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CHAPTER 11

MASCINISM AS LIBERATION

"I'm worth it," insists Cybill Shepherd in her brattiest, na-na-na-poo-poo voice as she swirls her blond hair in my face. Since I have to be restrained, physically, from hatching my television set to death whenever this ad appears (and every woman I know has the same reaction), it is amazing to think it actually sells hair dye. But it must, since this campaign has been harassing us for nearly a decade. "I'm worth it" became the motto for the 1980s woman we saw in television and magazines ads. Endless images of women lounging on tiled verandas, or smuggling with their white angora cats while wearing white silk pajamas, exhorted us to be self-indulgent, self-centered, private, hedonistic. In stark contrast to the selfless wife and mom of *The Feminine Mystique*, not to mention those hideous, loudmouthed feminists who thought sisterhood and political activism mattered, women of the 1980s were urged to take care of themselves, and to do so for themselves. An ad for Charles of the Ritz, featuring a gorgeous model dripping with pearls and staring off into space, summed up women's recent history. "I'm not the girl I used to be. Now I want to surround myself with beautiful things. And I want to look beautiful too. I've discovered that it's easier to face the world when I like what I see in the mirror."

By the 1980s, advertising agencies had figured out how to make feminism—and antifeminism—work for them. There had been a few clumsy starts in the 1970s, like the Virginia Slims "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" campaign, which equated liberation with the free-

dom to give yourself lung cancer. And feminine hygiene sprays like Massengill's pictured the product with a political button reading "Freedom Now" and touted the crotch rot in the can as "The Freedom Spray." But the approaches got more subtle and certainly more invidious as America's multibillion-dollar cosmetics industry realized that all those kids who once bought Clearasil and Stri-Dex were now getting something even worse than acne—wrinkles. Here was an enormous market—the women who grew up with, who in fact made possible, a youth culture—now getting old. You could almost hear the skin cream moguls in their boardrooms yelling yippee-kiyo-kiyay.

The appropriation of feminist desires and feminist rhetoric by Revlon, Lancôme, and other major corporations was nothing short of spectacular. Women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts and goals like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires. Women's liberation became equated with women's ability to do whatever they wanted for themselves, whenever they wanted, no matter what the expense. These ads were geared to the woman who had made it in a man's world, or who hoped she would, and the message was Reward yourself, you deserve it. There was enormous emphasis on luxury, and on separating oneself from the less enlightened, less privileged herd. The ability to spend time and money on one's appearance was a sign of personal success and of breaking away from the old roles and rules that had held women down in the past. Break free from those old conventions, the ads urged, and get *truly* liberated: put yourself first.

Narcissism was more in for women than ever, and the ability to indulge oneself, pamper oneself, and focus at length on oneself without having to listen to the needy voices of others was the mark of upscale female achievement. These were the years when we were supposed to put the naive, idealistic, antimaterialistic 1960s behind us and, instead, go to polo matches and wash our hair with bottled water from the Alps. Ralph Lauren, in his ads for sheets and oxford

cloth shirts, used manor houses, antique furniture, riding boots, and safari gear to make us long for the days when the sun never set on the British Empire, when natives (and women) knew their place, and robber barons ran America. Huge museum exhibits celebrated England's "Treasure Houses" and the gowns favored by Marie Antoinette and her pals, each of which represented the work of 213 starving peasant seamstresses.¹ *The Big Chill* suggested that even radical baby boomers had sold out to Wall Street, a move portrayed as inevitable and perfectly understandable.

For women in the age of Reagan, elitism and narcissism merged in a perfect appeal to forget the political already, and get back to the personal, which you might be able to do something about. But let's not forget the most ubiquitous and oppressive anatomical symbol of the new woman's achievement that came into its own in the 1980s: the perfectly sculpted, dimple-free upper thigh and buttock. A tour through the land of smooth faces and even smoother buttocks and thighs makes one appreciate why the women of the 1980s who had reason to feel pride in their accomplishments still felt like worthless losers when they looked in the mirror or, horror of horrors, put on a bathing suit. Of course, these feelings were hardly confined to baby boomers. Nor are they confined to the past. Though I write about what emerged in the 1980s in the past tense, I feel awkward about doing so, because the ad strategies established then are still in high gear, and we watch their effects with sorrow, anger, and empathy. When I go to any number of college or university swimming pools, I see women twenty years younger than I, at their physical peak, healthy and trim, walk out to the pool with towels wrapped around their waists so their thighs will be exposed to the world only for the few nanoseconds it takes to drop the towel and dive into the pool. I have *never* seen a young man do this. Then they go back to the locker room and slather their sweet, twenty-year-old faces with Oil of Olay so they can fight getting old "every step of the way."

