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WORK?

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INTO THE DEEP

"Acting," the actress says, is about "exploring things I don't understand in myself." In this homage to Félix Vallotton's 1924 painting *Le Retour de la Mer*, she wears an Alexander Wang cerulean-blue twill dress with oversize draped sleeves. Details, see in This Issue.

Fashion Editor:
Grace Coddington.





WORK OF ART

Jessica Chastain reveals a more personal side in two upcoming films—as Tom Shone discovers the passion and determination that have made her Hollywood’s most versatile star. Photographed by Annie Leibovitz.

When Al Pacino was directing Jessica Chastain in the film version of his 2006 theatrical production of Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*, he told the actress two things. One: *The camera sees deeper into your soul than your scene partner.* And two: *Don’t lie—the camera will always pick it up.* Chastain had the normal nerves that any theater actor has on making her first film. On top of that was the challenge of the role itself, the flame-haired stepdaughter of King Herod who demands John the Baptist’s head on a plate—destructive sexuality incarnate. “I did not feel like a beautiful woman that people would kill each other for,” Chastain says near her Manhattan apartment, climbing into an SUV bound for the Bronx Zoo. “Jessica—who I am in my personal life—I’m very shy, I feel very awkward, I don’t feel like a femme fatale at all.”

On this bright fall day, her own energy couldn’t be less predatory. Wearing a figure-hugging woolen brown-and-black top beneath a black Burberry coat and black Lanvin boots, she is smaller than she appears on-screen, with a contained power, like a dancer’s, and a very clear sense of boundaries—an accidental elbow brush brings a quick apology. Like a lot of screen beauties, Chastain is almost excessively luscious up close—pale Botticelli features wrapped around a bone structure that has a touch of the masculine, right down to the cleft in her chin. The Victorians would have loved her. Her conversation is engaged but polite in the manner of a bright schoolgirl having dinner with her friends’ parents. “She is never guarded, but she is very protective of not having to be an open book,” says Guillermo del Toro, who produced last year’s high-toned horror

hit *Mama*, in which she starred. “The crew loves her, the cast loves her, but that doesn’t mean that she has to cook a dinner for 25 people every Friday.” Even Pacino, who worked with her for the better part of a year on *Salomé*, admits, “I don’t know anything about her. I know I loved working with her, I enjoyed her company, we’d go out with her from time to time, but I never really sat down and had a heart-to-heart with her. I don’t know where she goes.”

Her Facebook page, unusually well curated and full of “xxjes”s to her fans, charts her movements, from Paris Fashion Week to Jay Leno, but speak to friends and the picture that emerges is of a life that has remained more or less unchanged since Chastain’s days as a student at Juilliard, which she attended after winning a Robin Williams–funded scholarship. An early riser, she likes shopping for food at the local farmer’s market, doesn’t drink much, and is far more likely to be found at home playing Scrabble with friends, or else catching the latest Michael Haneke movie at the Angelika, than stumbling out of a nightclub at 3:00 A.M. “She’s always been unbelievably focused,” says actress Jess Weixler, her best friend from Juilliard, where Chastain cut a studious path, only twice visiting Malachy’s, the local bar. “It used to drive the guys crazy. ‘Why won’t Jessica stay up late?’ There were a few times when I was like: I can’t believe she’s waking up on a Saturday to go to an extra class.”

It isn’t Chastain’s first visit to the Bronx Zoo. She once came as part of her orientation at Juilliard. Students were asked to pick an animal and act it out in class. Chastain chose the tiger, fascinated by the movement of its shoulder blades. “They have their heads down and they look up,” she says, looking at me through a curtain of hair. “Like a boxer, almost.” For another class, she was asked to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art, pick a painting, and bring it to life, an exercise that she drew on for her *Vogue* shoot with Annie Leibovitz. “I approach fashion the same way I approach acting,” she says. “I don’t want to wear the same silhouette or color over and over again. It’s like telling a story. I want things to influence me and change me.”

