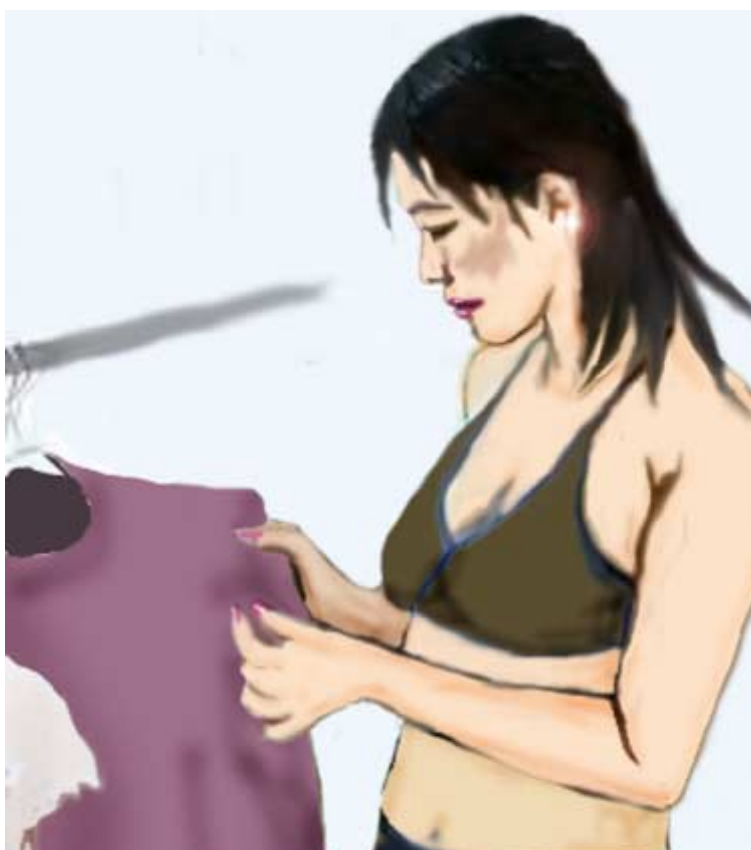




Reluctant Press presents:

Body & Mind

Laura Sexton



ILLUSTRATIONS BY C. HAIGHT

A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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BODY & MIND

By Laura Sexton

THE MASTER HYPNOTIST

Jason and I had known each other since we were kids, though we didn't become friends until college. We roomed together for a time, but it wasn't until my girlfriend kicked me out of the apartment after less than three months that Jason and I decided to pool our resources together to buy one of those "handyman's specials," a bungalow in the old part of town that needed a lot of work. With real estate prices being what they were, we figured we could do better buying that place than we would with a condo.

One Saturday afternoon, after we'd spent most of the day painting and repairing, Jason said he bet he could hypnotize me.

"No way," I said.

"Would you like to place a wager on it?" he asked.

"No I would not," I replied.

"Would you consent to letting me try to hypnotize you anyway?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Hypnotism gives me the creeps. I realize that a hypnotized person doesn't become a zombie like you see in sitcoms and horror movies. And those people hypnotized by stage magicians go up on stage in an agreeable state, but to me it seems like an invasion of some kind."

"Listen. You know a hypnotized person can't be made to do anything they don't want to."

"That's what they say. But if hypnotism consists of suggestion, and if you phrase your suggestions correctly, you can make a person think it's a good idea to do something he doesn't want to do."

"Like what?"

It took me a few moments to come up with a believable scenario. "Okay," I said. "Adultery. Let's ignore people looking for any excuse to cheat on their spouse, and stick with someone who thinks that adultery is wrong. You know, for richer and poorer, for better and for worse."

"I get the point."

"Now imagine implanting resentments against the spouse, suggesting that the spouse has grown inattentive or rude, inflating the importance of each imagined slight to make the resentments build more quickly. When the resentments have festered sufficiently, the hypnotist might suggest the subject deserves to have an affair, going so far as suggesting someone who would not only be attractive to the subject, but sympathetic to the cause. I'm sure that over time, you could alter their belief system."

"That's an interesting hypothesis," he said. "We should test it to see if it holds true."

"No we shouldn't." I was getting a creepy feeling down my spine.

