

Mesmerize Me

My fifth husband, Fred, started hypnotizing me for smoking addiction therapy, but that slipped into manipulation faster than you might think. The easy part would go something like this: We would be in the kitchen together, making breakfast, and I would be cracking eggs to go into the pan, when Fred would say the key words, “Big Bird,” and I would have to get all excited and ready for sex because he thought that he had me under his trance. I would humor him by going along with it.

The hard part is everything else, which is longer, which goes like this: When Fred got the idea, we had been married for one year, together for two, and we were on that downward slide where we started taking each other for granted, where I got all bitchy and non-responsive, and he would come home from a hard day of telemarketing and get all distant and lost in the TV. If you are on your fifth marriage and are only thirty-three like me, you know how this works, how long you can look forward to passion. We still liked each other, don't get me wrong, but I could see the signs. He got into hypnotism because he saw a Fox special on it, some man walking around a city getting people to cluck like chickens and drink milk when they absolutely hated drinking milk. What he really should have been doing was helping people get over their hang-ups. Imagine the kind of good a hypnotist could do if the FBI parachuted him into the Nazi-skinhead stronghold in Hayden Lake, Idaho. He could pick off hate crimes, one by one, before ropes and automatic weapons ever got into the picture. He should have been using his influence for good, which is what I said to Fred, who said, his eyes on the TV screen, “Some hypnotists do it for good, cure addictions — like smoking,” and he looked at me when he said that last part. I've been smoking for years, a pack a day, depending on the rain, my period, the moon.

Two weeks after the Fox special, I let him give hypnosis a shot. “Now, you've got to be very relaxed,” he said to me as I reclined in our La-Z-Boy, the foot rest up, my bare feet facing him. He had a pocket

watch he picked up at a pawnshop, said he didn't really need it, but he liked the tradition of it, the sentimentality. He had one of his books open to a page for addiction treatment. "Focus your eyes on the watch, see how it moves back and forth," he said, his voice deep and slipping into a rhythm.

But I was already laughing at him and the furrows in his forehead, his intense gaze. He scowled. "We're barely getting started and you're already fighting me. I need your help for this to work."

"I'm sorry. Try again."

But I laughed, I was suddenly giddy with laughter, and his feeling got hurt to he stalked off and said fine, fine, if you want your lungs to fill with tar and choke the life out of your heart, that's just fine with me.

I went after him, touched his shoulders, apologized, and told him he could try rubbing my feet, which always relaxed me.

Back at the La-Z-Boy, rubbing my feet, he said, "When a hypnotist induces a trance, a close rapport develops between the operator and the subject — it's very intimate."

"Mmm," I said. He had been reciting those kinds of lines all over the house, to me, to the bathroom mirror, to bowls of cereal at breakfast, and I knew as much about hypnotism as he did, except he had the lines memorized. I was willing to indulge him, because that's what you do when you love someone, you indulge each other. But let us cut to the chase here: It didn't work. He was very disappointed. Moped around the house, then redoubled his efforts. He'd get up in the middle of the night and go into the bathroom to practice his voice, to practice holding his arm steady as the watch moved in the pendulum's smooth arc. When we tried again, it still didn't work, so I faked it, which isn't hard to do, which something every married woman learns to do every now and then, which is not as bad as it sounds. You would do it too if you were on a downward slide.

Of course, the hypnotism escalated. At first, he'd be telling me how awful cigarettes were for me, that I could stop, that I wanted to stop, and I'd chant with him, and focus on stopping. The next day, I'd smoke one or two in front of him, and several when he wasn't around, and he'd smell it on my clothes, in my hair, and know I was still sucking down way too many.

"We've got to go deeper," he said.

So we went deeper, which really just amounted to morning and

night sessions, for longer periods of time, and he even got me talking to my red blood cells, telling them they didn't need the nicotine. You have to control yourself when something like that is thrown at you — you burst out laughing, or just let slip a lip or eyebrow twitch, and who knows, you might blow the whole thing, foot rubs and all, the intimate attention of your operator gone in a single wisp of humor.