Chastain’s performance in *Salomé*, which hits cinemas this month, is a marvel of controlled ferocity, offering a fascinating time-capsule view of a talent in first flush. It’s all the more striking when set next to a scene in the accompanying documentary, *Wilde Salomé*, Pacino’s behind-the-scenes rummage through his production of both play and movie, in which Chastain, attending what she thought would be a dinner party for Pacino, seizes up when she finds cameras present. “I don’t understand,” we see her repeating, peering nervously around a producer’s shoulder.

“I was just scared to death because I was told I was going to be at this dinner for Al’s birthday party,” she says when I ask her about that moment. “Are we doing the play? Or are we doing the movie? Is this acting or is this not, because right now it feels like a blur.”

She definitely observes the distinction. She recently completed a film version of *Miss Julie* directed by Liv Ullmann, who calls her performance as Strindberg’s suicidal heroine “a

“I love playing strong women,” she says. “When I get a character, I always think, How can we give her a bit of an edge?”

miracle. There were takes that I just had to keep without cutting away to anyone else because she is extraordinary.” But, Ullmann says, the moment the take was over, “she would smile and step away. There was a separation.” With Chastain’s soft, nonconfrontational manner, her veganism, and her rules against dating fellow actors, she appears to be the embodiment of appetites curbed and controlled. Until three years ago she lived in a rent-stabilized apartment in Santa Monica, parceling out money into envelopes, as she once read Barbra Streisand used to do: “\$500 after rent, \$100 for food, \$25 dollars for entertainment,” she recalls. A small family of mice lived in her cutlery drawer, and Chastain, who loves animals, let them stay.

We arrive at the zoo. Above us stretches a vast canopy of trees and foliage, dappling the path up ahead, where an electric cart sits waiting to ferry us around. Acting for her is about “exploring things I don’t understand in myself,” she says as we board, “maybe that I’m afraid of within myself.”

Ned Benson, a close friend who directed her in the upcoming *The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby*, says, “It’s like that Flaubert quote: ‘Live a well-ordered life so you can be violent in your work.’ I think that’s Jessica exactly. She lives a well-ordered life so she can go to extremes in her work.”

For a long time, Jessica Chastain seemed to exist only as an industry secret—Pacino’s prodigy. In the years the actor spent trying to get distribution for *Salomé*, he raved about her to director Terrence Malick, who cast her in *The Tree of Life* and recommended her in turn to directors John Hillcoat, John Madden, and Jeff Nichols. Which meant that when she finally burst into public consciousness in 2011, she did so with a fusillade of no fewer than six movies, in which she played, variously, a Texas Earth Mother, a Mossad agent, an Ohio housewife, a detective, a Southern homemaker, and the wife of Coriolanus. Hollywood didn’t have time to typecast her. “Different camera angles catch her differently,” says Nichols, director of *Take Shelter*. “My cameraman and I commented on this—she just would morph sometimes, like a stealth fighter deflecting radar.”

Since then, she has kept up a steady, radar-jamming zigzag across the field. She won her first Oscar nomination for her ditzzy Southern blonde in *The Help*, the kind of role that traditionally serves as entrée to status as America’s sweetheart, but then how did she follow it up? A second Oscar nomination, this time for last year’s *Zero Dark Thirty*, in which she played Maya, the steely CIA officer with bin Laden in her sights, a chaste warrior, as cuddly as brushed steel. America’s sweetheart got Tasered.

“I do love playing strong women that don’t just serve the male character of the story,” she tells me as, behind her, an eight-foot-long female tiger slowly circles the rim of a rock pool. “That’s why I love French films because usually you see very complex women; they don’t have to be likable. This is a problem: I need to pull back a little bit, but when I get a character I always think, How can we give her a bit of an edge? I love Celia Foote [her character in *The Help*], but after playing her and Mrs. O’Brien in *The Tree of Life* I kept getting these sweetheart characters. I’m constantly trying to fight it.”

