

The Star

NEXT DOOR

She hasn't fixed her nose, she lets her roots grow out, and she doesn't care if you don't find her sexy. Sarah Jessica Parker has fashioned an empire from being herself. By Brooke Hauser

Am I the unsexiest woman, like, in the world?" Sarah Jessica Parker wonders aloud, her girlish voice tapering into an incredulous squeak. "My God—I'm the unsexiest woman in the world!" That, Parker says, was her reaction when she learned that *Maxim* magazine had anointed her the Unsexiest Woman Alive.

On a recent rainy afternoon in Manhattan, settled into a couch in her trailer, the actress recounted how, in the days after the dis, friends rallied to her support. First there was the loyal grip who broke the news. "I'm never reading *Maxim* again, Sarah!" says the pint-size Parker, channeling a large, gruff man with a New Yawk accent. Her publicist offered this insight: "It's because you don't have a fake nose and fake breasts and collagen and Botox," Parker recalls, laughing. "Well, that's cold comfort!"

Other actresses might dismiss the insult with an impenetrable "no comment." But Parker, who comes across as both ladylike and scrappy, invites the listmakers to expound: "My instinct was that it felt personal. It was really about 'We don't like her.' Who were the judges and critics? I would like to ask them, 'What exactly is it that you personally find not sexy about me?'" she says, her chest flushing red. "Is it my figure? Is it my brain that bothers you?"

Parker isn't easily miffed. However, the 42-year-old wife and mother knows

how to defend herself with style. She doesn't try to censor her critics. ("That's the beauty of this country—we can have different opinions and coexist and be amused by each other and hurt and offended.") She doesn't call them out for what could be seen as blatantly misogynistic attacks on a group that includes three moms—in addition to Parker and Britney Spears, Madonna was on the list for her "rapid postnuptial deterioration"—and actress Sandra Oh, who was singled out for her "boyish figure" and "cold bedside manner."

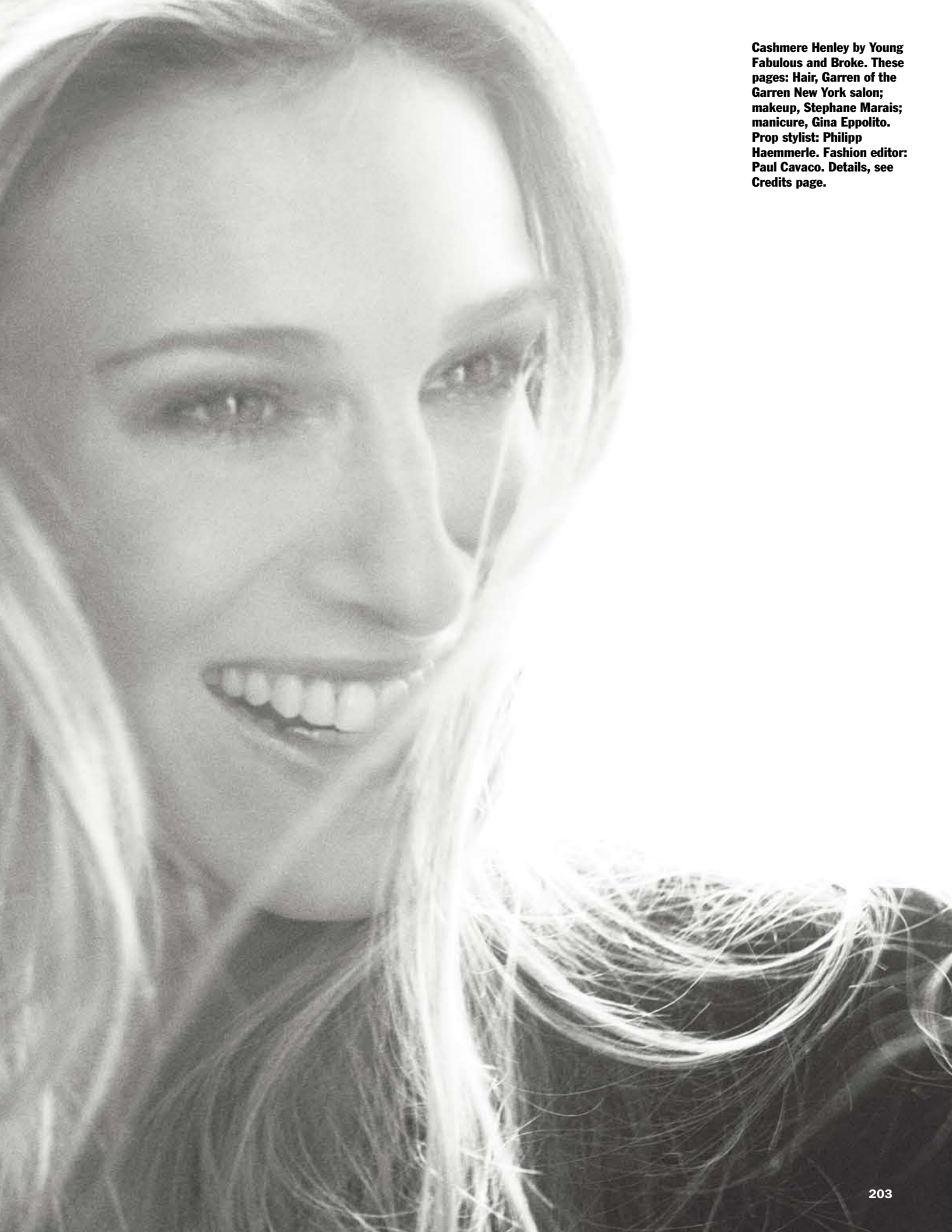
No, Parker only suggests that any man who prefers an airbrushed woman to a real one is just kind of...boring. "My impression is that what they find sexy doesn't make them very interesting or unusual or special," she says, with a shrug. "That makes them common."

