

Brie Encounter

Brie Larson is an actress with a difference.

It wasn't long ago that the 28-year-old was an indie outsider, but in a blink of an eye she's become an

Oscar-winning sensation admired for her laid-bare performances and fêted by Hollywood's biggest hitters.

Add in her dignified public stands against sexism and the girl from Sacramento is shaping up

to be the Meryl Streep of her generation.

Here, she talks success and self-doubt with *Woody Harrelson*,

her close friend and co-star in *The Glass Castle*,

while *Jennifer Dickinson* reveals

a very surprising kind of star

Photography by Camilla Akrans Fashion editor Julia von Boehm

Top by Emilia
Wickstead, \$550, at
Net-A-Porter.com;
gloves by Ermanno
Scervino, \$130





Dress, \$25,000,
and belt, \$701,
both by Bottega
Veneta; gloves by
Abbie Walsh \$60

What do you know about Brie Larson? If the 28-year-old actress had her way, the answer would be very little. Privacy comes into it, of course, but what really motivates her not to give too much away is the work. How will you believe her when she pretends to be someone else if you know what her nickname was in fifth grade?

Work, the obtaining of it, preparation for it and execution of it, is life's driving force for the Sacramento-born Oscar winner. Twenty months after she achieved the Hollywood Grand Slam, only the 14th actress ever to take home an Academy Award, BAFTA Award, Critics' Choice Award, Golden Globe Award and SAG Award for the same performance – as Ma, the abused kidnap victim in *Room* – and 20 years after she moved to LA in pursuit of a dream, Larson is still just getting into her stride.

She was six years old, says Larson, when she declared to her chiropractor parents that she had found her 'dharma' and wanted to become an actress. Her mother, Heather, moved eight-year-old Brianna Sidonie Desaulniers (the surname change was inspired by a doll she owned as a child) and her younger sister Milaine to LA when she separated from their father, and only someone with such wide-eyed conviction could have kept the faith through almost two decades of mostly fruitless auditions.

"I've always dreamed big and sometimes it was really, brutally painful. I auditioned for so many things and never got the job," says Larson, still bright at 10pm on a Sunday evening in London,

mid-promotional whirl for her next awards contender, *The Glass Castle* (the true story of writer Jeannette Walls and her dysfunctional but loving family). Only three years ago she would face constant rejection at auditions. "My impression of myself, especially at that time, was that I was too emotional, too raw. I remember auditioning to play a prostitute who was being interrogated. To prepare I didn't eat for days, started smoking even though I have asthma, wore the same clothes for three days and listened to intense music on the way there. It was this crazy, rageful, raw audition and I thought I'd nailed it. Afterwards, they said, 'You were terrifying and you were bad,' and cast someone from the Disney channel. I realized, 'Oh, I'm doing something that's completely different from what cinema is doing right now', but I didn't know how to turn it off." There were jobs along the way that kept the dream alive, even if they didn't contribute much to the rent. Larson's CV kicks off in 1998 with sketch appearances on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno* and remains uneventful until 2009 when she began playing Toni Collette's daughter in Diablo Cody's TV series *United States of Tara*. Then the more familiar credits begin to appear: *Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World*; *Rampart*, which also starred Woody Harrelson as a renegade cop; and, in 2013, the mark-making *Short Term 12*.

Directed by Destin Daniel Cretton, the low-budget, independent film told the story of a foster care worker, played by Larson, struggling to help her charges and make sense of her life. It was a turning point. "I had never been the lead before and I don't know if it was a defense mechanism, but I was kind of against it. I just didn't feel confident in myself, I didn't feel like I was pretty

"I've always dreamed really big and sometimes it was brutally painful"

enough. I thought I'd be a supporting character my whole life and I was struggling with the idea of being the star."

Larson's reluctance to claim the limelight is entirely genuine. And very much still present. But *Short Term 12*, which was based on Cretton's real-life experience working with at-risk children, helped her to find a way to make peace with putting herself front and center. "I remember going to the foster care facilities and seeing what was happening there and feeling so much pain and helplessness," she recalls. "And because I had seen what was going on, I was able to go, 'This isn't about the fact that my face is on screen, which makes me feel sick to my stomach, it's about saving these kids. It's not about me, it's not about getting my face plastered on surfaces. If it's about raising awareness and helping people, then I'm comfortable doing it.'"

