especially men, we really have no idea we've drifted off into the insidious slumber of middle age, or how far we've fallen from the grace of our youth. One day you're David Beckham with abs like the grill of a Bentley and an attitude to match, and 25 years later you wake up and you're Rush Limbaugh after a 12-day all-you-can-eat cruise. Life insurance bills I can handle, but this... no, this was a four-alarm emergency of the highest order. My self-image and my ego were being called out – they'd taken quite a beating lately, to be honest – and even if I really could run and hide from the four hundred sets of judgmental eyes that would be there, there was no hiding from the one single person who counted most: me.

Okay, make that two important people. My ex-wife would be there, too.

My first inclination, not remotely unique I'm sure, was simply to not go. To conjure up an excuse that even my ex-wife's brilliant attorney could not disprove. To move to Puerto Vallarta and take up basket weaving. But that urge quickly collided with an even stronger psychological need, this one far more noble and healthy: I wanted to go. If I could get past the paranoid notion that everyone there would be whispering, "Hey, what the hell happened to him?" it would be a night to remember.

Then again, with my ex strutting her homecoming queen stuff, very possibly on the arm of another man, it just might end up being a night to jump off a bridge.

No, there was no getting out of this one. Not if I wanted to hang on to the last thin shred of self-respect I suspected still lingered within my withering, hulking shell. I was going. Now all I had to do was figure out how to transform the suddenly single old fart staring back at me in the mirror, the one with the beer belly and the receding hairline and a chin reminiscent of a turkey gullet, into some semblance of the smugly grinning jock that had been the homecoming queen's clueless but buff boyfriend. And then her husband. And then her ex-husband.

Now all I had to do was figure out how to begin the transformation.

My name is Fred, but back in school they called me The Man. Okay, they really didn't call me The Man, that was just the caption of the year-book photo on the page announcing that I had been named Best Athlete by a committee of my peers. You wouldn't guess it now, but back then I could throw a football sixty yards on a line and out-bench press the linemen protecting me. But fate had intervened in the form of a scalpel and a missing ACL, so I stashed my jockstrap in the attic and earned a degree in finance, took up golf, got married and have since been mired in middle management at a bank, doing what men do, raising kids and generally managing to live some semblance of the good life, give or take.

Then, doing what men do, it all went to hell in a handbasket. I had gradually let myself go, which somehow played into the sudden and complex explanation for my wife deciding that life was too short and I wasn't the ticket after all. This, of course, being what her parents had been telling her all along. So here I am in a singles city condo with a view of the industrial district, seeing my kids every other weekend, paying child support, drinking too much and exercising too little (as in, not at all), blaming everyone else for my problems, giving thanks for my widescreen high-def plasma and a new DVR. Hey, pass the chips and salsa, life isn't so bad after all, especially with video-on-demand and the internet.

Who did I think I was kidding?

But now, with a class reunion invitation in my hand, none of that really mattered. I had twelve weeks until the Big Day, which would be held at a hotel off the freeway, dinner and dancing and a slide show that would show us all how much we'd aged. On the day the invitation arrived, I made a beeline for the closet, digging out my old letterman jacket – one of the few things I got to keep in the settlement – which hadn't seen the light of day since gas was a buck a gallon. As I put it on, or at least tried to, I realized that I was breathing hard and that my heart was racing. In fact, I was actually dizzy, since the walk from the golf cart to the tee box over the years had been about all the exercise I'd known, and even that had been a while. Of course, the jacket looked ridiculous – for a moment I thought there was a very real possibility that a few of the seams would give way before my eyes as I stood there in front of the mirror – and I was suddenly stricken with the realization that I was far, far over the proverbial hill. From a purely statistical point of view, I was actually closer to death than I'd been the day that jacket had fit perfectly.

It was right then when this latest threat to my ego met the abrupt dawning of my realization that not only was I out of shape and barely recognizable – thank God for reunion nametags – but I was also

certainly a textbook case for an entire laundry list of impending middle age medical disasters. I'd be lucky if I even made it to reunion day.

I had twelve weeks to make all this go away.

And that was the beginning. Not just of my push to make the best of my appearance at my 25th high school reunion, but the beginning of the rest of my life, which I hoped would be longer and more pleasurable for the effort.

I knew this resurrection process would not be easy. What I didn't know was how much I really could accomplish in that time, and how high the stakes really were.

