

## KIT REED

### *The New You*



“**N**OW—the New You,” the ad said. It was a two-page spread in one of the glossier fashion magazines, and it was accompanied by a shadowed, grainy art photograph that hinted at the possibility of a miraculous transformation which hovered—so the ad said—at every woman’s fingertips.

Raptly, Martha Merriam hunched forward, pulling at her violet-sprigged housedress so that it almost covered plump knees, and bent once more over the magazine. Raptly she contemplated the photograph, the list of promises framed in elegant italics, absently chewing a string of wiry, dun-colored hair.

In her more wistful, rebellious moments, Martha Merriam forgot her dumpy body and imagined herself the svelte, impeccable Marnie, taller by six inches and lighter by forty pounds. When a suaver, better-dressed woman cut her at a luncheon or her husband left her alone at parties she would retreat into dialogues with Marnie. Marnie knew just the right, devastating thing to say to chic, overconfident women, and Marnie was expert in all the wiles that keep a man at home. In the person of Marnie, Martha could pretend.

“Watch the Old You Melt Away,” Martha read aloud, and as she mouthed the words for the second time Marnie strained inside her, waiting for release. Martha straightened imperceptibly, patting her doughy throat with a stubby hand, and as her eyes found the hooker—the price tag for the New You in small print in the lower right hand corner—longing consumed her, and Marnie took cover.

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"We could use a New You," Marnie said.

"But three thousand dollars." Martha nibbled at the strand of hair.

"You have those stocks," Marnie prompted.

"But those were Howard's wedding present to me—part of his *business*."

"He won't mind . . ." Marnie twisted and became one with the photograph.

"But a hundred shares . . ." The hank of hair was sodden now, and Martha was chewing faster.

"He won't mind when he sees us," Marnie said.

And Martha, eyes aglow, got up and went to the telephone almost without realizing what she was doing, and got her broker on the line.

The New You arrived as advertised two weeks later, and when it came, Martha was too excited to touch it, alone in the house as she was, with this impossibly beautiful future.

In mid-afternoon, when she had looked at the coffin-shaped crate from every possible angle and smoothed the ruffled, splintered edges of wood, she nerved herself to pull the ripcord the company had provided—and let her future begin. She jumped back with a little squeak as the hard crate sides fell away to reveal a black and richly molded box. Trembling, she twiddled the gold-plated clasp with the rosebud emblem and opened the lid.

For a moment, all she saw was an instruction booklet, centered on top of fold upon fold of purple tissue paper, but as she looked closer, she saw that the paper was massed to protect a mysterious, promising form which lay beneath. IMPORTANT: READ THIS BEFORE PROCEEDING, the booklet warned. Distracted, she threw it aside, reflecting as she did so that the last time she had seen paper

folded in this way was around long-stemmed American Beauties—a dozen of them, which Howard had sent her a dozen years before.

The last piece of paper came away in her fingers, revealing the figure beneath, and Martha gasped. It was a long-stemmed American Beauty—everything she had hoped for. She recognized her own expression in its face, but it was a superb, glamorous version of her face, and at the same time it was Marnie, Helen, Cleopatra—more than she had dared anticipate. It was the new her. Quivering with impatience to get into it, she bent over it without another thought for the instruction book, and plunged her arms to the elbows in the rustling, rising swirl of purple tissue paper. The sudden aura of perfume, the movement of the paper, a sense of mounting excitement overcame her, and the last thing she remembered was clasping the figure's silken hands in her own stubby fingers and holding them to her bosom as the two figures, new and old, tossed on a rushing purple sea. Then the moiling sheets of purple kaleidoscoped and engulfed her and she lost consciousness.