"How about if I give you a post-hypnotic suggestion, one that's so outrageous that, once you complete the suggestion, it will be obvious that you were hypnotized."

"I'd be embarrassed."

"Nobody else would know," he said.

"It doesn't matter. *I'd* know."

"That's a shame," he said, pulling an object from his pocket and holding it to the light. It was round, slightly larger than a silver dollar, looking sort of like a jewel from a bad Hollywood movie. Its movements reflected and refracted the light in an odd way. "I so much wanted to test my ability to hypnotize someone."

"What's that?" I said.

"The professor said it's usually easier if you have an object to capture the subject's attention. That's why hypnotists are always waving pocket watches in the movies. That's why I got this. Some people use it to focus their attention when meditating."

"Stop it," I said. "Quit waving it around."

"You see? It's captured your attention already." He was flashing it like a signal mirror.

"You're shining it in my eyes."

"Your eyes are drawn to its light. You are compelled to look at the way the disc sparkles and shimmers." He was starting to talk in a deep monotone.

"Will you quit doing that?" I said. "It's annoying." Now he was slowly waving the thing around in front of his face.

"It is not annoying. It's fascinating. The fascination of the object draws your attention to the many facets on the face. You are compelled to follow the shiny object with your eyes."

I looked away, but every time I turned my eyes away from the crystal, the thing flashed in the corner of my eye, making me look that way. It was a reflex action. I would look away, and even though I knew he would make the thing flash, when it flashed I turned my eyes toward the source of the irritation. I discovered to my horror that I couldn't even close my eyes.

"You . . . bastard," I said. I found myself speaking slowly as my whole head followed the movement of the object. "I . . . hate . . ."

The next thing I knew Jason was sitting coily on the sofa, the crystal nowhere to be seen. "What did you do?" I said. I knew he had done something by the look on his face. Some kind of practical joke? There had been a . . . a, a something. It was kind of hard to remember.

"Do you want to play catch?" he suddenly suggested.

"Yeah, that sounds like fun," I said. It seemed that I had been thinking about baseball. "I'll have to fetch my glove, though."

"I've got it," he said, tossing me my mitt.

"Cool."

We went into the backyard, where we warmed up about twenty feet apart, getting our muscles loosened. We backed up, putting more power into our throws. It felt good to get back into the rhythm of a game of catch. However, when the distance between us had grown to around fifty to sixty feet, the muscles in my arm tightened up. My throws started having less force and going errantly.

"What's wrong?" Jason asked.

"I don't know," I confessed, rubbing my shoulder. "Whenever I start to throw the ball, I get this twitch in my muscles that makes it go awry."

"Do you want to stop?"

"No," I said. "I'm going to try to work it out." I continued to throw, but the throws kept getting worse. My mechanics started to deteriorate as well. Instead of striding with my left leg and thrusting with my right, rotating my hips, and using the muscles in my shoulder, arm, wrist, and fingers to increase velocity and guide the ball, I started keeping my torso square and pushing out with my butt. I led with my elbow and began to more or less shot put the ball toward Jason, using only the muscles in my forearm as a propellant, instead of my whole arm.

My throws started to hit the ground before they reached Jason, so I began to compensate by bending at the waist to get more power. The throws grew more errant, going left, right, and making a rainbow arc as they went in Jason's general direction.

"You know, you're really starting to throw like a girl. Are you sure you don't want to quit before you hurt something?"

"No," I said, a little more forcefully than I intended. It pissed me off that he compared my throwing to a girl's. I played baseball in high school. I *knew* how to throw a baseball. But I did remember certain girls in junior high and high school who seemed to go to great pains to display utter incompetence during co-ed softball games, squealing and giggling and hiding their faces in their mitts after trying to heave a ball toward another player, annoying the girl athletes who played on the school softball team.

One event came to mind, a youth group-sponsored camp I participated in at age fourteen. There was this one girl, a Mary Jean Something-or-Other, who did everything possible to captivate the boys. She fled from the ball, then flung her glove at it, threw the ball wildly, spun around three or four times whenever she swung the bat at a pitched ball, giggled, flirted, forgot which way she was supposed to run around the bases, and in general was completely useless. None of the boys could take our eyes off her.

