

COSMOPOLITAN

A full-page photograph of Jennie Kim, a K-pop star, posing for the cover of Cosmo magazine. She is wearing a pink and red floral lace dress with a large pink feathered flower accessory on her shoulder. She has long dark hair and is looking towards the camera with a slight smile.

THE STYLE ISSUE

The Charm of Jennie

+

Zara Larsson
Inde Navarrette
Paloma Elsesser
Billie Jean King
Elizabeth Yu
Olandria Carthen
Ben Marshall
R.F. Kuang
Lexi Minetree
Jeff Probst
& More

The Best
Situationship:
Five at
Once

This Dating
Trend Is Up

193%

**Cosmo
Investigates**

Reality Star
Superfandoms

Confessions!

"Can My Relationship
Survive a Swag Gap?"

A black and white portrait of a woman with voluminous, curly hair. She is looking slightly upwards and to the side with a soft expression. Her right hand is raised near her face, and her left hand is partially visible at the bottom. She is wearing several pieces of jewelry: a ring with two diamonds on her right ring finger, a multi-strand gold cuff bracelet with small diamonds on her right wrist, and a delicate gold chain necklace with a single teardrop-shaped diamond pendant. The background is a plain, light gray.

BE

LOVE



PANDORA
LAB-GROWN DIAMONDS

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Cover photographed by
GRAYSON VAUGHAN

Cover styled by
BRANDON TAN

Hair by Evanie Frausto for Redken.
Makeup by Lee Sol at CO-OP. Manicure
by Mei Kawajiri for Chanel Beauty. Set
design by Milena Gorum at Artistry Agency.
Movement direction by Sadie Wilking.

This page: All clothing **Eckhaus Latta**, shoes
Christian Louboutin, brooches **Doyle & Doyle**
and (bottom) **John Hardy**, rings **Ray Griffiths**.

OLIVIA PARKER



FOR BOLD STEPS

SOREL

INTRODUCING

—

THE

ALL-DAY

ALL-NEW

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WP

COSMOPOLITAN

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Editor's Letter

DEAR READERS,

I've always thought of personal style as a tool for self-expression. When I was younger, I'd throw on neon tights, leg warmers, tutus, and sometimes even ties just to go to the grocery store with my older sister. *Could a tie make people see me as a writer? Could a dress transform me into a pop star? Would leg warmers make everyone realize I was a practicing ballet dancer?* The outfits I wore helped define me, but they also served as an escape from the uncertainty of growing up. Style felt like both a refuge and a fantasy.

It's a feeling I kept returning to as we put together this Style Issue and something Jennie, our cover star, also understands. The music phenomenon knows that style is never just about clothing. It's also about emotion and identity—driven by who you are and who you are becoming.

Jennie is on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* and on my YouTube series *Blind Date* during a particularly exciting moment in her career. With the help of photographer Grayson Vaughan and writer Brittany Spanos, we dove into her lore and what makes her the perfect person to represent this moment in pop culture. As Jennie danced around our photo shoot set, moving from backdrop to backdrop, what struck me most wasn't her influence, although there is certainly plenty of it (see: her nearly 90 million Instagram followers). It was that she approaches fashion the same way she thinks about her work, both as part of the K-pop supergroup Blackpink and on her own: with curiosity, precision, and a deep trust in her own instincts. Jennie uses style not so much as an escape but as a way of asking questions: *How do I want to be seen? What parts of myself do I want to reveal? What story am I telling?*

The people in this issue—from Jennie to Paloma Elsesser to Inde Navarrette to Lexi Minnetree—answer those questions in wildly different ways. But they all share a commitment to self-expression and the knowledge that experimenting with personal style can help you become fully yourself.

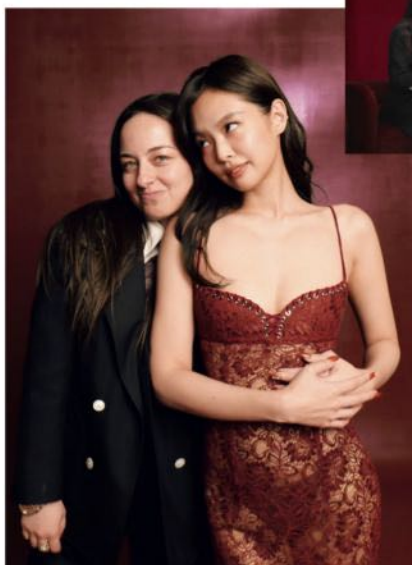
I hope this issue inspires you to trust your own instincts, embrace your own points of view, and remember that fashion is at its most powerful when it reflects something true. The clothes may change as you go, but the feeling of finding yourself in them never really does.

LOVE,

Willa

WILLA BENNETT

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF
COSMOPOLITAN & SEVENTEEN



Jennie and I pretending to take prom photos after her New York City photo shoot and, at top right, sitting down for an episode of *Blind Date*.



MEANWHILE, AT COSMO HQ:

Season 4 of my celebrity interview series, *Blind Date*, has debuted on *Cosmopolitan's* YouTube page!

Have you subscribed to my weekly newsletter *Love, Willa*? Find me at [Cosmopolitan.com/love-willa](https://cosmopolitan.com/love-willa).

We're here to help you explore all facets of your personal style at [Cosmopolitan.com/style](https://cosmopolitan.com/style).



Covers (from top left, top to bottom): All clothing and accessories **Chanel**; jacket **Chanel** from **Pechuga Vintage**, bra and briefs **Chanel**, brooch **Bill Blass** from **eBay**; gown **Roberto Cavalli**; dress **Ludovic de Saint Sernin**; bodysuit **Area**, earrings **David Webb**, bracelet **Verdura**; all clothing, accessories, and jewelry **Chrome Hearts**.

Hair by Evanie Frausto for Redken. Makeup by Lee Sol at CO-OP. Manicure by Mei Kawajiri for Chanel Beauty. Set design by Milena Gorum at Artistry Agency. Movement direction by Sadie Wilking.

BENNETT AND JENNIE: COURTESY OF ARIANNA SHOOSHANI; COVERS: GRAYSON VAUGHAN



COSMOPOLITAN



BLIND DATE



At *Cosmopolitan*, we believe blind dates can be beautiful—so much so that we send our editor-in-chief, Willa Bennett, on blindfolded dates with the internet's favorite people, from Ariana Madix to Rob Rausch. After she guesses their identity, they flirt over cocktails, dive into the *Cosmopolitan* archives to see what readers were up to back then, and answer questions about everything readers want to know now. Want to see who Willa meets next? Scan the QR code for more *Blind Date*.



CLASS ACTS

This fall is all about honoring—and breaking—preppy traditions.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT
Written by JESSICA NEISES

Old-School, New Tricks

Polo Ralph Lauren has always led the prep pack. Stick to tradition in a cable-knit sweater, then add an off-kilter touch with this pup-printed cap.

Sweater, \$498, hat, \$70, and tie, \$125, Polo Ralph Lauren, ralphlauren.com.

Once the exclusive uniform of Ivy League campuses and old-money enclaves, the preppy aesthetic has officially been updated for a new generation, as a fresh class of designers rewrites the dress code established by heritage brands like Polo Ralph Lauren and Brooks Brothers. Take Charlie Beads's cheerful version of your standard plaid skirt or Cleo Camp's canvas tote that trades classic monogram customization for leather and studs. Gap's chambray shirt feels both rugged and refined, while Vivienne Westwood brings a quintessential punk ethos to school uniforms. Go ahead and start mixing the labels you know with the ones you need to.



01. Headband **Machete**, \$60, shopmachete.com. 02. Ties **Hermès**, \$300 each, hermes.com. 03. Jacket **Vivienne Westwood**, \$2,055, viviennewestwood.com. 04. Skirt **Vivienne Westwood**, \$975, viviennewestwood.com. 05. Shoes **J.Crew**, \$198, jcrew.com. 06. Watch **Shinola**, \$360, shinola.com. 07. Shirt **Gap**, \$60, gap.com. 08. Bag **Cleo Camp**, \$288, cleocamp.com. 09. Glasses **Jimmy Fairly**, \$148, jimmyfairly.com. 10. Sweater **Kiel James Patrick**, \$168, kieljamespatrick.com. 11. Belt **J.Press**, \$95, jpress.com. 12. Racket covers **Puebco**, \$58 each, puebco.us. 13. Ambler Mules **Sorel**, \$130, sorel.com. 14. Goddess Amber Vanilla Eau de Parfum Intense **Burberry**, \$190, sephora.com. 15. Bag **Bode**, \$630, bode.com. 16. Cardigan **6397**, \$475, 6397news.com. 17. Skirt **Charlie Beads**, \$118, charliebeads.com. 18. MacBook Neo **Apple**, \$599, apple.com. 19. Socks **Rowing Blazers**, \$18, rowingblazers.com. 20. Loafers **Belgian Shoes**, \$750, belgianshoes.com. 21. Polo Blaze Bag **Polo Ralph Lauren**, \$1,298, ralphlauren.com. 22. Chinos **Jeanerica**, \$330, jeanerica.com.

Suit Yourself

Brooks Brothers pioneered the Oxford shirt and has dressed more than 40 U.S. presidents. Personalize one of its tailored looks with a unique touch, like this leather tie from Coach.

Jacket, \$498, sweater, \$278, and shirt, \$108, **Brooks Brothers**, brooksbrothers.com. Tie **Coach**, coach.com.





Bag Report

Class stays in session at Miu Miu: Take notes on this sumptuous bowler bag in rich caramel, sized for all your reading material.

Vivant Bag **Miu Miu**, \$4,400, miumiu.com.



Elizabeth Yu

She is an actor first, a Beyoncé disciple second, and—despite her portrayal of the villainous Princess Azula in Netflix's live-action *Avatar: The Last Airbender*—not into plotting anyone's downfall. In real life, she's warm, thoughtful, and very funny, as evidenced by her answers to our Cosmo Quiz.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT
Styled by JESSICA NEISES
Written by MAXWELL LOSGAR



Nickname:

♡ LIZZY ♡

Hometown:

LITTLE Egg HARBOR, NJ

Sun + Moon + Rising signs:

LIBRA SUN
VIRGO MOON
LEO RISING

Relationship status:

TAKEN, OFF
THE MARKET,
MARRIED
(NOT REALLY)

An artist on all my
playlists:

BEYONCÉ

Album I'd take with me
to a desert island:

RENAISSANCE
- BEYONCÉ

Biggest red flag in a human being:

SPECIFICALLY NOT
LIKING BEYONCÉ

What I tell myself before
hitting the red carpet:

BREATHE, BITCH!

Best food to order after a night out:

I NEVER LEAVE THE HOUSE
(NO NIGHTS OUT, ☹️
BUT I ♥ TACO BELL)

Movie I can watch over and over:

MOMMIE DEAREST !!!!!

Last TV show I binged:

★ LOVE ON THE
♡ SPECTRUM ♡
★

Avatar: The Last Airbender cast member I'd trust with the aux:

ANYONE BUT ME, BAHHAHA!
BITCH, I STILL GET CRUNK
TO HAMILTON...THEY'RE
SICK AND TIRED OF ME.

Dream dinner party guests:

♡ MY BLOOD AND FOUND
FAMILIES ALL IN ONE PLACE
WOULD BE HEAVEN + KBBQ

If I worked at Cosmo, my job would be...

P.A.? I BROUGHT BAGELS
FOR EVERYONE, LMAO

App that takes up most of
my screen time:

TIKTOK, OBVI

Dream summer
holiday destination:

ITALY

I smell like:

JAKES HOUSE
- HENRY ROSE

Best advice I've ever received:

"DAMN, I FORGOT!"

Last time I cried:

I RARELY CRY,
I'M A COLD-
HEARTED BITCH

You'll never catch me without:

WIRE HEADPHONES

Most strongly held yet unpopular opinion:

PINEAPPLE ON PIZZA CAN
SOMETIMES BE FIRE *shrugs*

Dress **Hervé Léger**, hairpin and earrings
Ariana Boussard-Reifel, rings **Pandora**.
Opposite page: All clothing and earrings **Gucci**.

Hair by Sky Kim at The Only Agency.
Makeup by Mollie Gloss at Forward Artists.



Identity Has Outgrown the Label

Sexuality is becoming less prescriptive and more experimental. And as younger generations reject rigid definitions, *selfhood* is evolving into something more personal, fluid, and self-directed.

By KAYLA KIBBE

Late last year, the dating app Feeld named “heteroflexible” the fastest-growing sexuality of the moment, citing a 193 percent increase in use of the label among its users. The term originally emerged in the '90s as a way to describe straight people who were curious about same-sex experiences. And while the resurgence of an arguably dated label—one that dabbles in queerness while centering straightness—may strike some as a throwback to less progressive times, Feeld sees it as something else: a sign that young people are embracing experimentation beyond the boundaries of set sexual identities.

The idea of sexuality as a dynamic rather than fixed entity is also at the center of another trend, a shift toward something dating app Hinge calls “label fluidity.” In a 2025 report, 28 percent of Hinge daters said developing an attraction to someone outside the gender or gender expression they’re typically into has changed the language they use to express their sexual orientation.

“Some people experience their sexuality to be fluid moment to moment, day to day, or over their lifespan,” says Melissa A. Fabello, PhD, a sex and relationships educator. “And there’s something powerful and necessary about being honest and authentic in how it shows up.”

In other words, it’s about letting your experiences shape (and reshape) how you identify rather than allowing your identity to dictate your experiences. Here’s what a handful of experts have to say about this increasingly fluid future of love, sex, and sexuality.

“Labels were created to offer us clarity around identity and to help other people understand our differences. But when they become restrictive, they’re no longer celebratory. Label fluidity is about having the freedom to update our identities as we learn about ourselves.”

—MOE ARI BROWN,
LOVE AND CONNECTION
EXPERT AT HINGE

“There are a lot of different ways to be bi, be heteroflexible, or explore your sexuality. We’re now more connected than ever with people in the queer community, so I think that naturally leads to more self-discovery.”

—ZACHARY ZANE, SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS
EXPERT AT GRINDR

“Younger generations are much more comfortable with the idea that sexuality is fluid over time and context. We’re seeing more people play with language that keeps the door open for exploration and evolution and that acknowledges variability without forcing someone to squeeze themselves into yet another box. There’s less patience for rigid binaries.”

—CASEY TANNER, CERTIFIED SEX THERAPIST
AND LELO SEXPERT

“We live in a world that tells us *who* to love more times than it teaches us *how* to love. People are tired of labels not doing the work of actually telling us how we can make genuine, authentic connections.”

—MOE ARI BROWN

“Overarchingly, the debate over labels is tired. People use the best language available to them to communicate who they are to others, and language can never capture the complexity of the human experience. The problem is when we take the nuance out of experiences and flatten them. I’ve seen people who experience their sexuality as more fluid make the argument that labels like ‘lesbian’ are no longer necessary. So why are we still so attached to such rigid identities? Because some people *do* experience their sexuality as more rigid—and that’s okay, too.”

—MELISSA A. FABELLO, PHD



“My dream is finally coming true. Women in sports getting more money makes me very happy.”

BILLIE JEAN KING

So much of what's happening today in women's sports—the fanfare, the fandoms, the financial recognition—sits on the shoulders of this woman. The tennis legend, now 82, did the work and made the sacrifices so women could finally have some of the same chances in athletics as men do. “I’m so glad I’m still alive to watch this,” she says.

Photographed by COLIENA RENTMEESTER





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- 6-8 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs
- 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
- Kosher salt & fresh ground pepper, to taste

For safe meat preparation, reference the USDA website.



PALOMA ELSESSER

Wants to Be Your Safe Space

The fashion model and activist is protecting herself—and, hopefully, you.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT ■ Written by AIYANA ISHMAEL

Thirty-four-year-old Paloma, who was discovered on Instagram in 2014, knows exactly how she wants to use her platform of more than 700,000 social media followers. And while she's been an advocate for many causes in her career, this time what she's fighting for is extra personal.