If there is a criticism to be leveled at Chastain, it is that her zigzag has managed to jam the radar not just of casting agents

PALE FIRE

"I don't feel like a femme fatale at all," Chastain says. Here she reenacts Anders Zorn's 1899 portrait of Frances Folsom Cleveland. Oscar de la Renta silver duchesse silk satin dress with organza neckline. Details, see In This Issue.



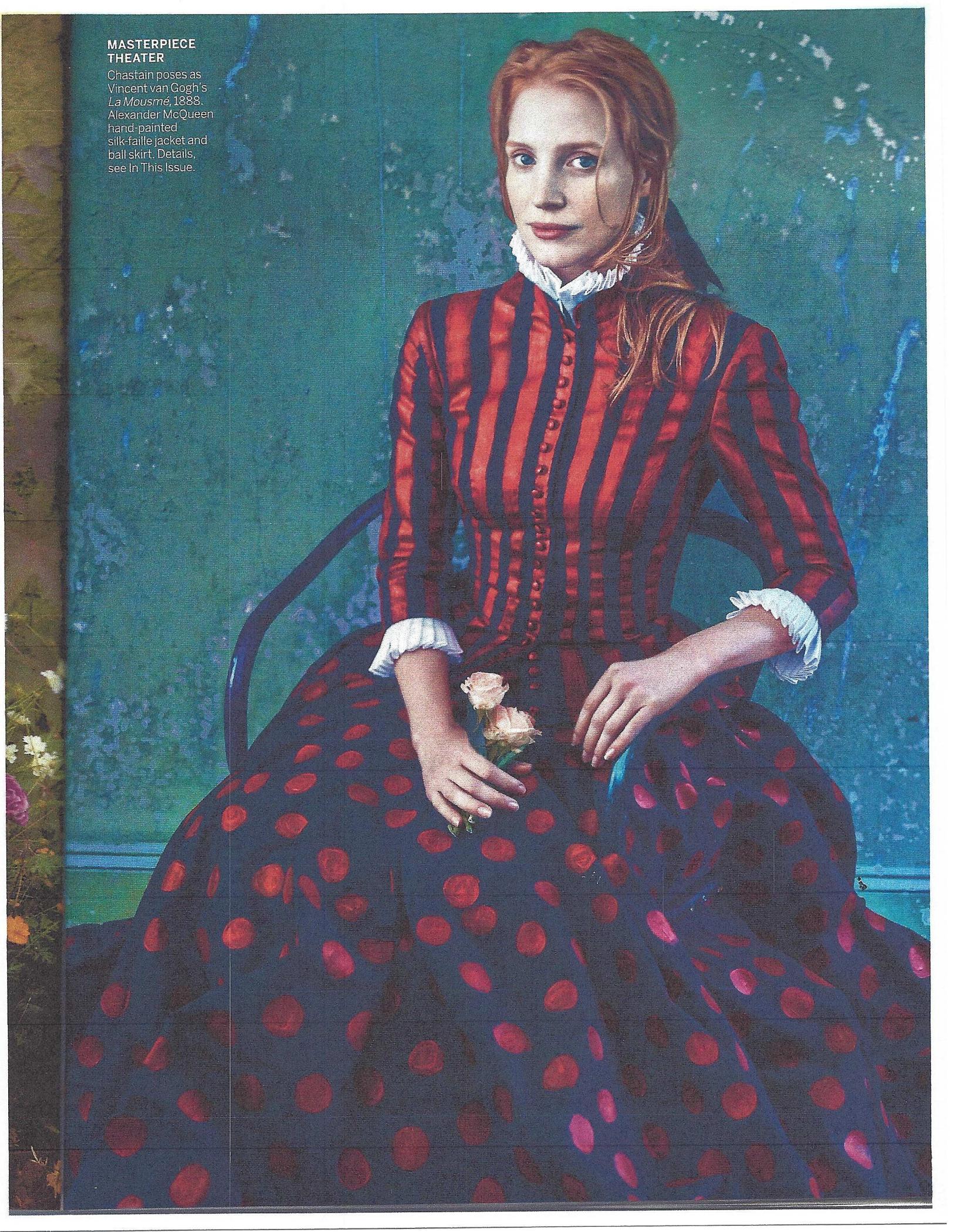


IN FULL FLOWER

The twice-Oscar-nominated actress in the role of Gustav Klimt's frequent subject Rie Munk. Vera Wang Collection hand-painted silk chiffon dress. Manolo Blahnik heels.