I was preoccupied with those thoughts and misjudged one of Jason's throws. The ball hit the heel of the glove and bounced into my shoulder. It didn't hurt much, but it stung. That brought up memories of bad bounce grounders and fly balls lost in the sun, and memories of me at age eight or so, learning how to play. I began to grow scared of the ball, and instead of letting the ball meet my glove, I started jumping out of the way and stabbing at the ball, then chasing it when I missed it.

"We can quit, you know," Jason shouted at me.

"No," I squealed as I ran after one of his hard thrown balls. I retrieved it and found myself bending over to pick it up by keeping my knees locked and sticking out my butt. I noticed my running had started to take on a different character.

Jason must have noticed it too, because he yelled out "Grounder," as he threw the ball to the side so that I had to chase it a good twenty feet. I found myself running with my forearms upraised and my chest stuck out, my hips pivoting more than necessary. "You even *run* like a girl," Jason said, laughing as he watched me run a few paces with the ball in my hand and arch my torso into the motion as I pitched it kind of in his direction.

"I do not," I said.

"Pop up," he yelled, throwing the ball into the sky in my general direction. I saw the ball go up and watched it come down. As it approached, I squealed and ducked out of the way, even though that was not necessary, as it landed a good ten feet from where I had been standing. I was just about to tell him I had enough, when he asked again if I wanted to quit.

"No," I said again, and he threw another one at me.

Whenever he grabbed the ball, he asked if I wanted to quit. He started to call me girly-boy, then just girly. "Do you want to quit now, girly?" After a while it started to get comical, so I found myself grinning, then giggling every time I made him fetch one of my errant tosses.

"Oops."

"Are you sure you don't want to quit, Little Miss Girly Girl?" He threw the ball, then got in position like he was going to receive a throw. "Let's see if you can hit the cutoff man, missy," he said.

"You're not wearing cutoffs," I pointed out.

"It's a baseball term, young lady. Don't tell me you can't remember any basics of baseball. Who won the World Series in 1985?"

I started giggling uncontrollably. I suddenly couldn't remember any of that stuff. Jason began asking me all sorts of things, like last year's batting champion, the name of the all-time strikeout leader, what a Texas Leaguer or "dinger" was, until things began sounding odd to my ears, like Arbys-I. What did a restaurant have to do with baseball anyway?

"What's an urn drum?" I asked after one of his questions.

"It's earned run. Earned run average."

"Oh." I did know that Babe Ruth was a candy bar, but when he started asking me who the players were, I had no clue. Then he went on to teams, asking me where the Oreos played. He seemed to be having a lot of fun at my expense.

"They have a team named after a cookie?" I asked.

"No, the bird. You know, like Blue Jay. Speaking of which, where do the Blue Jays play?"

"This is boring," I complained.

"Do you want to quit?" he asked, throwing one right at me that forced me to duck out of the way.

"No," I said.

He threw a couple more until I finally said I had enough. By that time my head was awhirl and I couldn't think straight.

"Hey Girly," Jason said as we went into the house. "Why don't you get me a beer?"

"Okay," I said, giggling.

He looked at me strange, like he was thinking, and then added, "And then you can fix dinner."

"All right. What do you want?"

"The usual, some meat, potatoes, and vegetables. Maybe a dessert."

"Sounds good," I said.

"While you're working, I'm going to see if there's a baseball game on."

"I don't know what you see in that dumb old game anyway," I said as I went to get his beer. I could feel his eyes on my back as I left.

During dinner, Jason remarked that the dinner was so good I'd make someone a wonderful wife someday. "Now if I can only get you to clean up this mess," he added, waving his arm around to show the general area of the house.

I wanted to make a retort, but I couldn't think of anything to say. My mind felt completely blank. I told him I'd get working on it. He stared at me.

After dinner, I cleaned up the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher, put away the food, and got him another beer when he yelled for one. I began tidying up the place, pick-

ing up loose papers and magazines, putting the empties in the recycling bin, polishing the dining room table, and dusting and polishing the rest of the furniture. I couldn't do any vacuuming while he watched the game, no matter how much I wanted to.

After he had me get him another beer, he told me to sit down. "Why *are* you doing this?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you cleaning up the house?"

"Don't you want it cleaned?" I asked.

"Of course I want it cleaned. I just want to know why you feel it's your responsibility."

"Isn't it my responsibility?" I asked.