Throughout her teen years, Paloma struggled with alcohol and drug abuse, and in 2019, she lost a best friend to an overdose. The devastating experience was both a wake-up call and the thing that helped shape the next chapter of her life. Now 15 years sober, Paloma tells *Cosmopolitan* she wants to support others battling addiction as she works closely with the nonprofit organization End Overdose to help educate people on naloxone, a lifesaving medication used to rapidly reverse an opioid overdose.

Your honesty around sobriety is beautiful. What is it like sharing your life experiences so candidly?

Vulnerability always begets vulnerability, and it's never a disservice if it reaches a single person. It's obviously scary to be so open, but it's also a privilege to be perceived in a way people can relate to.

How do you tell new people you don't drink? Are you more casual about it, or do you go deep?

I don't overexplain. I just casually am like, "Trust me, you don't want me to drink." If people ask why, I'm totally open, because you don't know who you're going to touch when you share that.

I imagine that navigating friendships in the fashion industry while sober could be complicated.

I always say I like to go where it's warm, go where I'm safe. I want to be safe for other people, be someone that people can feel safe around. But it's hard because the fashion industry is extremely superficial. People glamorize drug and alcohol use, and it's rife with addiction and behavioral issues.

What are people's biggest misconceptions about drug use?

Drug use touches every community, every type of person, from color to creed, background, and finances. I hope that in talk-

ing about its simplicity and its power, people will be like, "Oh, it's not this scary thing." If you're going to even casually do drugs, naloxone should also always be present.

And what are the biggest unseen struggles when it comes to addiction?

It is like an allergy. I don't respond to alcohol like a "normal person." Some people can have two drinks and go home; I can't do that. People see it as a choice, and that really prevents people from getting the help they need.

Can you walk me through what your advice would be for someone who suspects a friend or family member is abusing drugs or alcohol?

You want to give everyone the dignity of their own experience, but it is a dangerous world out there. It's important to be like, "Hey, there is an easier, softer way to do this. Live your life, and if it is something that you're curious about or you're seeing the damage of this in your life, come holler at me." But I think trying to save people prevents them from growth.

What does community look like for you right now?

The relationships I have with other sober women have been powerful. It's inspiring, so healing, so essential to my development. I don't have the privilege of "pouring a drink on top of my feelings," so I need to be able to resource people who can understand that experience. Otherwise, it can be isolating. I also rely on my family and team. I have created a gentle, harmonious system around me.

When I think about sobriety now while looking back at my younger self, sometimes I catch myself saying, "She was more fun." What would you say to those who feel similarly?

I spent my 20s sober. I had to get comfortable in uncomfortable situations. The party girl still very much resides within me. It's my truth: I love the night. I try to engage my childlike wonder as much as I can, because that girl who was out there was fun—but she was also marred with depression. Yet I was fearless, and I want to keep that part of me. I work hard to protect her and what she didn't have. ■





*"I spent my 20s
sober. I had to
get comfortable
in uncomfortable
situations."*

—PALOMA ELSESSER

Ask @WillaHBennett

Cosmopolitan editor-in-chief
Willa Bennett answers all your questions
about love and relationships.

**The guy I've been talking to and I have a noticeable swag gap.
Am I a bad person for wanting to break it off?**

I love this question, because our team spends a lot of time delving into different relationship dynamics, including swag gaps (scan here to read all about them). My answer for you is: No, you're not a bad person. Being concerned about a swag gap doesn't mean you're heartless or shallow. Compatibility *does* matter. That said, swag is subjective, and sometimes when you start catching real feelings for someone, your brain suddenly becomes a private investigator looking for reasons to run. Ask yourself what specifically feels off. Is it really about your different aesthetics or do you just feel vulnerable? Then be honest with yourself and the person you've been talking to.



I just started seeing someone and, while sharing our respective dating histories, I realized I'm completely different from his usual type. Should I be worried?

I wouldn't be. I've always seen a "type" as more of a record of who someone has tried with before rather than a blueprint for who they might love forever. What you should pay attention to is how he treats you now. Do you feel desired and wanted? Is he curious about you and your needs?

Lately, I've had no interest in sex. Is something wrong with me?

Absolutely not. You may just relate to intimacy differently than our culture says you're supposed to. Some people are deeply sexual, some are occasionally interested, and some feel little to no desire at all. What matters more is whether you are distressed by your current state. If your lack of interest feels neutral or authentic to who you are, you may simply fall somewhere on the asexual spectrum. If the change feels sudden, upsetting, or connected to things like depression, medication, anxiety, hormones, or past experiences, it could be worth exploring with a doctor or therapist. Just remember that while the internet loves to pathologize, there is no universal "normal" level of desire.

I've been openly trying to change my partner's style. He seems to be happily going along with it, but am I secretly making him feel bad about himself?

There is a difference between encouraging someone's self-expression and treating them like a project. The important question is whether your boyfriend feels expanded by your influence or corrected by it. If he is genuinely having fun, great. A lot of people like being introduced to new versions of themselves through someone they love. But it can become dangerous territory if you're both not on the same page. Make sure you're still celebrating who he already is, not just who he could be with a new pair of expensive sneakers.

My boyfriend is really embarrassed about his cooked hairline. Is there anything I can do to help?

It's common for men to experience hair loss as an identity crisis, even if their partner still thinks they look handsome. The best thing you can do is avoid treating it like a problem to solve. Try not to over-reassure him every five minutes. Instead, remind him casually and consistently that you are attracted to him. If he wants to talk about treatments, shaving, hats, whatever, let him lead. Confidence usually returns faster when someone feels accepted instead of managed or embarrassed.

My girlfriend is perfectly nice, but I know she's not the one. Should we break up?

You don't have to end it this very minute, but "perfectly nice" is not enough of a reason to stay with someone long-term. One of the hardest parts of dating is accepting that a person can be kind, attractive, emotionally available...and still not be your person. In the past, I've stayed in relationships for too long because there was no obvious problem. But I've found that being with someone out of guilt is its own form of dishonesty. Breaking up with a good person can feel cruel, but it's sometimes crueler to

keep loving someone halfway. The truth is that you don't need a dramatic reason to leave a relationship. Sometimes the absence of a future is reason enough.

I'm looking for outfits that will make me feel sexy on a first date. Any style tips?

I always advise being comfortable. If I spend an entire date adjusting my outfit or worrying about how I look, it takes me out of the present. Seriously, just be yourself. Bring a jacket if you get cold easily. Wear shoes you can actually walk in. Trust me, you'll find it so much easier to flirt, laugh, and enjoy yourself if you feel physically comfortable.

I'm reaching my limit with dating apps. How do I catch someone's eye IRL?

Instead of scrolling through dating apps like a full-time job, try being more present in your own life. Sit at your favorite coffee shop a little longer. Take long walks without headphones. Become a regular at a restaurant. Look around. Eye contact only works if your eyes are actually up! Also, try challenging yourself to use your phone differently: Text three friends this week and ask if they know anyone you should meet. Blind dates are underrated because even when they're bad, they usually leave you with a good story. If it makes you feel any better, I'm right there with you—I host an entire YouTube series about them. Scan here to watch me in action. ■



Have more questions?

Get answers by DMing or emailing AskWilla@cosmopolitan.com.

Fresh Blood

Obsession breakout horror star Inde Navarrette isn't scared of her future.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT ■ Styled by JESSICA NEISES ■ Written by TAMARA FUENTES

Don't let her standout performance in writer-director Curry Barker's film *Obsession* fool you—the 25-year-old actor has more than earned this moment. Back in 2020, she garnered praise for her role as Estela de la Cruz in the final season of *13 Reasons Why* on Netflix. Then she was poised to grow—and go mainstream—with Sarah Cortez, her character on The CW's *Superman & Lois*, but last-minute budget cuts derailed that plan. What could have been a career setback, notes Inde, “was really just divine timing. That disappointment led me to *Obsession*.”

The \$750,000 indie movie became a \$300 million success story, thanks in part to Inde's depiction of Nikki, a young woman compelled

by magic to develop a deadly fixation on a man after he wishes she loved him.

“We never know where Nikki is coming from,” Inde says. “That aids the horror, because one of the most terrifying experiences to go through is to not know a person's intentions.” Her nuanced portrayal, she adds, was based on the fact that she “didn't want Nikki to be quote, unquote insane or crazy. I wanted her to feel like a girl.”

The story spawned cultural discussions about consent and dating in the modern age, and Nikki's facial expressions quickly became memes. Her character has likely secured a place in monster-movie canon, which is thrilling for Inde, who grew up watching scary movies and playing with her aunt's Chucky dolls. “I feel so protective over Nikki,” she says. “I could play her for the rest of my life.” ■





Dress, shoes, and belt **Versace**.

Hair by Davide Perfetti for Amika.
Makeup by Mollie Gloss at
Forward Artists. Special thanks to
Russian Samovar NYC.

Your Cosmic Match

When it comes to sexual chemistry, astrology can help you navigate the driving forces behind your desires and motivations—and find out who might satisfy you the most.

By VALERIE MESA

ARIES

YOUR BEST MATCH IS LEO

Bold and unapologetically passionate, an Aries and Leo combination is just as spicy as it is playful. You find Leos' authenticity and charisma wildly attractive, but you're also extremely drawn to their courage and pride, in part because it provokes your competitive spirit. In addition to being a fellow fire sign, Leos respond to your innate carnality and physical stamina, especially when it comes to the endurance you seek in a lover. This is an alpha-alpha affair with no-holds-barred sex, and you wouldn't have it any other way.



LIBRA

YOUR BEST MATCH IS AQUARIUS

This air sign pairing is nothing short of electric. Your diplomatic approach and eye for aesthetics arouses Aquariuses, and their eccentricities and intellectual quirks make you smitten. And while you typically pride yourself on reading the room, you can't seem to put your finger on Aquariuses' next move. That in itself is a turn-on, as are their vibrant social life and contrarian ways. You both prioritize logic over emotion, but this doesn't stop you from bringing your fantasies to life. Whether in person or via a virtual setting, you'll play along and let Aquariuses take the lead.



TAURUS

YOUR BEST MATCH IS VIRGO

Slow and steady with an equal exchange of giving and receiving, this pairing knows a thing or two about sensual lovemaking. On top of the similarities that come with being earth signs, you can't help but appreciate Virgos' patience, poise, and keen attention to detail. And although being ruled by Venus makes you a natural at the art of seduction, you pride yourself on being hard to get—so much so that you may purposely sit back just to see how far they're willing to go to have you. Good thing Virgos want nothing more than to put in the work. They not only live to serve but will also devote themselves to you fully.



SCORPIO

YOUR BEST MATCH IS PISCES

Deeply mystical and out of this world, the sexual connection between these water signs epitomizes an erotic fantasy. Pisces' ethereal essence and emotional receptivity captivate you in ways you didn't know were possible, and your ability to fixate on this passionate affair is reassuring for Pisces souls. Together, you can easily partake in sex that is tantric and addictive. Pisces can



pick up on your subtle hints, making your fantasies all the more riveting. Their ever-changing nature and artistic musings always set the right mood.

GEMINI

YOUR BEST MATCH IS LIBRA

Buzzing with mental stimuli, this connection is big on banter as foreplay. Libras' indecision is part of their charm, and they unintentionally keep you guessing. The last thing you're looking for is commitment, but Libras' coquettish disposition and socialite status always keep you on your toes. Libras have an eclectic array of interests and connections, which makes them all the more fascinating to you. The sexual chemistry between your two signs is palpable, but the more space you give each other, the hotter it is. Both signs make it a point to prioritize the buildup over instant gratification.



SAGITTARIUS

YOUR BEST MATCH IS ARIES

Everything about this connection thrills you. You find Aries' daring spirit and red-hot passions incredibly attractive, and their overzealous behavior is a big turn-on for you as well. Similarly, your truth-seeking nature and desire for experience light a fire in Aries. Sexually, you two aren't afraid to test your limits, whether in an adventurous setting or in physical endurance. This can be an exhilarating and spontaneous affair; competitive behavior is risky business.





CANCER

YOUR BEST MATCH IS SCORPIO

Your sign and Scorpios have emotionally captivating soul-to-soul connections that take arousal to the next level. You're both keen on secrets, taboos, and intoxicating encounters, but Scorpios' underworld mystique makes them all the more intriguing to you. Scorpios' unbreakable poker face doesn't intimidate you, and their seductive yet dangerous persona lures you in like a moth to a flame, evoking a desire to submit to their spell. Scorpios find comfort in your vulnerability, and the memory of their eyes haunts you forever.



CAPRICORN

YOUR BEST MATCH IS TAURUS

You find yourself enamored by Tauruses' classic beauty, but your attraction goes beyond that. In fact, both of you have similar traditions and value systems, which inspire you to invest in them. You're also keen on taking the lead, which is something the security-seeking bull appreciates, both in the bedroom and in real life.

Physically driven and down-to-earth, you mutually pursue sensuous lovemaking and a desire to be completely present in the moment.



LEO

YOUR BEST MATCH IS SAGITTARIUS

Dynamic and larger than life itself, this fire sign connection is based on energizing reciprocity and strong physical intimacy. The two of you consciously and unconsciously feed off of each other's passions, wanting nothing more than to explore exciting new horizons together—sexual adventures included. PDA makes you swoon, but Sagittariuses take those adoring acts to a whole new level. Whether it be for the exotic scenery or the impromptu thrill of it all, you're taking a walk on the wild side when you couple up with a Sag.



AQUARIUS

YOUR BEST MATCH IS GEMINI

This intellectually stimulating pairing is a perfect friends-to-lovers match. It's undeniably a cerebral connection, but the only thing that turns you on more than Gemini's insatiable curiosity is their sense of mischief. Neither of you is a stranger to the social scene, so you each find a thrill in flirting (or more) in public, where you can revel in the variety of the atmosphere. The sex is wildly creative, but it all starts mentally.



VIRGO

YOUR BEST MATCH IS CAPRICORN

Capricorns' drive and endless pursuit of success inspire you a great deal, but you'll also stop at nothing to give them the pleasure they deserve. You're eager to explore the lust that hides behind Capricorns' sophistication. And when you get the chance, you have the patience and endurance needed to please them sexually, even if this happens to involve a little bondage and submission. Their kinks could include restraints and edging, and you have no problem getting hands-on. While you're both fond of taking things one step at a time, together you'll be devoted and risqué.



PISCES

YOUR BEST MATCH IS CANCER

Pisces and Cancers are soulmates from the very moment you lock eyes. Your desire to merge with each other is always present and intuitively felt throughout your entire relationship. Cancers' ability to remain true to their emotional authenticity stimulates your sexual fantasies. Sexually, your synergy moves to the infinite rhythms of the cosmos, forever making waves. The both of you find secret locations, not to mention manifest alternate realities, where you can make love, passionately and freely. This is a match that is based on feeling deeply—together.





Zara Larsson has had one of the biggest years in pop music. But for those who have followed the Swedish pop star since “Never Forget You,” none of this is a surprise.

Midnight Sun

Photographed by PER FLORIAN APPELGREN ■ Styled by LIEKE BROEKHUIZEN ■ Interviewed by IVANA BATSTRA DONAHUE

HAIR: CHRISTINE MARIE KAT AT AMOY GROUP MAKEUP: SOPHIA SINOT AT THE WALL GROUP PRODUCER: SHANYA VALIES

W

hen she was 10, Zara won the Swedish version of *America's Got Talent* by singing Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On."

The next few years were full of trips to Los Angeles, meetings with Disney and several major record labels, a reality TV series...but little success. Looking back on that period now, Zara says she was simply too young. Still, she never gave up.

In 2012, she officially signed with a label and released EP after EP. And finally, starting in 2015, she began putting out megahits like "Never Forget You," "Lush Life," "Girls Like," and—my forever favorite—2017's "Symphony." Yet even then, she says, she never felt like she was peaking. "I've just always had very big dreams. There's always something new to create. I always want to evolve."