Somehow, that says it all.

The long, narrow face, the blitz of blonde hair, the killer body, and the combo of uptown sparkle and downtown grit—Sarah Jessica Parker is anything but common. Her off-kilter beauty has set her apart from the pretties with little else to offer, allowing her to play a range of compelling characters, from orphan Annie on Broadway to brainy sex scribe Carrie Bradshaw, a role she will reprise in the feverishly anticipated *Sex and the City* movie.

This month, she stars in *Smart People*, a romantic comedy for the hyperliterate populated with characters the actress describes as "messed-up, interesting, compelling, complicated." She plays a doctor with a penchant for arcane vocabulary words and a crush on her former

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM MUNRO



Cashmere Henley by Young Fabulous and Broke. These pages: Hair, Garren of the Garren New York salon; makeup, Stephane Marais; manicure, Gina Eppolito. Prop stylist: Philipp Haemmerle. Fashion editor: Paul Cavaco. Details, see Credits page.

college professor (Dennis Quaid), who turns out to be a bloviating bully.

“My character has a kind of unpleasant darkness in that movie, a bleak outlook,” says Parker, wearing a thundercloud-gray ribbed shirt from her Bitten fashion line and her curly hair in a sleek ponytail. “It was different from anything anyone had asked me to do.”

Parker always welcomes the challenge to walk in someone else’s shoes, so long as the experience is “interesting” and “difficult,” she says. No doubt, she will find a way to bring some panache to her upcoming role as a sportscaster in the hockey movie *Thin at the Blue Line*, written by *Capote* author Dan Futterman and produced by her company Pretty Matches. “I’ve always been an actor,” she says matter-of-factly. “That’s my job—I can be anything you want me to be.” There is one role, however, that she never thought she would inhabit: “I didn’t think I was going to be a person who other people knew, whose name was recognizable.”

That was long before Manolo Blahnik named “The SJP” stiletto in her honor; and women around the world wanted to daub their wrists and necks with a little eau de Sarah Jessica (Lovely generated nearly \$60 million in its first year, and her new perfume, *Covet*, is primed for success); before the paparazzi stalked her movie sets and bloggers argued over her sex appeal with the intensity of a presidential debate.

“The most vulgar thing about my long-term plans is that my dream was to win a Tony award,” says Parker, who has won two Emmys and four Golden Globes for *Sex and the City*. “I didn’t know any of this existed. Thank God.”

For a movie star, the amenities in Sarah Jessica Parker’s trailer do seem a bit lackluster. “You were expecting it to be prettier in here, weren’t you?” she asks. Well, maybe a little. The only signs that SJP was here are a few rifled-through sections of *The New York Times* (getting the newspaper is one of the few nonnegotiable demands in her contract), a burning scented candle and incense box that she brought from home, and a brown paper bag stuffed with Thai takeout.

In her spare time, Parker unwinds by reading the *Zagat Survey* with the kind of breathless anticipation that most people reserve for romance novels. (“Anything having to do with food is pleasurable for me,” she says, in between bites of pad Thai. “Any conversation about food,

grace. They used to call Warren Beatty ‘The Pro.’ Well, she’s ‘The New Pro.’”