Advertisers in the 1980s, especially those targeting women, apparently had a new bible: Christopher Lasch's 1979 best-seller, *The*

Culture of Narcissism. Lasch identified what he saw as a new trend, the emergence of people who seemed self-centered and self-satisfied but were really deeply anxious about what others thought of them. Americans were becoming increasingly self-absorbed, he wrote, but not because they were conceited. On the contrary, Americans were desperately insecure, consumed by self-doubt and self-loathing, and totally obsessed with competing with other people for approval and acclaim. The "narcissistic personality," according to Lasch, was compulsively "other-directed" and consumed by self-doubt, even self-hatred. As a result, the narcissist craved approval and fantasized about adulation. Any sense of self-esteem was fleeting, hinging on things like whether someone looked at you funny or laughed at one of your jokes. This obsessive need for admiration prompted the narcissist to become skilled at managing impressions, at assuming different roles, and at developing a magnetic personality. Narcissists were always measuring themselves against others; being envied, for example, had become infinitely more important than being admired or respected. Narcissists had a strong belief in their right to be gratified and were constantly searching for heightened emotional experiences, for instant gratification, to stave off the fear that life is unreal, artificial, and meaningless. Narcissists were especially terrified of aging and death. Lasch particularly emphasized how the messages and ploys of American advertising had cultivated such narcissistic personalities.

When I read this book, I was struck by two things. First, Lasch kept using the pronoun *he* to talk about the narcissist, and this helped make the trend he was describing seem new. But for women, this wasn't so new, this was the story of our lives, of how we had been socialized since childhood. Second, it was in ads geared specifically to women, especially ads for cosmetics and other personal care items, that we saw advertisers applying, with a vengeance, the various insights of Lasch's book. Under the guise of addressing our purported new confidence and self-love, these ads really reinforced how we failed to measure up to others. Hanes, for example, in a classic campaign, skillfully resolved the tensions surrounding new womanhood

in its series of ads titled "Reflections On . . ." A woman was pictured sitting across the arms of a leather chair, or in a wicker patio lounger, with her legs prominently displayed. She was usually dressed up in a glittery cocktail dress, exchanging smiles with a man in a tux. She was always white. In one ad, the admiring male voice said, "She messes up the punch line of every joke; can tell a Burgundy from a Bordeaux; and her legs . . . Oh yes, Joanna's legs." In another version, the copy read: "She does this flawless imitation of Groucho Marx; recites the most astonishing passages from Hemingway; ah, and her legs . . . Emily's legs."

Joanna's and Emily's nonanatomical achievements were impressive—they knew things only elite men used to know, like how to select a wine, and their favorite writer wasn't Edith Wharton or Alice Walker, it was Mr. Macho himself. They didn't imitate Mae West (too threatening), they imitated a constantly lecherous man. They had cracked the male code, but, because of Hanes, they were still ladies. These women were huge successes at managing the impressions they gave to others, coming across as distinctive, nonconformist women who nonetheless conform perfectly to dominant standards of beauty. They were self-satisfied and self-assured, yet their value came from male admiration and approval. The ads suggested that without inner confidence, and a core self that is assured and discriminating (made possible, one can infer, by feminism), these women would not be the charmers they are today. But without male approval and admiration, they would not have the acclaim on which narcissistic self-esteem rests. It was in campaigns such as this that the appearance of female self-love and achievement was used to reinforce female dependence on male approval. If you wore Hanes, in other words, you would feel the contradictions between feminism and pre-feminism thread together smoothly as you pulled them up over your legs and hips and then strode confidently out into the world.

The cult of narcissism Lasch saw in the 1970s exploded in the 1980s, nurtured by Reagan's me-first-and-to-hell-with-everyone-else political and moral philosophies. Under the guise of telling

women, "You're worth it," advertisers suggested we weren't worth it at all but could feel we were, for a moment, if we bought the right product. Here we were again, same as it ever was, bombarded by the message that approval from others, especially men, means everything, and without it you are nothing, an outcast, unworthy and unloved. We were right back to Tinker Bell and Cinderella, urged to be narcissistic yet ridiculed if it was discovered that we were.

The narcissism as liberation campaign found its happiest home in certain television ads, such as those that sponsored shows like *Dynasty*, and in women's magazines like *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Mademoiselle*, *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, and the aptly named *Self*. These magazines, with their emphasis on clothes, makeup, and dieting, were much more hospitable than *Ladies' Home Journal* or *McCall's*, which acknowledged that women couldn't be completely self-indulgent since they still were the ones responsible for pureeing bananas for the baby and getting dinner on the table at night. *Vogue* et al. didn't contaminate their pages with such gritty reminders of reality, thank God. Instead, they created a narcissistic paradise, a luxurious daydream, in which women focused on themselves and their appearance, and in which any change was possible, as long as it was personal.

Now, before I get on my high horse about cures for what the fashion magazines call "orange peel skin" and subdermal rehydrating systems, let me be perfectly honest about my own vulnerability to these really preposterous ploys. Like a lot of women, I look at ads for things like Elizabeth Arden's Ceramide Time Complex Capsules, little gelatinous spheres that look like a cross between a diaphragm and a UFO, which claim to—"get this—"boost [the] skin's hydration level over 450% after one hour" because they are "supercharged with HCA, a unique alpha-hydroxy complex," and I think—or sometimes yell—would you puleeze get real here. I know that in 1987 the FDA had cracked down on cosmetics ads then in print because they were, to put it euphemistically, inflated in their claims. I know that putting collagen on your skin does nothing. Nevertheless, there's this perfectly airbrushed model, young, beautiful, and carefree, her eyebrows

the only lines on her face, and I sigh a longing sigh. Even when we are fully able to deconstruct these pseudoscientific sales pitches, which would make any self-respecting snake oil salesman blush, there we are, a part of us still wanting to believe that we can look younger and that it's desirable to do so. I don't "read" *Vogue* or *Glamour*, if you'll pardon the masculine metaphor, I enter them. I escape into them, into a world where I have nothing more stressful to do than smooth on some skin cream, polish my toenails, and lie on the beach. But despite these soft spots, I'm here to say that deconstruction can make us strong, so let's be on with it.