For Zara, standing still is not an option, even if the constant hustle has come with challenges. "In the beginning, everything came so easily," she tells me. "From my first single onward, it just kept going. And then I felt the pressure to keep that up. I started comparing myself to the version of me that was scoring hits. It made me so sad that it didn't come naturally anymore." She ended up in a me-versus-me phase, especially because, as she explains it, "In Europe, I was playing arenas, while in America, I was starting again in clubs. It felt like I had to start over."

It's not that she enjoyed building a new fan base any less. For her, it was another chance to evolve. "I started doing what I wanted again, instead of what I thought other people wanted," she says. When I ask whether she now sees that period as a dip in her career, she answers firmly: "It is a dip, at the end of the day. But that doesn't mean it's the end of it all."

Wiser words have never been spoken, because she came back hard with a new album, the recent *Midnight Sun*, of which she says, "Success doesn't necessarily make you happier. It gives you more opportunities, but I was already happy."

As we chat, it becomes clear how much Zara's music and her personality have gotten more entwined in recent years. Both revolve around color, glitter, happiness, and fun—not just because it works well but because it is genuinely her vibe. In the eyes of her fans, she is basically a human version of a rainbow.

Chances are you've seen the TikToks around "Symphony"—the ones where the song is edited over pretty sunsets, pictures of dolphins, and vaguely existential captions. The internet has officially crowned Zara "Dolphin Girl," a title she has fully embraced. "I saw it going around and thought, *What the hell?*" she says.

That doesn't mean she's immune to the more negative corners of online culture. Zara is on TikTok and likes dropping comments, especially on topics like feminism, human rights, and politics. "At the end of the day, I'm just a girl with something to say. I've always been very outspoken," she says. "I feel very deeply and I genuinely love people. But sometimes things get taken out of context, people misunderstand you, or they just don't want to understand you. But that can't be my problem." To protect her peace, she explains, she doesn't read everything people say about her. "I need to put my phone down often."

She also consciously surrounds herself with people whose vibe and values match her own. "It's not like it's some hard requirement," she says, "but if someone doesn't believe in basic human rights, I can't work with that person. For me, that's not even a discussion—it's just the baseline."

Her team is her safe space. It consists of people she clicks with in terms of humor, taste, and energy—but above all, people who are on the same wavelength. And maybe that is exactly why her activism never feels manufactured. What you see is what you get; there is no filter between who she is and what she shows the world.

When I ask Zara how she would describe herself after all these years in the spotlight and whether 2015 Zara would recognize 2026 Zara, she laughs. "I think she would recognize me," she says. "I'm still the same. Maybe I've actually become more of who I already was back then."

What has changed is her love life. Or rather, the chaos of it. "I'm much less preoccupied with boys," she says. She has now been with her boyfriend for six years and describes the

sense of calm she feels with him: "It's just really great. Love is easy and breezy. I feel safe with him." According to Zara, part of the reason she became an artist was that she was "looking for validation, attention, and love from other people," things she says she no longer needs. "Love has taught me to be gentler with myself. That means I no longer put myself in situations that only bring chaos or drama because I want to feel something. I still love intensely, but I know now that you don't have to be broken first to feel that it's real."

For now, she's happy to stay in and enjoy her *Midnight Sun* moment for a little longer. The dolphins are sticking around too, along with the glitter and colors. "I think I'm only becoming more authentic," she says. "The music leads the way."

What does she want to achieve when she's ready to once again push forward? "A stadium tour," she says with a big grin. "A really crazy production. I want to build an entire universe." She's talking about filling arenas, making people dance, and creating memories with her fans. As she puts it: "Performing is my one true love. Singing is who I am—it's in my DNA." ■

*"At the end
of the day,
I'm just a
girl with
something
to say."*

—ZARA LARSSON

WHAT IF HAVING A ROSTER IS THE RED FLAG?



All clothing **Area**,
shoes **Jude**,
earrings **Swarovski**.

It might sound like a smart relationship strategy, but for me, it was nothing more than a way to avoid intimacy.

Photographed by **RONA LIANA AHDOUT**
Styled by **KAIA CARIOLI**
Written by **ELLA SNYDER**

W

hen I was visiting my best friend in Dallas recently, her mom, Daisy,* told me I needed to be dating “a Rolodex of men.”

Daisy is not one of those moms with unwarranted advice. Once upon a time, she told me, she had been juggling four guys. Then she bumped into Michael,* her now-husband of more than 30 years, in line at Lover’s Egg Roll. The following week, she’d go on to break things off with her four other bachelors and gain a boyfriend she’d eventually build a dream life with.

Daisy, you queen; I wasn’t familiar with your game was admittedly my initial reaction to her story. But as I thought more about it and heard more about her delicious dating escapades, I wondered if her long-term relationship success stemmed from her initial approach to romance.

A true lovgirl at heart, I’ve always been the type to fall in love too quickly, to become enamored with the fantasy I build in my head versus the actual person I’m seeing. Could having a roster, as my peers call it (because what even is a Rolodex?), help me better navigate dating and commitment while protecting my heart? Would building a league of suitors help me eventually connect on a deeper level with one of them? I could get behind that kind of happily ever after.

*Name has been changed.

Intentionally starting a roster while trying to intentionally date presented itself as an absurd paradox.

Back home, I immediately resumed swiping on the apps, hoping to build a lineup of men while also figuring out some parameters. How big should my roster be? How many guys did I need to be dating for it to even be considered a roster? After rewatching a season 3 episode of *Friends* in which Phoebe juggles dating two guys, I decided that my list could consist of as few or as many men as I could manage. So with an I'll-try-anything-once attitude, I approached my roster like a full-time job. And boy, was I working.

I overanalyzed profiles like a hiring manager looking at résumés. I swiped so much, my thumbs felt numb. My nights were consumed with virtual chitchat. I became utterly exhausted simply trying to set up my roster—my social battery is only equipped for so much planning and so many a “getting to know you”—not to mention keeping track of who was who. I can barely handle texting back all of my friends in time, let alone keeping track of multiple conversations, personal details, and faces to match with all of it.

Doubt started to creep in, but with Daisy's directive and fairy-tale outcome ringing in my ears, I continued on and began going on dates.

I grabbed drinks with Dave,* then a couple of days later, I got breakfast with Kai.* Shortly after that, I went to the movies with Jake.* On each of these dates, I had the same conversations again and again, and I quickly realized how inorganic it all felt. Intentionally starting a roster while also trying to intentionally date was presenting itself as an absurd paradox.

Dave was the only one from that group who secured a second date, but the idea of being with him again started to make me feel anxious. How could I keep seeing him, trying to grow an honest connection with him, while also welcoming other new men into my life? For a girl who's only ever been single or in a monogamous relationship, playing the field felt foreign.

Even more off-putting, dating like this made me feel no better than the shitty men of my past, the ones who hurt me and kept me on the sidelines while they kept their own options open. I had once been collateral damage in the same type of scenario I was now attempting to play out.

I started to realize that my desire for a roster might have stemmed in part from an attempt to reject that sideline role in favor of one with main

character energy. Every person I dated could simply be a recurring guest star in the show that was my life. If I was the true protagonist, everyone around me could be “recast” at a moment's notice; my ego never had to bend, and I could be incredibly self-centered without consequence.

In rostering, I never had to be vulnerable, but in turn, I never built true intimacy. And by discarding people as sideline characters, I never had to truly face myself. I could



rotate to the next guy as soon as one started reflecting my own flaws back to me.

If true love requires genuine acceptance and a certain amount of selflessness, then roster dating the way I was doing it is the definition of avoidant attachment, the insecure style characterized by a deep discomfort with emotional intimacy. I started to feel like I was doing something wrong, like my desire to manage a Daisy-level Rolodex was a sophisticated coping mechanism for a lonely digital age. I worried it was functioning as a Band-Aid for my insecurities instead of a solution for overcoming them.

For what it's worth, there's probably a very intentional, loving way to have a roster in which all parties have agency. Many of my friends love dating this way. They thrive with a sense of autonomy and view their overlapping flings as great forms of education that teach them about themselves, what they want, and what they don't want.

Alice,* Daisy's daughter, gave rostering a try around the same time I did. She saw it as a form of speed dating before settling down. At one point, her roster grew to three men she successfully split her time between, and she has since met a man she wants to date exclusively.

Part of me still worries about why a dating style that's become the norm for my generation doesn't work for me. But I know that using a roster as a form of projecting my past experiences onto others just isn't healthy. I've accepted that my version of casual dating does not need to involve more than one guy at one time. And the timing of this revelation worked out, too, because my roster died before I could kill it when Dave ghosted me in advance of our third date. ■

ELLA SNYDER is a model, photographer, and writer living in New York City. When she's not on set, she's in a method acting class or drafting a diaristic entry for her Substack, *Esoteric It Girl*.



More Ella right this way!

Beautiful Brushes



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according to
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beauty editors.

Photographed by
FLORENCE SULLIVAN
Written by
JASMINE HYMAN

FROM LEFT: E.L.F. PRECISION SCULPTING SPONGE, \$7. ELFCOSMETICS.COM; PRADA O3 FOUNDATION OPTIMIZING BRUSH, \$90, PRADA.COM; VICTORIA BECKHAM BEAUTY FAN BRUSH, \$42, VICTORIABECKHAMBEAUTY.COM; DIOR BACKSTAGE POWDER BRUSH N14, \$68, DIOR.COM.

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01. CONCEALERS
 “The angled tip gets into tiny corners, while the dense bristles provide a full-coverage finish that hides dark circles and breakouts.”
 —JASMINE HYMAN,
 ASSISTANT BEAUTY EDITOR
Haus Labs Concealer Brush,
 \$30, hauslabs.com

02. EYESHADOWS
 “This works equally well with powder and cream pigments, and the domed shape helps blend out edges.”
 —BETH GILLETTE,
 BEAUTY EDITOR
MAC Cosmetics 217
 Synthetic Blending Brush,
 \$30, maccosmetics.com



03. FOUNDATIONS
 “Your base only looks as good as the brush you apply it with. This one leaves no streaks behind, only smooth, even skin.”
 —JH
Hourglass Ambient Soft
 Glow Foundation Brush, \$52,
hourglasscosmetics.com

04. POWDERS
 “I use this to dust on every type of powder—brush, bronzer, highlighter. The angled shape applies product with precision, and the soft bristles effortlessly diffuse color.”
 —BG
Rèphr Brush 04, \$35, rephr.com



05. CREAMS AND LIQUIDS
 “This applies cheek products flawlessly. I use the angled side to sculpt with bronzer or highlighter and the rounded side to melt blush into my cheeks.”
 —LAUREN BALSAMO,
 BEAUTY DIRECTOR
Refy Duo 2.0 Brush, \$26,
refybeauty.com

06. FINAL TOUCHES
 “The fluffy, tapered bristles pick up just the right amount of loose or pressed powder for an airbrushed effect with zero caking or patchiness.”
 —LB
Saie The All-Over Powder Brush,
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Photographed by BANG KYU HYEONG ■ Styled by YOO JAE YOUNG ■ Written by BETH GILLETTE



Way back when, a rosy flush, immortalized in Renaissance-style portraits, was a symbol of health and beauty. Today, it has the same effect from your iPhone screen.

Of course, the era of using crushed berries and red sandalwood to add life to your face is long gone, and modern blush products have been around for decades. But this year's big resurgence comes in the form of dewy creams, pigmented sticks, sheer liquids, and soft powders—all seemingly made for the front-facing camera.

Celebrity makeup artist Carolina Gonzalez, who works with often-photographed stars like Sabrina Carpenter, knows this better than anyone. To create a pink, baby-doll glow like Sabrina's, she advises lightly dabbing a cream blush on the

highest point of your cheeks, tapping in circular motions until the edges are invisible. "I build it up slowly, so I have more control over how much or how little I apply," she explains. Next step: Buff the color out with any leftover product on your foundation brush.

If pink is not your thing, Gonzalez suggests trying a blush-bronzer hybrid (aptly dubbed "blonzer") in a caramel shade. And if you need help pulling a full beauty look together, makeup artist Ngozi Edeme, who works with Olandria Carthen and Tyla, recommends going monochromatic.

"It creates harmony and makes everything feel cohesive, soft, and intentional," she says, adding that the effect feels "like it's coming from within rather than sitting on top of your skin." Turn the page to get started with our favorite new picks.





Dress **Blumarine**, gloves
Prada, sunglasses
Gentle Monster,
necklace **Hurjaboy**.



Hoodie and skirt **Kenzo**,
top **Ganni**, tights
and earrings stylist's own,
sneakers **Converse**.

Next page: Hoodie
Onitsuka Tiger, shorts
YCH, socks **Minjiena**,
sneakers **Louis Vuitton**,
hair clip stylist's own,
glasses **Gentle Monster**.

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Armani Beauty
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sephora.com



QUICK STICK

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Kosas Impressionist
Multistick Cream
Blush Stick and Lip Color,
\$34, sephora.com



PRETTY POWDER

Skip the highlighter and just dust on this powder for sheen without glitter.

MAC Skinfinish
Colourstruck Blush, \$34,
maccosmetics.com



DEWY LIQUID

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Nars Insatiable
Liquid Blush, \$36,
nars.com



CREAM COLOR

These creams prove you shouldn't be afraid of bright colors.

Marc Jacobs Beauty
Joystick Buildable
Cream Blush Stick,
\$35, sephora.com



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COULD GLP-1s FIX MY UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH SEX?



I was desperate to blunt the desire that too often tipped into obsession. It worked a little too well.

By JESSICA KEY

I won't pretend the appetite-suppressing effects of weight-loss injections aren't appealing to me. As a woman living in a culture that still treats thinness as a kind of moral achievement, this is to be expected. But weight loss wasn't the real reason I tried a GLP-1 drug.

What really caught my attention were the growing observational reports from doctors and researchers that semaglutide, the active ingredient in many GLP-1 medications, might dampen desire more broadly—not just hunger but cravings of all kinds, including sex. Appetite, after all, is not just about food; it's bound up with desirability, sexuality, and the idea that wanting less is a form of discipline or virtue. We're encouraged to see excess as something

to be embarrassed about, whether that's hunger, emotional need, or lust.

In my 20s, I struggled with alcoholism and drug addiction, and I'm glad to say that at 36, I'm still sober. But getting sober didn't solve all my problems. I've continued to struggle with other compulsions—namely, unsuitable relationships and chasing sexual intensity that tipped into obsession. Sex, for me, often felt less like pleasure and more like pursuit, something fused with urgency. Sometimes, it felt like sex brought me closer to something vital, like I was brushing up against what it meant to really be alive. But it also made me feel like a pinball in a machine, hurtling back and forth between overwhelming desires, and I'd question whether I could really trust the forces that were driving me.

Anecdotal reports on Reddit mention semaglutide helping people with their shopping addictions and debt management, with quitting vaping and curbing other unwanted habits like nail biting. Research into why this happens is ongoing, but experts suspect it's because GLP-1s target the brain's reward system, diminishing the returns we get from compulsive behaviors. *Who would I be, I wondered, without my compulsions, without a constant hunger for validation and intensity?*

I accessed semaglutide through an online pharmacy, navigating the increasingly common gray area of off-label prescriptions. I should say up front that this isn't recommended, and the risks—especially for people who aren't diabetic or obese—are well documented. But it also feels disingenuous to pretend that curiosity like mine exists in a vacuum. We live in a world where bodies are shrinking in real time. Desire is both sold to us and policed, and women are routinely encouraged to control ourselves, just not too obviously.

Inevitably, I lost weight—weight that I've since regained, as I was already at a healthy size for my height and age. But more striking than the physical change was a sudden sense of freedom I hadn't felt since learning what a calorie was at age 16. The quieting of “food noise,” that constant internal negotiation about what to eat and when, is a well-known effect of semaglutide, but feeling it firsthand was extraordinary. I hadn't realized how much mental space was occupied by thoughts of food until, almost overnight, the part of my brain that endlessly calculated calories seemed to switch off. Suddenly, I had energy to think about other things, or, rather, I noticed how little I wanted to chase anything at all. My morning coffee—once sacred and essential—became unnecessary.