She was awakened by a squashy thud. She lay in the midst of the purple tissue, stretching luxuriously, thinking that she ought to get up to see what the thud had been. She raised one knee, in the beginning of a movement to get to her feet, and then stopped, delighted by its golden sleekness. She stretched the leg she knew must be just beyond that perfect knee, and then hugged shoulders lithe and smooth as a jungle cat's in a gradual awareness of what had happened. Then, remembering that the new her was quite naked and that Howard would be home any minute, she pulled herself together in one fluid glide of muscles and got to her feet. With the air of a queen, she lifted one foot delicately and stepped out of the box.

She remembered the line from the advertisement "Watch the Old You Melt Away," and she smiled languidly as she flowed away

from the box. Yawning, she reached in the closet, picked up her old quilted wrapper and discarded it for the silk kimono Howard had brought her from Japan. It had fitted her ten years before, and then it had gotten too small. She looped the sash twice about her middle and then—still not too good to be an orderly housewife—she began folding the tissue paper that seemed to have exploded all over the room, and putting it in the box. As she came to the side where the old her had first touched the gold-plated rosebud, she swooped up a whole armful of tissue in a gesture of exuberance—and dropped it with a little scream. Her toe had hit something. Not wanting to look, she poked at the remaining pieces of paper with a gilded toenail. Her foot connected with something soft. She made herself look down, and stifled a moan.

The old her had not melted away. It was still there, dowdy as ever in its violet-sprigged housedress. Its drab hair trailed like seaweed, and its hips seemed to spread where it lay, settling on the rug.

“But you promised!” the new, sleek Martha yelped. With a sudden sinking feeling, she rooted around in the rest of the purple tissue until she found the cast-off instruction book.

“Care must be exercised in effecting the transfer,” the book warned in urgent italics. Then it went on with a number of complicated, technical directions about transfer and grounding, which Martha didn’t understand. When she had grasped the new her’s hands she had plunged right into the transfer, without a thought for the body she was leaving behind. And it had to be dematerialized at the time of transfer, no later. It was pointless to send botched jobs back to the company, the booklet warned. The company would send them back. Apparently, the new Martha was stuck with the old her.

“Ohh . . .” There was a little moan from the figure on the floor. And the old Martha sat up and looked dully around the room.

"You—" the new Martha looked at it with growing hatred. "You leave me alone," she said. She was about to lunge at it in a fit of irritation when there was a sound in the driveway. "Oh-oh. Howard." Without another thought, she pushed the lumpy, unresisting old her into the hall closet, locked it and pocketed the key.

Then, pulling the robe around her, she went to the door. "Howard, darling," she began.

He recognized her and he didn't recognize her. He stood just inside the doorway with the look of a child who has just been given a soda fountain, listening as she explained (leaving out certain details—the sale of his stock, the matter of the old her) in vibrant, intimate tones.

"Martha, darling," he said at last, pulling her toward him.

"Call me Marnie, dear. Hm?" she purred, and nestled against his chest.

Of course the change involved a new wardrobe, and new things for Howard too, as Marnie had read in a dozen glamour magazines how important an accessory a well-dressed man could be. The Merriams were swept up in a round of parties and were admitted, for the first time, to the city's most glittering homes. Howard's business flourished and Marnie, surrounded by admirers, far more attractive than the most fashionable of her rivals, thrived. There were parties, meetings, theatre dates, luncheon engagements with a number of attractive men. And what with one thing and another, Marnie didn't have much time for piddling around the house. The black box from the New You Company lay where she had left it, and the old her was still stacked—like an old vacuum cleaner, so far as she was concerned—unused, in the closet in the hall.

In the second week of her new life, Marnie began to notice things. The tissue paper around the New You box was disarrayed, and the

instruction book was gone. Once, when she had stepped out of the bedroom for a moment, she thought she saw a shadow moving in the hall. "Oh, it's you," Howard said with an ambiguous look, when she returned to their room. "For a minute I thought . . ." He sounded almost wistful.

And there were crumbs—little trails of them—and empty food containers left in odd corners of the house.

