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# REESE IN LOVE

ROMANCE, KIDS AND CAREER HIGHS.  
HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN GIRL  
ON FINDING HAPPINESS AGAIN

  
THE SUNDAY TIMES

# STYLE

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I'm sitting in the living room of a suite at the Ritz-Carlton New York, waiting for Reese Witherspoon. From behind a door hung with dresses, I can make out some very quiet whispering between the star and her publicist. Ms Witherspoon, it seems, is changing her outfit between interviews.

If this were Lady Gaga, you would dismiss it as the behaviour of a diva, but Witherspoon's reputation precedes her. There are no reports of on-set tantrums, and *Autograph* magazine has described her as one of the sweetest A-listers when it comes to signature-seeking fans. She has the goodwill of the industry behind her, too: in 2005, critics and colleagues rewarded her undisputed talent with an Oscar, Bafta and Golden Globe for her performance as June Carter Cash in *Walk the Line*.

Of course, there's more to this story: she's been fighting a cold and is exhausted. She has been a single mother since her split from Ryan Phillippe in 2006, and the gossip pages have been speculating for weeks that her boyfriend of nearly a year, Hollywood agent Jim Toth, has been shopping for an engagement ring. When I ask later if he's popped the question yet, she cuts me off with a firm "no" and such a tight smile that I'm inclined to believe she's more annoyed that the surprise has been ruined than at the actual question. Sure enough, less than a month later, it's official: she's wearing a 4-carat, super-rare Ashoka diamond, big enough to take your eye out, and the couple are declaring themselves to be "extremely happy". For now, the tiredness is attributed to the fact she has just wrapped a film that had her commuting between the set in Vancouver and her kids, Ava, 11, and Deacon, 7, in LA, and she is now promoting her new romantic comedy, *How Do You Know*. In many of her films she's sunshine personified, a coiled spring of comedic energy and bouncy blonde waves, but today it's as if the lights have been dimmed.

"Sorry about that," she says, curling up in her chair with a sugary soy latte, her voice barely audible. "My dress was so uncomfortable." Who knows what she was wearing before, but it's not as if she's changed into trackie bottoms: she has straightened hair, is wearing a sharp black jacket over a dark red lace L'Wren Scott dress, and her 5ft 2in frame is boosted by Louboutin platform shoe-boots, which she bafflingly describes as "cosy".

Born in New Orleans 34 years ago, she has the good manners of the South and retains a light Southern drawl. She frames her answers carefully, frequently cutting herself off mid-sentence to take a safer direction. She is also relentlessly "glass half full". Even when describing the tough early years of her career she sees the positive. "Movies that went straight to video, losing jobs, getting rejected — years and years of it... You get a thick skin. And because you had that taste of disappointment, when you do well, it feels so much better." Her face shows a real flicker of glee at the thought that "Academy Award-winning" will forever be written before her name: "Definitely very cool," she grins.

Along with the Academy Award came talk of the so-called "Oscar divorce curse". Witherspoon's is one of the names listed as proof that Oscars end marriages (see also Sandra Bullock and Kate Winslet), the implication being that some husbands can't deal with their wives' success. Witherspoon and Phillippe split the year she won hers. When I explain, she lets out a huge, throaty laugh.

"Oh God. You have to be where you're at in a relationship. You can't think, 'Is it a pattern with other people?' There are the realities of a very busy life, and balancing work and kids and travelling a lot is very hard on relationships.

JAMES WHITE/CORBIS, PHOTOSHOT/GETTY, IAN

FROM THE BREAK-UP OF HER MARRIAGE TO AN AFFAIR WITH JAKE GYLLENHAAL, REESE WITHERSPOON'S LOVE LIFE WAS STRUCK BY THE OSCAR CURSE. BUT NOW, SHE TELLS **KATE BUSSMANN**, SHE'S BACK WITH A NEW FILM AND A NEW FIANCE

**BACK IN THE**







You have to work a lot harder than when you see somebody every day.”

She met Phillippe at her 21st birthday party, and Ava was born two years later, postponing her plan to go back to college. She insists she has no regrets. “I never went through that partying phase or dated a bunch of guys or anything like that. But a lot of my girlfriends did, so I don’t know if I really missed out on anything.”

Motherhood barely stalled her career — before it, she’d already won a cult following as the deliciously devious Tracy Flick in 1999’s *Election*; afterwards, she won over the rest of the planet as a defiantly nonditsy sorority girl in *Legally Blonde*. But she doesn’t seem to have capitalised as much as expected on her Oscar win. In fact, she’s appeared on screen only four times since. Her first post-Oscar film was *Rendition*, a no-punches-pulled drama about CIA-sponsored torture, in which she starred opposite Meryl Streep and Jake Gyllenhaal. The film underperformed critically and financially, but some good came out of it: she and Gyllenhaal became an item, their every date chronicled by a dozen paparazzi. It had fizzled out by the end of 2009, amid reports that he wanted to get married, but she wasn’t sure he was right for her kids. Her career, meanwhile, had gone very quiet. She’s complained of a lack of decent roles for women her age, and said she just didn’t read anything she liked, but insists today that she feels no pressure. “I’ve got to do some really inspiring work lately, and that’s a lucky place to be as an actor. So I’m feeling really good, really positive.”

Although *How Do You Know* is ostensibly just another romantic comedy, its pedigree is impeccable and the lead role was created with her in mind. But it suffered at the US box office, going up against *Tron: Legacy* and earning barely half her reported fee on its opening weekend. She plays a driven softball star, ageing out of the game that she’s prioritised over her relationships. She trained with pros five days a week for months, but again, she’s sanguine about the fact that, in the end, most of those scenes ended up on the cutting-room floor. “That was okay, because it was less about learning softball than hanging out with female athletes — they’re a different tribe of people. I met a lot of women who didn’t focus on their romantic lives until their careers were over.”

She has said little about her new fiancé in the past, describing him as “a great guy”, and adding that “what I’m finding out is that it’s very comfortable to be with somebody who understands my career, but doesn’t do what I do”. Asked whether her position at the top of the A list intimidates men, she shakes her head. “I think it’d be harder to meet someone outside of what we do. It’s a one-industry town, and those are the people you meet.”

Positive to the end, she also insists that dating as a single mother has had its upsides. “In some ways, it’s really good, because if somebody’s not interested in having a family, they don’t want to go out with you in the first place,” she says. “It kind of weeds out the guys that aren’t serious.” Toth obviously is. The next time she pops up in a tabloid, no doubt it will be the inevitable “bump watch”, and don’t be surprised if it turns out to be accurate. “Oh sure, I would be lucky to have more kids,” she says. “When it starts out it’s physically exhausting, and then it becomes very emotional. It’s been really fascinating, I’ve felt lucky to be able to guide them through life.” And there she goes again, an optimist to the end. ●

*How Do You Know* is out in cinemas on January 28



With her first husband, Ryan Phillippe



With former boyfriend Jake Gyllenhaal



With fiancé Jim Toth

# E GAME

ST Watch the trailer of Reese's new film at [thesundaytimes.co.uk/style](http://thesundaytimes.co.uk/style)