Then there was the question of sex. I'd just started dating someone new, and it was going surprisingly well. I worried that semaglutide might dampen the erotic spark of our early encounters at the same time as it quelled the desire for the more destructive sex I'd had in the past. I explained what I was doing and he was supportive, so I decided to bring the drug into our sex life rather than letting it get in the way.

The first night I planned to inject the drug, I greeted him at the door in lingerie. I placed the pen in his hand and opened my legs. A quiet charge passed between us as he cleaned a patch of skin on my inner thigh with an alcohol swab. Then came the brief, sharp scratch of the needle as he pressed it in. Certainly that first time, desire wasn't a problem.

After that, we looked forward to our erotic ritual, but I noticed as the weeks went by, I got less and less out of it. After around a month, sex, even with him, seemed less urgent. Not unpleasant or aversive, just oddly muted, like the volume had been turned down on a familiar song. Desire had lost its sharp edge. It was working but maybe not how I wanted it to. The chaos was gone, but so was the current. I couldn't tell whether I'd cured my compulsion or dulled something vital.

As my desire was fading, I met with a friend—a fellow addict in recovery and someone who had also experienced a compulsive relationship with sex—who was taking semaglutide. I wanted to understand how his emotional and erotic landscape had shifted. He told me that since starting the medication, his mental state had changed so profoundly that he felt almost no craving at all, for alcohol, sex, or external stimulation of any kind. He was, as he put it, completely content with life as it was. I was struck by this and thought of other friends who had spent years in therapy or on meditation retreats trying to cultivate that same equanimity. *What if we could just inject enlightenment instead?*

Naturally, I turned back to Reddit, where I found many users who described a strange emotional flatness, distinct from depression by its lack of negativity. “Not happy, not sad, just kind of nothing,” one wrote. Another person weighed in: “I don't seem to be interested in anything very much. All my desires and impulses seem low-key.” Yet another expressed



I couldn't tell whether I'd cured my compulsion or dulled something vital.

reduction in “not just desire but getting to climax, and suppression of intensity.”

Whatever these people were describing, it didn't seem like nirvana to me. I stopped taking semaglutide after around six weeks because as the cravings fell away, I realized that desire itself—including sexual desire, with all its mess and risk—wasn't the enemy but a part of what makes life textured and real.

Within weeks of stopping, I noticed things returning. Sex with the guy I was dating felt vivid again, like seeing a film in Technicolor for the first time. That's when the distinction became clearer to me: In trying to dull my compulsions with semaglutide, I had dulled my aliveness, too. The destructive edge softened, but so did the generative spark. The drug didn't differentiate between the kind of wanting that erodes you and the kind that animates you.

Perhaps freedom doesn't come from erasing desire but from understanding it, from knowing which kinds sustain us and which consume us. I've since dedicated time in therapy to getting to the root of my compulsions, trying to listen to what they're asking for rather than shutting them out completely. Desire is what makes us human: sexually, emotionally, creatively. The work is not to suppress it but to live alongside it. ■

JESSICA KEY is a writer exploring relationships, desire, and modern intimacy. She is currently working on a novel about growing up online and learning how to love offline.

Timeless Glow

Beauty editor-at-large **Julee Wilson** on why Black women have never needed the fantasy of eternal youth.



Sometimes, beauty culture feels like one giant group chat dedicated to outrunning age. Everyone is freezing, lifting, tightening, dissolving, and trying to prevent wrinkles that haven't even developed yet. The message, a loud and endless "stay young at all costs," is broadcast to *all* women but received by Black women in a unique way—with less panic and more perspective.

Let me be clear: Black women absolutely care about beauty and especially skincare. We love a cream and respect a peptide. We trust a good vitamin C serum with our lives. We are not above some lifting and firming work; we want the glow and we want the bounce. We covet skin that looks rested, moisturized, and unbothered. (I also need to pause here to say that, yes, melanin helps. Black skin often ages differently because it has more natural protection against sun damage and collagen breakdown. But the notion that Black people don't age at all is a myth. Black absolutely cracks; it just tends to happen later and a little more gracefully.)

The difference is that our goal has never been to look like we're trapped in a time capsule. For many Black women, beauty has always been tied to evolution, not preservation. Plenty of our beauty inspirations aren't impossibly-young-for-their-age-looking women.

They are grown humans who look flyer as time goes by. I'm talking about icons like Nia Long, Halle Berry, Gabrielle Union, Tracee Ellis Ross, and most definitely her mama, Diana Ross. All of them look powerful, glamorous, and deeply themselves. None of them make me dread the aging that comes with another year on Earth.

There's so much wisdom and reverence in this perspective. Because when you grow up seeing women of a certain age being celebrated instead of erased, aging feels less like a crisis and more like a continuation. It becomes something to work with, not against. The group chat shifts from "How do I look younger?" to "How do I look my best right now?"

I want everyone to buy their lotions and potions—check out a few of my favorites on the next page—and lean into feeling fabulous without losing their minds over a forehead crease. Let's internalize a little of what I've learned from the older Black women in my life: that every version of myself will always and forever be that girl. ■

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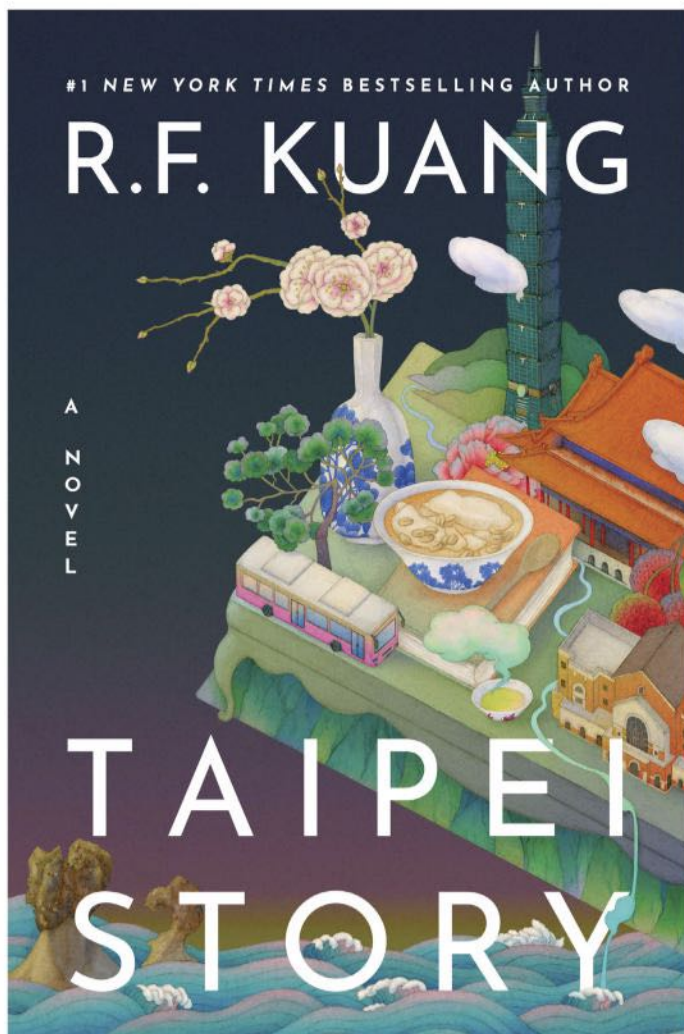


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Who Gets to Belong?

Award-winning author R.F. Kuang is back with a new coming-of-age story that follows a college student on a summer abroad. Here, she annotates an exclusive excerpt and goes deep on the power of language and belonging.

Interviewed by TAMARA FUENTES

What was the spark for this novel: plot, character, or setting?

Setting. A lot of my books are inspired by places I find myself in at different points of my life. I was in Taipei a few years ago when my grandfather passed away. I had a summer where I was ruminating on questions of language and identity and grief. I wanted to convey a very strong sense of being out of place and out of touch and feeling like you don't belong.

The book uses Chinese language characters, but their translations seem to give more context on how your protagonist, Lily, is learning the language versus their exact meaning. How did you land on this setup?

There's deliberate engagement with all of the Chinese text that bridges the distance between the reader, who has no idea what it says, and Lily, who has some idea of what it says. Lily is the character doing the work of looking things up and often coming to the wrong conclusions about what certain phrases mean. I was trying to give an accurate representation of what moving through Taipei would have been like for her as she encounters phrases she has no idea what to do with.

Lily is trying—and struggling—to reconnect with her family via a second language. That's very relatable to plenty of people.

We have this strict idea that language is tied to ethnicity and heritage. I'm really interested in immigrant shame and shame over fluency.

Maybe it's an American way of thinking, but it does feel like a weakness when you reveal that you're not fluent in a language that you're expected to know.

It might be more of a social media thing. There is such a fear of making mistakes and a drive to always seem perfect and polished—to have the cultural authority to tell everybody what's what—that we don't make space for the messy and productive and generative encounters. We don't have a type of popular culture where we really like people to try again. A lot of people carry a secret shame and embarrassment around with them, and it operates as this barrier to ever reaching out or having those awkward conversations.

At the start of the book, Lily says that she's a different person when she's speaking Chinese than when she's speaking English. Have you ever felt similarly?

There's a slow convergence of the person you are with the language you're most comfortable in and the one that you're learning. At the start of my own program in Taipei, my English self was the self where I was really confident and thoughtful and funny. But in Chinese, I was like, "I'm just doing my best." Then over time, my teachers were like, "Oh, you're actually really funny." There's something essential about you that moves between cultural worlds and it feels really nice when you finally get to show yourself for who you are. ■



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In this scene Lily is talking to Paolo, one of her classmates, about whether speaking Chinese makes them more/less honest.

Paolo told me about a theory he was developing: that you couldn't lie in a language that you weren't good at.

"Think about it," he said. "Do you ever lie in class? Even about sensitive topics?"

I had to discuss sensitive topics in class all the time. In Thought and Society, Teacher Cai was always asking us to express our opinions on various matters: whether health care should be privatized, whether the government should give women incentives to get pregnant. And I did, in fact, always try to tell the truth, even if I had to dumb down my opinion from "reproductive justice affects women in every stratum of society" to "childbirth is really hard." I suppose I could have lied. But this seemed like extra work: First you had to make up an opinion you didn't believe in, and then you had to find the Chinese words to match.

Paolo said this wasn't what he meant. His point was rather that a low language level restored in you the naivete and innocence of a child. If your language patterns were blunt and straightforward, then so too were your thoughts. For instance, whenever he introduced himself, he said that his hobbies were films and literature. His Chinese wasn't good enough to signal taste or pretension—he only had those basic building blocks. He didn't know how to say "German expressionism" (though now he knew, because he had looked it up).

I asked him how this squared with his mission to use language as a shield. He admitted this disturbed him. "It is greater motivation to achieve fluency," he said. "Until I can manipulate language in such a way as to hide my thoughts"—and the word he used for "manipulate" was the word for "knead," like kneading pizza dough—"I will remain vulnerable."

Maybe that was the problem between me and Anna. We couldn't hide anything from each other. We couldn't even be tactful, let alone deceitful. We each knew what the other wanted, and we wanted those things too much, and that was fatal.

I've always felt this way in my own Japanese classes. I feel so honest and transparent.

Both true!
But I did once default to "pregnancy is very scary" to ward off well-meaning aunts.

is fluency when you can be a snob?

Paolo keeps diaries in other languages to hide his thoughts from his parents.

I love Paolo. He's such a weirdo—based on a classmate I had in Venice.

I think all the time about how language lets us show or hide ourselves. Sometimes lack of fluency is a shield—you can demur or pretend you don't understand.

I do feel this in Chinese, though likely because the last time I was 100% in Chinese I was five!

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Anna is Lily's roommate. They're fighting because they can say too much!

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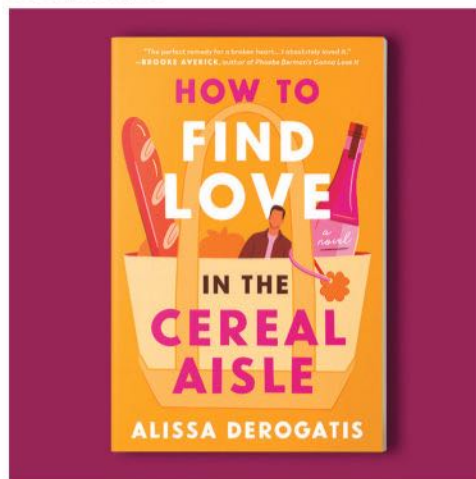


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Like JENNIE

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JENNIE IS OUT OF TIME.

"Honestly, it's not on my side," she says with a sense of urgency. It's spring and she's in L.A., where she's been recording her sophomore solo album. "I'm constantly in the studio. My fingers are crossed to have music out for the summer festivals."

Those include the Mad Cool Festival in Spain, Lollapalooza in Chicago, and Summer Sonic in Japan, where she'll headline just as Jennie, separate from the K-pop group Blackpink that made her a household name across much of the world. Weeks after we chat, the internet would be in a frenzy over videos of Jennie performing unreleased songs like "Lock It Down" at a Chanel show after-party in South Korea and "Little Less" and "Heaven" at Governors Ball in New York City. Gleeful speculation about what else might appear on the new album would run rampant. But for now, as we talk, with Jennie both in the studio and preparing for months of performances, it's clear she's feeling the pressure.

It's a familiar sentiment: Jennie has lived in a go, go, go state for the past decade. Blackpink debuted in 2016, and the nonstop nature of their work ethic paid off. The group currently has more than 40 billion streams and has sold more than 20 million albums—they're not just one of the most successful K-pop acts to cross over into the Western market but one of the best-selling girl groups of all time. Blackpink's most recent EP, February's *Deadline*, coincided with the end of a 2025 global stadium tour—and that was *after* Jennie had released and toured for her first solo project, *Ruby*, in the spring of 2025.

"Being honest, it was a crazy year for me, the past year," Jennie says. "I never had the time to sit down, adapt, and really embrace what *Ruby* did for

me." The album was an audacious invitation into Jennie's personal musical world, praised by critics for its brash, unapologetic, and experimental sound. With features from Dua Lipa, Kali Uchis, Doechii, and more, *Ruby* quickly hit number 7 on the Billboard 200 and had multiple singles, including the bombastic "Like Jennie" and "Mantra," on the Billboard Hot 100.

The success gave her confidence, Jennie tells me now, but it also fed her hunger for more—and spiked the appetite of her ever-growing fan base. Put simply, there are *many* people anticipating what's next. Jennie has accumulated nearly 90 million followers on Instagram alone, to say nothing of her fervent communities on fan platforms like Weverse. (For context, pop sensations like Olivia Rodrigo and Sabrina Carpenter have around 41 million and 51 million Instagram followers, respectively.)

Jennie is also itching to show people what else she can do. She acted in HBO's drama *The Idol* and is a regular at the Met Gala, where, soon after we speak, she would walk the steps in a custom Chanel gown made of 15,000 sequins. Somehow, she found a moment to collaborate with Tame Impala on a dance-floor-ready "Dracula" remix, which has become a hit so viral that *Real Housewives* are using it to create TikToks. "Man, I love seeing all the videos of people singing along," she says of the latter. "It's so fun for me."

And it's a long way away from the life 14-year-old Jennie Kim led. The now-30-year-old, who grew up between South Korea and New Zealand and signed with YG Entertainment as a teen trainee, knows she's in the middle of something huge—and that she'll be held to account accordingly.

This moment in pop music feels unique, a response to the previous era of the undercooked star who built a career off of viral fame alone. Our current heroes aren't ingenues who perfected the art of a brilliant rollout on their first try. They're long-hustling songwriters finally getting a mainstream break (Charli xcx, Raye) or young stars constantly redefining themselves (Billie Eilish, Tate McRae). Or, like Jennie, they're coming from a part of the industry built around the old-school notions of incubation and professionalism. Much has been written about so-called K-pop factories, but the fact remains that they have produced some of the sleekest, hardest-working stars of this generation.