In ads for personal care products in the 1980s, especially skin creams, makeup, and perfume, we confronted our ideal selves, eternally young, flawless, confident, assured of the envy of others, yet insulated from the needs of others. The Lutèce Bath, for example, created "your private world of luxury." In these ads, the contradictions that we'd lived with all our lives, the tensions between the need to be passive and the need to be active, were subtly and brilliantly resolved. Usually the women pictured were enjoying leisure moments, or what *Glamour* called "private time." They were sitting alone on their enormous porches, or reclining in beds of satin sheets, or soaking in bubble baths, sometimes with their eyes closed, in a state of relaxation and escape. In one of my favorites, an ad for something called Terme di Montecatini, we saw the profile of a woman at a spa, covered from forehead to rib cage with a kind of mud we assumed would make her even more beautiful while she just rested. Women like this are passive, inactive, supine. Yet make no mistake about it, these women are in complete control: they are dependent on no one, their time is their own, they are beyond the cares of the world, they long for nothing they don't already have. Those symbols of wealth—a huge veranda, the Riviera, art objects, unusual breeds of dogs, the omnipresent glass of white wine—convey comfort, luxury, insulation from the masses, and control.

It wasn't enough to put some Lubriderm on your face—my God, that was like consigning your skin to the soup kitchens of moisturiz-

ers. No, you had to spend money, and plenty of it, to be a discriminating, knowledgeable, accomplished woman. An ad for a product called Oligo-Major lectured, "No woman can afford to be without it." The cosmetics industry employed three main strategies to get women to buy the high-priced spreads for their faces instead of using the cheap shit, Pond's or Nivea—the building construction approach, the haute cuisine approach, and the high-tech approach, all intended to flatter the "new woman." They were designed to convey one basic message: you get what you pay for, and if you scrimp on skin-care products, you get what you deserve—crow's-feet, eye bags, turkey neck, the worst. Fail to spend \$42.50 on one-thirty-second of an ounce of skin cream and the next time you look in the mirror, you'll see Lyndon Johnson in drag.

The building construction approach was best represented by a fabulous new product, Line Fill, a kind of Silly Putty for the face. Line Fill was also called skin Spackle—now we were supposed to think of ourselves as a slab of drywall—and was best used to "fill those character lines we can all do without." In the same age when "character," particularly for male politicians, became an obsession, women didn't dare look like they had any character at all. Chanel's Lift Sérum Anti-Wrinkle Complex relied on Plastoderm, which, despite its name, operated as a kind of hydraulic jack for sagging skin. "Wrinkles," informed the ad, "are 'lifted' by gentle upward pressure." The haute cuisine approach reached its apotheosis with "skin caviar," an "intensive concentration of vitamins, humectants, emollients and plant naturals." The assumption here was that aging skin was merely malnourished, so in a gesture reminiscent of our new heroine, Marie Antoinette, the truly discriminating woman should say, "Let it eat caviar."

But without doubt the most prevalent approach was the high-tech approach, the one that introduced us to "delivery systems," "collagen," and lots of words starting with *micro-* and *lipo-*. What women's liberation really meant was that now the labs of America would turn to our real concerns: our crow's-feet. Science and tech-

nology; those onetime villains that had brought us napalm, the bomb, Three Mile Island, Love Canal, and the Dalkon Shield, were themselves given a face-lift for women. They were rehabilitated as our allies and our minions. Science and technology were the most effective agents of luxurious narcissism, and the various forms of white goop that we slopped on our faces had amazing names that cloaked the products in mystery while keeping supposedly technophobic and techno-dumbo females engaged and credulous.

Here we see another clever twist on feminism. The women's health movement of the 1970s, as embodied in *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, insisted that doctors not treat women like morons but that they talk to us as adults, provide us with information and choices, and give us more control over our bodies. Advertisers said OK, you want technical, medical information, we'll give it to you. They got to have it both ways—they flattered the "new woman" with all this pseudoscientific jargon, suggesting that this was the kind of information she wanted, needed, and could easily understand, and they got to make the goop they were selling sound as if it had been developed at Cal Tech.

In the 1980s, in nearly every cosmetic ad we saw, science and technology were women's servants, and servants not just to expedite domestic chores (as in the bad, selfless old days) but through which women could remake themselves, conquer time, and conquer nature by overcoming their genetic heritage. Here women's desires for more control over and more autonomy in their lives were shrewdly co-opted. Naomi Wolf argues that the high-tech approach sought to speak to women whose work was increasingly dominated by computers and the microchip.² The words *performance*, *precision*, and *control* were used repeatedly, and products such as Swiss Performing Extract or Niosôme Système Anti-Age performed on you (you are passive) while performing for you (you are in command). One product's slogan was, simply, "The Victory of Science over Time." This product, like so many, contained "patented liposomes," which, in case you needed an explanation, were "micro-capsules of select

ingredients of natural origin which fuse with the membrane restoring fluidity, promoting reactivation of cells in your skin." Niosôme produced "an exclusive action, 'Bionimitism.' " This was not supposed to make you think of conjugating spirogyra; it was supposed to make you feel privy to the world of the scientist. It was very important to feature microscopes, women in white lab jackets, and lots of footnotes about patents pending to suggest the weight of a scientific abstract.