The criticism Larson levels at herself is interesting. When it comes to her talent, she knows that what she can do is special and she's not disingenuous enough to deny it. But while channeling others comes naturally, being in her own skin appears uncomfortable. "If I could act without my face, I would do it," she confirms, readily. "I feel weird suggesting that people look at me, that part is very uncomfortable for me, so it has to be because there's a message that I want to impart."

The film changed more than her outlook. It generated awards buzz that had nothing to do with having a big-budget campaign behind it (it didn't) and everything to do with the story, the honesty of its telling and Larson's heartfelt performance. Watching it led director Lenny Abrahamson to

cast Larson in *Room*. But for the actress, success felt like a stranger. "I still had to audition for everything and I was still broke. Destin and I traveled all over the world, in coach seats, selling the movie. We were both dead broke because no one pays you to do press and I didn't get paid for the movie either, so I was basically living out of gift bags. I'd be on a plane and they'd pass out the snacks and I'd think, 'OK, so I can have these pretzels now, but I've got to hang onto these others because I don't know when I'm gonna get food again.'"

Room, of course, brought success and an Oscar statuette. But if it seemed that her star ascended from nowhere, it's important to recognize the work that went into that meteoric rise. In preparation for *Room* for example, Larson confined herself to her apartment for a month, restricting her diet, so that she could understand what being so trapped would feel like. Her dedication is becoming Hollywood folklore. "I have no idea where the work ethic comes from," she says, acknowledging her unusual approach with pride. "My mother said that I was always like this. She has these memories of me at three years old trying to draw a perfect circle and I had a bunch of crumpled up papers next to me. She said, 'I thought that was so weird because most kids just scribbled on a page and were proud of it and you were never proud of what you were making.'" Now though, there is definite pleasure in seeing what she is capable of. "I love working really hard. It's pushing yourself past that threshold where you're comfortable, where really interesting things happen. I keep surprising myself by what can come out of my brain."

Although no one could have been more prepared for the job itself, the actress admits that she struggles with the attendant >



Dress by Gucci, \$11,000



Top, \$750, and pants,
\$1,010, both by Emilia
Wickstead at Net-A-
Porter.com; shoes by
Repetto, \$445; gloves by
Ermano Scervino, \$130;
belt by Nina Ricci, \$250



Dress by Oscar de la
Renta, 812,290;
shoes by Hepetto,
8445; gloves by
Abbie Walsh, 860;
belt by Hermès, 8291

scrutiny and credits her friendships with Emma Stone (who gave her a book called *I Can Fly* and an elephant charm to hold just before the 2016 Oscars ceremony), Jennifer Lawrence, Lena Dunham and Amy Schumer (with whom she starred in *Trainwreck*) with helping her to cope. The peers who gravitate towards her say a great deal about the woman herself, and indeed Larson is unusually impressive in person. She's eloquent without the need for pause. It can make it a little harder to get a handle on her at first. How do you bond with someone who seems so fully formed? But they are there, the soft spots. Her genuine fear she might turn up on set one day and find her skill at telling stories has deserted her; the girlish giddiness that emanates when she recounts her Oscar-winning evening; the shocked pleasure when you tell her that the photographs in this magazine have enchanted everyone who has been granted a peek.

That last, in particular, is significant. A camera directed at Ma or Jeannette Walls, her character in *The Glass Castle*, is no problem. A lens focused on Brie Larson is an entirely different matter. In an interview with Jane Fonda in March, she confessed that she had been shocked to discover that actresses were often expected to fit into sample sizes on photoshoots. It's still a bone of contention. "One piece of clothing is made and everybody has to fit into that one shape? What is that doing for our industry?" she laments. "Just think about that: if every woman has to fit in that one dress, how can we say to ourselves at the end of every day that we're giving an equal opportunity to all? That doesn't make any sense. And I think audiences are desiring more. If we continue to make everything 'one size fits all', we're never really going to get the full scope of the human experience."