Of course, it's one thing to rise to fame as part of a well-trained unit and quite another to then break out on your own. The type of fame that a group like Blackpink has together rarely translates to the same level of influence for its individual members. Take a look at history and the pop groups of yesteryear: There is almost always a Beyoncé to every Destiny's Child, one clear star primed for greater heights once a band parts ways or outgrows its fan base.

Blackpink, however, is not your normal group, and Jennie is not the only member currently flooding everyone's playlists, feeds, and screens. Jisoo (80 million Instagram followers), Rosé (83.2 million), and Lisa (105 million) have also released solo projects in the past few years, each spawning hit singles and new label deals outside of their YG contracts. It's all the more impressive given that to be a woman in music is to be up against an expectation of excellence at all times.

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High-profile female artists have always dealt with intense scrutiny, from vicious tabloids and invasive paparazzi trying to catch them in the daring act of being imperfect. But the internet has now reached a boiling point of critique, and the call can often be coming from inside the house as parasocial love turns to obsession and the most obsessive fans become the most critical. Commenters on social and fan platforms engage in endless discourse about everything from singers' styling choices to their body language. Viral analytical TikToks break down stars' lyrics and rip apart their tracks.

While working on *Ruby*, Jennie says, her perfectionist nature—both learned and innate—got the best of her. She spent a year in a self-described bubble, driving toward a singular goal, she recalls. “I made sure I didn’t step out of that bubble, so I stayed focused.” She knew from firsthand experience that her own fans would demand nothing less.

Within the ecosystem of the Blinks, Blackpink’s gigantic fandom, followers have formed “biases,” or subgroups, around specific members. In 2024, some of her own bias turned against her when a video surfaced of Jennie vaping indoors, seemingly blowing smoke into a staff member’s face at an event. The drama became so heightened that event staffers had to come to Jennie’s defense—the area was designated for smoking, they said, and it was a case of bad timing as a worker had leaned down right as Jennie was exhaling smoke. Jennie apologized profusely anyway.

Fans have called Jennie “lazy” and criticized her for having lower energy than the rest of Blackpink. They’ve offered performance clips as evidence, pointing to mere seconds where they insist she’s slacking at the choreography or not hitting a move with maximum gracefulness. There are full threads on platforms like X and Reddit with critical videos and countless, never-ending posts picking apart her every move. Jennie has responded by pointing out how much she pushes her body past its limit, how she’s dealt with repeated ankle injuries. Most recently, Odd Atelier, Jennie’s own new label, put out a statement in response to numerous online rumors ranging from her dating life to her political stances.

Needless to say, Jennie tells me now, “I know how toxic social media can be.”

In some ways, the people who love an artist as intensely as Jennie’s base loves her have started acting more like business managers than fans. It’s not hard to see the slippery slope within this kind of relationship because a fandom’s passion is foundational to an artist’s success.

All across pop music, hardcore stans campaign for tours, petition for splashy magazine covers, and band together to stream songs until those songs hit number one. They have learned the inner workings of the music business, know the names of everyone on their favorite star’s teams, and have become experts on the qualifications for awards shows.

And most of this happens on social media, where geographical borders cannot limit their connection, influence, or purchasing power.

The dynamic has left many people in hyper-engaged fandoms with a sense of what they’re owed for their efforts: more music, more shows, more perfection.

Jennie is still figuring out the resulting creative push and pull. “To have a strange form of second chance to build my own career from now on with the amount of experience and love that I’ve gotten from people is only an advantage,” she says. She mentions her fans specifically many times throughout our conversation, expressing her desire to give them new music they’ll like, to meet them at her summer shows, to try out new fashion they might enjoy.

Still, as an artist, you want your art to reflect you, first and foremost, before it’s turned over to the rest of the world. To get to a place where she can create outside of 90 million people’s demands and to balance the beauty of her fandom with the pressure that comes with it, Jennie says she checks social media on an on-again, off-again cadence.

“When I’m releasing something, when I have new projects that I’m sharing with my fans, I like to stay online,” she explains. “To see their reactions is sometimes the sweetest thing ever.” But in moments like this spring, where she’s locking in on new music, she all but throws away her phone.

Jennie also checks in more with herself, she says. “I’m becoming friends with my body. There are definitely things

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GIRLS. WE WERE
TOGETHER, FOR THE
HARD TIMES
AND THE GOOD.”

“IT’S VERY SPECIAL...”





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Roberto
Cavalli.

THE UNKNOWINGNESS.”

“I’M LEAVING A BLANK SPACE IN MY HEAD TO SEE IF THERE’S ANYTHING ELSE I WANT TO REACH FOR.”

that I’ve been insecure about. I’m a very petite person, and early on, I felt the need to make myself look tall,” she says. “But I’m learning to love my own body and to see what works on my body the best. I’m more confident with myself.”

Keeping her grounded, as always, is the rest of Blackpink. In spite of the way critics often stack the women up against each other, they’ll always be bonded by their shared experience, says Jennie. It’s something she’s thankful for, that she can still lean on them even as they each step into their own.

“I grew up with the girls,” she says. “We were always together, for the hard times and the good times. We took care of each other, and we gave advice to each other. I never felt lost.”

When Jennie thinks on who she was a decade ago and who she is now, she sees the same girl. If anything, she’s just stronger and more self-assured, a classic coming-of-age evolution for any woman, pop star or not.

“In my head, I’m still such a free and young spirit that’s on a journey to find herself,” she says. “The past 10 years have taught me how to communicate, how to embrace things I’m not comfortable with.” Getting through all the grow-

ing pains required what she describes as a “survival instinct”—she knew what it was that she needed to do and figured out in real time how to achieve it.

“I’m so proud of myself for designing that life from an early age,” she adds. She didn’t follow any specific idols but does cite one icon she wants to emulate moving forward. “Rihanna will always be my biggest dream in terms of how much influence she has over pop culture and also music culture and art itself,” she reveals. “She’s so inspiring for me. To find that for myself would be a dream.” (Jennie pauses to drop a reminder that she’s available for more acting roles: “I’m bilingual, and to act in my second language does teach you a lot of things. If anyone is looking for this, I’m here.”)

In the meantime, after the second album is out and the festival circuit is finished, Jennie is ready to finally have some time to just be. She’s already dreaming of trotting around Europe, visiting sun-soaked beaches and sipping Aperol Spritzes between dips in the ocean. Maybe she’ll experiment more with fashion (“It’s a part of me now,” she explains). Maybe she’ll host an elaborate dinner party for her friends (“I don’t have time to do that right now; I love being a guest,” she laughs). At said dinner party, she might even serve homemade drinks. “I want to learn how to do the little shaky things and make

a pretty cocktail,” she says. “I suck at it right now.”

Honestly, maybe that’s okay. Creating something that feels true if not quite flawless is something that’s also been on her mind, a proposition she hopes her fans can get behind. She knows they’ll be watching. She knows they’ll read this very story and take to the comments with their own opinions.

“I’m more in control of who’s in the studio and who I’m working with,” she explains, “but I’m definitely not in a space where I want to make everything perfect. If anything, I’m heading the other way, where I might sound horrible and may not be perfect, but I’m just trying to enjoy and be less serious and be me. I’m not a ‘let’s be perfect’ person right now. I’m trying to stay on a good vibe.”

That’s likely why, after this summer, Jennie will find herself, for the first time in her life, without the next two to three years of her time meticulously planned out. The mystery, for her at least, is thrilling.

“I’m leaving a little blank space in my head to see if there’s anything else I want to reach for,” she says. “It’s very special, the unknowingness. It gives me space to just think. I’m seeing it as a great opportunity. But for now, I’m spending every minute and second in it.” ■



Dress **Fleur du Mal**, shoes **Vivienne Westwood** from **Amarcord Vintage**, necklace and ring **Lorraine Schwartz**.

Dress **Fleur
du Mal**, hat
Moschino.



Bodysuit **Area**,
earrings **David Webb**,
bracelet **Verdura**.

Hair by Evanie
Frausto for Redken.
Makeup by Lee Sol
at CO-OP. Manicure
by Mei Kawajiri for
Chanel Beauty. Set
design by Milena
Gorum at Artistry
Agency. Movement
direction by
Sadie Wilking.



KISS, KISS!

This fall, the chicest couples
can't keep their hands—or
their wardrobes—to themselves.
Consider this a love language.

Photographed by RONA LIANA AHDOUT

Styled by BRANDON TAN

Written by KIM DUONG

SHADES OF US

The new rules of couple styling: Rainey Qualley and Anthony Wilson demonstrate the power of a coordinated palette. It's all about leaning on texture and prints.

On Rainey: All clothing **Louis Vuitton**, shoes **Emporio Armani**. On Anthony: All clothing and accessories **Tom Ford**, shoes **Versace**, watch **Omega**, ring Anthony's own.





SHADOW PLAY

Inky black punctuated by flashes of shine—a master class in monochrome drama and romantic communication, as evidenced by Bella Semiao and Gigi Giobbi Valentino.

On Bella: All clothing and shoes **McQueen**, earrings **Laura Lombardi**, scarf **Emporio Armani**, bracelets **Hermès**, belt **Todd Snyder**. On Gigi: Top **R13**, shorts **Coach**, earrings Gigi's own, bracelet **Title of Work**, belt **Chloé**.



SKIN ON SKIN

In the season of layers, strip down to buttery leather and not much else. It's yearning, but make it fashion.

On Gigi: All clothing **Miu Miu**, jewelry Gigi's own. On Bella: Dress **Miu Miu**, earrings **Coach**.

SLOW BURN

Silk on top, leather down below: the date-night formula that'll do all the flirting for you (as it does here on Tomas De Keulenaer and Anita Jane Pathammavong).

On Tomas: Top and belt **Marni**, pants **Commission**, socks **Falke**, shoes **Rabanne**. On Anita: Dress **Eckhaus Latta**, sandals **Versace**, bracelet **Patricia Von Musulin**.







DEEP ATTRACTION

Brown had its moment last fall and refused to leave. Go head to toe in the shade—together, like Brynn Bonner and Jordan Swail here.

On Brynn: All clothing **Louis Vuitton**, shoes **Isabel Marant**, earrings Brynn's own. On Jordan: All clothing and shoes **Gucci**, jewelry (worn throughout) Jordan's own.

PEEK SEASON

Cold weather, hot strategy: A little exposure goes a long way under all that fall tailoring.

On Jordan: All clothing **Stella McCartney**, bracelets **Pandora**. On Brynn: All clothing and shoes **Balenciaga**, jewelry Brynn's own.

Hair by Davide Perfetti for Amika. Makeup by Shaina Ehrlich for Charlotte Tilbury. Manicure by Yukie Miyakawa for Dior. Set design by Jacob Burstein.



INTRODUCING

Lexi Nimelee

The 25-year-old actor wasn't even born when the first *Legally Blonde* was filmed. Now, she's carrying the entire franchise into the future.

Photographed by OLIVIA PARKER
Styled by KAIA CARIOLI
Interviewed by BIZ SHERBERT



Jumpsuit **Dolce & Gabbana**, bra and underwear **Araks**, bracelet **Chopard**.





Lexi Minetree looks exactly like Elle Woods. Heart-shaped face, wide blue eyes, America's sweetheart smile, buttery blonde blowout. The uncanny

resemblance is the first thing people usually point out when they learn that Lexi is playing a teenage version of the character immortalized by Reese Witherspoon in 2001. But it's also something Lexi has been hearing for years, long before she ever auditioned for the new Prime Video series *Elle*.

"My whole life, strangers on the street have come up to me and been like, 'You know, you look a lot like Reese Witherspoon,'" she tells me at a café near New York's Central Park.

It's weeks before the *Elle* premiere on July 1 and Lexi is in green,¹ a shade that sits all the way across the color wheel from Elle's signature pink: namely, a sage tank top with matching green frog earrings, baggy jeans, sneakers, and a faux-fur hooded coat she'd thrifted in London. The only real sign that she might be at work on a big Hollywood production is her manicure—acrylics with a white French tip a bit thicker than what's in style now. *Elle* is set in the mid-'90s, and because Lexi has just flown in from Vancouver, where she's filming season 2,² her nails are still in costume. As we settle in at an outdoor table, two elementary school-age boys inside bang on the window to get our attention—one cavalierly wields a bunless hot dog like a sword. "I think they're in love with us," Lexi quips.

Her life is currently somewhere between pink and green, glamazon French tips and plastic frog earrings. Last year, she was thrust into the spotlight when Reese Witherspoon, *Elle*'s executive producer, announced to the world that Lexi would be the next Elle Woods.³ But when we meet, the world still hasn't seen her as Elle yet. I joke that the hot dog boys will one day consider this a core memory—that time they harassed Lexi Minetree at Sant Ambroeus before they knew who she was.

Lexi was born the year *Legally Blonde* came out, yet Elle Woods is as beloved to Lexi and her peers as she was the day she walked onto screens in a hot-pink halter dress 25 years ago, subverting the "dumb blonde" trope that had been a mainstay of film and television. The movie transcended its initial success to become a kind of cultural fact: "I've always known *Legally Blonde*," Lexi says as she shares her memories of the franchise, which eventually included not only the sequel but also the Broadway show.

Elle's staying power can't only be chalked up to her epic one-liners and Y2K outfits—it's her entire persona, her can-do attitude, that continues to cement her legacy with millions of young women. Elle wants to fly high without bringing others down, and she wants to look good while doing it. And now, for the first time, the latest generation that grew up on her will see her brought to life by one of their own.

Lexi is a newcomer in the truest sense, increasingly rare in a world of nepo babies and "breakout" stars who have actually

been racking up credits for a decade. Before booking *Elle*, her biggest project was a guest spot on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, where she, ironically, played a law student. She got the role after graduating from the School of Dramatic Arts at USC in Los Angeles in 2024. As of early summer, her IMDb page is still sparse, with only a few stills from *Elle*, a set of very blonde and very pink headshots, and exactly one red carpet appearance at a Power of Young Hollywood event that may have since been removed.

Taking on a character as treasured as Elle Woods would be intimidating for anyone but especially for an actor less than two years out of drama school. It's a reality Lexi freely admits: "Stepping into shoes that are enormous and pink and six inches tall can be scary," she says. But she still set her sights on the role as soon as the open casting call was announced, transforming a simple self-tape into an over-the-top, pinked-out proposal in the style of Elle's iconic Harvard admissions tape from the original movie. The rest was just a matter of blonde ambition.

Cosmo plays a big role in *Elle* as your character's dream place to intern. And now here you are, with an actual Cosmo feature.

If you had told me a year and a half ago that I'd be doing *Cosmo*, I don't think I would've believed you. I had just graduated from college and moved to New York City. I was trying to be an actor.

Where did you originally grow up?

I'm from Atlanta, Georgia.

Oh my gosh, I was born in Atlanta.

Okay, fellow Southerner. I had a very normal upbringing. I am a total theater kid and a total nerd. I was really into gaming and Pokémon. If you had met me, you would never in a million years be like, "Yep, that's going to be Elle Woods."

Your frog earrings feel Pokémon-esque to me.

I'm going to take that as a compliment. I liked Pokémon before it was cool. I was a huge reader. That's what drew me into acting, when I found out you could insert yourself into the story. I was also very emotional as a kid. I felt things strongly, and acting was the first place I could use those emotions for good, where you're applauded for showing feelings. Then I said every parent's worst nightmare: "I want to be an actor."

“”
I was
the same
person
but with
this huge
secret.

—LEXI MINETREE

1. When I ask if Lexi was a pink girl growing up, she tells me she wasn't. She was all about the color green. She loves pink now, just not for days off: "I do think that if I were to wear pink now, it would feel like I'm back at work."

2. The fact that Lexi is already filming season 2—before episode 1 of season 1 has even aired—is a huge deal in Hollywood terms and says a lot about the confidence the studio has in her and the show.

3. The video—in which Reese asks Lexi, "Are we the same person?"—captured the first time Lexi received the news herself. It currently has more than 14 million views on TikTok.



Dress **SC103**,
bra and underwear
Deborah Marquit.

Left: Jacket **Coach**,
skirt **Patou**, earrings
Chopard, rings **Pandora**.