As we read other ads for competing products (and there was no shortage of them), a pattern started to emerge. Nearly all the cosmetics companies referred to their products as "systems." These systems "penetrate" the "intercellular structure" of the skin, increasing "microcirculation." Using only the most advanced "delivery systems," presumably inspired by NASA, the Pentagon, and Star Wars, these creams and lotions deployed "advanced microcarriers" or "active anti-age agents," presumably trained by the CIA to terminate wrinkles with extreme prejudice. So cosmetics actually became weapons, and the word *defense* began to proliferate in ads at the same time, interestingly, that the Pentagon's budget was going through the roof.

In copy sounding as if it had been written by Alexander Haig, our skin was put in a bunker or, better yet, behind Reagan's version of Star Wars, as "protective barriers" and "invisible shields" deflected "external aggressors." These muscular products relied on the same high-tech weaponry we saw in *The Empire Strikes Back* and had straightforward names like Defense Cream and Skin Defender. You could almost see Luke Skywalker, backed up by the Green Berets, zapping those wrinkles back to kingdom come. Turning on its head the feminist argument that the emphasis on beauty undermines women's ability to be taken seriously and to gain control over their lives, advertisers now assured women that control *comes* from cosmetics. Cosmetics were sold as newly engineered tools, precision instruments you could use on yourself to gain more control than ever over the various masks and identities you as a woman must present to the world.

But lest all this high-tech talk alienate women, cosmetics firms also made sure to give their products European-, and especially French-sounding names. System was usually spelled *système*; concentrated became *concentré*. Accent signs became essential, as did the pronoun *Le*. Several product names simply went for broke, as in this little gem, Crème Multi Modelanée bio-suractivée, or Lift Extrême Nutri-gène Collagène Concentré. What were brilliantly brought together were the seemingly opposite worlds of advanced, ever-changing, American engineering technology and laboratory science (traditionally the province of men) and the preindustrialist, timeless, beauty-oriented cultural authority of Europe (which caters to women). For new beauty products to sell, it seems, the ads had to refer to and unite recent scientific breakthroughs and the language of engineering with references to France, Switzerland, or Italy. The words *extrinac*, *serum*, and *molecular* suggested both the lab and elements found in nature. Thus Niosôme, from Lancôme, is an antiaging "system" with a French-sounding name that "recreates the structure of a young skin." Cosmetics ads straddled the Atlantic, linking American technology with European culture, and the traditions of the old world with the futurism of the new.

With the union of science and aesthetics, women now could draw from the achievements of men in a world in which science and technology did what we always wished they would do—slow the passage of time, provide us with cost-free luxury and convenience, and allow us to remake ourselves. It was through the female form, and the idealized female face in particular, that science and technology were made to seem altruistic, progressive, relevant to everyday needs, and responsive to women's desires. They were made humane and romantic, and allied with the realms of art, nature, and tradition.

At the same time, the pseudoscientific language not only legitimated cosmetic companies' claims but also assured women that these products were for discriminating, upscale consumers. The new woman was now sophisticated enough and privileged enough to benefit from a scientific enterprise designed specifically for elite

white women. The linking of American science and technology with European cultural authority served to unite narcissism with elitism, to make elitism seem natural, legitimate, and inevitable, and to suggest that if you truly loved yourself, you had to aspire to the privileged, idle, self-indulgent world of the rich, who were the rightful beneficiaries of technology, and the true abiders of high art. Here we had a new kind of magic. How could products that relied on herbal treatments, molecular biology, and chemistry fail to transform us into newer, better selves?

Of course, if you'd been derelict in your moisturizing duties, there were more heroic methods to combat the signs of aging. Article after article touted plastic surgery, so that no woman would ever have to go out in public again looking like Eleanor Roosevelt, Simone de Beauvoir, or Margaret Mead did in their later years. Experts from skin-care labs, their names trailed by twenty-eight initials signifying their degrees and affiliations, happily agreed to interviews for *Harper's Bazaar* and elsewhere, promoting the knife. They always said these really informative and logical things, like that the first part of the body people usually look at is the face, which is why you shouldn't have any lines on yours. So what if, after a few tucks, you were laid up for six weeks and looked like you'd gone eighteen rounds with George Foreman? It was true, some women did experience a little facial paralysis after a lift, and you might not look as Occidental as you used to or have enough skin to smile in quite the same way, but these concerns were all picky, picky, picky. Did you want to look like Cher, or not?

The other intermediate step was promoted in full-page ads by the Collagen Corporation. Here we met Sunny Griffin, "mother, building contractor, and former TV correspondent and model." Already I felt pretty inferior, but it quickly got worse. Sunny was ten years older than I and easily looked ten years younger. Sunny, it turned out, "didn't like those 'little commas' at the corners of her mouth, her crow's feet, or the lines on her forehead. So she did something

about them." But, unlike me, she was a woman of action. She went to a doctor who stuck needles in her face, filling in those hideous lines with "injectable Zyderm" and Zyplast® Collagen." Now those wrinkles were "mere memories." Here were feminism and feminism beautifully reconciled in Sunny Griffin, Collagen poster girl. As a feminist, this superwoman had tackled male jobs and female jobs and combined them successfully with motherhood. This gave her permission to indulge her feminist side, the one still obsessed with little commas and crow's-feet, especially if she took decisive medical action to take control of her face and herself.