The itch of the addiction just about drove me nuts. I didn't really want to quit, so I could snatch one or two out on the back porch after he went to work, which was selling everything from portable sewing machines to slug and snail repellent, which he hated. And then I'd hustle home from my job, which was medical records for the moment, which was OK. Before he'd get back, I would have a couple more, then shower and do a load of laundry to cover it all up. As far as Fred knew, the hypnotism was working, and it gave him an edge I liked — a small measure of confidence.

But when you get that kind of power who knows how far you'll take it? I don't know how far I could have taken it if our positions had been reversed. If I hypnotized him, he would have suddenly found himself cleaning the toilet and scrubbing the shower. What's the harm in that? There isn't, if you love each other, which is the crux of the whole thing, which is how we got the easy part — the kitchen scene — the part where Fred would say "Big Bird" and I would let my faked hypnosis kick on, forget the frying eggs, and play the role of lusty wife — roll my hips, move my hands through my hair, throw my head back so my neck was open to the world.

I should say that I have cycles. Long cycles, not monthly cycles. I go chinking upward like I'm starting a roller coaster ride and every day just gets sunnier until I get to the top and can see everywhere around me. It's then I realize this is it — anticipation, there's nothing up here but open sky. There's no ride, no loop-de-loop, no twisting spin, no tunnels, no splash through a cool pool of water. It just ends, like I said, all pent-up anticipation and then one big crash, and the crash is huge when there's a husband attached to it. So what I do is smoke and drink coffee by the pot to keep everything smooth. I stay away from alcohol. I take St. John's Wort on the sly. It helps a little, boosts serotonin, which knocks down my sex drive — but I'm more even, more likable overall when I take it, and I can extend that roller coaster climb. The point is, when Fred came home and said he no longer had a job, I didn't do the right thing. I didn't hug him, tell him

that it was all right, that he didn't like the damn job anyway, that he could find something better. Instead, I put my head in both hands and said, "Oh no, oh no," and I meant it. Then I looked at him hard, and asked, "Were you fired or did you quit? Because if you quit, you're not getting unemployment, and then we're really screwed."

"I got fired."

"Why?"

"Wayne said my mind is not on the job anymore."

"What do you mean your mind's not on the job? You call someone, try to sell her the product of the week. You don't need your mind to do that — you have a script."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh boo-hoo-hoo. I'm sorry too."

My first husband, Max, lost his job and couldn't find another, and that's when the pettiness between us really blossomed, dreams failing left and right, and we abandoned our kitty cat in the country because we couldn't afford the food. With Fred, we sold our car and maxed our credit cards and were scraping along like most other people so we could buy our house, the first real home I've ever lived in with a man. Let's just say I was taking a mental inventory of everything we could sell in a yard sale. But that doesn't make it all right that I was mean to him, not just in what I said, but how I said it, my tone, the way I pinned his eyes with mine and then ignored him altogether. I was scared.

It seems like a simple thing, smoking addiction therapy, but there are so many things that should be said to make a story fair, to make it honest. Here is one of those things: When I get to the very top of that roller coaster, it stops being sunny, and I don't know why. The only hint I have when I'm at this peak is that I no longer hope for good things to come. They are all used up. What happens is that I go around wherever I'm living and close all the curtains and lock all the doors, and what I really want to do is find places to hid, starting with my bed, then shuffling, with the big quilt my grandmother made the year before she died, to the kitchen table, which I lay under. I look at the stickers on the bottom and feel only a little protected. Then all the solid wood above me doesn't do it anymore, and I get up and start shuffling around, looking at the closet but not wanting to, but going to it anyway, taking a pack of cigarettes, the quilt wrapped around my shoulders. I throw all the coats out, yank the vacuum cleaner away, and sit down inside the closet and close the door, lighting and smok-

ing one cigarette after another, watching the hot orange ash flare and glow until they are all gone, and I sleep the sleep of a child, my head down, my knees tucked up under my belly, my hands between my legs, my butt in the air — until I wake up in what has to be the morning, my bladder straining. I go sit on the cold toilet, open the bathroom window, suck in breath after breath of cool morning air, and in this way I begin to rejoin the world.