"Evidently it is, if that's the way you see it. Next thing I know you'll be doing my laundry."

"Do you need something washed?" I asked.

"You've certainly become eager to please," he said, taking a pull from his beer. "You've become willing to do everything I ask. Doesn't that strike you as odd?"

"Not really," I said. "I just want to be nice."

He smacked his forehead with his hand and turned off the television. "Sit down," he ordered. I sat. "Haven't you noticed anything odd going on today?"

"What do you mean?"

"When we went outside to play catch and you started throwing like a girl."

"Well," I confessed, "I'm not very good at baseball."

"*What?*" he said, an amazed look on his face. "What do you mean? You lettered three times in baseball in high school. You made All-Conference your junior year and 2nd team All-State as a senior, playing center field. You nearly got a college scholarship in baseball. You love the sport."

"Is this some kind of joke?" I said. "If it is, it's not very funny. I can't stand the game. I only agreed to play because you wanted to."

"I hypnotized you into throwing like a girl."

"You did not!"

"I gave you a post-hypnotic suggestion so that the more we played, the more your throwing would resemble this girl you knew in youth camp – Mary Jane something or other – "

I could feel my face turning red. I didn't know how he knew about Mary Jean, but suddenly I remembered that softball game where all the other kids started comparing me to her, except that she was cute and had boobs. They said that I could give her pointers on how to throw like a girl, because I obviously threw more like a girl than she did.

Meanwhile, Jason was going on. "Evidently you started imitating all her actions, from being afraid of the ball to giggling whenever she made a mistake, and flirting, and all that girly stuff. I suppose it's partially my fault. I probably shouldn't have had you visualize

her game, and I really shouldn't have made that other post-hypnotic suggestion, so that every time I offered to quit, you would be compelled to keep playing. That must have strengthened your unconscious desire to act more like Mary Jane. But why you'd want to do the cooking, cleaning, and laundry is beyond me. Maybe I forgot to wake you and each suggestion I made, like that housewife crack, your unconscious mind decided to comply with. Then again, maybe you're such a good subject that when you started throwing like a girl, you put yourself in another trance."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"I'm trying to figure out why you're acting so goofy. I'm probably going to have to re-hypnotize you."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. "I was never hypnotized."

"Yes you were." He fished an object from his pocket. It was the size of a large coin, though it looked more like a jewel. He started flashing it in my face. I started to say something, but stopped. He then began speaking in this mumbo jumbo. I let him prattle on without paying much attention.

"And three, you are now awake and free from previous suggestions. Everything is back to normal."

"I told you I can't be hypnotized," I said.

"I just hypnotized you."

"No you didn't."

"Yes I did. I just spent the last thirty minutes reversing what I had done this afternoon."

"I don't have time for this. I need to take a bath."

That seemed to shock him. "A bath? You *never* take baths."

"I don't?" I said puzzled. "I should. They're so much more relaxing than showers. Do we still have that box of stuff left over from the people who used to live here? I think I remembered seeing some bath oil beads and a loofah sponge in one of the boxes."

"Why do you want to take a bubble bath all of a sudden?" Jason asked. "Did that Mary Jane – no, Mary Jean chick take baths?"

"Who are you talking about?"

"Mary Jean. That girl that you played softball with that one time."

"I don't know who you're talking about," I replied. "And as for softball, you know I don't like sports. You know, you're acting really weird right now. Maybe you should lay off the beers."

"Oh crap," he said, staring off into space. "I told you to forget her. I didn't mean it like that."

"I'm going to take a relaxing bubble bath. Maybe you should go to bed. You evidently had too much to drink."

As I went into the bathroom, I could hear him mumbling something about “telling him to relax, to feel as though he’s floating . . .” before I went out of hearing.

* * *

For the next few days, Jason kept trying to get me to admit that I had been hypnotized. Naturally I wouldn’t, but that didn’t stop him from trying. The more he pressed, the more I denied it. Eventually he gave up. It also seemed that he had given up on trying to hypnotize me as well. I don’t know if it was because that first attempt scared the crap out of him, or he was trying to learn more so that he could do it right the next time. It was probably a little bit of both. One day, as I was tidying up his room and making his bed, I found a couple of texts on psychology and hypnotism he had checked out of the college library. They were hidden under the bed, so I knew he wasn’t done with the subject. I kept silent, hoping he wouldn’t bring it up.