WELCOME TO MIDDLE AGE. Or more accurately, to what for men is more clinically referred to as *andropause*. Women have their own term for this time of a man's life: "*Grumpy old man syndrome*." And a truer description has never been written. Andropause, or male menopause, is the hormonally-triggered decline of body, mind and spirit that manifests not only in the mirror, but in the lives of men who don't make the effort to do something about it. Unlike menopause in women, which usually begins in their mid to late-forties and hormonally decimates their child-bearing abilities, not to mention their sex drive, by the mid-fifties, men begin feeling and actually seeing the effects of mid-life hormonal change in their late thirties, some even earlier. What once was lean muscle tissue gives way to fleshy deposits of fat (to be clear, muscle does not turn into fat, any more than bone can transform itself into skin; but as muscle tissue atrophies and disappears with age, fat deposits often appear in the same location, giving the appearance of a literal transformation).

Lean Muscle Mass: The Key to Metabolism

This is one of the primary reasons our metabolism declines with age. Muscle is the key metabolic engine of the human body, and normal aging (or abnormal aging, depending upon how you view it) strips

men of anywhere from one-third to one-half of our muscularity, which in turn causes our metabolism to slow to the pace of an inebriated snail. The extra muscle on a younger man is also the main reason why men burn up to 30 percent more calories than women – even sitting on their hairy behinds (unless they shave their butts that is).

If most men *only* experienced a drastic decline in their ability to burn calories over a 24-hour period as they aged, that would be reason enough to get depressed. The truth, however, is worse than that, because this is really just the beginning. It all goes south from there.

Yeah, getting old sucks, and not just because our muscles, if left untended, wither away. Just how does it suck? Let us count the ways.

Singing the Beer Belly Blues

What once was a healthy, sexy head of hair gradually becomes a diminishing shadow of its former self, tinged with evidence of emerging grey. Pants and belts that once fit perfectly are suddenly snug (not to mention sorely out of style), and the statistics that define one's health – blood pressure, heart rate, cholesterol, PSA, among others – are suddenly things that must be monitored with the same devotion as the stock exchange and your kid's report card. And worst of all, the hungry sexuality that consumed your teenage years has cooled – frankly you'd rather play golf – despite the ironic fact that the woman lying next to you seems friskier than ever, at least if you listen to how she talks to her girlfriends or gobbles up anything with Matthew McConaughey on the cover.

To state it in less than clinical terms – all of this simply and completely sucks. And while that fellow looking back at you from the mirror may be a mystery, the explanation behind the way he looks is not: as a man ages, his body loses its ability to produce the same level of testosterone that it once did. And when that happens, everything goes to hell in a hand basket, or so it seems.

It's just that simple. When testosterone production decreases, things change. Bad things happen. Then we go from bad to worse. Muscles

shrink, body fat percentage increases, once defined abdominal six-packs turn into a keg, losing weight becomes more difficult (if not nearly impossible), energy levels diminish, hairlines recede into oblivion, erections become projects, you develop a sudden awareness of something called a prostate gland, and your wife or significant other watches the whole thing with silent, supportive horror, hoping against hope that you'll find a way to fight back. Or worse, not caring if you do because – let's get real here – she no longer is chemically attracted to who and what you've become, and those Matthew McConaughey magazines are all that she needs these days.

Like I said, it sucks.

The Good News of Hormonal Cause and Effect

For men who care about any or all of these issues – which should cover just about every guy out there with a pulse – there is astoundingly good news. Because there is a way to fight back. We can't combat the passage of time in a *chronological* sense, but we absolutely can go to war with the effects of aging in a *biological* sense, both medically and aesthetically. We really can feel better, live longer and actually look better while we're at it. Maybe not at the level of one's raging youth, but much better than all those guys on the putting green with their guts hanging over their Tommy Bahama leather-weave belts. With the right combination of lifestyle changes in the form of diet, exercise, and nonprescription supplementation, and if needed, medical intervention, hormone levels can be maintained. Which makes it far more likely that you can keep your hair, hold on to more of your lean muscle mass, and in many cases grow some new lean muscle tissue, manage your hard-on and your ego to the levels you want them to be, even approximating the way things were when you were too young to even think about such things. Because let's face it, back then you really didn't have to.

This book is about how to get this done. We'll be with Fred as he prepares for his class reunion in twelve weeks, and the inevitable showdown with his ex-wife, who indeed will be at the reunion with – and this is any man's worst nightmare – a younger, richer guy at her

side, and one who looks suspiciously like – who else – Matthew McConaughey.

But don't count Fred out yet. Because the path he's about to embark upon is rich with wisdom and opportunity, and if he does the right things the right way, and makes the commitment to apply the abundant discipline required... well, his ex-wife just might have a surprise in store come reunion night.

And, so might Fred.