It only took another two weeks for Fred to lose satisfaction in smoking addiction therapy, to start him on the track of Big Bird code words and the idea that he could create a career out of hypnosis. He moped around the house and the public library, studied and ordered his books, and didn't even look for a real job — he ignored my classified ad circles and gentle, guilty prods. Then he went to the barber and got a crewcut like the guy on TV. "I need to expand my range of influence here," he told me, transferring the pocket watch back and forth between his hands, his forehead all round and shiny.

"Oh, no you don't. We have one range here, one mountain," I told him, "and that's smoking."

I reached to take his pocket watch from his hands, but he pulled it back, then relented and gave it to me. "How about I mesmerize you?" I said.

"You already do — but I don't have any addictions," he said quickly. "And besides, I want to start my own practice. I need to hone my skills on the business end of the pocket watch." He took the watch back.

Sometimes I think that deep down I'm a cold person because I laughed at him when he said that, the irony of his inability to put me under on my mind. His jaw got tight, his lips thing, and his face red. His feelings were more hurt than he was angry. "Assuming you can make a career out of this, and that's a big fat if," I said, "I'm not going to do it. I signed up for smoking therapy, nothing else."

"Please."

"Now you're whining."

"Leslie, you're being silly here. You can trust me. I'm your husband, remember?"

"You just want to be on TV. You want to be able to go to the beach and touch women's shoulders and get them to act like fashion models. You want to steal people's thoughts. I can see that in you."

His eyes widened just a bit, and I knew I had him. I love winning arguments. It gets my blood racing. But it seems that whenever

I win an argument with someone I love, I kind of lose, too. I saw his shoulders slump and his eyes fall to the ground, and that moment of triumph slithered away. Fred slept on the couch and we stopped the smoking therapy altogether. We didn't even talk, and soon I was smoking more than before. My second husband, Steve, his game was the silent treatment. With Fred, he was just hurt.

"We're being silly," he said two nights later, coming at me with the pocket watch shining and swinging. "We've got to get back on track." So I let him take me under again, and I worked on convincing my body and mind that I didn't need to smoke, didn't need the rush, the nicotine, the feel of something slender between my fingers, something to do with my hands, my mouth. And this time we added something new, a mantra, a phrase that he and I could say that would unconsciously reinforce everything we did when we were under. The word was wonderful, and it came from the phrase: I am a wonderful person.

I don't know where he pulled that crap from.

So then mortgage time would roll around, and we'd be about ten bucks short, and I'd get agitated and want a smoke, and he'd come put his arms around my shoulders from behind me, kiss the back of my head and whisper "wonderful" in my ear, and I would have to exercise enough self-control to keep from bashing his head in with a frying pan, for better or worse and all that barely holding me together.

A couple days later, he didn't bring me out after we finished the addiction exercise. He talked straight to my unconscious. He said, "Listen, Leslie, making a career out of hypnosis is important to me. I need your help, here, your support, if you can give it to me. So let your unconscious think about it a little, and sometime in the next day or so let me know if you can help."

I thought about that and came to the conclusion that I had to support him. How could I not? Sure, he was lousy at hypnosis, but maybe I was just a poor subject. Maybe he could hypnotize others more easily if he got comfortable with the right phrases, the timing, the cadence in his voice, and the patterns of his breathing. I was afraid of him learning too much about me. Seems silly, but Fred didn't know about angry sex with Richard or Gus's elaborate put-downs. And he didn't know about the closets. Some things no husband should know, for one, and for two, if he found out about the closets he might leave like Max — just a puff of dust in the driveway. Or like Steve, who whipped the closet door open and stood above me naked with bed

hair, asking, “What the fuck are you doing?” before kicking me in disgust as I crouched away from him. Or maybe he would be like Gus, who held me and rocked me, then couldn’t stop joking about it later, again and again, a closet here, a closet there. Or maybe he would be like Richard, who said, “You’ve got to stop this. You’re going to kill yourself in there sometime and the cops are gonna come after me. I don’t need that. Or you’re going to burn the house down, and burn it down with me in it, and I don’t need that either.”

So I told Fred that he could try to hypnotize me into doing odd things just for practice, like that guy on TV, but I said no to any memory regression therapy. “Promise me that and we’ve got a big green go, OK?” The grin on his face, the shine in his eyes, the way he bounced into the bedroom to get his watch — it was worth the risk of giving him this control.

He took me under. “You’re a chicken,” he said. “Cluck for me.”