I devised a cooking and cleaning routine, which I stuck to faithfully for the next month. I knew that with my work schedule, I wouldn’t be able to cook on a regular basis, so I made a big Sunday meal so I could use the leftovers as a basis for the rest of the week. I also packed lunches for Jason, which he seemed to appreciate, except when I cut his sandwiches diagonally or added a folded napkin.

“What’s up with that?” he asked one morning, as he watched me prepare our lunches from the remains of the previous night’s meatloaf. I had made sandwiches, added an apple, a cookie, and some juice in a container, with a folded napkin included.

“That whole lunch thing. It looks so sixth grade.”

“You don’t like it?” I asked.

“It’s not that. It just feels like you should be adding a note with my lunch, telling me to do well in school.”

I looked at the lunches and began laughing. “You’re right,” I said. “This is exactly how my mom made my lunch when I was a kid. I must have reverted because you told me not to give you anything that needed to be heated because of the line at the microwave during lunch.”

“Yeah,” he said. “That’s true. But I’m a big boy now. I think you could at least give me two cookies. And maybe sometimes, instead of sandwiches, we could have some of that chicken salad they serve down at the supermarket deli, or those instant soups. You only need hot water for those.”

“I could probably make my own,” I said. “It shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“And Ma,” he said, whining, “Can you at least let me go to Wendy’s once a week? All the other guys get to go.”

“Oh sure,” I said. “Didn’t you say that you were saving about \$25 a week by having me make your lunches?”

“So I’ll only be saving \$20 a week.”

It wasn't long after that that I began doing his laundry. Logically it made sense. I was already doing mine, so it wasn't that much more trouble to do his too. However, Jason soon stopped calling me by my real name and began referring to me as Girly or Missy. It got especially weird one Saturday afternoon when he caught me wearing a frilly apron.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

"What does it look like?"

"It looks like a girly apron. Why would you be wearing one of those things?"

"To protect my clothes, silly."

"Why do you need to protect your clothes?" he asked.

"Well," I said. "I found an old book on canning the other day and as I was going to the store, I stopped at a garage sale and found a bunch of Ball jars for a quarter apiece. I thought why not try, especially as there are some good deals on cucumbers and tomatoes down at the Farmer's Market. I managed to dig out my grandma's old recipe for making sweet pickles."

"Nobody I know has done canning in years," Jason said.

"I know," I told him. "But if I can start canning homemade tomato sauce and pickles and other stuff, we can save money on food this winter."

"You're turning into a regular pioneer wife," said Jason, taking a draw from his beer. "What are you going to be doing next, making quilts?"

"Do we *need* any quilts?" I asked dubiously.

"No, but if you want to sew some buttons on my shirts, I'd be more than happy to let you."

"Leave them down in the study," I said. "I'll take a look at them when I finish what I'm doing."

"As long as you're not doing anything important," he added, "why don't you get me another beer?"

"Okay," I said. I went to get him a beer.

Later in the evening, after I had finished the canning for the day and had taken a long, hot bubble bath (despite it being summer), I was sitting in the easy chair, working on replacing buttons on his shirts. Since I hadn't had any practice doing that sort of thing, it was slow going. A couple of times I had to pull the thread out and start over.

I was nearly finished when Jason turned off the TV and turned to me. "Doesn't it strike you as odd that you're doing all the women's work?"

"What do you mean, women's work?"

"You know, that division of labor thing. You're doing all the work that women used to do – and many still do. There's the cooking, cleaning, laundry, and now the canning and sewing. What would you say if I asked you to mow the lawn or repair the screen door?"

"Well," I replied slowly, "I've already got my hands full with all these other chores and I don't really know how to repair a screen door."

"Yet you were willing to learn how to can."

"What's your point?" I said.

He smacked his forehead with his palm. "If someone wanted you to make a dress for them, would you go out and buy a dress form and sewing machine and do it?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Okay, let's say I had a costume for a talent show, but it needed alterations. Would you buy a sewing machine and alter the costume?"

"If you asked me to."

"Why?"

That stopped me. Why *would* I do that and not the other? I had to think about it for a moment. "I guess I would do it because you're my friend and need it done."

