

# mysterious G I R L

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It's time to rethink the fierce, seductive  
NATALIE PORTMAN  
we know from the big screen and discover  
her distinct real-life counterpart –  
an elegant, Harvard-educated everywoman.  
*Christine Lennon* meets the Hollywood  
chameleon, who talks passionately  
about politics and equality, and proves  
that it's always the quiet ones who are  
the true forces to be reckoned with...

*Photography by Cass Bird  
Fashion editor Veronique Didry*





Previous page: Dress by Dior, \$906; earrings by Isabel Marant, \$585  
This page: top by Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood, \$12,000; shorts by Isabel Marant Etoile, \$230; earrings by Isabel Marant \$210; ring (worn throughout) by Jamie Wolf, Natalie's own

There is a scene in Natalie Portman's new film, *Annihilation* – a fantasy horror about a wife's mission to help her husband in an environmental disaster zone – where she unloads a magazine of bullets from an automatic weapon in such a ferociously convincing way – her left cheek quivers as each bullet leaves the barrel – that I had to cover my eyes for much of the scene. "Oh good!" she says, laughing. "I was pregnant when we were filming so my instinct was to kind of lean back. But my security detail, who is Israeli, would be like, 'No, no, no, you have to lean in, put your leg in front and shift your weight forward.' It was awesome."

The sweet and delicate Portman is clearly not so sweet inside. "And here are the all-male nominees," she declared mischievously at the Golden Globes, when announcing the category for Best Director. And if there is one consistent thread connecting most of her roles over her 24-year career to date, it's that they have a dark edge – not least her explosive debut as a child assassin in Luc Besson's *Léon*, aged just 12. By the time she had graduated from high school she was known for her precociousness and beauty, famously cast as Queen Padmeh Amidala in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy. But she then swapped Hollywood for Harvard, brazenly stating, "I don't care if it ruins my career; I'd rather be smart than a movie star."

When she returned to Hollywood, her appeal was undiminished, and she was cast in Zach Braff's *Garden State*, followed by Mike Nichols' *Closer*, for which she won a Golden Globe and received her first Oscar nomination. But it was her turn as the psychotic prima ballerina in Darren Aronofsky's thriller *Black Swan* in 2010 that saw her sweep the board with a Golden Globe, a Bafta and an Oscar. And that's not to mention the effect she has had on the fashion industry – covering in the ensuing years countless magazines and appearing as the face of Christian Dior beauty since 2010. But still, how much do we actually know about her?

She was born Neta-Lee Hershlag in Jerusalem in 1981, the only child of an Israeli fertility specialist and gynecologist father and an American mother, now her agent. The family moved to the US when she was three and she was raised primarily on Long Island in Syosset, New York. She expressed a serious interest in acting by the time she was 10. But she is not one of those former child actors who regrets the choices she made when she was very young. What we know of her life away from the screen

“I don't care if it ruins my *career*; I'd rather be *smart* than a movie star”

is sketchy. In 2002, she co-hosted a New Year's Eve party with Britney Spears at New York's Hudson Hotel; her best friend is Jeanine Lobell, the founder of Stila Cosmetics; she is close to the Rodarte sisters, Kate and Laura Mulleavy; and she once appeared in a Paul McCartney video. And that is about as far as her starriness goes. Never has such a successful actress been so adept at keeping private who she is away from acting.

Portman has always been something of an enigma – or, as Tom Hanks puts it, "an unknowable mystery" – a person who loves to surprise people, hopping from one deeply immersive, challenging role to another. More recently, her portrayal of the grieving First Lady (with that chilling accent) in *Jackie* earned her another string of award nominations. "I don't know," she shrugs, when I ask her over breakfast in a café near her Silver Lake home, why she thinks she's drawn to such demanding, often dark roles.