I clucked like a chicken.

“Bark like a dog.”

I barked like a dog. We went through a barn full of unimaginative animals this way, and I felt so good that it was hard not to smile, to let him know that the attention and focused togetherness felt so damn warm. It was like one big happy game of charades. And then he started in on spiders. “Leslie, you are no longer afraid of spiders. Repeat after me, ‘I am no longer afraid of spiders.’”

I wasn’t exactly afraid of spiders, they just freaked me out, gave me the shivers, and made me feel like legs were crawling all over me. “Next time you see a spider, you will not scream for me to come kill it. You will not call me out of the shower or wake me up from a nap, you will calmly take care of it yourself — and you won’t feel your skin crawl either,” he added. Then he told me to wait where I was. He was going to the laundry room to find a spider behind the dryer, where there was always a big one hiding, it seemed, and just thinking about it sent my skin into spasms. He came back with one in a jar. “When I dump this on the floor, I want you to step on it,” he said. I don’t think he realized that I was still barefoot from his foot rub. I closed my eyes and it squished under the ball of my foot.

Bad things come in the mail, I know. It is our link to things beyond our control. It was a notice from the mortgage company. Our payment was way late, and the next one would be missed, too, and the

letter hinted that something bad would happen if we didn't pay right away. I didn't call the 800 number. Fred didn't call either. As I felt myself falling, this is what I wanted to say to him: Call the number and explain that you lost your job. Tell them you just got another job. Ask them if there's a plan we can get on. But this is what I said: "Wall and explain, Fred, and while you're at it, why don't you tell the person that she's getting very very sleepy, Fred, and tell her to just wait and that we're going to win the lottery, so there's no need to send a lawyer over at all, Fred, why don't you tell her that?"

He said, "It's OK, it'll be fine. Everything will work out just fine. We'll have a yard sale, and we'll sell because it's the right time of year. Everything goes. It'll be fun and it'll work." He said this as we stood together, and he took my face in his hands, an image I've seen but never felt before, total sincerity, and I realized what his major flaw was: He was an optimist, an all-out believer in something better, that good things will come, and maybe that was why I was with him.

We got up before dark and started moving all of our stuff to the front yard. We lugged and dragged the big furniture out, the couches, the La-Z-Boy and the small things too, measuring cups and silverware, Trivial Pursuit, paperback novels, our cloth shower curtain, lamps, and light bulbs and picture frames — two years piled up in front of us. People would think we were getting a divorce, but they would not ask at least, they would just nod and know in their hearts, but it would not stop them from bargaining hard, I knew from experience.

But it was morning, the sky was blue, and I wrapped myself in my dead grandmother's quilt and sat on the couch on the lawn with a cup of coffee warming in my hands as I sucked in cool morning. Fred looked in the house for other things to sell. People started coming, driving by looking and leaving, getting out and going straight for the things that caught their eye, the lawnmower, the power drill, the venetian blinds. The couches sold, the La-Z-Boy, and there was a buying frenzy, and Fred and I were almost dizzy as we took cash, and sometimes checks with a driver's license, a note on the make and model of their cars, the license plates' numbers. We added it up as the afternoon sun started to bake us. Fred's face getting a slow red burn, and flushed, too, with excitement. "We're going to make it," he said. "I know it in my heart."

But everything was slowing down and fewer people showed up, the good stuff already gone. A woman came, in her 50s, and she spotted my grandmother's quilt hanging from the branch of a tree, and she

touched it, said it was beautiful, how much?

I told her it wasn't for sale, but she didn't listen. She took it in both hands and lifted it to her face, breathing deeply. "It smells like cigarette smoke. I'll take it, how much?"

"It's really not for sale." I wanted to tear it from her hands and wrap it around me.

"A hundred? Two hundred?"

It was my grandmother's. I'm sorry."

Fred said, "In desperate times, Leslie, everything is for sale."

"It's not," I said, suddenly not sure whether I was saying it wasn't desperate times or that it wasn't for sale, but my voice was weak, a hoarse whisper.

"Five hundred. That's my final offer. Cash." And she smelled it again, deeply.