"It would cost less to have a professional do the work," he pointed out. "You would also have to learn how to alter the costume."

"Well yes," I said, "but if you asked, I'd learn how to do it."

"Do you secretly want to be a girl?" That was an odd question. I hadn't ever thought about it before. I was still trying to figure out how to answer when he added, "You let me call you Missy and Girly without any complaint."

"That's true," I said. "I suppose that if you did it in public, it might be kind of demeaning. But it always struck me as kind of a joke."

"Do you still like women?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"When you see a pretty woman, do you get the hots for her? Do you lust after her? What do you think about your ex-girlfriend?"

To be honest, my breakup with Angie was hard. After she kicked me out, I had been too shell-shocked to get into another relationship. I hadn't thought about women much the last four months. In retrospect, I was glad I got out. I hadn't realized how controlling she was until I had moved into *her* apartment. It never became *our* apartment. I had to put most of my things into storage because of the space I had been allotted in *her* closet. I felt like an interloper.

"Maybe I'm overcompensating because she claimed I never did my fair share of the chores when I lived with her."

"Didn't you say that whenever you tried to help out, she criticized you for doing it badly?"

"I guess so. It's all so confusing. I think I got twisted by all her mind games."

"Would you like to forget her?"

"How do you mean? I don't want to forget her like she never existed, although it would be interesting to meet her on the street and not remember who she is. But then I might make the same mistake again."

"What if you remembered it as happening to someone else? You could still reap the benefits from your experience, but it wouldn't be as painful. Would that satisfy you?"

"I suppose so. But how can you make that happen?"

Jason looked at me with disgust. "You never learn, do you? I'd hypnotize you."

"You can try," I said, "But I can't be hypnotized."

"You can believe that if you want," he replied, "though I know you can. We can get you interested in other women. How about that Jennifer chick from the office? I hear she's available."

"Umm," I said.

"What's wrong with her?"

"I don't really like redheads," I said.

"I don't believe you. Redheads are great, especially the fiery Celtic ones. Long, thick, lustrous hair, creamy skin . . ."

"If redheads are so wonderful, how come you never go out with any?"

"I did. A couple of times. However, one didn't give a rat's ass about her ethnic heritage, while the other turned out to be a flake." Jason was half-Scottish and half-Danish. He listened to Celtic music, attended Irish and Scottish festivals, and although he did own a kilt in his clan's tartan, I never saw him wear it.

I hated that crap. I always went away when he started playing his fiddle and bagpipe music on the stereo. Naturally he accused me of being a traitor. Most of my ancestors had been Irish and Welsh, but they had gotten over it once they arrived in this country. "You know," I said. "If Jennifer's so wonderful, why don't you ask her out?"

"She's not my type," he said. "Besides, this isn't about me. We're trying to get *you* fixed up."

"*You* need a girl worse than *I* do. But your standards are so weird, no girl can meet them. You want a red-headed Irish girl descended from the fairies, playing fiddle or flute and step dancing, speaking flawless Gaelic who can take you back to the Emerald Isle so you won't feel like an interloper."

"She doesn't *have* to be Irish. She could be Scottish."

"Okay Laddie, you'll settle for a highland girl named Mac something or other, so you can take her hand and step over the crossed swords or whatever the hell it is they do to sanctify their marriages. Instead of drinking pints of Guinness and Bass, you'll be hoisting shots of single malt liquors and quoting Robert Burns."

He started laughing. "You're quite passionate when you get your dander up. Are you sure you don't have red hair?"

"I have relatives as wacky as you. They want to believe they live in Ireland. I think it's stupid. I'm an American. I live in America."

He shook his head. "I think it would be better for you to open up to your heritage. It helps define who you are. Be that as it may, you need to feel desirable before you can find love. This Angie thing has completely knocked you for a loop."

"What do you suggest, Doctor Fraud?"

"An exercise program of some kind to help tone your body. Something spiritual for your mind. A belief in your ability to attract."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Belief is important. If you believe that something is going to work, there is a greater chance of success. If you believe you can find true love, a pleasant outcome is much more likely. That's what all those infomercials have in common. They want you to believe their product will give you a beautiful complexion, tighter abs, more money, youth, vitality . . . that vitamin one, whatever it was. I think there was one for increased bust size."