Your parents are both accountants. How have they reacted to all of this?

They've been so supportive. I honestly have the best family ever.⁴

Were you already living in New York City when you auditioned for *Elle*?

Yeah. After I moved, I got initiated in the most New York way possible by booking *Law & Order: SVU*. That character's arc is very different from Elle's, but at the end of the episode, she says, "I'm going to go back to school and I'm going to become a kick-ass lawyer." Which feels very much like an Elle Woods premonition.

What was the process of auditioning through open casting like?

When they first announced it, five of my friends immediately texted me. I was like, "I have to re-create her Harvard admissions video, where she's in the hot tub in her pink sequined bikini instead of writing an admissions letter. She's going above and beyond and doing her version of it."

So literally that day, I went and I got a pink bikini and I wrote a script and filmed everything. My mom helped me. I had these pink weights and I was knitting and showing my different interests. I added music and I edited it together. It took me so long, but I was so proud of it. I believe that if you're having a fun time with your work, then other people will, too.

I loved the manifestation photo shoot you did before you booked the role, where you're wearing all pink and looking very Elle Woods. Can you tell me about that?

I used to have brown hair. Everyone knows you can dye your hair or put on a wig, but if you show them that you're the character, it makes it that much easier.⁵ I had just gone blonde by happenstance, so I didn't

4. Lexi carved out time from filming to watch her high school-age sister perform in a hometown production of *Legally Blonde: The Musical*. When I suggest that her sister must think Lexi is the coolest person in the world, Lexi says, "She's the coolest person."

5. Lexi says that her double major in PR and theater helped her learn the importance of creating the vision you want people to see.



Dress **GCDS**, necklace **Anna Sui x Erickson Beamon**, ring **Chopard**.

Hair by Rei Kawauchi for Kérastase. Makeup by Sena Murahashi at MA + Group. Manicure by Ada Yeung for Zoya.

have any pictures as a blonde yet. And I was like, “You know what? When they look me up, I want them to see Elle Woods. I don’t want them to even hesitate.”

I contacted one of my friends, Natalie, who’s a fantastic photographer, and we did this really fun photo shoot in L.A. where I’m wearing pink. I remember I put the photos up on my IMDb and everything. I’m so glad I did, because when the casting news started leaking, people were like, “Oh, she looks just like Elle Woods.” You have to dress for the job you want, not the job you have.

Do you have an affirmation practice aside from the Elle Woods photo shoot?

Before booking the role, I talked to my cousin who’s a life coach and big into manifesting. She told me you should always speak what you want into existence as if it’s already happened. So say, “Oh, I can’t believe I booked this role,” even if you haven’t gotten it yet. Just by saying those words, it’s putting you in a mindset of where you want to be.

Words have power. And what I love about Elle is that even though she still does the work, she speaks so positively about herself and is so confident in her abilities that she almost manifests them.

What was the experience of finding out you got the role like?

I didn’t know I’d be meeting Reese that day. They told me I was meeting someone from Hello Sunshine and someone from Amazon. When I got there that morning, Jason Moore, who’s the director of the first two episodes, sat me down and he goes, “Okay, I just found this out. It’s not those two people. It’s actually Reese. She wants to do a scene with you.” I was like, “Oh, great. Reese wants to do a scene with me. I’ve prepared nothing. Great!”

You’re like, “I’m wearing my pink. My hair is blonde. Let’s get in there.”

I walked in, she gave me the biggest hug, and we did this acting scene together, which is why they were filming. And then she sat me down, and that became the video of her telling me I got the role. They just continued to film, and I’m really glad they did because it was a blur to receive news that basically changed my entire life.

They told me that, other than my mom, I couldn’t tell anyone for 24 hours because they wanted to be the ones to announce it. So I had this crazy secret with me for a whole day. I got this news and I took the subway home. I went to Planet Fitness. I was the same person but with this huge secret.

You’re texting your group like, “The reading went well today.”

I had to lie to so many people. And ironically, even though I love to act, I’m a really bad liar. Don’t catch me in the game Mafia. I’m going to crack. I’m really grateful, though, because once it was announced, it was like Pandora’s box being opened, with thousands of calls and texts from family and friends. But for those 24 hours, it was mine.

Were you all of a sudden in this whirlwind getting ready for the show?

As soon as I booked it, I was like, “Please give me as much material as you possibly can.” We had eight episodes, which was, like, 450 pages

of dialogue. We filmed for five months, and of those five months, I had two days off. A lot of days, I’d get to set and work 12 to 15 hours, then I’d get home, dissociate for 30 minutes, and go down to the gym and run my lines on the StairMaster.

It’s actually very Elle Woods to do that.

She does it in the movie. She’s on the elliptical and she has a textbook open.

In the show, teenage Elle moves from Bel Air to Seattle. There’s a connection with your real life, where you’re being thrust into Hollywood and fame. Is that something you’ve thought about?

Definitely. As an actor, you always try to pull from your own experiences when you’re thinking about your character. I’ve never lived in Seattle and I’ve never lived in Bel Air, but we’ve all come into contact with experiences where you’re a fish out of water.

What’s cool about this show is that you get to see a side of Elle Woods that’s a little more insecure. In *Legally Blonde*, there’s the iconic scene where she walks into the party in the bunny outfit and no one else is in costume. There’s a moment where you see her think, *Oh crap*, but then she smiles and she owns it. It’s a small thing, but I always wondered where she got that confidence to just own it. In *Elle*, you get to see where she learned to own who she is, even if she’s sticking out.

There’s been this bigger cultural moment around girlhood in the past few years with the *Barbie* movie, bows on everything, girl dinner, girl math—this whole obsession on social media. What did you want to get right about the portrayal of girlhood?

I really wanted to be the role model that I would have wanted when I was in high school. At that time in my life, I wasn’t very sure of myself. Elle is a character that really pushes you to be yourself and accept who you are. Own whatever you’ve got and surround yourself with people who are going to uplift that part of you. Don’t change just because people judge you. The right people will come around.

What do you think Elle, the character, represents to your generation?

She is someone who—no matter what, even if she fails—gets back up, dusts herself off, and keeps going.

Specifically for people who grew up on social media, it feels like there’s this all-or-nothing attitude: “Oh, I already messed up today, so I’m just going to stay in bed and rot.”

It’s not about the failure; it’s about what you do after the failure that defines you. Elle is not afraid to own her mistakes and learn from them. I think if I had seen this when I was younger, it would have empowered me to not be afraid to take a risk, take a leap. A lot of times, things seem so far out of reach and it’s like, *Am I even capable of doing something?* Obviously, those feelings are human, and I have those feelings all the time. But it’s just like, *You know what? I’m just going to go for it. I’m just going to try.* ■

“”
*It’s not
about the
failure;
it’s about
what you
do after the
failure.*
— LEXI MINETREE

COSMO
centerfold



BEN
MARSHA



Photographed by
RYAN LOWRY
Styled by
IZAAKE SOUZA
ZUCKERMAN
Interviewed by
CORINNE SULLIVAN

Jacket **Dsquared2**,
shirt **Acne Studios**,
top from **The Society**
Archive, shorts
Everlast, socks **Coach**,
boots **Ugg**.

LL

“We’re gonna make
it happen for all
the gingers out
there feeling
weird about their
faces and bodies.”

—BEN MARSHALL



AGE: 31 SIGN: Taurus
RELATIONSHIP STATUS: Taken

Ben Marshall doesn't buy into the idea that nice guys finish last. This photo shoot took place after the actor and comedian wrapped his fifth season of *Saturday Night Live* and just before the press tour for his new film *72 Hours*. In other words, he's definitely winning these days—not that he lets his success go to his head.

"It's boring and obvious, but I really just love comedy," he says. "I love laughing with my friends. I feel so lucky to get to make stuff with people I like." It's the kind of sincerity that separates Ben from his peers—well, that and his 6'5" frame, shock of red hair, and unflappable grin.

If he had his way, Ben's next era would involve him as a romantic lead. His rom-com pitch: "Guy falls in love with his hair transplant doctor in a film called *Turkish Delights*." For more brilliant insight from Ben (on, among other things, going shirtless, TikTok fan edits, and kissing hot guys on *SNL*), visit [Cosmopolitan.com/centerfold](https://www.cosmopolitan.com/centerfold). ■

T-shirt **Bluemarble**, top **Tracksmith**, pants **Dsquared2**, pins from **The Society Archive**, watch from **Foundwell**, belt **Emporio Armani**.

Opposite page: Top **Commission**.

Grooming by Davide Perfetti for Oribe.





THE STARS

WHO LAUNCHED

A MILLION

HOLLY

GROUP CHATS

By LINDSEY WEBER

BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING!



WOOD

The rumors started in February. *Summer House* fans knew how to read between the Bravo lines. The show, in which svelte New Yorkers spend their weekends partying in a Hamptons mansion, has a zealous, millions-strong fandom that knew, *just knew*, something was up between leads Ciara Miller; her ex, West Wilson; and her close friend, Amanda Batula. They were right, as the now-iconic image of Ciara crying on the sidewalk outside an Hermès store in Manhattan soon proved. West and Amanda had gotten together behind her back.

For Ciara, the moment was both a heartbreak and a breakout. All the lies and betrayal—coupled with her deeply relatable reaction (disbelief, anger, indignation)—elevated the former ICU nurse from reality TV cast member to reality TV star. Her loyal followers (1 million on Instagram at last count) cheered as the opportunities rolled in: red carpet hosting gigs; a spot on *Dancing With the Stars*; Sonic, DSW, and Old Navy campaigns; and then the pinnacle of modern reality star achievement, a hosting gig, for the *Love Island* companion series *Aftersun*. (“Keep on epically winning, Ciara!” commented one fan. “Best news ever!” wrote another.)

“Don’t quit your day job; this is not a career,” offered Bravo’s Andy Cohen at a *Vulture* event in May, speaking to aspiring reality TV personalities. Perhaps the advice is sage (if a bit cheeky), but the assertion is wrong. In 2026, “reality star” is very much a career—pioneered by the Kardashians, forged over the course of decades, and solidified by a concurrence of shifting cultural appetites and social necessity. Once objects of ridicule, reduced to comic relief by callous producers and taunted by the public for reeking of desperation, reality stars have become some of the most famous people on earth. The former proverbial losers now capture and hold our attention in a way previously

reserved for movie stars. They are breaking out bigger, staying in the limelight longer, and influencing our lives like never before. They are needy, messy, dramatic, imperfect, ambitious, and, most importantly, everywhere. And we are, collectively, obsessed.

“Back in the day, we used to watch reality shows for trainwrecks,” says John Arthur Hill, a former reality TV producer and current SiriusXM radio host. “Now we have heroes. Ciara is like this generation’s Julia Roberts.”

The proof is in the numbers. More than 3.5 million people are now watching every episode of season 8 of Peacock’s reality dating show *Love Island USA*. The series’ last season drew 8.8 billion minutes of total viewing time over its six-week run (it was the most-watched streamed title anywhere for adults under 35). Netflix’s dating experiment *Love Is Blind* once hit 2.1 billion minutes of viewing time in a single week, while Hulu’s *The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives* and Peacock’s *The Traitors* each often rake in half a billion weekly viewing minutes. Credit goes in part to the series’ showrunners, who make even the most banal moments sparkle, but mostly to the stars and their followers, who together have created a modern ouroboros of fame and fandom.

Love Island USA’s Leah Kate had 20,000 Instagram followers when season 6 started airing in June 2024. By the time she finished in second place, she had 1 million. (With those numbers, who cares what place you come in?) Today, she has 5.5 million and dozens of adoring fan accounts. *Love Island UK* alum Maura Higgins currently has 4.3 million Instagram followers. *The Bachelorette*’s Gabby Windey has 1.5 million. Stats like these have networks and streaming platforms paying attention; they’re casting popular reality stars again and again in a thriving ecosystem of show-hopping as fans demand to see more of them.

A few years after she exited *The Bachelorette*, Gabby joined OG *Survivor* star Boston Rob Mariano on season 3 of *The Traitors*, where they each amassed new fans. A year later, Maura and fellow *Love Islander* Rob Rausch followed suit, charming their way through season 4 and

BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING! BREAKING!

watching their follower counts (and sponsorship deals) explode. The opportunities are now endless: *Love Island* itself has its own universe of spin-offs, including *All Stars*, *Games*, *Beyond the Villa*, and *AfterSun*. Reality stars can earn loyal stans across *Dancing With the Stars*, *The Masked Singer*, and *Big Brother* and jump to more mainstream fare from *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *The Challenge*, and *Top Chef*.

Ashley Iaconetti, cast member of no fewer than seven reality shows including her current *Real Housewives of Rhode Island* gig, sometimes has to pause to take it all in. "I'm like, 'Wait,'" she says. "'You're telling me that I married a guy from meeting him on *Bachelor in Paradise*. And then we moved to Rhode Island. And then Bravo decides to make a *Real Housewives of Rhode Island*?' " Yes, exactly that. Nearly 3 million viewers tuned in to watch Ashley (1.3 million followers) and her newest batch of costars in the show's first seven days. She's still got it.

"I've gotten really supportive messages," she adds. "A lot of the people who reach out to me are people who have been following me since *The Bachelor* and then throughout the years. Now they're seeing me again on TV and they're like, *Oh man, her consistency is awesome.*"

That kind of staying power is infinitely valuable as celebrity itself splinters and the influence of traditional Hollywood contracts. On the big screen, the classic movie star is being overshadowed by the franchise character—we used to buy tickets to see Leo, Denzel, or ScarJo; now we're buying them to see *Spider-Man*, *The Avengers*, and *Barbie*. Back home, on our phones, we're favoring whoever populates our feeds the most. "When we had more movie stars, we hated reality stars," explains Brian Moylan, author of *The Housewives: The Real Story Behind the Real Housewives*. "Now that we have fewer movie stars, we have more reality stars we love."

To truly understand the appeal, you have to first grasp one thing: We may follow reality stars like they are Hollywood A-listers, but they are not Hollywood A-listers. They are us. And when dropped into unfamiliar or challenging situations, they have no choice but to do what any of us would do: be themselves. "On a reality show, eventually the audience disappears," says longtime *Survivor* host and now showrunner Jeff Probst. "Exhaustion, uncertainty, fear, and disappointment all start arriving faster than you can manage them. At that point, you're no longer performing. You're responding. And that's when the most revealing moments happen."

Viewers don't have to be stranded on a deserted island to get it. Most of us grapple with similar feelings every day: fear that we

might lose our jobs to AI, worry that we might get ghosted or dumped, exhaustion over our always-on culture. To see these emotions mirrored by a reality star—on and off television—feels visceral. "As today's movie and TV stars are increasingly guarded and presenting meticulously curated personas, we see people gravitating toward reality stars who are more open and real," says Jason Lynch, a curator at the Paley Center for Media.

"People relate to us because they experience what we experience," adds *Love Island USA* season 6 contestant JaNa Craig. "We're just doing it in front of a camera."

JaNa's own viral onscreen crash-out was one for the reality TV history books. Discovering that her castmate Connor Newsum, who she'd been coupled up with, was getting cozy with Leah had JaNa sobbing through a monologue about...plants: "They have a lot in common. Like, they both live in fucking

"PEOPLE RELATE TO US BECAUSE THEY EXPERIENCE WHAT WE EXPERIENCE. WE'RE JUST DOING IT IN FRONT OF A CAMERA."

L.A. and they both like, like, fucking plants. Like, I like fucking plants, but I can't name all the fucking plants. Like, *fuck*. So I need to go study some fucking plants?" Sure, it was funny, but it was also JaNa's raw insecurity splayed out for all to see, the amplification of thoughts we've all had—*What if I'm not good enough for someone the way I am?* Fans rewarded JaNa for her vulnerability, flooding her socials (she's now at 2.5 million Instagram followers) and helping her score brand deals with Maybelline, Revolve, and Credit One, among many others.