Blaming Fred somehow made me feel better, full of energy. "We should not have sold it," he told me. "I was wrong. She paid in cash — if she had a check with an address on it I would go get it back." I believed him, and suddenly my anger and energy was gone and I wanted to sit down, but there was no furniture in our bare house.

"Leslie, look at me."

I looked at him.

"You made me want to have this house. And you make me want to risk it all. I want to sell the house, too. I want to use the money to start a hypnosis career. I can help people, like you said."

I found myself pushing him in the chest and then screaming at him. "You want me to sell our house too? You lose your no-brainer job and we sell everything — everything to keep this home, and now you want to sell it? You and your stupid pocket watch!" I pounded him on his chest, and he backed away. "You're a big dope and you need to go beg for your real job back because if you don't, you will fail and we won't have anything. You will fail, Fred! You've got to know that."

He held his own hands in front of his stomach and backed away shaking his head, and I knew I was finally going to tell him that I was faking it because I was feeling the words roll around and wanting to spill out, my throat was getting tight, but he slid out the front door and all I could say to his back was the we would fail, too, Fred — we will fail too.

I looked around. The walls were bare, the floor was bare, and

there was no table for me to crawl under, no quilt. I found a thin bed sheet that I wrapped around my shoulders. I found my cigarettes. I opened the closet door and it was bare inside, a broken dustpan leaning in the corner. I crawled in and closed the door.

Fred came back. We stayed away from each other as much as we could, hung close to walls and kept the empty space in the rooms between us. We slept on the floor in separate rooms. A day went by, two, and we didn't talk. I didn't want us to end. Fred was an optimist, and that was why I was with him. So when he came out of the shower and hugged me, and said he was sorry, I said I was too.

Sometime later, he started rubbing my feet and said, "I know you're mad and sad, but we probably shouldn't skip this tonight, because if we can kick this habit, we'll have a few more bucks that won't be going for cigarettes." I hated him right then, the bastard, and I almost stalked off, but I let it go, because that's what you do when you love someone, you let things go. Then, when I was under, he told me I was beautiful, sexy, and horny. He told me that I was suddenly very relaxed and again, horny. And the thing was, I was relaxed. And then we started touching each other, and it was all slow and nice, and then he brought me out, told me not to remember what we just did, and I realized what he had just done. It didn't surprise me because I think I suspected it would happen all along, because this was easy — Fred was a man, and every man I've ever known would have done the same thing. And me, if I was the one doing the hypnotism, I might have done it also. I might have hypnotized him into getting it just right, every time, the right rhythm and angles. And anyone else, they would do it, too.

So I let him practice on me in the middle of the living room on the floor, and it was here that he came up with Big Bird. He would rub my feet — I never gave that up — because a good foot rub is the best foreplay of all, even if the sex is delayed until breakfast in the kitchen. But what attracted me all over again was the questions he would ask. What do you want more than anything else in the world? Where did that come from? I didn't know what I wanted more than anything else in the world. And when he asked me something I had to answer fast. Maybe when you're really hypnotized and all your guards are down this stuff comes out easy because your unconscious really knows the answers.

"I want a house, a home, a family, a quilt," I said. "I want to love

and be loved, and I want to be happy at least 80 percent of the time.” I didn’t know if he bought that, and to me, the answer felt soft, easy, safe. I felt small saying it. Shouldn’t I want something larger? To be the CEO of a corporation? To own my own line of power bras and be on infomercials late at night?

“Me too,” he said, and I wanted to hug him for it, but of course, I couldn’t.

“What do you really think of me?”

The question caught me off guard. I didn’t answer.

“What do you really think of me?”

I was unsure how to respond. Should I tell him the truth? Did I even know the truth? Or should I make up something he wanted to hear? But then I saw how vulnerable he was right there in front of me, his legs crossed. He had me under, he had all the power, and suddenly he was scared of me, worried about what I might say. And besides, I realized, can you imagine the courage it takes to ask that question? To know that you’re going to get a straight response? It gave me the shivers all over just thinking about it. It’s not a questions I would have been able to ask. “Leslie,” he said again. “What do you really think of me?”