Disturbed by the dirt which had begun to collect, Marnie refused two luncheon dates and a cocktail invitation and spent one of her rare afternoons at home. In slippers and the quilted house coat she had discarded the first day of her transformation, she began to clean the house. She was outraged to find a damp trail leading from the kitchen to the hall closet. With a rug-cleaning preparation she began scrubbing at the hall carpet, and she straightened her back, indignant, when she reached a particularly sordid little mixture of liquid and crumbs, right at the closet door. Fumbling in her pocket, she brought out the key and applied herself to the lock.

"You," she said disgustedly. She had almost forgotten.

"Yes—yes ma'am," the old her said humbly, almost completely cowed. The dumpy, violet-sprigged Martha was sitting in one corner of the closet, a milk carton in one hand and a box of marshmallow cookies open in her lap.

"Why can't you just . . . Why can't you . . ." Marnie snorted in disgust. There was chocolate at the corners of the creature's mouth, and it had gained another five pounds.

"A body has to live," the old her said humbly, trying to wipe away the chocolate. "You forgot—I had a key to the closet too."

"If you're going to be wandering around," Marnie said, tapping one vermillion fingernail on a flawless tooth, "you might as well

be of some use. Come on," she said, pulling at the old her. "We're going to clear out the old maid's room. Move!"

The old Martha came to its feet and shambled behind Marnie, making little sounds of obedience.

The experiment was a flop. The creature ate constantly and had a number of (to Marnie) disgusting habits, and when Marnie invited some of Howard's more attractive business contacts in for dinner, it refused to wear a maid's cap and apron, and made a terrible mess of serving the soup. When she called it down at table, Howard protested mildly but Marnie was too engrossed in conversation with a Latin type who dealt in platinum to notice. Nor did she notice, in the days that followed, that Howard was putting on weight. She was slimmer even than she had been the first day of her new life, and she stalked the house impatiently, nervous and well-groomed as a high-bred horse. Howard seemed unusually quiet and withdrawn, and Marnie laid it to the effect of having the Old Her around, flat-footed and quiet in its violet-sprigged dress. When she caught it feeding Howard fudge cake at the kitchen table the very day she found he could no longer button his tuxedo, she knew the Old Her had to go.

She had a Dispose-All installed in her kitchen sink and began a quiet investigation into the properties of various poisons, in hopes of finding a permanent way of getting rid of it. But when she brought a supply of sharp-edged equipment into the house the violet-sprigged Martha seemed to sense what she was planning. It stood in front of her, wringing its hands humbly, until she noticed it.

"Well?" Marnie said, perhaps more sharply than she had intended.

"I—just wanted to say you can't get rid of me that way," it offered, almost apologetically.

"What way?" Marnie asked, trying to cover, and then, with a little gesture of indifference, she raised one eyebrow. "Okay, smarty, why not?"

"Killing's against the law," the creature said patiently.

"This would hardly be killing," Marnie said in her most biting tones. "It's like giving your old clothes to the rag man or the Good Will, or burning them. Getting rid of old clothes has never been murder."

"Not murder," the old her said, and it produced the instruction book. Patiently, it guided Marnie's eyes over the well-thumbed pages to a paragraph marked in chocolate. "Suicide."

Desperate, she gave it a thousand dollars and a ticket to California.

And for a few days, the gay life went on as it had before. The Merriams were entertained or entertaining day and night now, and Howard hardly had time to notice that the quiet old Martha was missing. Marnie's new autochef made her dinner parties the talk of the city's smarter social set, and she found herself the center of an inexhaustible crowd of attentive, handsome young men in tuxedoes. While Howard had abandoned the old her at parties, she saw little more of him now, because the good-looking young men adored her too much to leave her alone. She was welcome in the very best places and there wasn't a woman in town who dared exclude her from her invitation list. Marnie went everywhere.

If she was dissatisfied, it was only because Howard seemed lumpier and less attractive than usual, and the bumps and wrinkles in his evening clothes made him seem something less than the perfect accessory. She slipped away from him early in the evening each time they went out together, and she looked for him again only in the small hours, when it was time to collect him and go home.

