



How to Get Lucky

By Ben Sherwood



Photo: Peter Rad

A chance meeting might seem like a fluke, but as Ben Sherwood explains, scientific research backs up the notion that you *can* influence your own destiny. Step one: Smile.

On a Saturday morning February 1994, Colleen Seifert, PhD, woke up early and ate her usual breakfast: half a bagel, fruit, and coffee. She walked her Russian wolfhound, Bandit, and tidied her apartment. Seifert was an assistant professor in psychology at the University of Michigan, and for six years her life had been entirely focused on a single goal: earning tenure. She was a work machine, putting in seven-day weeks and sleeping fewer than six hours each night. Even when she left the lab, her mind was consumed with academic research. "I couldn't walk into a shopping mall without feeling I should have been at work," she says. Her big indulgence was running errands on

Saturday mornings.

On this Saturday morning, however, her life was about to catapult in a new direction. Seifert's first stop was Pittsfield Cleaners, a couple of blocks away from her home. It was a splendid, sunny day, she remembers; the university was on spring break, and the streets of Ann Arbor were quiet. She pulled up to the dry cleaner's drive-through window and handed over a tangle of clothes. The man at the cash register sorted through the items and held up a hot pink blouse.

"Is this a dress?" he asked.

"It's a shirt," Seifert said. "I wouldn't wear a dress that short."

The man had a handsome face, and dimples; he wore his hair in a ponytail. "If you've got it, flaunt it," he said with a smile.

Seifert was 34 years old, and it had been a long time since a man had even noticed her. Her 60-hour workweeks left neither time nor energy for taking care of herself. She was overweight and overstressed. She hadn't been on a date in more than two years. Friends had tried to fix her up, but when it came to flirting, she was "out of practice." And yet when the man asked for her phone number to include on the dry cleaning ticket, she blurted out: "So? Are you going to call me?"

He looked confused but recovered quickly. "Sure," he said. "I'll do that."

Flustered but "flushed with the daring" of what she'd said, Seifert drove off. She figured the man would never call, but it was thrilling to have done something so out of character. And then, around 7 o'clock that evening, the phone rang. It was him. He introduced himself—his name was Zeke Montalvo—and asked Seifert to go to the movies that night. She said yes. They had a good time. It turned out that Montalvo was only 25 and hadn't gone to college, but the two started dating. Then they fell in love. And six years after they met, on a cold Christmas Eve at a house by a lake, Montalvo proposed with an heirloom ring. They were married the next month.

At the most unlikely time, in the least romantic place, Seifert met the man of her dreams. It was a random event that changed her life forever. A classic chance encounter. Or was it?

Seifert's academic specialty is cognitive psychology, the science of why people think the way they do. And to understand what really happened the day she met Montalvo, she says you need to start the day *before* her trip to the cleaners.

That afternoon, in her office, she had received a bouquet of flowers from the chair of the psychology department. The note read, "Congratulations! Your tenure has been approved." If someone else had been in the room, she might have hugged them, but she was alone, so she simply cried with relief. After six years of single-minded obsession, her work had paid off. To celebrate, she went for a drink with a colleague that night. But even as she sat sipping her margarita, a feeling of anticlimax set in. She wondered if the achievement had been worth the sacrifice.

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