"I saw a thing on the stock market that said the same thing," I said. "As long as people believed their investments would make money, they did. But once people stopped believing, things began falling apart."

"That's the stock market version," he said. "But we want you to believe in yourself."

"What the hell is that?" I said.

He had reached into his pocket to retrieve some kind of stone. It looked somewhat like a gem, nearly colorless and translucent, with numerous facets, oblong and slightly larger than a golf ball. "Do you know what this is?"

"I'm sure you'll tell me," I said.

"It's a crystal," he said, holding it up to the light. "I will now use it to put you into a trance," he said, holding it up in front of his mouth.

"Puh-leeze," I said. "I know that crystals are supposed to have special powers, but this is ridiculous."

"I am going to use this crystal to see into your mind and pull out your deepest darkest beliefs." Then he suddenly changed gears. "Isn't it a pretty crystal?" he said brightly, holding it up to the light.

"I guess so," I said.

Jason had somehow put himself in shadow, holding the stone in front of him. "It's a nice crystal," he said, making sure it caught the light. "You can see a rainbow when it hits the light just right."

"Yes," I agreed. "There is a kind of rainbow quality to it."

"You are fascinated by it," he pointed out. "You can't take your eyes off the crystal."

"You're holding it right in front of your face," I said. "I can't see your mouth."

"And yet you're completely focused on the crystal. You're not even looking at my eyes. You're watching the way the light reflects from the facets. In fact, you're not only watching the crystal, you're staring at it. You're fascinated by the interplay of light. You're so engrossed you can't take your eyes from the crystal. You can't even speak you're so enthralled as you stare at the object."

The way he turned the thing so it threw off little flashes of light was kind of annoying, but what could I do? He was holding the thing in front of him and it would be rude to

look away. I started to say something, but thought better of it. I would just let him continue his spiel until he grew tired. All I had to do was wait him out . . .

The crystal must have caught the light in a different way because it flashed like someone was taking a picture with a camera's flashbulb. I saw spots before my eyes and found it hard to focus. Suddenly there were two crystals in front of me, then one, then two again as it went in and out of focus. I couldn't even see Jason any more because the crystal seemed to glow, while he remained in shadow. The crystal grew large, becoming bright and enormous, filling the room with a kind of white light. The thing filled my whole field of vision and even kept me from hearing what Jason was trying to tell me.

As I sat there, I saw a woman, with long red tresses that reflected the sun like strands of shiny copper. She wore a short skirt and was dancing one of those Irish dances. I knew her to be Jason's perfect woman. In the distance I could hear him telling me how I needed to prepare myself to be loved or some such garbage, but the vision before my eyes blinded me to all else. I would have to find her, but I didn't know where to look. Maybe if I believed in her, she would come. Jason seemed to be saying something about belief.

After that, things got kind of hazy. The next thing I remembered was Jason asking me to get him a beer.

"Okay, honey," I said, standing up.

"What?"

I stopped. "What do you mean?"

"You just called me honey."

"I did not, dear," I said.

"Oh crap," he said.

I shook my head. What was wrong with him? I left the room.

When I returned with his beer, he looked at me speculatively. "So what about Angie?" he said, after taking a draw from the bottle.

"Who?" I said.

"Angie," he said. "That girl you roomed with for a while."

"I don't know who you're talking about," I told him. At that point, something clicked in my head. "I have to go to the store."

"At this hour?" he said, confused. "What could you possibly need?"

"I don't know," I confessed. "I'll know it when I see it."

"What's going on?"

I looked at him. "Why are you acting weird all of a sudden? I told you I have to go to the store even though I don't know what I need there. Is that so hard to understand? What I'm doing is perfectly normal. You're blowing everything out of proportion." I turned and left the room.

I went to the all-night drug store, knowing that I would find whatever I needed there. When I arrived, I got a basket and began searching. Finding nothing in the painkillers, I

moved over to the vitamins. I found my hand reaching for a product designed for hair, skin, and nails. I next discovered myself heading toward the weight loss products. Although I wasn't overweight, I felt a need to lose body mass. I picked out three different products and put those in my basket.

I was in a daze after that. I didn't remember much of anything, but when I got home, I discovered that Jason had gone to bed. I transported the bags to my bedroom and disposed of his empties before going through the loot.