**MASTERPIECE
THEATER**

Chastain poses as
Vincent van Gogh's
La Mousmé, 1888.
Alexander McQueen
hand-painted
silk-faille jacket and
ball skirt. Details,
see In This Issue.



and studio executives but of moviegoers as well. On-screen, she seems to disappear into character like a stone that drops into a lake without a ripple. On some basic level, we still don't know who she is. This might start to shift with her new movie, *The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby*. It may not be her best film, but it could be her most personal: something of a labor of love, eight years in the making, for Chastain and an inner circle of friends, including Benson and producer Cassandra Kulukundis, who first met the actress back in 2003, after she moved to L.A., looking for work. Tuning into KCRW one day, Chastain heard the station giving away tickets to the Malibu Film Festival, called in, won, and thought, It's a sign. "You know—'OK, I'm going to make it in this business!'" she says with a swing of her fist and a laugh. "I had no idea what I was doing."

At the festival she saw a short film called *Four Lean Hounds* and buttonholed the director, Ned Benson, in the foyer afterward. "She was my first fan," says Benson, who quickly became friends with the actress and later shared an apartment with her. "We would go to movies, see plays," he remembers, "or else she'd be reading Jean Genet's *The Maids*, or *Miss Julie*. She just devoured this curriculum of theater and film." It wasn't until 2011, he says, "when she got *The Tree of Life*, that all the study, all the preparation just fell away. Terry basically gave her so much respect, she could just breathe."

In many ways, *The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby* catches exactly this moment—a snapshot of the actress in transition. It's actually two films, subtitled "Him" and "Her," each telling the story of a couple, played by Chastain and James McAvoy, as they deal with a terrible loss. In "Him," which was originally intended to stand alone, Chastain's character, Eleanor, distraught with grief, attempts suicide and abruptly disappears, only to reappear on the streets of New York a few weeks later, sporting sunglasses and a new bob, as if she had simply pressed the RESET button on her entire existence. She is a sleek cipher. "Then Jessica started asking questions: where the character went, who she was," says Benson, who wrote a second script, in which Eleanor gets a past and a family, including a sister played by Weixler and a mother played by Chastain's acting idol, Isabelle Huppert. In many ways the resulting film is exactly the kind of thing the French do best—an essay on grief, deconstructed identity, and the irreducible mystery of great-looking sunglasses. It ends with a scene of shattering grief. Chastain was in tears, too, at the Q & A after the film's premiere in Toronto, where it received an ovation.

"My friends have all been the biggest cheerleaders as my life has gone, you know, a little wonderful and crazy," she says of

her tears. "So to be in Toronto watching their dreams come true after watching years and years of struggle was so emotional for me." The role itself crept up on her. "It's about trying to change who you are into something else," she observes, "but the problem at the end is that she's lost her history."

Chastain's relationship to her personal history has its own ellipses and enigmas. In February of this year, in the middle of the Oscar campaign for *Zero Dark Thirty*, as the world's press was capturing her every move on the red carpet, reports surfaced that Chastain's alleged biological father, a rock musician named Michael Monasterio, had died of "complications from bronchitis." They claimed that Monasterio had met Chastain's mother, Jerri, when she was still in high school, and

fathered two daughters, Jessica and Juliet, with her. At the time, Chastain remained silent.