Parker’s overall decency is partly due to the fact that she was never an overnight star, but rather diligently self-made, and partly due to her upbringing in a family that took nothing for granted.

“For so long, I just wasn’t examined in the same way that a ‘pretty girl’ would be.”

review of food, story of food, picture of food, thought of food...”) And earlier this afternoon, she was watching *Charlie Rose*. “I know,” she says with a smirk. “Picture of the cultural Jew.”

Not that she’s some cultural purist. Parker wants to clarify that she watches reality TV shows like *The Amazing Race* and *Project Runway*. (During a recent guest appearance on *Project Runway*, her presence brought one beefy designer to tears). She loves vegging out on the couch and eating Fritos as much as the next girl, and insists that she sometimes lapses into “slovenly behavior that can build up over a five-day period.”

Still, despite the occasional transgression, Parker’s reputation is already sealed: She is the Conscientious Movie Star. Although she enjoys a glass of wine, she doesn’t really drink, smoke, or curse. (“Holy moly” is her idea of an expletive.) With a designer’s eye for detail, she has carved out a niche for herself as both a modern feminist and a throwback to a more civilized time, when “Paris” didn’t refer to an heiress, ladies wore dresses and used words like “grand,” and style and substance went hand in hand.

Her good manners haven’t gone unnoticed by her costars. “I fell in love, I confess,” says Diane Keaton, who took pleasure in teasing Parker about playing her shrill future daughter-in-law in *The Family Stone*. “It’s ridiculous to say this, but to me, she is a role model—she is what a celebrity should be. She handles it with

The youngest of four kids born to Stephen, an aspiring writer, and Barbara, an elementary school teacher (who divorced when she was a toddler), the actress grew up in Cincinnati with her mother, stepfather, and seven siblings. (Her mother had four more children with Paul Forste, a truck driver.)

Parker, who now lives with husband Matthew Broderick and their five-year-old son, James Wilkie, in a Greenwich Village townhouse, vividly remembers what it felt like to be poor. There were times when the family had to go without electricity or phones, without celebrating birthdays or holidays. “We definitely were not a house of privilege,” says the star, adding that her mother would sometimes bring home “the best stuff” from neighborhood tag sales.

The actress’ experiences as a have-not are one source of inspiration for her budget-conscious Bitten clothing line for Steve & Barry’s. Every piece is under \$20, supporting her manifesto that “fashion shouldn’t be a luxury, and quality shouldn’t be a privilege.” Considering her own status as fashion royalty, Parker as a businesswoman is more like a fashion socialist who believes in spreading style to the people. And she won’t stop short of a revolution. “You know, we all have to leave the house with clothes on. Some of us care a lot about it, and some of us dress because it’s required by law,” she says. “Just because people don’t have money doesn’t mean



Nylon top by Calvin Klein Collection. Cotton-and-spandex pants from Bitten by Sarah Jessica Parker. Makeup colors: Color Design Eye Shadows in Daylight and Exhibition, Magique Blush in Cinnamon Glaze, and Color Design Lipcolor in Pale Lip by Lancôme. Details, see Credits page.

they don't desire the same thing. They should have it, and it should be good."

Though her closet is now teeming with Carrie Bradshaw's fabulous castoffs, growing up Parker felt self-conscious about being one step behind the curve when it came to trends. "We didn't have most of the things that our peer groups had. I won't pretend I didn't notice. But now I'm really grateful that that was my upbringing, and it's one of the things that makes me nervous about being the parent that I am," she says, thinking of James Wilkie. "I feel like he's at a strange disadvantage being a child of privilege."

Parker credits her own mother for keeping her sensible from a young age, as well as for her vigorous arts education. Despite their financial hardships, Barbara Forste took all the kids to the opera and the symphony and enrolled them in ballet, music, and theater classes.

"We weren't allowed to watch television, sadly. We weren't allowed to listen to Top 40 radio," Parker recalls. "But we listened to Broadway musicals all the time."

In the late 1970s, Forste brought Parker and her siblings to New York City to audition for the Broadway play *The Innocents*. Sarah Jessica and her brother Toby both landed roles. At the age of 14, she nabbed the lead in *Annie*, and the curly red wig to match.

With her unconventional looks, Parker admits, she was the subject of some unkind scrutiny from industry types. "There were some not-terribly-veiled conversations," she says when asked whether she was ever pressured to change her appearance. "Anything from as silly as plucking my eyebrows to getting my nose fixed. Nothing that stayed in my brain for very long."