In the collagen ad, it was the beautiful, rich, and successful Sunny Griffin versus the rest of us. And that was the other important thrust of the narcissism as liberation campaign, the continuation of the catfight, the war between women. In all these ads, sisterhood was out, competitive individualism was in. It got worse if you actually fell for these ads (hey, I was in my thirties, what did I know?) and went out to buy some skin defender. If you've ever bought anything at a Clinique, Lancôme, or other such counter, you know what I mean. The saleswoman's face is made up like a Kabuki mask to put you off balance right away. And, clearly, all these women were trained wherever that awful secret place is that they train used car salesmen. Using a combination of intimidation, pressure, and highly uncharitable assessments of your existing skin-care regimen, these women sought to shame you into buying everything they had, which could come to the equivalent of a monthly car payment. The worst, and I mean the worst, thing you could say to one of these women was that you mixed products—you know, used a cleanser from one company and moisturizer from another. Then they'd nearly croak from exasperation at your stupidity and your self-destructive tendencies. Didn't you know, these cosmetic lines were *integrated* systems; each component worked with the other components as a unit. Mixing products was akin to putting a Chevy carburetor inside a Porsche engine and expecting the car to run. You'd wreck your face by mixing products;

you had to buy into the entire system or risk waking up one morning to discover your face turning into melting wax.

The notion of sisterhood being powerful seemed a real joke under this onslaught. Fisticuffs seemed more appropriate. It took work to remember that the salesclerks needed these jobs, that many of them were supporting kids with their salaries, and that while we squared off against each other across the glass-cased counter, the big boys upstairs who didn't need face cream were getting ready for their three-in-a-martini lunches and their affairs with women twenty years younger than they.

Tensions between technology and nature, between feminism and antifeminism, and between self-love and self-doubt were played out not only on the terrain of the flawless female face. Everywhere we looked, in the incessant "get-back-in-shape" TV ads and magazine articles, on billboards, in the catalogs that jammed our mailboxes, and in the endless diet soda and cereal ads on the airwaves, the perfectly smooth, toned buttocks and thighs of models and actresses accosted the women of America. They jutted out at us from the new, high-cut, split-'em-in-two bathing suits and exercise outfits, challenging us and humbling us, reminding all women that nothing in the world is more repulsive and shameful than "orange peel skin," a.k.a. "cellulite." They provided women, whether black or white, rich or poor, with a universal standard of achievement and success. They insisted that the rest of us should feel only one thing when we put on a bathing suit: profound mortification.

It's true that we also started seeing more female biceps, and every few months *The New York Times* asserted that breasts were back "in." But, still, it was the slim, dimple-free buttock and thigh that became, in the 1980s and the 1990s, the ultimate signifier of female fitness, beauty, and character. To make sure you couldn't hide them, the fashion industry gave us bathing suits with legs cut up to just below the armpit. Thin, snug models were positioned with their knees bent or their bodies curled so that their superhuman hindquarters were front and center. And not just in *Vogue* or *Cosmo*, either: even in *The Village*

Voice, between the exposés on racism and government malfeasance, ads appeared for products like the videotape *Buns of Steel*, which promised, "Now you can have the buns you've always wanted." Sad-dilebag-busting products like Biotherm appeared, which actually suggested that if you just rubbed some cream on your buttocks, the dimples would go into remission.

Why this part of the body? Why were we suddenly but constantly confronted by these perfectly sculpted rumps? During the mammary mania of the 1950s and '60s, bust creams, exercisers, and padded bras suggested that women could compensate for what nature forgot. Yet while less-endowed women might buy such products, and bemoan their lack of voluptuousness, there was also a basic understanding that, short of surgery, there was little a woman could do to actually change the size of her breasts. The thigh was different: this body part could be yoked to another pathology of the 1980s, the yuppie work ethic. Thin thighs and dimple-free buttocks became instant, automatic evidence of discipline, self-denial, and control. You, too, the message went, can achieve perfect thighs through dieting and exercise. As Jane Fonda put it, "Discipline Is Liberation."³

Emphasis on the thigh, which still harasses us, stems from the fitness craze of the past fifteen years, when increasing numbers of women discovered the physical and psychic benefits of exercise. I learned in graduate school, for example, that if I swam sixty-seven laps in the pool I was less likely to strangle the pompous white male professors making my life miserable, and I'd also sort out some problem with my own work as well. Plus, for inspiration to get off your butt, there were women like Billie Jean King, one of my heroes, a fabulous athlete and a feminist, and the first woman athlete to earn more than \$100,000 a year. When she beat the living crap out of Bobby Riggs in the much touted "Battle of the Sexes" in 1973, as women like me screamed with delight in our living rooms, she not only vindicated female athletes and feminism but also inspired many of us to get in shape—not because it would make us beautiful but because it would make us strong and healthy.