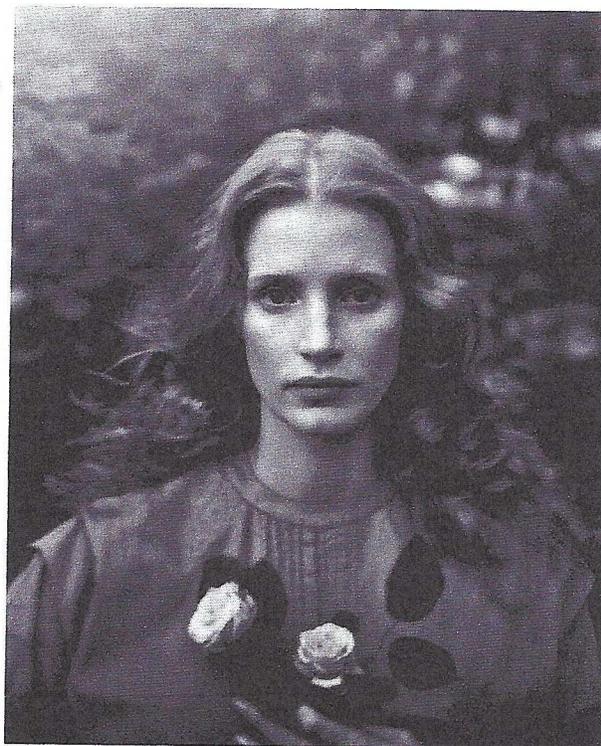
"It was very difficult," she says somberly. "Especially because a lot of it was speculation. I don't have anyone listed on my birth certificate as my father, so there's no proof of anything. I didn't want to comment and say anything at the time, because a gentleman had died, but also, too, I wanted to protect my family and acknowledge this very important man in my life"—her stepfather, Michael Hastey, who met her mother, by then a vegan chef, when Chastain was in eighth grade and whom she calls "one of the greatest people in my life. He's my dad because when he came into my life, it completely changed. It was the first time I had felt security."

Most of her stories about her childhood in a Northern California suburb date from this point—the happy ones,

anyway. Of her early childhood, she gives only snapshots. One time she came home from school to find a man placing eviction locks on the doors; he took pity on her and let her retrieve some of her things. Another time, she stole some postcards a classmate had brought back from Disneyland, only to be found writing them out to herself—"Dear Jessica . . ."—on the bus, and was forced to apologize in front of the class. "It was horrible," she recalls. "I think I wanted a community. It was like on *Glee*, this island of misfit toys who find each other, except I just didn't know how. I was a kid who didn't want to be a kid. I wanted to have control over my life, and because I felt completely out of control, it was tough."

There are two heroes in Chastain's account of her childhood: her stepfather and her maternal grandmother, Marilyn, who was her date to the Oscars in 2012. It was her grandmother who first took Chastain, age seven, to the theater, to see a performance of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. "She used to say to me, 'You have such a beautiful smile, why don't you smile?'"

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CLEAR FOCUS

The actress in an image inspired by the work of Julia Margaret Cameron. Band of Outsiders gray smocked dress.

SURREAL MOMENT

"My life has gone, you know, a little wonderful and crazy," says Chastain, seen here in a reimagining of René Magritte's *La Robe du Soir*, 1955. In this story: hair, Julien d'Ys for Julien d'Ys; makeup, Diane Kendal for Marc Jacobs Beauty. Set design, Mary Howard. Interiors photographed at the Dr. Oliver Bronson House, a project of Historic Hudson. THIS PAGE: hair, Renato Campora. Details, see In This Issue.



THE LONG ROAD BACK

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off for money. So my friend and I went there to help out.

The garage behind the house in Stamford hadn't caught fire, and I had stored old boxes of toys there that my girls had outgrown and a bunch of things I had saved for them for when they grew up. I took a bag of it all to Thailand, and on Christmas morning I gave the girls presents, and they were so excited. Thirty or so of them came and stood in front of me and prayed for me in Thai. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them we were all crying. When I looked into the girls' faces, I saw my children. It broke me open in a way I still can't fully explain. But if these little girls were living their lives with joy and happiness, I realized—and if they could give their love to me after all they had been through—how could I possibly feel sorry for myself? What they showed me was that what had happened to them had just happened. It wasn't "done" to them, just as none of this had been "done" to me. I wasn't being punished; I had not been singled out.