For Larson, it all comes back to that idea of the messages she is trying to send, the dialogue she wants to start. Since she made a relatively late debut on social media, and in the context of a global political awakening, the actress has been using her platforms to ask questions and look for answers, despite a backlash. "People say I'm an 'elite', that I don't know what I'm talking about," she says, adding that everything she posts comes "from a place of love". Her co-star in *The Glass Castle*, Naomi Watts, who turns in a brilliant performance as Jeannette's conflicted mother, admires her approach. "How she opens up conversations and confronts important and sensitive issues makes her one of a kind," says the Australian actress. "It's fantastic to see someone have such confidence and a point of view so early in their career." Right now, it seems the idea that Larson is most keen to put out into the world, is acceptance. "I don't want people to live their lives being afraid and thinking that they can't do things, so I'll go out there and make a fool out of myself sometimes and I'll still be OK and then maybe I can be an example of that. We focus so much on the ups. I want to get a little more into the dips and champion them so that people feel like it's OK to take huge strides and fail."

In March this year, at the 89th Academy Awards ceremony, Larson appeared to send one of her strongest messages yet, without saying a word. While prepping for *Room*, the actress met with psychologists to understand the impact of sexual abuse and her experiences led her to become a vocal campaigner on behalf of victims. So when she found herself, via her duties

"Women are coming into their own, we're louder than ever now"

as a winner the previous year, in the position of presenting an Oscar statuette to Casey Affleck, a man who in 2010 settled claims of sexual harassment made by two women against him, the public viewed her marked lack of applause as a silent but powerful stand. "I think that whatever it was that I did onstage kind of spoke for itself," she said afterwards, in the only statement she has ever made about the issue. It was a moment that confirmed her as a woman of honor and compassion.

Now, the actress is preparing to take two more huge strides. First, she is premiering *Unicorn Store*, a comedy that marks her feature-length debut as a director (she won an award for short film *The Arm* in 2012) at the Toronto Film Festival, an event that she admits makes her feel "totally terrified and really excited". Starring Samuel L. Jackson, who asked her to cast him while they were filming *Kong: Skull Island*, Larson says the movie is about "inspiration and positivity", offering a form of escapism that the world needs right now. Jackson is clearly won over, describing his director and co-star as "brave, fearless and gifted with a heart I wish I could emulate".

Next, she embarks on her biggest project yet: bringing superheroine Captain Marvel to the big screen. With *Wonder Woman* proving that there is a vast, lucrative market for female depictions of strength, expectations are high. "I spent months thinking about whether or not I was going to do the film and I realized that it was a chance to tell a story on the largest stage possible," she says. "I know it's going to make me lose some of the things that I love most about my life, but I think it's worth it."

It is also an opportunity to do something that Larson set out to do from the beginning: create the 'symptom of strength' she wishes she had seen growing up. "Strength doesn't always look like how we think it looks. It doesn't always mean that you are unemotional and kicking ass, that you don't feel fear. I think strength comes from trying, it comes from life experience, it comes from being vulnerable, it comes from putting yourself out there and so I want to see more of that."

The actress is stronger herself, she says, for all of her recent experiences. "I've been on sets where I didn't feel safe, I've felt objectified. But as I'm getting older I'm realizing that I can value myself, I'm allowed to. It doesn't mean that I'm egotistical, it doesn't mean that I'm high and mighty or believing my own bullshit. It just means that I believe in that little inner child in me that needs to be protected and wants to do well."

But what makes Larson truly an incredible woman is that while she might not want you to know her favorite holiday destination or share her workout regimen, she thinks it's important that you understand what she has struggled with and continues to be challenged by, if only because it might make your own journey easier. "I think women are really coming into their own, we're louder than ever now, and so I want to be very clear that it wasn't an easy path for me, it was incredibly hard. And it's still not easy, but I'm used to it being hard and my hope is that I can pave the road a little smoother for the women to come after me. I don't think I can get a smooth, freshly paved asphalt road, but I think I can grind down some of those stones so that people feel more comfortable telling their story." ■