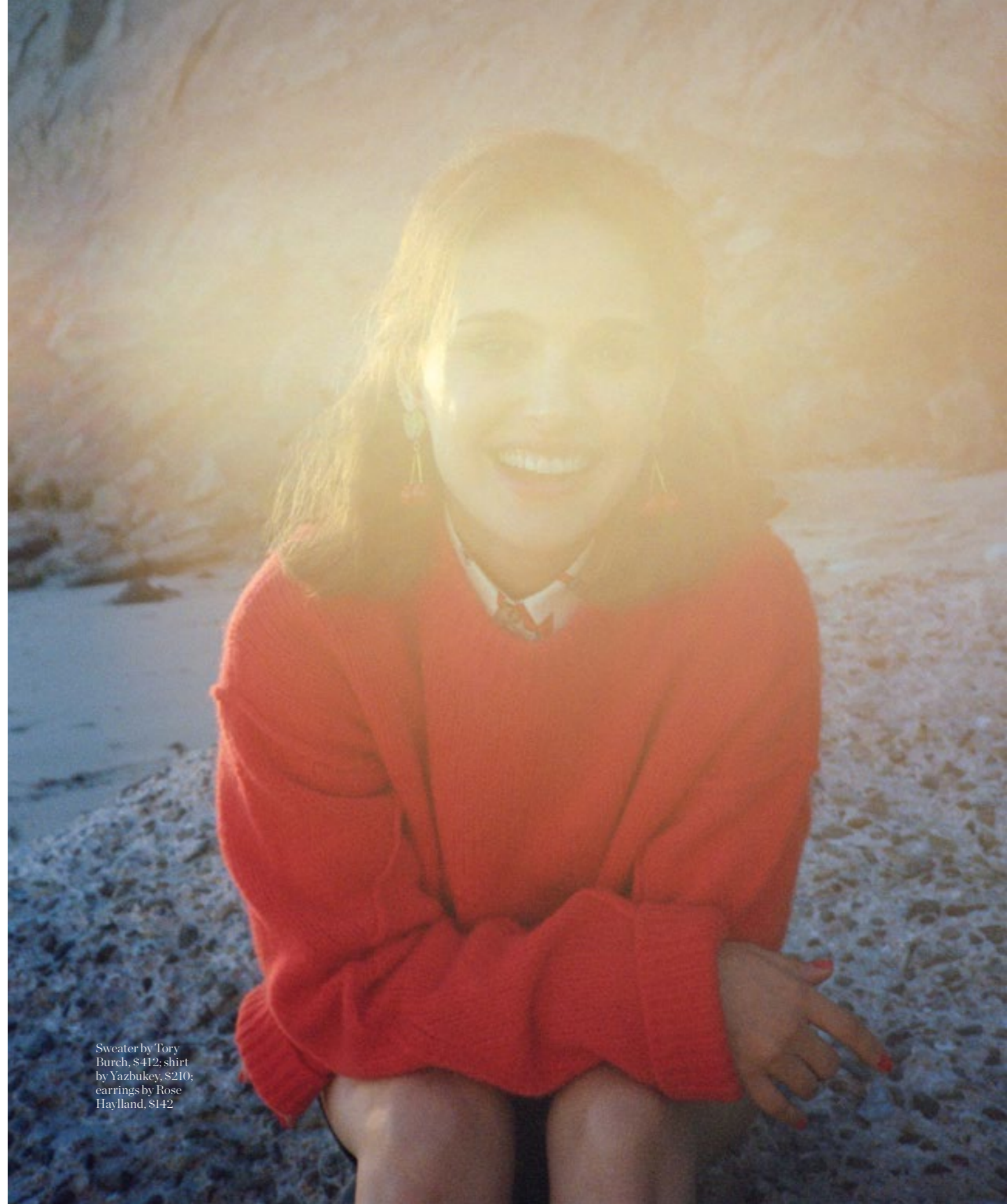
"Maybe it is a way to get it out at work, and then in real life things can be simpler, happier, less complicated."

However fierce Portman is on screen, off-screen she is considerate and friendly, if a little guarded. Dressed in a navy and white striped T-shirt and Levi's, with no jewelry and her hair pulled back, this is not the hyper-glamorous Portman we see in the Miss Dior adverts, or the poised, red-carpet Portman, elegant in a Rodarte gown. Today, she could almost pass as a local slightly harried working mother of two – her son, Aleph, is six, and her daughter, Amalia, is 11 months – who wolfs down a vegan breakfast burrito to fuel her for a busy day ahead. "Two kids and working. It's wonderful, but it's a lot."