Bill Duke was one of the three men at the side of my bed when I woke up in the hospital on that Christmas morning. I had dated one of his brothers years ago and had met Bill at their grandparents' house in East Hampton. Bill and I had stayed friends, and when I started looking for an apartment in New York in March, I called him—he's a real estate broker—and we looked at houses for several weeks. One day he asked me out and I said yes. Recently he asked me to marry him, and I said yes to that, too. We're getting married next September; more immediately, we're volunteering together this Christmas to help kids in need.

Matthew has been very loving and kind, and he's doing an amazing job with the foundation he's created in the name of our children, the LilySarahGraceFund, to help teachers help children by bringing more art into public school systems. Because our children were dyslexic, the arts, in many ways, saved their confidence and their self-esteem, and Matthew's passion for the foundation is his way of honoring them.

The first few months back at work were really hard, but I love my job, and it's a deep comfort to work hard at something I can do well. Calvin told me early on that work and my company would help me, and he was right.

I'm also still a mom, and I'm still my parents' daughter. Just because they're all gone doesn't mean that any of that stops, and what better way to honor their

lives than to not give up? I chose this life. I wanted to have these babies, and I wanted to have this company. And I wanted my girls—and my mom and dad—to look at me and see a strong, smart businesswoman with a heart full of love for them.

It's never going to be easy. The pain is just so huge that sometimes it feels like a prison cell. But trying really hard to not feel sorry for myself makes me feel good. Being of service helps the pain to go away, if only for a little while, and giving and receiving love makes me feel good. Basically, I go to wherever the light is, because anything else is darkness, and it can be a deeply black darkness.

Earlier this fall I walked from Bill's house in Brooklyn to Green-Wood Cemetery to find a place to bury the ashes of my daughters. I kept thinking that I should have been taking them to their first day of school, or having a parent-teacher conference, but after almost two years, I was ready for them to have a final resting place. Once I came to terms with that, I felt strangely peaceful, though facing the physicality of that place is really, really hard. At a certain point, you can either be full of hate or full of love—it can go either way. I have no hate in my heart, no bitterness, and I am blessed by this.

I found a beautiful spot for them, up on a hill. And I can feel my girls and my parents with me every day. This gives me immeasurable hope. □

WORK OF ART

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 262

she remembers. "She saw that I had a lot of intensity that I wasn't expressing or didn't have an outlet for. I saw a child on the stage, and it was the first time I thought, Oh, my God, that's it. It changed my life."

What did acting give her? "A way of feeling closeness, of feeling part of something bigger than who I was in school, feeling like the outsider, writing those postcards to myself. There's freedom. Even if you're meeting with someone and falling in love in real life, there's still this sense of 'I like this person; do they like me?' You're always checking yourself. But when you're acting, you're not allowed to be self-conscious. I allow myself to do everything. I completely give myself over."

Emerging from the shade of the trees into chalky sunlight, we make our way to the top of a tall wooden scaffold in time for the giraffes' feeding. Chastain holds out a carrot to a nearly eighteen-foot female. "Hi there, beauty," she says. The giraffe slowly walks toward us, head bobbing, until she is just a few feet away, large jet-black irises rimmed with thick black

eyelashes, gently tugging the carrot from Chastain's fingers.

"Isn't she beautiful?" whispers Chastain. "The most wonderful thing about balance also is imbalance. The people on the trapeze, they can all have breakfast up there. Maybe that's why I love giraffes so much. They look very unsteady, but they're not at all. They're much stronger than they look."

"Their legs are actually very stout," chips in the giraffe's keeper. "They can kill a lion with one well-placed kick."

Chastain seems happy with the answer. "You can't push one of these over."