The speed with which it all happens is also part of the allure. Writer Anna Peele, whose book *Enter the Villa: The (Unauthorized) Reality Behind Love Island* tracks the rise of the dating show, explains. "They're not on their phones; they're not on the internet," she says of the contestants. "It's very immediate for them in a way that I think most young

people aren't experiencing, so we easily fall in love *alongside* them." And because many shows like *Love Island* air practically in real time, when a cast member does something amazing (or awful), all of pop culture can pile on right away, giving way to tweets, memes, mashups, and the rest.

That, in turn, gives reality stars the chance to listen to their fans and respond to their wishes, pushing these relationships beyond the parasocial into a symbiotic audience-famous person arrangement. Don't like the way someone treated their costar or hate an interaction between two of your favorites? DM them. Chances are, producers—and later, the stars themselves—will take note, giving fans a chance to influence the narrative. To create a world where someone beleaguered can persevere. Where someone wronged can take the high ground. Where a misdeed can be rectified. On *The Traitors*, Maura was betrayed by Rob, but he later made it up to her with a Birkin bag. And two previously fierce *Traitors* rivals, Bob the Drag Queen and Boston Rob, have become comrades and opinionated podcast cohorts.

That the storylines no longer end when the cameras stop rolling helps us cling to the ideas of empowerment, transformation, and connection. The latter is especially important during our well-documented post-COVID loneliness epidemic rife with social isolation. As we gather at watch parties and band together online to track these stars, "they stop feeling like television characters and start feeling like people you know—because you do," says Jeff. "You understand their strengths, weaknesses, blind spots, and motivations. Sometimes better than they do, because you are observing them without any stakes. It goes so deep that you may not even agree with their choices, but you understand why they made them."

Rooting for them is like rooting for ourselves. Even if these days, we're a risky bet.

No examination of the power of reality TV stars could be complete without acknowledging how that power has the potential to transform not only the stars and their fans but the entire world order. President Donald Trump owes much of his popularity to the picture of leadership he projected while hosting 14 seasons of NBC's *The Apprentice*. That he now wields his position of power to campaign against the rights of women, transgender people, immigrants, and other marginalized groups is a stark reminder that reality stars mirror not just our dreams but the crueler aspects of humanity as well.

Over the course of Trump's two presidential administrations, movies and TV shows have gotten markedly less diverse. In 2024, a trans storyline was pulled from a Pixar series. Nearly half of the LGBTQIA+ characters on



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TV shows didn't return in 2025. The number of BIPOC film leads has fallen, and disability representation remains grim. Against a backdrop of economic, political, and social instability, once-aspirational superstars now repel audiences with their lives of excess: Chrissy Teigen's "accidental" ordering of a \$13,000 bottle of wine, Logan Paul's \$5.275 million Pokémon card.

By contrast, even when their content is aspirational, reality stars are some of the only entertainers sitting in the mess with us, not serving up hyper-curated lives or even toxic positivity. What they're sharing looks more like what we're actually all living through. "Scripted television can comment on culture," notes Jeff. "But reality television documents it in real time."

And when it comes to representation, that realness looks a lot like resistance. Reality TV has become one of the only forms of onscreen entertainment that widely and consistently offers many viewers better reflections of themselves, says Raina Deerwater, associate director of entertainment research and analysis at GLAAD. "It has a history of touching on real conversations and tense moments as people are able to authentically speak their minds. When those stars are from communities that are being actively attacked and silenced in this political moment, these series offer a platform for their voices to be heard."

As examples, Deerwater cites the original *Queer Eye* Fab Five; Richard Hatch, *Survivor*'s first winner and an out gay man; and the many iterations of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. "There are audiences for reality TV that may not know a trans person in real life," she says. "But if they get to know and love someone like *Survivor*'s Zeke Smith, *Drag Race*'s Peppermint, or *America's Next Top Model*'s Isis King on TV, it can be very impactful. Reaching people in their living rooms while they're being entertained is a powerful force in pushing back on disinformation and harmful rhetoric."

Former *Vanderpump Rules* cast member and *Dancing With the Stars* contestant Ariana Madix, now host of *Love Island USA*, wants to see more kinds of relationships on her show. "Queer representation is just representation," Ariana, who is bisexual, told *Cosmopolitan* earlier this month. "Queer people are part of life." Meanwhile, the top three contestants—JaNa, Leah, and Serena Page—of season 6 of *Love Island USA* were all women of color. This season, *Love Island*er Beatriz Hatz is a Paralympian and the first person with a physical disability to appear on the show.

And then there are reality stars like Ron Funches, a stand-up comedian with no prior reality TV credits, who was banished from the *Traitors* castle in episode 6 of season 4. Onscreen, Ron regularly seemed

confused as to why his direct communication style was perceived as deceptive. After the show aired, Ron says he got messages from fans telling him he might be autistic. "They started off pretty mean," he told *CBS Mornings* in February, "but then they started turning into, 'Oh, it's so nice to see a representation of myself.'" Ron has a son with autism but had never considered that he might also be neurodivergent. After following the fandom's lead, he received his own diagnosis, posting on Instagram, "Well, the internet told me I was autistic and was right."

When a show successfully connects two real people in a real relationship, searing their romance into the hearts and minds of viewers, their fandom also explodes. *Love Island USA* season 6 winners Kordell Beckham and Serena coupled up on day one and survived the show's many obstacles (mainly, the temp-

"THEY STOP FEELING LIKE CHARACTERS AND START FEELING LIKE PEOPLE YOU KNOW—BECAUSE YOU DO."

tations of Casa Amor). Now, two years after they met on TV, they are still earnestly and obsessively tracked by their fans. (Sample comments from some of their combined 3.7 million followers: "I'm going to tell my kids this is Michelle and Barack Obama" and "Just marry this girl already!! Sheesh!!")

"It was such a relatable journey," Serena says about their appeal. "Everyone got to watch it blossom in real time and even have a part to play in it."

Their success as a couple feels like our success—or at least, the kind of relationship we'd like to have in a time of app doomscrolling and chatbot romances. Watching someone else find love and choose commitment feels like wish fulfillment, the antidote to the misery of present-day dating.

"Everybody wants to find love," says Ashley, who transformed her *Bachelor* sob

story (quite literally—she spent her entire first season crying) into a real-life nearly seven-year marriage with fellow Bachelor Nation alum Jared Haibon. "I think we all are ingrained to want to experience something like a rom-com."

Except, for these stars, their rom-coms aren't the classic polished version. They're dramatic by design but also familiar in their heady highs and gritty lows. "That's always been what was great about reality television—you can't help but keep the dark underbelly from coming out," says Moylan.

"It's bold," adds Serena of the way reality stars like her and Kordell come together. "It's easy to play into what people want to see, but it's that much harder to be vulnerable."

Reality dating show contestants' willingness to appear cringe feels simultaneously repulsive and seductive. We can't imagine ourselves publicly melting down while looking for love but also can't look away from what might happen if we did. "In our society, everything is so curated," says Hill. "But ultimately, people want to see something real and not perfectly pruned."

With big movie stars a dying breed and scripted TV and film actors seemingly following scripts even offscreen, Hollywood should pay attention. Thanks to pressure from studios with too much to lose and actors' tendency to seek out emotional separation from their roles, its elite stars may still elicit aspiration but are giving back zero relatability. How well do we really know them or their relationships? By their accounts, not in the slightest. This side of the industry could stand to give its emerging talent, coupled up or not, a few pages from the reality star playbook.

Perhaps it's already started doing so. Take the leads of *Heated Rivalry*, Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie, who play lovers on the show and play up their close friendship outside of it without fear or hesitation. Their shenanigans feel like access, and they cater directly to their enormous fandoms, regularly dropping content like photos and videos. Whenever Hudson and Connor (who are, quite crucially, not a couple in real life) appear anywhere together, their raw chemistry and willingness (or ability) to appear un-media trained feels like watching behind-the-scenes footage.

Actually, it feels a lot like watching a reality TV show.

When Amanda and West betrayed Ciara. When Tom Sandoval cheated on Ariana on *Vanderpump Rules*. When the *Traitors* roundtable expelled Ron. We—the audience, the fandoms—rose up in their defense. We're not always right, and our methods can still be questionable, but we've always been attracted to spaces and platforms where we

93



OLANDRIA

The 28-year-old went on *Love Island USA* looking for love—then the world fell for her.

Photographed by RICHIE LEE DAVIS
Styled by JESSICA NEISES
Interviewed by SAMANTHA OLSON



hen Olandria Carthen walks into a room, you'll know. The Alabama-born multi-hyphenate doesn't need to announce herself—the energy shifts, and people notice. The first time she visited *Cosmo* HQ, she arrived in a preppy

black-and-white look that could have been plucked from a '90s Chanel runway. Poised and personable, she introduced herself around the room until a staffer looked up from their desk, visibly stunned, to ask, "Who is she?"

Olandria had just started settling into adulthood when Peacock approached her to join *Love Island USA*. She said no. She had just moved out to Houston, was working in sales at an elevator company, and wasn't having much luck in the romance department. But she wanted to make life on her own work. The network approached her again, two more times. Eventually, for season 7, Olandria caved.

Onscreen, her Southern charm, coupled with her keep-it-real attitude and fabulous bikini styling, made her a standout. Her friends-to-lovers arc with fellow contestant Nic Vansteenbergh became one of the season's defining storylines, and by the time they became runners-up in the finale, she had an army of more than 2 million followers across platforms.

Since then, Olandria has made her runway debut for Sergio Hudson, turned heads at the VMAs and the Golden Globes, and become the muse behind designer Brandon Blackwood's first-ever collaboration, which sold out in 10 minutes. Her supporters—known as Nicolandria Nation and the Ola Dolls—not only bought space on a Times Square billboard to ring in her 28th birthday but also fiercely campaigned for

this very "Cosmolandria" story. We heard their calls and we caught up with the Bama Barbie on love after *Love Island*.

Your fans are incredibly invested in you and Nic. When did you realize your connection could work outside the Villa?

Our final date, I was like, "I'm gonna continue to water this love plant to see how it grows." He said that he's been in love twice and that the third time's the charm.

Has there been a moment in your relationship that felt surprisingly normal?

We don't monetize our relationship or put it on display. If you genuinely like spending quality time with somebody, it shouldn't involve a camera every two seconds. We enjoy each other's presence and do what normal people do: go out, have fun, and get to know each other.

I've seen people speculate, like, "Are they together or not...?"

Why is it your business? Go get a man; go do something with your life. Why does it matter if me and Nic are together? Why are you so invested in people that don't know you? That part kind of creeps me out, because I'm never that invested in someone's relationship, and I'm not living for the internet. I don't always post what people want me to or do what people want me to do.

Why is it important for you to keep parts of your relationship private?

It's important for our mental health. These people met you on TV, so they want access to you all the time. You see people overanalyze every little thing, and you shut down. When it comes to me and Nic—when you really care about something—you keep it very sacred and close to you. ■

All clothing and shoes **Gucci**.

Hair by Sy Monroe for Sy Monroe Collection. Makeup by Ernest Robinson III at Opus Beauty. Manicure by Mamie Onishi for Après Nail. Special thanks to Veloce Picture Cars.



Love Slowly in Puerto Rico

Our Cosmo Couples series, for which we travel the world photographing real-life partners, is proof that there's no single blueprint for romance. This time, we touched down in Puerto Rico to ask five pairs about their chemistry and what makes their love work.

Photographed by GABRIELA ZOÉ PÉREZ SILVER ■ Interviewed by MAXWELL LOSGAR

Gabriel + Gabriel

CREATIVE
DIRECTOR, 31 +
CONTENT
MANAGER, 32
Years together: 8

GABRIEL: We honeymooned in Brazil and visited the same beach town Edward and Bella had gone to.

GABRIEL: He's a big *Twilight* fan.

GABRIEL: I realized it during the boat ride.

GABRIEL: I'd wanted to take him to the house where they filmed the sex scene where they're breaking everything, but you can't go. It's private.

GABRIEL: So I just looked in from the gate, thinking, *They fucked over there*.

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Adrian + Natalia

CONTRACTOR, 29 +
MODEL AND STUDENT, 27
Years together: 1.5

ADRIAN: I once took her to this super-beautiful secret beach.

NATALIA: It had rained that day, so we had to walk through some gnarly terrain to get there.

ADRIAN: It was almost sunset and we had a couple of drinks—the vibes were great.

NATALIA: It was all cuddles, until it was time to leave....

ADRIAN: We got back to the car and I couldn't find my keys. I'd left them on the beach. My phone was dead, she only had 1 percent, and it was pitch-black out. She was in her bikini. We only had one towel.

NATALIA: He was so embarrassed, but I was just happy that we had a little bit more time together.



**Ana Paula +
Mussa**

FILMMAKER AND
PHOTOGRAPHER, 28 +
ACTOR AND DJ, 28
Years together: 5

MUSSA: I always trust Ana Paula to do my makeup.

ANA PAULA: I love doing her makeup. And her eyebrows.

MUSSA: Since the beginning of our relationship, we've had a very femme-for-femme dynamic.

ANA PAULA: We always joke, "We're too too much much."

MUSSA: Because we're both too much.



Alfonso + Cenit

RESTAURATEUR, 35 +
MODEL, 34

Years together: 10.5

ALFONSO: We met at my restaurant. I opened it up after hours for her, her friend, and a friend of mine. It was a double date.

CENIT: He made some tacos and said I should check out brunch the next day.

ALFONSO: When she came in, I forgot about all the other tables.

CENIT: The food was amazing. I was like, *I think I like this guy*.

ALFONSO: I lived on the second floor of the restaurant, and she liked it so much, she never left. I would go down and cook for her at all hours. Once, I went back upstairs and she was in one of my shirts playing *Mortal Kombat*. That's when I knew I might have met the one.

Daymé + Pablo

SINGER-SONGWRITER, 34 +
VISUAL ARTIST, 34

Years together: 7

DAYMÉ: He saw me on TV.

PABLO: I was delighted by her music. I was talking to a colleague about this woman I saw dressed all in white who sang barefoot, and she was like, "Oh, she's my friend. She lives next door."

DAYMÉ: That was my best friend. She and I have known each other since I was 8 years old and she was 12.

PABLO: She said, "Let's go knock on her door." But you weren't home; you were traveling.

DAYMÉ: When I got back, my friend was like, "I met a guy who I believe is in love with you."

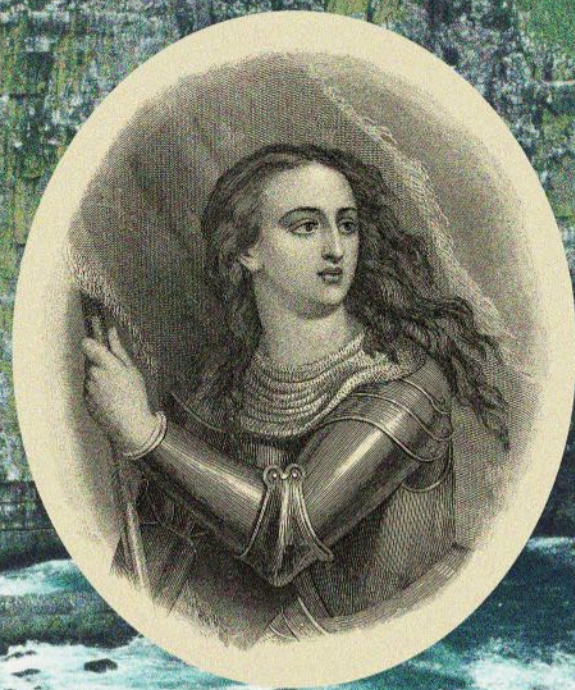



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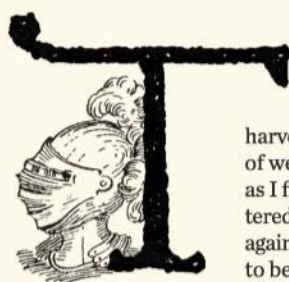
REIGN

A Cosmo Reads book by BETHAN CROOME





Novelist Bethan Croome holds nothing back in her epic romantasy debut set in a war-torn medieval world where nothing is as it seems. *Reign* has the best of the genre—knights, witches, and mystical creatures embroiled in deadly secrets, forbidden magic, and complicated politics—and also (of course) delicious slow-burn romance and plenty of high-stakes adventure. The book follows protagonist Niamh, who's forced to flee her village in disguise after her own outlawed powers are discovered, setting off a heart-pounding chain of events.



he Kingdom of Lyonesse was absent of magic but not of rain. A tempest had raged since the harvest festival, but it was a different kind of wet than yesterday. The night before, as I finally settled to sleep, the wind battered the thatch roof, and the rain knocked against the wattle and daub—as if pleading to be let in.