Steering away from such advice early in her career, Parker initially found herself passed over for lead roles and relegated to quirky character parts instead. And though she stole scenes as "Rusty," the frizzy-haired small-town hooper in

1984's *Footloose*, she had yet to be cast in a role in which she stole hearts.

"For so long, I didn't play the object of attention or affection," says Parker, who seems acutely aware of how audiences perceive her. "It wasn't until *L.A. Story* [in which she played SanDeE*, one of Steve Martin's love interests] that anyone cast me in a role that had my sexuality as a point of interest or focus or operation. I just wasn't examined in the same way that a 'pretty girl' would be."

Over the years, Parker has embraced her eccentricities and turned her imperfections into her boldest accessories. (She is one woman who is not afraid to let her dark roots show.) Her intrepid femininity has attracted the attention of male suitors from JFK Jr. to Robert Downey Jr., with whom she had a complicated seven-year relationship, and, of course, Broderick, whom she wed in 1997 after they appeared together in the Broadway revival of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

Though she claims to have little in



1979
WITH ACTOR RAY BOLGER, NEW YORK CITY "I was playing *Annie*; hence the hair. You wore your own hair, and then at the last costume change, you came out in the red dress and they popped a wig on your head."



1985
IN *GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN* "Oh, my God—look at my eyebrows. I should never have plucked them."



1988
WITH ROBERT DOWNEY JR. AT A PARTY FOR MICHAEL DUKAKIS, BEVERLY HILLS "I think that night someone accused him of taking their lighter. Isn't that funny? I had so many hats it's ridiculous."



1991
AT THE *FOR THE BOYS* PREMIERE, LOS ANGELES "I had just finished a movie, and I borrowed that. These were Christian Lacroix pants and shoes, and this was a Rifat Ozbek jacket. At the time, this was it! This was it!"



1994
WITH BROOKE ASTOR AT THE PROFESSIONAL CHILDREN'S SCHOOL HONORS, NEW YORK CITY "Matthew [Broderick] was friends with Brooke Astor. Isn't she gorgeous? Look at her. I mean, come on!"



2000
ON THE COVER OF *TIME* "I remember that necklace—it kept creating a flare for the camera."



2000
AT THE EMMY AWARDS, LOS ANGELES "That dress I loved. Mr. de la Renta made it, and it was a fantasy. I'm cliché—I'm a pink lover."



2002
AT THE PREMIERE OF *SEX AND THE CITY*, NEW YORK CITY "Oh, my God, I was pregnant with James Wilkie, and Narciso [Rodriguez] made that for me."



2003
WITH HER COSTARS AT THE PREMIERE OF *SEX AND THE CITY'S* FINAL SEASON "I remember those Fred Leighton earrings—I had to give them back the next day."



2004
WITH JOAN RIVERS AT THE NARCISO RODRIGUEZ FASHION SHOW, NEW YORK CITY "What am I doing with Joan Rivers?"



2004
AT THE CFDA FASHION AWARDS, NEW YORK CITY "I generally don't wear that color because I feel like it's a color for powerful women. Ambitious women wear red."

“I’ve always been an actor. That’s my job—I can be anything you want.”

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS’ CREDITS, SEE CREDITS PAGE.

common with her famous alter ego, Parker and Carrie Bradshaw share a trademark blend of vulnerability and wit, as well as a penchant for challenging social mores both big and small. (Her own idea of “sexy” skews closer to humanness than godliness; for instance, she says she likes a little natural body odor on a man.) One of Parker’s proudest moments, as both an actress and a producer, was in 2000 when the columnist Maureen Dowd first mentioned *Sex and the City* in *The New York Times*.

“I thought, Wow, this show is getting under someone’s skin,” says Parker, back

in her trailer. “You just know that the show has left an impression, or it’s creating one, or it’s been provocative enough that people are having conversations.”

If there is a secret to Parker’s appeal to women, it is that she represents a democratic idea of beauty. Though she sells her own special stardust to the public in the form of fragrances and fashion, in principle Parker is more interested in selling us on ourselves. When I suggest that Parker seems like a woman who loves other women, she concurs: “Yeah, because I think they’re inspiring.”

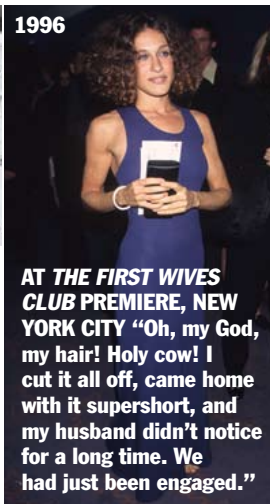
It could be all those years gossiping

with Samantha, Miranda, and Charlotte, but when it comes to winning favor among females, Parker is a practiced student. On the subject of what she considers beautiful, her generosity extends from Isabella Rossellini to her makeup artist Judy Chin and a flaxen-haired assistant whom she calls The Honey Pot. (Full disclosure: She even complimented me on my “big, nice, square teeth.”)

