

JUMPSUIT BY **ANNE VAL-ERIEHASH** FROM **CURVE**. SUEDE PLATFORM PUMPS BY **YVES SAINT LAURENT**. VINTAGE LESLIE HAMES FEATHER FEDORA FROM KRIS PETTIT AND MOLE MARBUT AT **VOK SHOWROOM** L.A. GOLD CUFF BY **YVES SAINT LAURENT**. DRAGON BRACELET BY **SAMANTHA WILLS**. VINTAGE COLENE BRACELET AND VINTAGE GIORGIO ARMANI DIAMOND EARRINGS FROM **THE WAY WE WORE**. ROMAN GOLD RING BY **TENOVERSEX** AND 18K GOLD RING WITH WHITE DIAMONDS AND SAPPHIRE BY **STEPHEN WEBSTER**.



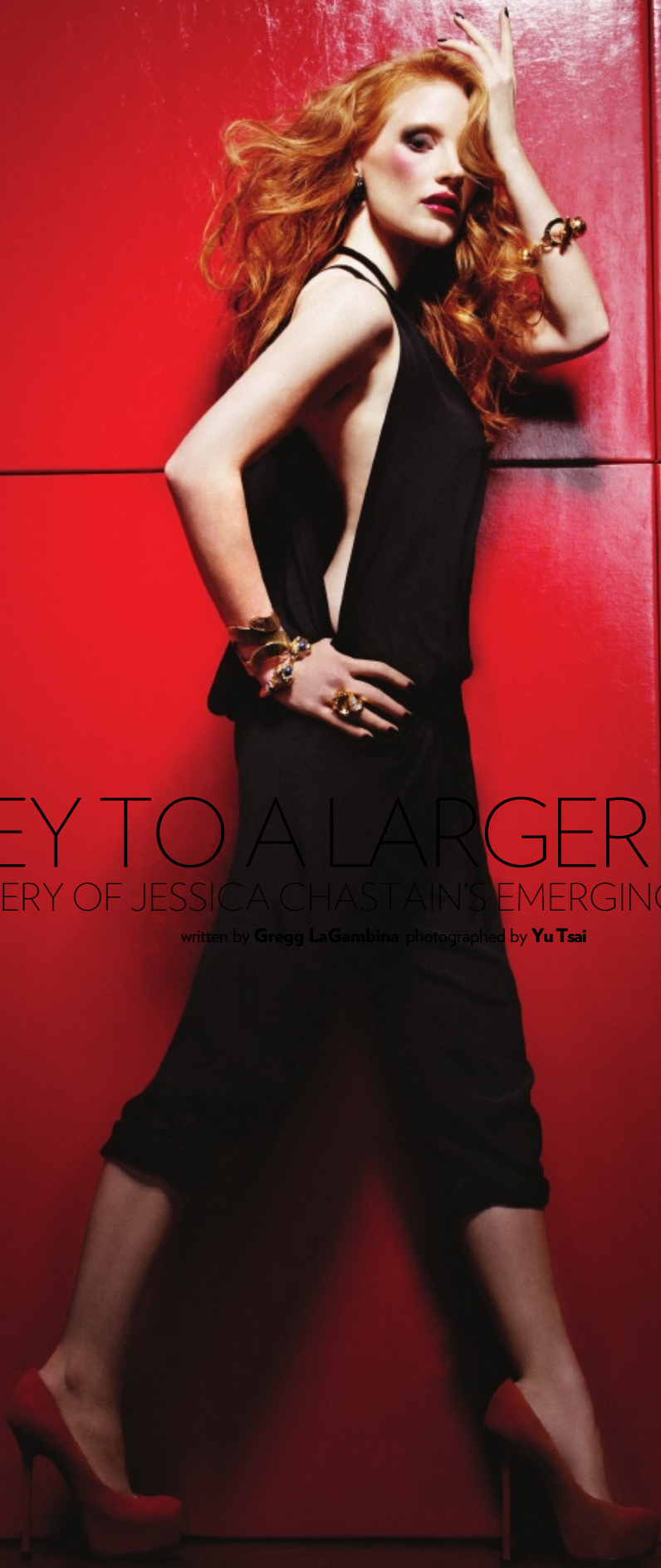
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THE KEY TO A LARGER SECRET