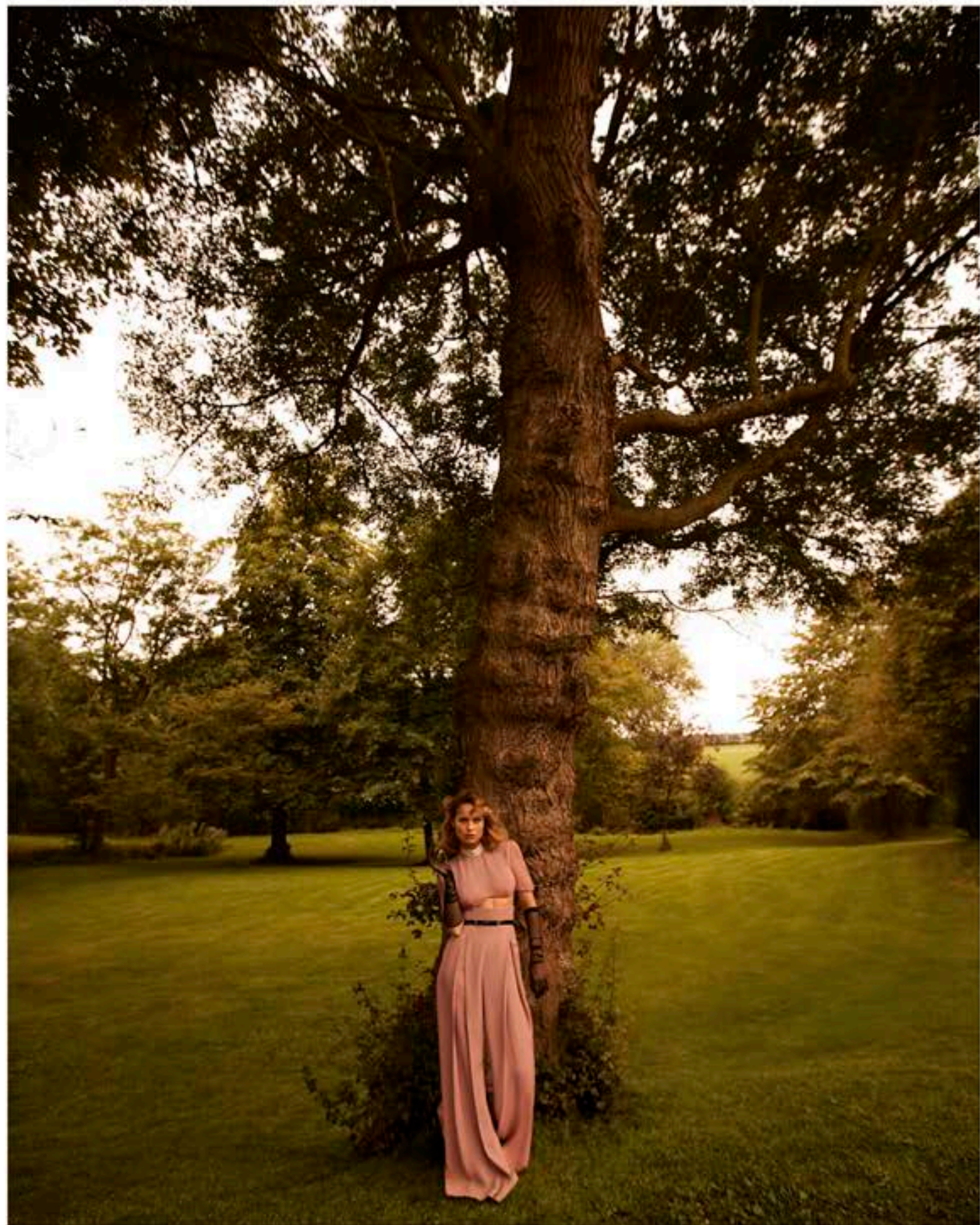
The Glass Castle is out now



Dress by Fendi, \$3,693; shoes by Repetto, \$445; gloves by Abbie Walsh, \$45



This page: dress, \$13,000, and umbrella, \$1,364, both by Gucci
Opposite: top, \$750, and pants, \$1,080, both by Emilia Wickstead at Net-A-Porter.com; gloves by Ermanno Scervino, \$130; belt by Nina Ricci, \$250





This page: dress, \$25,000, and belt, \$710, both by Bottega Veneta; gloves by Abbie Walsh, \$60.
Opposite: dress by Prada, \$2,050, at Net-A-Porter.com; gloves by Abbie Walsh, \$60; belt by Black & Brown, \$65.