It's hard not to discern a similar balancing act in her own life and career. On the one hand, there is her fierce drive, as if trying to quell the chaos of her childhood. "She's in control," says Jeff Nichols. "So many celebrities are spiraling. They can't handle the weight of the eyes upon them. Jessica was prepared, maybe in those years she was waiting for it all to come together. She knew what was coming." On the other hand, there are the performances themselves, in which she relinquishes control, again and again. Her commitment is not without its toll; coming off the shoot of *Miss Julie* in Northern Ireland, she resolved to limit the number of tragic heroines she plays every year.

"Because I do give myself over completely, I have to then be responsible," she tells me over a pot of herbal tea when I meet with her at the Mercer Hotel a week later; she is wearing a berry-colored shirt, a cream cashmere sweater, and Missoni boots. "I don't want to die for this business." Her downtown apartment is overrun at the moment with builders, laying down herringbone floors and installing a bathroom with a shower that doubles as a steam room. New York's winters have taken a little getting used to. "When it's snowing outside, I always feel like my bones are never going to get warm. So now I can come in from the snow and just sit in the steam and warm up."

She seems perfectly relaxed, perhaps the result of her recent vacation. Emerging from a tough awards season and a production of *The Heiress* on Broadway earlier this year, she decided to take a month off, visiting Bali, then the Maldives, before inviting her grandmother to Milan and spending time with her boyfriend, Gian Luca Passi de Preposulo, an executive at Moncler, in Paris. "I felt very relaxed, but at the same time, what am I doing on my first week of vacation? Reading scripts," she says. "The feeling that I need to put a roof over my head never quite goes away. When you grow up like that, it instills this 'I'm not going

to take anything for granted, because I don't want to lose it' feeling." She still heads straight for the clearance sale in department stores and hesitates over big purchases, taking a month to buy a Prius in 2007. (It has only 30,000 miles on it; she prefers to bike around New York.) She also recently started Italian lessons and cookery classes. "I want to do films in other languages. I speak German, I hope to be in a French film, maybe with Olivier Assayas directing," she says. "I want to be like Isabelle Huppert, constantly working in other countries and other languages. That's how I hope my life will be."

When I ask her if she wants kids, she says, "Absolutely. Family is the most important thing to me." But, at 36, she knows that, at least as far as Hollywood is concerned, she is in her acting prime. "I think she *would* like children," says Benson, "but she has finally gotten this opportunity she's been working toward for so long. She has to capitalize on the moment." Chastain recently started shooting the new Christopher Nolan sci-fi epic *Interstellar*, to be followed by the immigrant drama *A Most Violent Year*, directed by J. C. Chandor, and Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak*, a Gothic romance in which she plays the embodiment of destructive, possessive love—a kind of Halloween Salomé. Having worked with the actress before, del Toro knows what to expect. He sent Chastain a ten-page biography of her character, containing every like and dislike, every last crumb of backstory, including a lullaby she has to sing in the film. "We are four months away from shooting. She has already sent back an MP3 of her singing it. We have already gone through two arrangements," he says. "That's the insatiable curiosity." □

RAGNAR OF REYKJAVÍK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 267

which consisted of him painting 144 portraits, one a day, in a fourteenth-century palazzo on the Grand Canal. The subject was wearing a black Speedo swimsuit, and the painting performance required both of them to drink beer and smoke continuously. "It was an ode to the artist I wanted to be—the alcoholic, smoking painter."

His paintings are rooted in performance. "I love the act of painting and its aura. That's more important than the painting itself. I'm gradually trying to understand the art object. It's a constant search for me. It always feels like I'm pretending to be a painter."

Ragnar turns on the car stereo and cues Frank Sinatra singing "I've Got You Under My Skin." He wants me to hear the trombone solo, which sounds

exactly like the horn of his Cadillac. "You can't go wrong with a Cadillac," he says, honking his horn to demonstrate. "There are so many great songs about Cadillacs. Hank Williams even died in a Cadillac."