What too many of us forget is that the fitness movement began as a radical reaction against the degradation of food by huge conglomerates, and against the work routines and convenience technologies that encouraged us to be passive and sedentary. The organic health food movement was, initially, at its core, anticapitalist. The women's fitness movement, too, was a site of resistance, as women sought to break into sports previously restricted to men and other women simply sought to get strong. But one of capitalism's great strengths—perhaps its greatest—is its ability to co-opt and domesticate opposition, to transubstantiate criticism into a host of new, marketable products. And so it was with fitness.

Corporations saw immediately that there was gold in them that thighs. The key to huge profits was to emphasize beauty over health, sexuality over fitness, and to equate thin thighs with wealth and status. What had worked so well in the past was to set up standards of perfection that were cast as unattainable yet somehow within reach if only the right product were purchased. So we got a new, even narrower ideal of beauty that continues to bombard us from every media outlet and serves the needs of a host of corporations.

Yet there was much more going on here than just the media capitalizing on a trend or the standard let's-make-'em-feel-inferior-so-they'll-buy-our-product routine. The flawless rump became *the* most important female body part of the 1980s because its cultivation and display fit in so well with the great myth of Reaganism: that superficial appearances really can be equated with a person's deepest character strengths and weaknesses. The emphasis on streamlined rumps allowed for a dramatic reshaping of feminist urgings that women take control of their bodies and their health. All we had to do was listen to Chet in those health spa ads, she'd tell us: thin thighs and dimple-free buttocks meant you worked hard, took yourself seriously, and were ready to compete with anyone. They were indicators of a woman's potential for success. Any woman, so the message went, could achieve perfect thighs through concentrated effort, self-denial, and deferred gratification, the basic tenets of the work ethic. All she

had to do was apply herself and, of course, be a discriminating, upscale consumer. "You don't get this far by accident," proclaimed one sneaker ad displaying a tight, toned rump; "you've worked hard." Another magazine ad, this one for a spa, also spotlighted a machine-tooled hindquarter, intoning, "When you work at it, it shows." Meaning, if you've been slacking off, that will show too. Only "new women" had buns of steel; out-of-date women who had failed to have their consciousnesses raised didn't.

It didn't matter if you were healthy, exercised regularly, and weren't overweight. If wearing one of the new, ultrahigh-cut bathing suits would reveal too much roundness, a little fat (what the cosmetics industry christened "cellulite" in the 1970s), you would be dismissed as slothful and lacking moral fiber and self-respect, not to mention lazy, self-indulgent, insufficiently vigorous, lacking control, sedentary, and old. (The only acceptable sedentary indulgence was to lie on a chaise longue, slathered from head to toe in sludge, à la Terme di Montecatini.) No matter that the female hip area is naturally more fatty than the male (a function of reproduction), or that most women's jobs require constant sitting, two factors that tend to work against developing buns of steel. Over and again we were told that a real woman, whatever her age, would get off her butt and, by overcoming her sloth, not just get in shape but conquer genetics and history. Her buns of steel would instantly identify her as someone who subscribed to the new yuppie ethic that insisted that even in leisure hours, the truly tough, the truly deserving, never stopped working. The sleek, smooth, tight butt was—and is—a badge, a medal asserting that anal compulsiveness is an unalloyed virtue.

Perfect thighs, in other words, were an achievement, a product, and one to be admired and envied. They demonstrated that the woman had made something of herself, that she had character and class, that she was the master of her body and, thus, of her fate. If she had conquered her own adipose tissue, she could conquer anything. She was a new woman, liberated and in control. She had made her buttocks less fatty, more muscular, more, well . . . like a man's. So

here we have one of the media's most popular—and pernicious—distortions of feminism: that ambitious women want, or should want, to be just like men. The woman whose upper thigh best approximated a fat-free male hindquarter was the woman most entitled to enjoy the same privileges as men. Orange-peel skin should be a source of shame, not only because it's "ugly," but also because it's inherently female. It indicates that, as a woman, you aren't working hard enough, aren't really taking responsibility for your own life. You aren't really liberated because you haven't overcome being a woman. A desirable woman doesn't look like a real woman looks; thus, one of the basic physical markers of femaleness is cast as hideous.

Yet well-toned, machine-tooled thighs suggested that women could compete with men while increasing their own desirability. Thighs, rather than breasts, became the focus in the 1980s because presumably everyone, the flat-chested and the stacked, men as well as women, could work toward buns of steel. Women could develop the same anatomical zones that men did, giving their muscles new definition, a definition meant to serve simultaneously as a warning and as an enticement to men. Buns of steel marked a woman as a desirable piece of ass, and as someone who could kick ass when necessary.

What made these thighs desirable was that, while they were fat-free, like men's, they also resembled the thighs of adolescent girls. The ideal rump bore none of the marks of age, responsibility, work, or motherhood. And the crotch-splitting, cut-up-to-the-waistline, impossible-to-swim-in bathing suits featured in such publications as the loathsome *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue could never reveal that other marker of adulthood, pubic hair. So, under the guise of female fitness and empowerment, of control over her own body, was an idealized image that infantilized women, an image that kept women in their place.