But for all that, she still loved him, and it came as something of a blow when she discovered that it was no longer she who avoided him at parties—he was avoiding her. She first noticed it after an evening of dinner and dancing. She had been having a fascinating conversation with someone in consolidated metals, and it seemed to her the right touch—the final fillip—for the evening would be for the gentleman in question to see her standing next to Howard in the soft light, serene, beautiful, the doting wife.

“You must meet my husband,” she murmured, stroking the metal magnate’s lapel.

“Have you seen Howard?” she asked a friend nearby, and something in the way the friend shook his head and turned away from her made her a little uneasy.

Several minutes later, the metal magnate had taken his leave and Marnie was still looking for Howard. She found him at last, on a balcony, and she could have sworn that she saw him wave to a dark figure, which touched its hands to its lips and disappeared into the bushes just as she closed the balcony door.

“It’s not very flattering, you know,” she said, coiling around his arm.

“Mmmmm?” He hardly looked at her.

“Having to track you down like this,” she said, fitting against him.

“Mmm?”

She started to go on, but led him through the apartment and down to the front door. Even in the cab, she couldn’t shake his reverie. She tucked his coattails into the cab with a solicitous little frown. And she brooded. There had been something disturbingly familiar about that figure on the balcony.

The next morning Marnie was up at an unaccustomed hour,

dressing with exquisite care. She had been summoned to morning coffee with Edna Hotchkiss-Baines. For the first time, she had been invited to help with the Widows' and Orphans' Fund Bazaar. ("I've found somebody wonderful to help with the planning," the chichi Edna had confided. "You'll never guess who.")

Superb in an outfit that could stand even Edna's scrutiny, Marnie presented herself at the Hotchkiss-Baines door and followed the butler into the Hotchkiss-Baines breakfast room.

Edna Hotchkiss-Baines barely greeted her. She was engrossed in conversation with a squat, unassuming figure that slumped across the table from her, shoes slit to accommodate feet that were spreading now, violet-sprigged dress growing a little tight.

Face afire, Marnie fell back. She took a chair without speaking and leveled a look of hatred at the woman who held the town's most fashionable social leader enthralled—the dowdy, frumpy, lumpy old her.

It was only the beginning. Apparently the creature had cashed in the California ticket and used the fare and the thousand dollars to rent a small flat and buy a modest wardrobe. Now, to Marnie's helpless fury, it seemed to be going everywhere. It appeared at cocktail parties in a series of matronly crepe dresses ranging in color from taupe to dove grey. It sat on the most important committees and appeared at the most elegant dinners. No matter how exclusive the guest list or how gay the company, no matter how high Marnie's hopes that it had not been included, somebody had always invited it. It appeared behind her in clothing store mirrors when she was trying on new frocks and looked over her shoulder in restaurants when she dined with one of her devastating young men. It haunted her steps, looking just enough like her to make everyone uncomfortable, enough like everything Marnie hated, to embarrass her.

Then one night she found Howard kissing it at a party.

At home a few hours later, he confronted her.

“Marnie, I want a divorce.”

“Howard.” She made clutching motions. “Is there . . .”

He sounded grave. “My dear, there’s someone else. Well, it isn’t exactly someone else.”

“You don’t mean—Howard, you can’t be serious.”

“I’m in love with the girl I married,” he said. “A quiet girl, a grey-and-brown girl.”

“That—” Her fashionable body was trembling. Her gemlike eyes were aflame. “That frumpy . . .”

“A home girl . . .” He was getting rhapsodic now. “Like the girl I married so many years ago.”

“After all that money—the transformation—the new body—” Marnie’s voice rose with every word. “The CHANGE?”

“I never asked you to change, Marnie.” He smiled mistily. “You were so . . .”