Woody *asks* Brie...

Currently sharing the screen in *The Glass Castle*, the two friends — who first met when Larson played the sassy teenage daughter to Harrelson's LAPD cop in 2011's *Rampart* — discuss the highs and lows of movie stardom...

Woody: How old were you when we first met on *Rampart*?

Brie: I think I was 20. At the audition there were all of these beautiful girls and there I was with acne and ratty hair. I was getting upset thinking, "What am I doing with my life?" Then all of the pain and rage I was feeling came out in the audition. Afterwards, I was crying and Owen [Moverman, the director] came over and said, "I know that doesn't feel good, but it looks really good." I got the job. He was the first person who allowed me to be complicated and ugly, and it changed my view of myself.

Woody: Tell me about your breakout role in *Short Term 12*?

Brie: I won't ever forget it; I felt so raw. I walked into the after-party and there was silence. Everybody was staring at me. All of a sudden I realized, something was happening to me.

Woody: Then *Bloom* happened two years later? I remember you came over to Maui [where Harrelson lives with his wife, Laura] and that was the first time I heard about it.

Brie: I decided to come to Maui to get a vacation because I had gotten a phone call saying that [the film company] wanted to try to do an Oscar campaign and I felt so weird about it. I'm not a public person. Our friend Ethan and I drove to your house and when we woke up the next morning you were like, "Come on, let's go!" We got up and just started walking. I remember the grass being so green and you being so funny and kind, and eventually we got to the top of the mountain and I realized that I was afraid. I was afraid of trying and failing. I was afraid of being vulnerable.

Woody: I hadn't seen the movie, you know, and then when I saw it I was like, "Oh, my God, not only is she gonna be nominated, she's gonna win!" What was it like when they announced [you'd won the Oscar for Best Actress]?

Brie: My fiancé [musician Alex Greenwald] says I grabbed his hand and squeezed it so hard he thought I was going to break it. Then they said my name and I just let go and got up. I hadn't prepared a speech. I said what I needed to say and then I was on the side of the stage holding this thing and shaking. "Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God." A year later I was on the same side of the stage and I watched

Emma [Stone] come over and she's holding the thing, making the same face that I made, going, "Oh, my God, oh, my God, oh, my God." It was so therapeutic. I felt like I had more clarity on it watching her than I did when I was going through it.

Woody: I was jumping up and down! Now, let's get to this movie, *The Glass Castle*. You read the book when the director Destin was adapting the screenplay, just because he, your buddy, was doing it, not because he was asking you to do it.

Brie: Well, you know, I was excited [for Destin]. I couldn't believe my friend was adapting a book that Jennifer Lawrence was going to star in.

Woody: But did you say, "Man, I'd like to play that part"?

Brie: I never have a problem with someone else playing a part I want if they are really good. I'm super competitive with myself, but at this point in my life I'm not very competitive with other people.

Woody: So did Destin call you later, asking you to be in it?

Brie: When I found out Jen wasn't doing it, I felt scared. I didn't want to ask Destin about playing the role and for him to say, "I kind of want to see other people." Eventually I called and said, "Do you think I could do it?" But I still had to audition for it.

Woody: So cut to Montreal and we're hanging out in your apartment. I remember you freaking out a little.