THE MYSTERY OF JESSICA CHASTAIN'S EMERGING STARDOM

written by **Gregg LaGambina** photographed by **Yu Tsai**



LEATHER JACKET BY **INA SOLTANI**. LUREX PANTS BY **VANESSA BRUNO**. SEQUIN BELT BY **LOUIS VUITTON**. GOLD CARRIE NECKLACE AND ABU DHABI RING BY **SAMANTHA WILLS**, AND BANGLES BY **CHANEL**.



PENCIL SKIRT, GOLD COIN
NECKLACE, AND BLACK
COCKTAIL RING BY **YVES
SAINT LAURENT** AND
VINTAGE CONE BRA AND
STRAPPED CAGE BRA
FROM **LE BRA LINGERIE**.



SHE IS THE KEY TO A LARGER SECRET. SHE IS IMPORTANT. THERE ARE stories inside of her that she will suppress with a bat of her eyelashes or a giggle. There will even be a taunt or two, a challenge posed, a hint, a scent, a flash of the secret she knows that you don't know. When you lean in to catch just a glimpse of it, she'll sit back and sip at her straw and feign ignorance with a shrug. But this is all later. First, she needs to be found.

"I don't look modern," she'll say, once spotted. "I'm not the girl that would walk into the room and everyone goes, 'Oh!'"

"Oh!" I say, finally seeing her sun-touched strawberry hair and her pale profile peeking from around the corner, perched on a black leather couch in the lobby of The Fairmont Hotel in Santa Monica.

Reclining, legs crossed, her shoulder-length hair pinned back, revealing that unmodern poise and posture she must have intuitively carried from years spent studying theatre at Juilliard. Once spotted, you can see why she belongs in a picture, still or moving. But she is right, there is a touch of the past about her, filmic and sepia, even in the light of present day. Effortlessly mysterious, not with pretense, but because she has to be. It's these persistent secrets she must keep. It all adds up to this notion of another time.

"Maybe," she says, addressing a guess as to the meaning of *The Tree of Life*, Terrence Malick's new drama. "It's really hard to talk about this film. It's about a family, but the family represents more than the family. Even though it's a drama, it's beyond that. There are otherworldly themes within..." And she trails off.

She grabs at her iced tea and lifts it. The coaster clings to the bottom of the glass for a half-moment and drops, revealing a gold sketch of a tree embossed into the brown leather square.

"Hey, look, there's a tree and we're talking about *The Tree of Life*!"

If she weren't so disarmingly pretty and kind, you'd think she were being mean. Yet, there's nothing remotely aggressive about her reticence, her eagerness to distract, or her passive refusal to give up the ghost. You'd get the same thing from shouting at a butterfly—a breeze, a flit, color floating on the air, answers that beg questions. Like, how does an unknown grab the same marquee with Brad Pitt and Sean Penn?

"I feel like if you're mean to someone, then you're giving them your power," she says, smiling a bit. "If you're nice, it's basically saying, 'I have no control over what's going to happen.'"

She's talking about beating out other actresses for the part, but balks at that notion of "beating" or "winning."

"It's almost a stronger approach, being nice," she explains. "It was a very long audition process, because there were big actresses flying themselves to Texas vying for this part, because Terrence Malick is one of the greatest filmmakers of all time and when he's got a movie with a great female character, *everyone* wants to be in it. I approached it like, 'I have no control over what the outcome of this is going to be.'"

This, from the actress who now shares equal billing with Pitt and Penn. The trailer rolling out three names written in the same size, scrolling across a black, blank screen that can't help but be read by the mind as, "One, two, who?" Malick plucked her from the pack of everyone for some reason.

So, the legendary and reclusive director of only a handful of beloved films—*Badlands*, *Days of Heaven*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, and now *The Tree of Life*—is approached as a topic, but remains as elusive as everything else: the plot, the story, the man himself.