The upper thigh thus became freighted with meaning. The work ethic, the ethos of production and achievement, self-denial and deferred gratification was united there with egoism, vanity, self-absorption, and other-directedness. With the work ethic moved from

the workplace to the private sphere, the greatest female achievement became, ironically, her body, her self. The message was that women were capable of remaking themselves and that this remaking required not only intelligent consumption but also hard work. Thus could women be, simultaneously, self-indulgent consumers, buying high-priced exercise shoes and spa memberships, and self-denying producers who were working hard to remake something—their bodies. They could be active subjects in control of their own images and passive objects judged by those images. They could be feminists and new women at the same time.

By the middle of the 1980s, these buttocks and thighs were making me and all the other women I knew really hostile and defensive. Their sleek, seemingly healthy surfaces really demanded that we all be pathological: compulsive, filled with self-hate, and schizophrenic, and we were already schizophrenic enough, thank you very much. Aside from the impossible standards of perfection they imposed, these buns of steel urged women to never stop and to be all things to all people: to be both competitive workaholics *and* sex objects, to be active workers in control of their bodies *and* passive ornaments for the pleasure of men, to be hard-as-nails superwomen *and* vulnerable, unthreatening, teenage beach bunnies. Straddling such contradictions, even on toned, fat-free, muscular legs is, in real life, impossible. And buns of steel were meant to separate the truly classy, deserving women from the rest of the lumpy female proletariat. Buns of steel, like a Pierre Cardin label, were a mark of well-earned exclusivity. Lumpy thighs were K mart thighs, not the thighs of Rodeo Drive.

The 1980s are over, but buns of steel are very much with us, in Diet Pepsi ads, Victoria's Secret catalogs, and women's magazines. A 1993 survey reported that while only 6 percent of women wished their breasts were either bigger or smaller, a whopping 72 percent wished they had "better thighs."⁴ That same year, the cover of *Glamour* promised, in a two-inch headline, "A Better Butt, Fast!" The cover also promised to explain "Why 15 Million Women Own Guns."⁵ I figure it's to shoot everyone involved in the campaign to

make us think we need buns of steel. The article inside, titled euphously enough "The World-Class Butt," accompanied by exercise instructions and an enormous photo of a smooth, sixteen-year-old butt in white eyelet short shorts, lectured, "A toned, firm bottom has plenty to recommend it, as the photo on the right confirms." I also learned that the "flat bottom featured in those beach-blanket movies" was really out. "Now women want a defined, sculpted look with higher, rounder cheeks." Yep, this has been an overarching goal I've wanted to devote a lot of time to in the 1990s. But there's the same old hitch: "You have to work hard to firm them up. So get busy." No need to repeat which expletives I use when reading an exhortation such as this.

So where do these buttocks and thighs leave the rest of us, the real women of America who sit at desks or stand at sinks, who are over sixteen, and who don't have the time, money, personal trainer, or surgical team to help us forge our own buns of steel? Even nonoverweight women, and women who do and should know better, have been worked over so well that whenever we look at ourselves in the mirror or, worse, have to be seen in public in a bathing suit, all we can feel is disgust and shame. But it isn't just shame of our bodies. Buns of steel have taught us to be ashamed of the way we live our day-to-day lives; of the fact that whatever we're doing, we aren't working hard enough; that we don't have that badge of entitlement; that we don't really have enough self-respect and dignity; that we aren't enough like men; and, worst of all, that we're adult females in a culture that still prefers, by and large, little girls. All it takes is the slightest roundness, the smallest dimple, to mark a woman as a lazy, and therefore worthless, unattractive person whose thighs obliterate whatever other admirable traits or impressive accomplishments she might possess.

I'm tired of being told never to stop, and that some physical exertion, like pumping a Nautilus machine, is more valuable than some other exertion, such as chasing a two-year-old. I'm tired of Cher's rump, Christie Brinkley's thighs, and countless starved, airbrushed,

surgically enhanced hindquarters being shoved in my face. I'm tired of being told that if I just exercise a lot more and eat a lot less, I, too, can conquer biology, make my thighs less female, and thus not be eyed with derision. I'm *real* tired of the marquis de Sade "bathing suits" foisted on us by the fashion industry. Most of all, I'm tired of the endless self-flagellation we women subject ourselves to because of the way this latest, unattainable, physical ideal has been combined with the yuppie work ethic.

And I'm not alone. Backlash works two ways, and women, especially cranky women my age, are really getting the fed-up-skis with advertisers' obsession with machine-tooled faces and thighs. I think that catalogs like Lands' End must be making a fortune on this backlash against buns of steel. They sell bathing suits that fit and that you can actually swim in. If you make the mistake of waiting until late June to order one, they're out of stock because furious women all over the country now refuse to try on a glorified G-string under fluorescent lights that make you look like a very fat dead person.

At the same time that we can't exorcise such long-standing inferiority complexes about our bodies, we see women trying to reclaim the fitness movement from Kellogg's, Diet Pepsi, Biotherm, and all the rest of the buttocks and thighs cartel. Women know, in their heads if not their hearts, that buns of steel are not about fitness; they are about pretending that some anorexic, unnatural, corporate-constructed ideal is really a norm. Buns of steel are designed to humiliate women, and to make us complicit in our own degradation, and most women know this too. Silly as they may seem, buns of steel are worth being angry about because of the eating disorders they promote among young women and the general sexism they reinforce in society. So the next time some curled-up rump is forced into your field of vision, view it not with envy but with contempt. For it doesn't reflect hard work or entitlement so much as mindless narcissism, unproductive self-absorption, and the media's ongoing distortion of feminism to further their own misogynistic, profit-maximizing ends. Buns of steel are just another media Trojan

horse, pretending to advance feminism but harboring antifeminist weaponry.