Ragnar takes a mid-afternoon break to go to the christening of his best friends' daughter. Two hours later he calls me from the hotel lobby and says, rolling his r's, "R-r-r-ragnar here, intermission is over," and we're off again in the white Cadillac. Next stop is the i8 Gallery, where his Reykjavík dealer, Börkur Arnarson, pulls out three Ragnar self-portraits and screens footage from a few of his videos. Ragnar's videos don't tell stories, but the best of them can evoke fascination, laughter, and intense boredom—sometimes all at once. He nods approvingly when he sees me yawn at one point.

The market for video art has evolved. Museums are teaming up to buy and share important works—*The Visitors*, which is an edition of six, is co-owned by New York's Museum of Modern Art. Other museums have also come on board. Ragnar's work usually involves collaboration with highly accomplished fellow artists and musicians, and sometimes puts a severe strain on the endurance of both the performers and the audience. Some of the artists he's been compared to, such as Chris Burden and Marina Abramović, have rivaled his time-challenging exploits, but none have done so with his combination of goofy innocence, humor, and Nordic beauty. *Bliss*, a performance in which ten singers, including Ragnar, accompanied by a full orchestra, wear eighteenth-century costumes and sing the gorgeous final aria of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, over and over, for twelve hours without a break, won the award for most innovative work at 2011's Performa, the performance-art biennial. Roberta Smith, reviewing *Bliss* in *The New York Times*, called it "a collision between art and life, or more precisely, between Mozartian perfection and postmodern entropy."

Ragnar is leaving for Europe early in the morning. He's going to Milan, where *The Visitors* is being shown at the hot art space HangarBicocca, and from there to Venice to cheer on the six musicians who are nearing the end of *S.S. Hangover*'s six-month voyage—he's bringing each of them a Kjartansson painting of the boat. Over dinner in the hotel dining room, surrounded by large, colorful, and somewhat earnest Icelandic landscapes, he talks about how important it's been for him to work with other artists.

"Mainly," he says, "I consider my studio to be camaraderie. To be around people who are doing something gr-r-r-reat, to exchange ideas and occasionally to get

their time—that's what I've mostly ended up doing." Halfway through his lobster and his third glass of Pouilly-Fuissé, he's on to the oddities of making art in Iceland. "People here don't really believe you can make money out of art. That's what I like about this art community. Nobody buys art, so the idea of the art market doesn't exist." This reminds him of something he's just read in Kenneth Clark's book *Civilisation*. "He's talking about the aristocracy in Europe, the benefactors who didn't really know anything about art. 'They were as ignorant as swans' . . . glorious but totally stupid."

"In Iceland, where you've got free health care and free education," he says, "you don't have to financialize art. It's more like a hobby. I don't take art seriously, because it's so serious. It's like life itself—if you take it seriously, it's always going to be a burden."

It's past midnight. I've been with him for 24 hours, more or less, and I'm still riding on his high-octane exhilaration. Becoming a globally successful artist was never something he dreamed about. "I was really surprised by that," he says, "and I still am today. I think it must be some kind of a misunderstanding. It's hilarious that somebody wants to buy this stuff." □

TOWN AND COUNTRY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 276

chambers upstairs. Isabella responded to the house's aspiced period charm, with its original wide floorboards and ornate plaster cornices, but it also presented some challenges. Over the years those stately rooms had been clumsily subdivided, and curiously there was no kitchen of any description. So Colin set to work again, sensitively restoring the handsome bones while discreetly adding twenty-first-century amenities and creating light wells to brighten the gloomier recesses. "Every time you did something, something else sort of tilted over!" Isabella remembers. Behind a new stone parapet, matched to the others in the curving terrace, a master-bedroom floor was added, with dressing rooms filled with serious old mahogany wardrobes hauled back from Isabella's beloved Inverness antiques stores.

Isabella describes her enforced decorating style as "scruffy and cozy," and like all her environments it is a child-, dog- and friend-friendly haven of comfortable Victorian Howard-style sofas and chairs, of tapestries and rugs and chintzes and block-print linens, and a mass of Turkish ikat and cut-velvet cushions from her friend and London neighbor Rifat Özbek's

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