"I have to be careful what I say about him because he's a private person and I want to respect that," she says, when pressed about Malick being characterized as reclusive, or sometimes even a hermit. "The truth is that he's so humble that he doesn't want to take the credit. That's what it comes down to. He doesn't feel like there should be a spotlight on him. It's just beautiful. He's probably one of the greatest teachers I'll ever know. A great teacher for filmmaking, for acting, but also and mostly, a great teacher of what it is to be a great human being. I value him so much. That's the only reason he's private. People think he should be on a pedestal and he doesn't want that."

Does *she* want that? By this time next year, it'll be nearly impos-

sible to walk by Jessica Chastain without at least a glint of recognition. With no less than seven films rolling out in succession, Chastain visibly grips the couch thinking about what this all might mean once she's out there and finally seen in *The Debt* alongside Helen Mirren and Sam Worthington, directed by John Madden (*Shakespeare in Love*); *Take Shelter* with good friend Michael Shannon; a meta-production of Al Pacino's experience performing in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* called *Wilde Salome*; a Southern film set in the 1960s starring Emma Stone, *The Help*; and John Hillcoat's follow-up to *The Road*, a Depression-set, Nick Cave-scripted film called *The Wettest Country in the World*. She's also just met with Olivier Assayas, director of *Summer Hours* and *Irma Vep* to discuss appearing in the follow-up to his celebrated terrorism epic *Carlos*.

But it all circles back to Malick and *The Tree of Life*. Having only seen it herself a few days ago, even though filming concluded close to three years ago, Chastain is still gleaming with a kind of pride and excitement about that one picture. In the midst of this flurry of activity that has happened between this day and the day Malick yelled "cut" nearly a thousand afternoons ago, Chastain thinks she may have already peaked. And that's per-

fectly fine by her.

"It's a very strange thing to be in the best movie you'll ever be in at the beginning of your career. It's good because I got to be in a movie like that and most people don't ever get that. This is a movie that in 30 years, when I'm doing plays, someone will come up to me and be like, 'You were in *Tree of Life*.'"

With a smile and a last sip of tea, she is thankful and departs. Brad Pitt, Sean Penn, and Jessica Chastain. Not long from now, the imbalance of that last sentence might just right itself, this three-year-old *Tree of Life* will usher her in from out of the past and her secret will be out. Today, though, not a head turns as she walks through the lobby. She is still one of us. The sliding doors hiss and close, leaving her out in the ocean air, anonymous as the seagulls swirling in the gray air above.



HAIR BY JOHANNA JOHNSON
 MAKEUP BY WOLFFORD
 DRESS BY JOHANNA JOHNSON
 SHOES BY PRA LINGERE
 LEATHER PLATFORM
 BELT AND ROLLED
 GOLD RING BY YVES
 SAINT LAURENT SEQUIN
 BELT BY LOUIS VUITTON
 VINTAGE CELINE
 CHIFFON COCKTAIL FROM
 THE WAY WE WORE
 AND PEARL, DIAMOND
 AND PEARL DIAMANTE
 GOLD COCKTAIL RING
 BY STEPHEN WEBSTER



SHORT SLEEVED JACKET
BY **ANTONIO BERARDI**
FROM **CURVE**, SKIRT
FROM **LE BRA LINGERIE**,
AND VINTAGE CIRCLE
NECKLACE AND GOLD
CUFF WITH CRYSTALS
FROM **KRIS PETTIT**
AND **VIOLET MARUT**
AT **VOK SHOWROOM**
L.A., CHARM BRACE-
LET BY **YVES SAINT**
LAURENT, AND VIN-
TAGE EARRINGS FROM
THE WAY WE WORE

BEAUTY NOTES: ALL COS-
METICS BY **M.A.C.** HAIR
PRODUCTS BY **PHYTO**.

FASHION DIRECTOR:
LAURY SMITH
HAIR: ANDY LECOMPTE
MAKEUP: SPEN-
CER BARNES
MANICURIST:
ELISA WISHAN