Narcissism as liberation gutted many of the underlying principles of the women's movement. Instead of group action, we got escapist solitude. Instead of solidarity, we got female competition over men. And, most important, instead of seeing personal disappointments, frustrations, and failures as symptoms of an inequitable and patriarchal society, we saw these, just as in the 1950s, as personal failures, for which we should blame ourselves. Smooth, toned thighs and buttocks obstruct any vision of social change and tell us that, as women, personal change, physical change, is our last, best, and most realistic hope. Women are to take control of their bodies not for political or health reasons but to make them aesthetically pleasing. The "new woman" of the 1980s, then, perpetuated and legitimated the most crass, selfish aspects of consumer capitalism and thus served to distort and deny the most basic and revolutionary principles of feminism. Narcissism as liberation is liberation repackaged, deferred, and denied. Again women felt pinioned, trapped in a web of warring messages. We were supposed to work harder than ever; in fact, the mark of success was having no time for your friends, your family, or to yourself. But we were also supposed to indulge ourselves, and to know when and how to kick back, and to do so with style.

Let's take, for example, the politics of the face-lift. Baby boomers with sufficient discretionary income are starting to confront this one, and with the explosion in celebrity journalism, stars' face-lifts and other nips and tucks have become headline news, serving as an enticement and a warning. Cosmetic surgery is being presented as a perfectly natural, affordable, routine procedure, and increasing numbers of women are heeding the call. Cosmetic surgery is growing at a faster rate than any other medical specialty and grosses approximately \$300 million a year.⁶ The decision to get a face-lift or not is, inescapably, a political decision. Getting one means you're acquiescing to our country's sick norms about beauty, youth, and being "worth it." Not getting one means you're gonna tough it out, be

baggy-faced, and take the heat. Actresses and models have no choice. The rest of American women are pulled between these nodes.

But here's what doesn't come out in the war against wrinkles and cellulite: women are as conflicted about aging as they are about other aspects of their lives. For example, when I was twenty and had streaked blond hair, walking down pretty much any street was a nightmare. The incessant yells of "Hey, baby," and other more anatomically graphic remarks, the whistles and other simianlike sounds some men seem to spend an inordinate amount of time perfecting, all these infuriated me and kept me constantly on the defensive. Now that doesn't happen anymore—and I love it. I can walk—no comments; I can jog—no comments; I can walk along the beach—no leers. My eye bags and my "cellulite" are now my friends, my protectors, my armor, and I love them for that. At the same time, part of me will always want to sandpaper them off.

Then there's the love-hate relationship with the eye bags. No woman wants to look like George Shultz after a bad night, but a woman's facial lines are the story of her life. I got mine from pulling too many all-nighters in college, from smoking pot, from drinking tequila with my brother and champagne with my husband, from baking way too long in the sun, from putting in sixty-hour workweeks, from having a child unfamiliar with the concept of sleep, and, of course, from growing older. They've tracked my joys and sorrows, my failures and successes, and I'm supposed to want to chop them off so I can look like an empty vessel, a bimbo? Besides, my husband, who hates it when his favorite actresses get face-lifts and don't look like themselves anymore, likes them. They go with his; they're a team.

So here's the question, girls. And it's one you guys should consider too as Grecian Formula, Clinique, and Soloflex eye sagging faces and bodies greedily. What if every woman in America woke up tomorrow and simply decided that she was happy with the way she looked? She might exercise to keep herself healthy, and get some Vaseline Intensive Care from CVS to soothe her dry skin,

but, basically, that would be the extent of it. Think of the entire multibillion-dollar industries that would crumble. This is one of the reasons lesbians are so vilified—many of them have already made this choice, thereby costing the beauty industry millions. If women decided in the war between feminism and antifeminism being waged in skin-care and diet soda ads that antifeminism had way too big an advantage, women might decide to shift the odds a bit. For example, they might decide to take the \$42.50 for skin caviar or skin Spackle and send it, instead, to the Fund for the Feminist Majority, the International Red Cross, the Children's Defense Fund, or some other organization that works for the benefit of women and children.

The reason this won't happen is that advertising, women's magazines, movies, and TV shows have been especially effective in alienating women from their faces and bodies. Women of all ages, who are perfectly capable of denouncing sexist news coverage, or making their own empowering and subversive meanings out of TV shows and films, find it extremely difficult to resist the basic tenet that a face with lines or a thigh with dimples means you are worthless. The media's relentlessly coercive deployment of perfect faces and bodies, and the psychologically, politically, and economically punitive measures taken against women who fail to be young, thin, and beautiful, have intersected seamlessly with age-old American ideals about the work ethic, being productive, and being deserving of rewards. The "I'm Worth It" campaign and all its allies and imitators co-opt the feminist effort to promote female self-esteem to reassure women that, deep down, they aren't worth it at all. The same women who have been able to find feminist empowerment in the most unlikely places—from Harry Reasoner's editorials to Krystle and Alexis's cat-fights—find nothing but self-hatred and disempowerment here. Of all the disfigurements of feminism, this, perhaps, has been the most effective.