My answer rushed out on its own, and I wasn’t thinking about the words before they tumbled over one another. “I think you’re stronger than I ever knew before I married you. I think you believe in the good things in people, and that is stronger than the bad. I think you are an optimist, and I love you for it.” And then I added after a tiny pause, “I think that you’ll make a wonderful father.” He jumped at that word, wonderful, when I said it, and he smiled, then pulled me out of the trance, and before I had a chance to get myself oriented, he grabbed my hand and said, “Put your shoes on, baby, because we’re going for beer and pizza!”

We were happy together for awhile, eating on the floor, Fred practicing on me. He didn’t bring up selling the house again, and I was glad every day he didn’t. He made up roles for me to play, and I enjoyed playing his parts. I was a French maid, a dungeon master, and once — which he never repeated thank God — I was Betty Rubble. And yet, it all leads to the inevitable hard part, doesn’t it? The climb, the beautiful day outside, and then you get to the crest and you realize this is all it ever was — anticipation — and of course, the clouds roll in.

The next time he brought up the house, he did it on the sly. We

were standing in the middle of the empty kitchen, and while I was under his hypnosis he told me — commanded me: “You will believe in me and support me and we’ll sell the house and everything will work out fine. Tell me that you will sell the house.”

“I will sell the house.”

“Tell me that you will support me.”

“I will support you.”

“Tell me that you believe in me.”

My stomach knotted up and I said, “Sure baby, I’ll believe in you.”

He twisted back away from me when I said this. Maybe it was my tone that put him on to me, maybe it was the words themselves, but I knew what he was thinking: Maybe she’s been faking it all along. Everything I said would be suspect, good intentions and all that aside, our relationship was held together by a thread of deceit. If our positions were reversed, how would I react?

He told me not to move. He went into the spare bedroom. He came back with a thick sewing needle, the biggest one I had, for rugs and leather. He also had a lighter. He sterilized the needle in the lighter’s flame, then took my needle and placed the needle between my thumb and forefinger. “Take the needle,” he said. “Slowly poke it into the palm of your other hand. It won’t hurt you — you won’t feel any pain.”

I hesitated, then did as he said: The point hit the skin, created an indentation, and broke through, and as I slid the steel into my palm, I started to shake, but then I was bringing the needle out, and blood followed, and I was screaming inside, trying to keep my face passive, my eyes calm.

Fred was sweating through his forehead. He looked at the blood and the need then looked at me and shouted, “Again!”

I did it again, and anyone would be proud of me, standing there and sending the needle back in. He left after that and watching his back walk away was like watching the sun come up. I heard the bathroom door open. A drop of blood hit the kitchen floor. I thought of Max leaving without a trace. I thought of Steve kicking me out. I thought of Gus’s jokes, closets, closets everywhere. I thought of Richard and his cops, of Fred and his needle.

Fred came back, bent over and holding his head in his hands,

sobbing, the kind of sobs where you don't have enough air and you think your chest has stopped working entirely, and I knew this wasn't another test, but a full-blown realization. I just stood there and didn't go to him because I had to maintain the hypnotized position, and my God, that's what really hurt, not being able to go to him.

Later, I tell him that we can sell the house. I tell him that I trust him, that I love him, and that we'll give it a shot, and the thing is, I believe what I'm saying. Fred gets so excited he gets up and does a touchdown dance he's seen on TV, spiking an imaginary football over and over. I agree to this because we're just two people, alone together, no family, no friends, and we're both just reaching for something, scared of what it might not become. If you can't go over the line with your spouse, who else can you go over the line with? And I also say yes because when I'm under, I'm suddenly free, too. I'm being operated and there's an odd released in that feeling, something I never would have suspected or let myself fall into, if I had thought about it too much before it happened. So I'm willing to let him have his small indiscretions with me, to let him whisper Big Bird in my ear. I know him better because of it. There's one word that erases all of the hard parts and it came straight from Fred: Wonderful. As in, you are a wonderful person. And I know that despite my roller coaster theory, the question I should be asking myself is not how long will we last this time, but rather, how far can we go? We are all about anticipation, and that's the way it always will be. What will happen is that Fred will start his own practice with the money from the sale of our home, and he'll find clients who are willing and able to go under. He will hypnotize them and it will work. As for me, I will continue to take my cigarette breaks behind our home and shower it off, and Fred will keep mesmerizing me because it's working. I'm only smoking once a day — I've cut way back.