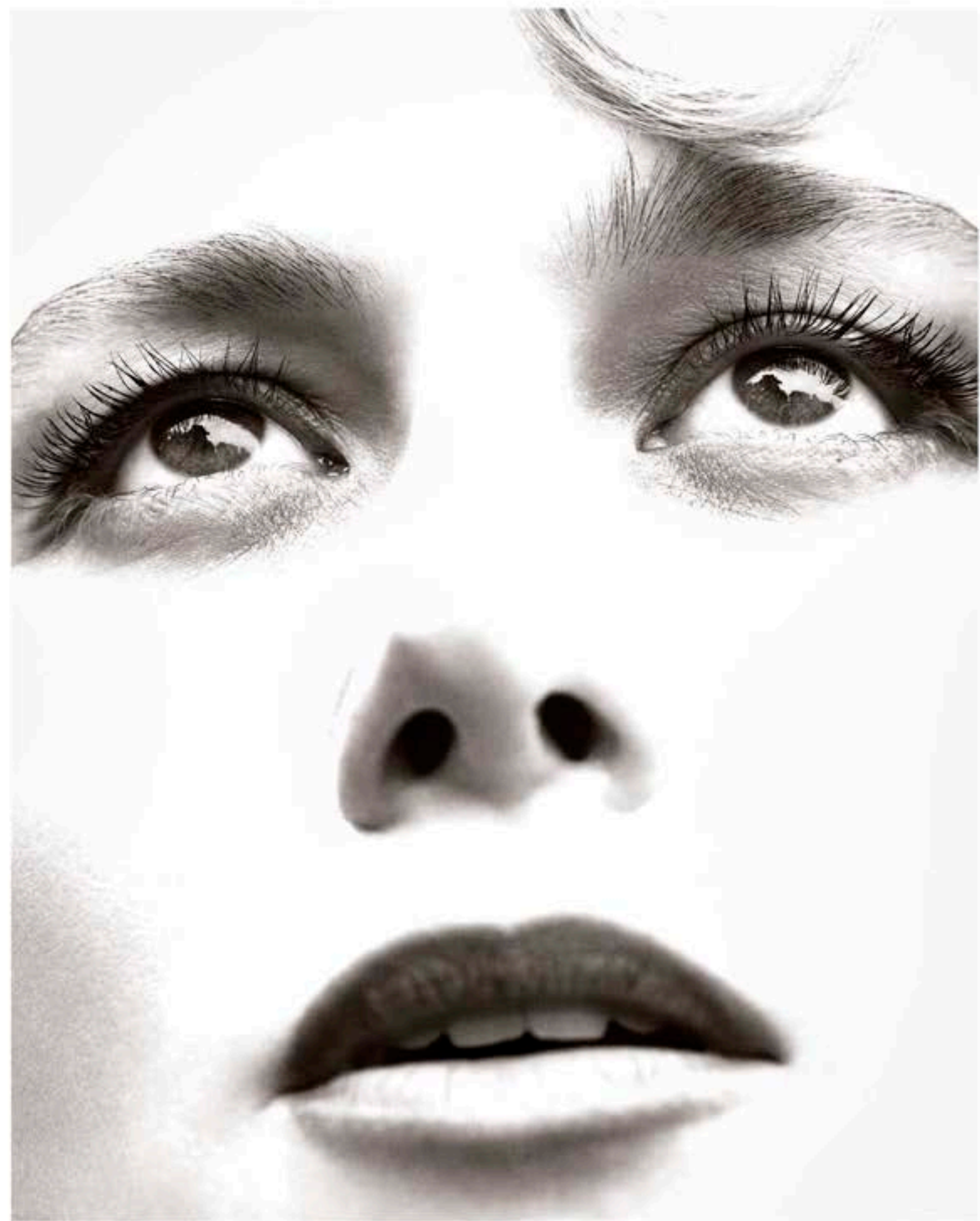
Brie: All of a sudden I started to worry: am I good or am I just good at one movie? When I'm on set something happens—it feels like I'm channeling people or something super witchy. It's a weird gift I have, one I still can't fully understand, and so I worry on every job that this might be the time I lose it.

Woody: And now you've directed your own film, *Unknown Store*. You're about to start showing it to people, right?

Brie: Yes. I feel super scared, but I'm really happy. I didn't let fear or the worry of what other people might think stop me. Everything in my life that's happened, the ups and the downs, I've digested and then put it back into my art. So whatever happens, I know I'll be OK because I'll just turn it into the next thing.

Dress by
Fendi, S31693







Dress by Valentino,
\$12,600; gloves by
Abbie Walsh, \$60



Dress by Oscar de la
Renta, \$12,290; gloves by
Abbie Walsh, \$60; belt
by Hermès, \$291

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