She conducts herself with no airs or drama – something which is reinforced by her *Annihilation* co-star, Jennifer Jason Leigh. "Natalie is so open, incredibly intelligent and just a force," she says. "But there is no star behavior involved, there's nothing precious about her, which is surprising because of her delicate beauty." Jason Leigh recalls how there were no trailers or dressing rooms on set, so she and Portman had to share a tent in the middle of the woods, a mile away from the nearest bathroom at Pinewood Studios in the UK. "We were sitting on folding chairs in front of a gas heater, walking through water in the freezing cold. She's a team player, only taking the lead when necessary, and using her voice for all of us."

The others milling about the small café do a reasonable job of pretending not to notice her, and maybe they don't. She, too, pantomimes a close approximation of a regular person, standing in line to order her food, subtly >

Sweater by Tory Burch, \$412; shirt by Yazbukey, \$210; earrings by Rose Hayland, \$142





This page: shirt, \$1,665, and shorts, \$905, both by Dior; rings, from \$1,900, and brooch on collar, \$800, all by Dior Joaillerie; earrings by Aurélie Bidermann, \$299; shoes by Dior, \$695; tights by Wolford, \$70, at Net-A-Porter.com  
Opposite: sweater by Tory Burch, \$412; shirt by Yazbukey, \$210; earrings by Rose Hayland, \$142

Dress by Givenchy,  
\$3,310; bracelet  
by Aurélie  
Bidermann, \$340



“I feel *energized*  
and I also feel  
a little bit like  
a *crazy person*”



Dress by Dior, \$906;  
earrings by Isabel  
Marant, \$585

SCAN & SHOP  
THESE LOOKS  
WITH THE NET-  
A-PORTER APP

Hair Didier Malige.  
Makeup Romy  
Soleimani at  
Streeters using Dior  
Makeup. Nails Millie  
Machado. Set design  
Jack Flanagan.  
Production Prodn.  
Shot on location in  
Santa Barbara on  
November 21, 2017

avoiding eye contact in a way that only a person who's been amous for most of their life can truly master. She was 10 minutes late for our appointment because she drove to the wrong restaurant (and later will drive herself in her own car to another press commitment an hour north in Calabasas), blaming her "mommy brain," jam-packed work schedule, and the fact that she woke before dawn. "I feel energized and I also feel a little bit like a crazy person. I keep sending emails to the wrong people. I just feel really inept, but so far it hasn't been that embarrassing because it hasn't been anything terribly important."

Juggling motherhood and her career has given Portman a renewed appreciation for her own mother. "When I was growing up, I was like, 'What does she DO all day?' And now I think, 'How did she get everything done in a day?' She did it all, without any help, and kept her relationship going with my dad, despite traveling and taking care of him and me. She's a miracle person."

Portman's own relationship is with handsome French dancer and choreographer Benjamin Millepied, who she met while working on the set of *Black Swan*. The pair, who were married in 2012, moved back to LA in 2016 after two years living in Paris, where Millepied was director of dance at the Paris Opera Ballet. "My husband has lived here longer than he's lived in France, so when we talk about politics, it doesn't feel like he has a foreign perspective." She recently mentioned on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* that "everyone smiles a lot here, it's so nice" but that she found the people she met in France "very cool". They mixed with a set that included producers, directors, writers and artists.

"Recently, I've been spending more time with other actresses," she says. "Not in a fake 'just because we're actresses so we should hang out' way. I feel there's been a shift. I felt that way on *Annihilation* too, working with a strong female ensemble cast. We are used to being 'the girl' on set. It was such a joy to be with a group of women."

It would be remiss talking to someone as insightful and intelligent as Portman, someone who has always been so outspoken about her politics and speaks as eloquently about the Middle East as she does environmental matters ("So many people still make fun of veganism, like it's self-righteous, but I'm not some Pollyanna – there is a real problem with the way animals are farmed in this country") and not get her take on gender inequity and the rampant sexual-harassment accusations in Hollywood. "First of all, I think it's really important to recognize all the people who

have come forward," she says. "They have created this cultural shift. A lot of people have been speaking out for a long time and not been heard, particularly women of color, so it's very important the industry listens." But she refuses to be drawn any further, particularly on the personal front, although she admits that she too has faced discrimination and harassment. "I went from thinking, 'I don't have a story' to 'Oh, wait, I have 100 stories.' And I think a lot of people are having these reckonings with themselves, of things that we just took for granted as like, this is part of the process."