I pulled out the bottles of vitamins and the three weight loss pills – an energy burner, an appetite suppressant, and one with the word miracle in it – as well as shampoo and conditioner called Radiant Redhead, designed to keep a redhead's color looking vibrant. There were some skincare products at twenty bucks a bottle, a hair removal product, and a bottle of pills that, when I looked at it, the words blurred and I had to blink before I could read it: Memory Enhancement.

I smiled. There was no time like the present for getting started on my new health regimen. I opened every bottle of pills and took the recommended dosage from each, then went into the shower and removed the hair from my body and – owing to my skin condition – used the skin care products, then the Redhead shampoo and conditioner, before going to bed.

I began taking the products on a regular basis, without even thinking about it. Nothing happened immediately, but I did notice that after a week, my clothes started feeling loose and my hair seemed to be fuller and thicker.

The next week at work, I started imagining people looking at me, though objectively I knew it wasn't so. It gnawed at me and I began feeling paranoid. Believing I had to get out of there, I put in my two weeks notice and didn't tell Jason until after I quit. Then I lied, saying that I got laid off. The people at work threw me a nice going away party, but I had to hide the gifts. By then, I had lost about thirty pounds and the new hair coming in had a decided reddish tint.

Naturally Jason was outraged. "They let you go, just like that? I thought they were hiring more people."

"Well," I admitted. "Not for what I do."

"Did you get a severance package?"

"A little. Some accrued vacation. I'm not worried about it. I've got some money in the bank and I've got a line on something I can do until I find something permanent."

"Oh?"

There was an immediate opening for a job delivering papers two to three hours a day, seven days a week. There was another job I was almost certain to get, mainly because very few people wanted it. It was cleaning offices after everyone had gone home. Most crews worked from six until midnight, but there was one office building where the cleanup person couldn't start until ten. The guy on the phone told me that the job usually lasted four hours a night. I figured it would be perfect. I'd get out at two and go directly to pick up the papers. By five-thirty, I should be done working and home in time to fix Jason's break-

fast and lunch. Granted, my days would be turned around, but I had grown fearful of meeting people I knew.

It was a little after one on a Saturday afternoon, two weeks after I'd quit my job. I'd just gotten up, and I had a hankering to get some exercise. I'd found a video on Irish Step Dancing earlier in the week; it was proving quite helpful, but with Jason home watching one of his games, I couldn't do it. Even if he wasn't, I still felt uncomfortable exercising in front of anyone, especially Jason.

During a commercial break, Jason turned from the TV and looked at me as I sat reading a magazine that I had found on the coffee table. "What's gotten into you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"That magazine in your hands. Why are you reading it?"

I looked at the cover, noticing it for the first time. It was the July issue of *Cosmopolitan*. "I don't *know* why," I said. "It caught my eye."

"It's like you're really turning into a girl," he said.

"I don't understand."

"I planted that magazine there just to see what you'd do. I also planted that pair of panties on top of the dryer and which are now mysteriously missing. You wouldn't be wearing them by any chance, would you?"

"I don't think so," I said. "I would have remembered if I put them on."

"Well," he said, "I think you are wearing them but you forgot. Just like you're unconscious of so many other things you are doing. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that given the chance, you'd die just for the opportunity to wear these." He pulled from behind the chair a pair of hip-hugging short shorts in a lilac color with a rear zipper, and set them on the table. Then he pulled out a pair of lilac mules with three-inch heels and placed them on top of the shorts.

I immediately hungered for a chance to try them on. I couldn't control myself. "Gosh," I exclaimed, "Those look gorgeous. May I wear them?"

"You have to answer a few questions," he said. "Those panties were not the only article of clothing I planted. You wouldn't know what happened to that flowery top with the spaghetti straps, would you?"

"Uh," I said. "I think I'm wearing it under my shirt."

"I thought so. Why?"

"I wanted to feel what it was like."

"I also left a tube of lipstick in the bathroom. I assume you put it someplace."

"I stashed it in the drawer of the vanity. I was waiting for you to go to bed before I tried it."

"Ah yes, the vanity. Whatever possessed you to buy yourself a vanity?"

"I don't know," I said. "I was passing the used furniture store and I saw it in the window. I couldn't help myself."