As for what she likes about herself, she sidesteps words like “beautiful” and “sexy” and instead talks about when she feels her “best.” After years of a nearly gym-free existence, she loves the rush that comes with a good workout, she says. “Other than that, when I don’t have zits.” And despite her enchantment with acting and the challenge of becoming someone else, just as her beautiful makeup artist enters the trailer to whisk her away, Parker adds, “I strangely feel better before I go through hair and makeup.” She wraps her hand around her throat and looks skyward, momentarily lost in thought. “Maybe that’s just because I feel like me.” ♦



1994
WITH TIM BURTON AND JOHNNY DEPP ON THE SET OF ED WOOD “I’d never give up that experience. That platinum hair was a wig.”



1996
AT THE FIRST WIVES CLUB PREMIERE, NEW YORK CITY “Oh, my God, my hair! Holy cow! I cut it all off, came home with it supershort, and my husband didn’t notice for a long time. We had just been engaged.”



1997
AT THE VH1/VOGUE FASHION AWARDS, NEW YORK CITY “A dress that I would no more wear today—like, you would have to pull me kicking and screaming into that dress. But I enjoy looking at it!”



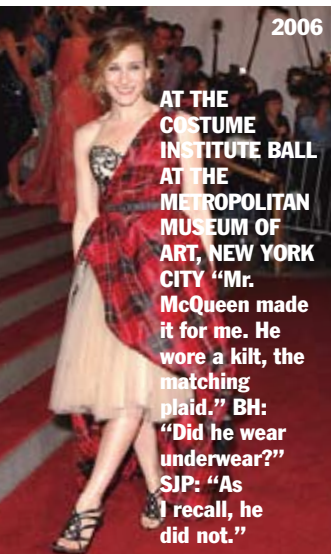
1999
AT THE COUNCIL OF FASHION DESIGNERS OF AMERICA AWARDS, NEW YORK CITY “They liked my hair blonde [for the show], but I felt more substantial with darker hair.”



2000
AT THE GOLDEN GLOBE AWARDS, LOS ANGELES “My friend told me, ‘Oh, you’re going to win—you’re wearing a winner’s dress.’ And I won.”



2000
WITH CHRIS NOTH AT THE HBO PREMIERE OF SEX AND THE CITY, NEW YORK CITY “I love him, I love him, I love him.”



2006
AT THE COSTUME INSTITUTE BALL AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK CITY “Mr. McQueen made it for me. He wore a kilt, the matching plaid.” BH: “Did he wear underwear?” SJP: “As I recall, he did not.”



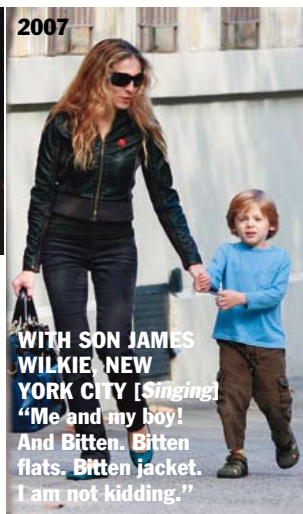
2006
WITH SEN. HILLARY CLINTON, BILL CLINTON, AND MATTHEW BRODERICK AT AN ART OPENING FOR BRODERICK’S LATE MOTHER, NEW YORK CITY “We chose not to invite the Clintons so as not to burden them. Then we heard: ‘Senator and President Clinton are on their way.’”



2007
IN AN AD FOR HER SECOND PERFUME, COVET “I was like, ‘Let’s put Christian Lacroix on the [dream designers] list. It will never happen.’ And it happened. He even came to the shoot in Paris. It was an amazing experience. It never grows old, putting on a beautiful dress. For me, it’s a great distraction. It’s always ridiculous, and it always feels like it should be happening to somebody else.”



2007
WITH MATTHEW BRODERICK AND MAYOR MICHAEL BLOOMBERG AT THE RALPH LAUREN SHOW, NEW YORK CITY “Bloomberg. I’m very fond of him. A couple of old-fashioned guys.”



2007
WITH SON JAMES WILKIE, NEW YORK CITY [Singing!] “Me and my boy! And Bitten. Bitten flats. Bitten jacket. I am not kidding.”