She has recounted how, early in her career, a producer invited her to accompany him on his private plane. "It was just the two of us, and only one bed was made up. Nothing happened, I was not assaulted. I did make a point of saying, 'This does not make me feel comfortable,' and that was respected. But that was super not OK, you know? That was really unacceptable and manipulative. I was scared."

Portman says she is grateful to be living in a time that's inspiring people to change the status quo. "I'm 36 and I am realizing, 'Wait, this country is still totally racist, and biased, and how have I been complicit in this system?' It's important to ask these questions, and it's hard, but it's also kind of exciting that so many people are having these awakenings, and asking how we can change and affect larger changes."

She sees the culture of sexual harassment as a systemic problem caused by great gender power imbalances – imbalances inherent in pretty much every industry. We discuss why there are less women in senior positions in the work place and the general assumption that it's

because we decide to become mothers and once we do, we then find it hard to achieve a work-life balance and as a result retreat. "But what's interesting about this harassment conversation is, maybe it has nothing to do with being a mother. Maybe women are dropping out of the workplace because it's a hostile environment for them and they are choosing not to be a part of that. It's been proven that once you change the power differential and reach a 50/50 ratio of men and women, you see fewer issues."

Listening to her talk about current events and gender issues makes you wish that she had a larger platform to express these ideas. Surely there's an audience on Instagram, or eager podcast listeners, who would want to hear more. But so far, she's avoided the pull, and was not on social media until the Time's Up campaign compelled her to join Instagram. She acknowledges its role in forming female communities where [CONTINUED ON PAGE 274]

“Maybe women  
are dropping  
out because  
it’s a *hostile*  
environment”

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 129] experiences can be shared. “It’s an interesting moment where technology is colliding with history,” she says. “But there’s a downside too – that addiction to technology and the impact it has on people, the disposability of information.”

Like most things, Portman wants to consider the options of social media, working out how much of her life she is willing to share. She’s clever – because she’s so friendly in person, it seems she is sharing a lot; she does so but it’s in more general terms, ones that rarely relate to her personally, which explains her social-media reluctance. “I’m not closed off to it in the future, I just haven’t figured out how I want to use it,” she says. “I already have trouble setting limits with my phone, just with texting and checking emails. Do I need to add more layers of communication that would take me away from face to face time with people I love? I need to think about it.”

“I actually think creative people know what they want to do when they’re really young,” she says, noting that her husband was an equally focused and driven child. “He knew he wanted to be a dancer and he started at the conservatory at 11. School can distract from that sometimes. It can make you think you’re supposed to be doing math, when you should be focusing on your art. Not that you shouldn’t learn math!” she laughs.

How the brain works, our intellect and how we feed it, is something of a hobby for her. When she first met Alex Garland, the dystopian writer and director of *Annihilation*, in which she plays a biologist, she says she was primarily interested in his brain. “He has such an interesting perspective on things and asks really interesting questions about society,” she says. “The film has this psychological bent of traveling into your own psyche, and the mutations of our own behavior.” He told her that if we saw the things we are used to seeing every day for the first time we would think how strange they were. “He said that we become used to things, like trees and stars and peacocks. Can you imagine seeing a peacock for the first time? Mutations can be like cancer, but they can also be something beautiful. If you see cancer cells on a slide they can look like art, but the beauty, danger and the art all mixed in?”

If the latter provides a clue to the inner workings of her brain, then the email exchange published by *The New York Times’s T* magazine between her and her friend of 15 years, the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer, the writer of *Extremely Loud And Incredibly Close* and *Here I am*, is then a clue to her emotional being: “An ex-boyfriend of mine used to call me Moscow, because he said I was always looking out the window sadly, like in some Russian novel or Chekhov play. Clearly, there were grounds for this ex getting fired, but he did have a point – I have that longing, yearning, it’s-better-over-there tendency.”

Where ‘over there’ is for her now is unclear, but Portman seems happy with her life. She’s busy prepping for a new film in which she plays a messed-up pop star from Staten Island. As ever, she is immersing herself in the part, spending time in New York working with a dialect coach,

recording songs and learning the choreography. “I’m not a singer, but she’s not supposed to be very good so it’s a low-pressure situation. It’s not *Phantom of the Opera*.” With that, the star ostensibly suffering from ‘mommy brain’ gets back on the road, devoid of any kind of retinue, and takes herself off to her next appointment.

*Annihilation is out on February 23, 2018*