“You’d drop me for that piece of suet?” She was getting shrill. “How could I face my *friends*?”

“You deserve somebody better looking,” he said with a little sigh. “Somebody tall and slim. I’ll just pack and go . . .”

“All right, Howard.” She managed a noble tone. “But not just yet.” She was thinking fast. “There has to be a Decent Waiting Period . . .”

A period would give her time to handle this.

“If you wish, my dear.” He had changed into his favorite flannel bathrobe. In times past, the old Martha had sat next to him on the couch in front of the television, she in her quilted house coat, he in his faithful robe. He stroked its lapels. “I just want you to realize that my mind is made up—we’ll all be happier . . .”

"Of course," she said, and a hundred plans went through her mind. "Of course."

She sat alone for the rest of the night, drumming opalescent nails on her dressing table, tapping one slender foot.

And by morning, she had it. Something Howard had said had set her mind churning. "You deserve somebody better looking."

"He's right," she said aloud. "I do." And by the time it had begun to get light she had conceived of a way to get rid of the persistent embarrassment of the old her and the homier elements of Howard at one stroke. As soon as Howard left for the office she began a series of long distance inquiries, and once she had satisfied her curiosity she called a number of friends and floated several discreet loans in the course of drinks before lunch.

There was a crate in the living room just two weeks later. "Howard," Marnie said, beckoning, "I have a surprise for you . . ."

He was just coming in, with the old Martha, from a date. They liked to sit in the kitchen over cocoa and talk. At a look from Marnie, the creature settled in a chair. It couldn't take its eyes off the coffin-shaped box. Howard stepped forward, brows wrinkling furiously. "What's this?" he asked, and then without waiting for her to answer, he murmured, "Didn't we have one of these around a few months ago?" and pulled the cord attached to the corner of the crate. It fell open—perhaps a little too easily—and the lid of the smooth ebony box sprang up under his fingers almost before he had touched the rosebud catch. The tissue paper was green this time, and if there had been an instruction book nestled on top, it was gone now.

Both the new Marnie and the old her watched raptly as Howard, oblivious of both of them, broke through the layers of tissue paper and with a spontaneous sound of pleasure grasped the figure in the box.

Both the new and the old woman watched as the papers began to swirl and rise, and they sat transfixed until there was a thud and the papers settled again.

When it was over, Marnie turned to the old her with a malicious grin. "Satisfied?" she asked. And then, eyes gleaming, she waited for the new Howard to rise from the box.

He came forth like a new Adam, ignoring both of them, and went to his own room for clothes.

While he was gone, the old Howard, a little frayed at the corners, almost buried under a fall of tissue, stirred and tried to rise.

"That's yours," Marnie said, giving the old her a dig in the ribs. "Better go help it up." And then she presented her face to the doorway, waiting with arms spread for the new Howard to reappear. After a few moments he came, godlike in one of Howard's pin-striped business suits.

"Darling," Marnie murmured, mentally cancelling dinner at the Hotchkiss-Baines' and a Westport party with a new man.

"Darling," the new Howard said. And he swept past her to the old Martha, still scrabbling around in the tissue paper on the floor. Gently, with the air of a prince who has discovered the new Cinderella, he helped her to her feet. "Shall we go?" he asked.

Marnie watched, openmouthed.

They did.

On the floor, the old Howard had gotten turned on its stomach somehow, and was floundering like a displaced fish. Marnie watched, taut with rage, too stricken to speak. The old Howard flapped a few more times, made it to its knees and then slipped on the tissue paper again. Hardly looking at it, Marnie smoothed the coif she had prepared for the Hotchkiss-Baines dinner that night. There was always the dinner—and the party in Westport.

Dispassionately, she moved forward and kicked a piece of tissue out of the way. She drew herself up, supple, beautiful, and she seemed to find new strength. The old Howard flapped again.

"Oh get *up*," she said, and poked it with her toe. She was completely composed now. "Get up—*darling*," she spat.

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