That afternoon, walking out of my village, Green Vale, I ventured toward the forest. The rain no longer lashed from the skies. Instead, it hung in the air—a thick mist that clung to my skin and veiled my path. The constant drizzle made me yearn for shelter—whether at the smithy, the tavern, or beneath the hawthorn trees. Yet I knew she'd be waiting, hungry, for me to feed her.

No one would notice my departure as I slipped away into the surrounding woodland. My father—the village blacksmith—had been sent on foot with the knights, sworn to their liege, the Lord of the Wetlands, to push back a malevolent invasion on the far shores of Cambas.

Meanwhile, my mother was busy raising my younger sibling or tending to her endless domestic duties, and in our father's absence, my elder brother was consumed by forging iron to the high standards he was renowned for.

I tucked my long, brown braid into my woolen hood, which hung heavy over my face. It was so saturated with

water that I longed for the dry days, before my cloak grew mossier than a tree stump. Clutching the basket of leftovers close to my chest, I feared that a hungry villager might smell the food and fight me for the feast hidden beneath my cloak.

Once I reached the dense forest on the outskirts of the Wetlands, I lowered my hood and silently thanked the trees for their shelter before hurrying to where I'd been nursing her. Amid the gentle patter of raindrops on the leaves, I hearkened to the sound of faint whimpers. In my haste, I moved the branches that formed the nest I'd built and, overcome with impatience, thrust my hand between the sticks.

Before I could feel her, a burst of warmth radiated from her hiding spot. A tussle of fur rubbed against my outstretched hand, followed by a wet nose that sniffed and licked my fingertips. I shifted the final twigs aside to be greeted by a wagging black tail.

Dog rolled onto her back, showing me her empty belly. I rubbed it until her leg kicked with joy.

"Good girl," I murmured.

Sometimes, I wished I'd given her a name. When I first found her a few months ago, I never imagined she'd make it through the night. Unearthing her from a burrow where she whimpered in despair, I discovered that she had more black fur than meat on her bones. She limped when she walked, and flies rested on her face as if awaiting

her death. I knew I'd become too fond of a sickly animal if I gave her a proper name—instead, I simply called her what she was. A dog.

I placed the basket down as Dog eagerly nuzzled her nose against the wicker. The moment the lid flipped open, she buried her face among the scraps. I scratched the scruff of her neck while she ate. Thin strands of light flowed through the breaks in the trees as if spun from golden thread. The rainfall quickened, dripping rhythmically from the sheltering leaves—its drumming the lone sound in the quiet.

My mother once told me tales from her girlhood—times when the forest hummed with life. Hares hopped through the long grass, while sprites swooped from branch to branch. Even during the chilling winter, when the grass wilted underneath a blanket of ice-cold snow, deer darted through the open plains.

But now, after the Dark Days when bloodshed rivaled the rain for what would sodden the Wetlands, Mother said she had not once heard the growl of a griffin.

The forest might have still been green, but almost all creatures were gone.

Dog's ears pricked up as she stopped eating and stared into nothingness, twitching as if attuned to something I couldn't hear. My heart pounded harder than drumsticks beating a tambour at the thought of being caught—alone in the forest with a dog. If a villager stumbled upon me, hunched between the nettles, nursing a creature, they'd suspect I was a witch practicing magic—and I'd be hanged.

Then, Dog dove her head back into the basket; she no longer sensed any threat. If she felt safe, so did I.

Some villagers believed that animals understood the magical language of Yfelle. One frequent patron of our local tavern claimed to have heard a hound fluently speak the forbidden tongue as he staggered back to his lodgings after one too many tankards.

I believed that Yfelle would soon be remembered as myth. Though the Dark Days were long ago, I grew up hearing grim stories of the slaughter—of how every wizard, witch, and magical creature had been executed or forced into hiding because of their abilities.

Despite all the fables bred from fear, one certainty remained: Anyone or anything caught speaking Yfelle was killed.

Mother reminded me daily.

As Dog ate, I foraged for things only the forest could offer. I gathered sticks for the furnace and scavenged wild herbs for Mother to pestle into medicines. Dog tipped over the basket in search of more food, but she had eaten it all. After a final rub behind the ears, I set off toward Green Vale.

Emerging from the sheltering trees into the rainy Wetlands, I felt something brush against my leg.

Glancing down, I saw Dog nuzzling into me. "Stay," I commanded.

Dog whined but obeyed; her gaze tugged at my heartstrings. Guilt gnawed at me for leaving her behind, yet I knew it was the only way to keep her safe.

The dewy grass soaked my boots as I trudged toward the crossways, where a sunken signpost—skewed in the clay-like soil—loomed overhead. King James had decreed its placement to guide passersby to the nearest village. A lingering terror pervaded these lands, for many feared encountering a magical entity without knowing where to flee for refuge.

Four wooden arrows branched off the post, each pointing toward a village in the Wetlands: Green Hollow, home to the nobility and knights; Green Vale, Green Gallows, and Green Glenn, where the common folk dwelled. One arrow bore a faded painting of a river winding between two hills. I followed its trail toward Green Vale.

My family was tied to the Wetlands. Unlike the free-men who dwelled in the romanticized Walled City, we belonged to a lord—in exchange for our labor, he provided us with land and lodgings.

A sharp snap of a branch broke my focus and sent me stumbling along the uneven path. Regaining my balance, I surveyed the middle distance toward my village. From this hilltop, I could normally see everything from the old stone well to the local tavern, and even the thatched roof of the smithy.

But today, the mist shrouded it all, leaving only the tallest turret of the Lord's castle piercing through the haze.



*The figure was racing
toward me, their
cloak billowing in the
strong winds like
a ghostly apparition.*



As a child, I often wondered what secrets were hidden behind the great stone wall protecting the Lord's fortress. Only as I grew older did I understand its true purpose—to keep magic out.

I heard another crunch—then several more—making my heart rattle in my chest. It sounded like footsteps on fallen sticks. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw light flickering through the trees. Something darted between them.

An overwhelming sense of foreboding gripped me as I wiped rainwater from my face.

"Who goes there?" I yelled back from where I just came, but only the gentle hum of the wind replied to my call.

As I squinted, a cloaked stranger stepped into a beam of light piercing the fog, lingering in the ethereal glow. From this distance, I couldn't tell if the silhouette was friend or foe. The wind coiled my hair around my neck like a noose as I hurriedly wiped raindrops from my eyelashes. When I looked again, the figure was racing toward me, their cloak billowing in the strong winds like a ghostly apparition.

I dashed toward the safety of Green Vale, cutting through a cornfield without caring which crops I



damaged. A fuming farmer didn't frighten me, but the person chasing me did—their desperation as wild as a starving man spotting a rabbit after months of famine.

Running was difficult. My thick cloak weighed me down. My damp linen undergarments chafed against my skin. But I forced one foot in front of the other—until my boot caught on the hem of my overdress, hurling me forward. The basket flew from my hands, throwing herbs up into the rain like confetti as I tumbled onto the crop. I lay on the dirt, staring up at the dense, gray clouds. The drizzle pattered against my face, momentarily distracting me from the burning in my scraped knees and palms.

For a fleeting instant, I mistook the shadow overhead for a storm cloud—but as my eyes adjusted, I realized it was a black cloak. A hand appeared on either side of my



*There was a sharp edge
of truth to her
words, and I worried
that if she knew
my secrets I'd be offered
no redemption.*



face and, before I could react, a stranger grappled my shoulders, pinning me down. The figure pressed their full weight into my chest, stealing my breath. Desperate to break free, I clawed through the fabric, searching for a weak point to bite—until my gaze caught on the cloak's lining: rich ermine fur, a pelt reserved solely for noble households.

A faint laugh echoed from inside the hood.

"What's a helpless maiden like yourself doing so far from the safety of the village?" my hunter mused.

The instant I heard her familiar, soft voice, I knew who was hiding in the dark folds. At last, she released me, and I reached upward, yanking down the hood.

Her auburn hair wildly rode the wind, blowing across her devilish grin.

"Avice," I said, catching my nervous breath. "My soul nearly leapt out of my skin!"

My heart still thudded, but I was relieved—my stalker was my closest friend.

Avice laughed as she extended her hand, helping me back to my feet.

"Why are you creeping around the outskirts of the village like a vagrant?" she asked, her rosy lips slipping into a coy smile.

I grabbed the empty basket and carefully picked out the damp sticks from the foxglove and wildflowers.

"Herbs," I replied, silently noting that my brother wouldn't be pleased about the wet wood.

I inspected each sprig before placing it back in the basket, worried I might accidentally grab foxglove instead of the yarrow and poison my family.

Avice plucked a black hair from my cloak. "I didn't know heather grew fur."

I chuckled at her naivety for herbs. "Don't confuse heather for foxglove—one's delicious, and the other's deadly."

"Just like me and you then," she teased. "Tell me honestly—did you go visit the dog?"

My words snagged in my throat, like wool on a splinter, as I contemplated how best to answer. When I'd confided in Avice about my wild companion, I'd foolishly hoped she'd be as intrigued by the unknown as me.

But she wasn't—she was unnerved.

I shook my head. "I went to collect sticks, and she crossed my path," I said, stretching the truth. "She followed me. I told her to go away, but she wouldn't listen. She likes me."

Mother often warned that sharing secrets was dangerous. She said hearsay was like little sparks beneath kindling—it didn't take much for one to catch and burn into great, untamable flames. But Avice and I had once sworn to tell each other everything—and I almost always kept that promise.

Avice tutted, clearly disappointed in my nurturing nature. "If my father knew you'd befriended a beast, he'd have you hanged," she said with no sentiment for our lifelong friendship—just plainspoken.

For a moment, I faltered, imagining the unyielding rope being strung around my throat before the deadly drop. I dwelled upon how suffocation might feel, how the pressure might pulsate behind my bulging eyes. Would Avice bear witness to my execution? Would she try to save me before my candle was blown out? Or would she watch on with burning certainty in her emerald irises that this was necessary—that because I cared for a creature, I deserved to die.

"Niamh, do you understand?" Avice's voice cut through my dark daydream. "My father treats his duty like a sacred obligation."

Her father, Lord of the Wetlands, valued his role in the King's Order above all else. *Even his own daughter*, I thought.

"I know," I murmured.

"He wouldn't care that you're my dearest friend," she reminded me. "That we've known each other longer than we've known our own names. He'd feel no remorse giving the order."

I nodded, ignoring a nigger—would she feel regret if I were accused of witchcraft and hanged? Before I could fret, I reminded myself that she cared for me deeply. I hoped that if that day came, she'd defend me with bone-deep loyalty. After all, we were the dearest of friends.

To an onlooker, Avice and I seemed an unlikely pair: the daughter of a lord befriending the daughter of the local blacksmith. But my father had spent his life delusionally devoted to his liege, and his unwavering loyalty meant





that from my first blink, I'd been given the role of Avice's plaything. Thankfully, her fondness for me blossomed early, while she was still suckling milk from her wetnurse.

"Niamh," Avice sighed, her gloved fingertip tapping lightly against my forehead. "Please, listen to me. Stop helping that dog. You know I'd never lie to my father. If he asks whether you've been tending to it, I'll be honest. Let it die so you can live."

"The dog's better now," I murmured. "I don't need to go back. She can fend for herself out there in the wilderness."

My words sought to reassure her, though I knew I wouldn't be able to resist returning before dawn broke.

Dog depended on me; she wholeheartedly trusted that I'd visit every day.

I imagined her, excitedly waiting for me at the forest's edge tomorrow. Only as dusk consumed the daylight would she realize I wasn't coming. When nightfall settled on the trees, she'd retreat to her burrow—hungry, confused, and abandoned. The mere thought made tears prick at my eyes.

"Good," Avice said, taking my hand in hers. "Even I'm beginning to worry that you might be a witch."

She wriggled her fingers against mine as though speaking in jest. Yet, there was a sharp edge of truth to her words, and I worried that if she knew all my secrets I'd be offered no redemption.

Her father had indoctrinated Avice, along with his knights and the villagers, into his merciless dogma, all in the name of protecting Lyonesse.

"I should be more concerned with your lack of heart," I replied, giving her hand a tight squeeze. "If I find a creature in need of help, I'll offer it."

Avice sighed. "Your kindness will get someone killed."

We walked hand in hand through the mizzle as Avice spoke of her wedding plans, and I found myself grateful for

the change of conversation. Long before she could walk, her father had arranged her marriage to King James's middle son. Prince Fitzroy, four years her senior, was twenty-five and desperate to produce a legitimate heir.

"We'll be wed before summer solstice in the grand Walled City, at the royal palace," Avice said. Though she tried to sound boastful, I knew she was dreading her departure. "Did I tell you there will be hundreds in attendance?"

I shook my head. "Sounds like a grand affair."

"It's been meticulously planned, with no input from myself," Avice sighed. "I've chosen the flowers and the color for the drapes in the feast hall, but no one has cared to ask for my opinion about anything."

"I'm sure the Prince has spectacular taste," I said, trying to reassure her, though I knew little of the man.

I'd once overheard a drunkard at the tavern claim that Prince Fitzroy possessed all the arrogance and hubris you'd expect of a King's son. According to Avice, he was a great swordsman and a natural-born leader. But I had yet to encounter a man who didn't consider himself endowed with the same virtues.

"He's had long enough to plan it," Avice said.

Their nuptials had been postponed for two winters, but this would be the final one we'd spend together.

From the way Avice hung her head, her face shrouded by the shadows of her hood, I knew she was deeply unhappy.

I gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Would your absence be noticed this evening?"

"No," Avice mumbled. "Everyone, even the chambermaids, is too preoccupied with the warmongering."

As she spoke, the skies above unleashed a slush of snowfall. Still gripping Avice's hand, I ran. We took shelter beneath the hawthorn trees while the flakes melted into the soil. ■

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Long Live the Cosmo Girl

Created by iconic editor Helen Gurley Brown and photographer Francesco Scavullo, the archetype became both a symbol of female ambition and a lasting cultural legacy.

By MIKHAILA ARCHER



Photographed by Francesco Scavullo, 1971 to 1996.

Olivia. Doe-hii. Margaret. You know today's *Cosmopolitan*

cover stars from your favorite playlists and most-loved movies. But when Helen took the reins of this magazine decades ago, she was interested in a different sort of cover model—not necessarily someone you knew but someone you could be. Maybe.

"We didn't want to take a picture of a librarian or the girl next door," Helen told the *New York Times* in 2006. "We wanted the most glamorous woman alive."

For nearly 30 years, Helen and Francesco collaborated on the now-iconic, often monochromatic covers that showcased both their version of glamour and the fantasy it represented: the Cosmo Girl readers might someday become (if only they read every word of each month's issue and followed all of its advice).

In the age of influencers and Facetune and the year that *The Devil Wears Prada 2* brought the era of glossy magazines back into the spotlight, the fine line between aspiration and self-deprecation feels more relevant than ever. Always ahead of her time, Helen understood this complicated balance better than anyone. "Am I terribly out of it and unfair to be pushing young women to be something they may not be able to become?" she asked *Interview* in 1973. "But I can't feel that it's not better to try, because within the trying, you get something out of it."

What exactly that something was and still is remains a question for anyone—current *Cosmopolitan* editors included—navigating timelines and, yes, covers filled with aspirational It Girls. ■



The Marsh sisters and their dog, Bogey



Allyson and her dog, Lacy

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