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MARCH 2009

ELLEN

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Her Cry!

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ellen enchanted

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL FOR ELLEN DEGENERES. AT 51, THE TV STAR, NEWLYWED AND ANIMAL-RIGHTS ADVOCATE HAS FOUND AN UNEXPECTED NEW ROLE AS A MODEL





"I like peace and I like houses," says DeGeneres, who despite her success in Hollywood dreams of greener pastures

I "Don't worry 'bout a thing 'Cause every little thing gonna be all right." The popular reggae tune blares over the studio speakers, and Ellen DeGeneres's audience members are on their feet and boogying, waiting for the talk-show host and winner of 25 Emmy awards to emerge from backstage. But when she does, it is clear everything is not all right. It should be a great day. The night before, the United States elected a new president, whom Ellen vigorously supported. Her guest on the show today is actor Samuel L. Jackson, a 60-year-old African-American who grew up in the segregated South and is beside himself with happiness and wonder. But Ellen looks as though she's about to cry. That famous blinding smile is clearly forced. She is taking the passing of Proposition 8 in California—the law that overturns the legality of gay marriage, and thus may call into question the validity of her own marriage to actress Portia de Rossi—very, very hard.

We meet 48 hours later, on the porch of the Beverly Hills home the 51-year-old DeGeneres shares with de Rossi, her love of four years. Formerly owned by Jackie Collins and by comedienne Totie Fields, the expansive modern house is filled with art and antiques, including an enormous Warhol named *Tennis Shoes* that was bought to commemorate DeGeneres's sneaker obsession. The house smells delicious, a mixture of cedar and Southwestern pine, which I assume is some New Agey/relaxation/aromatherapy thing. "Um, not really," she says. "I just don't

want the place to smell like the animals." At which point I notice an audience has gathered around us—three dogs and three cats, all rescues. DeGeneres has been an animal lover since childhood (see "Animal Magnetism" on page 121). They stare at DeGeneres as though she's the Second Coming. "Aw, don't worry, George is just loving you up," she says, as one of the cats attempts to gnaw off my hand.

Over a plate of fresh fruit, pumpkin muffins and cinnamon-infused coffee, we discuss the events of the past few days. Like so many comedians, Ellen is at heart a serious woman; unlike most, she is neither angry nor communicating any need to be "on." Most days, she says, the thing she strives for is not to be funny or fabulous but to simply be "a good person. I work every day to try to get better and to treat people with kindness," she tells me. It's easy to believe her.

But in any case, the subject of the day is something she is a little less comfortable with: her singular fresh-faced beauty, which CoverGirl has recognized by making DeGeneres the spokesmodel for Simply Ageless, its new line of antiaging foundation. Despite her glowing skin and cornflower-blue eyes, DeGeneres insists she is an unlikely choice for a beauty campaign. And though she's delighted to be considered pretty, she is thoughtful about what her looks mean. "To me it's sad to be defined by beauty, because it's something that goes away, and changes," she says. "If you're trying to chase that forever, you're in trouble." At the same time, DeGeneres adds, "as I've aged and matured, I just feel better about myself, more confident and more comfortable in my own skin. As that's happened, I think I look better than I've ever looked, because that's just what happens when you feel better about yourself."

When, I ask her, did she feel her most beautiful? "The day I got married," she says unhesitatingly. I see her eyes go red and watery, and I panic . . . I made Ellen DeGeneres cry! "Excuse me," she says, and runs off, while the animals look at me accusingly. I'm pretty sure George the Love Cat is going to bite my leg. "You're worse than Barbara Walters!" she says when she returns, blowing her nose. Well, in that case, I ask her what kind of a tree she would be if she were a tree. "A weeping willow," she shoots back. "It's just very emotional," DeGeneres continues. "You find the person you love, you think you've come this far . . . and anyway, I never thought I'd have a wedding, and I did, and it meant more than I imagined."

DeGeneres and de Rossi had known each other for years but were in relationships. After one evening

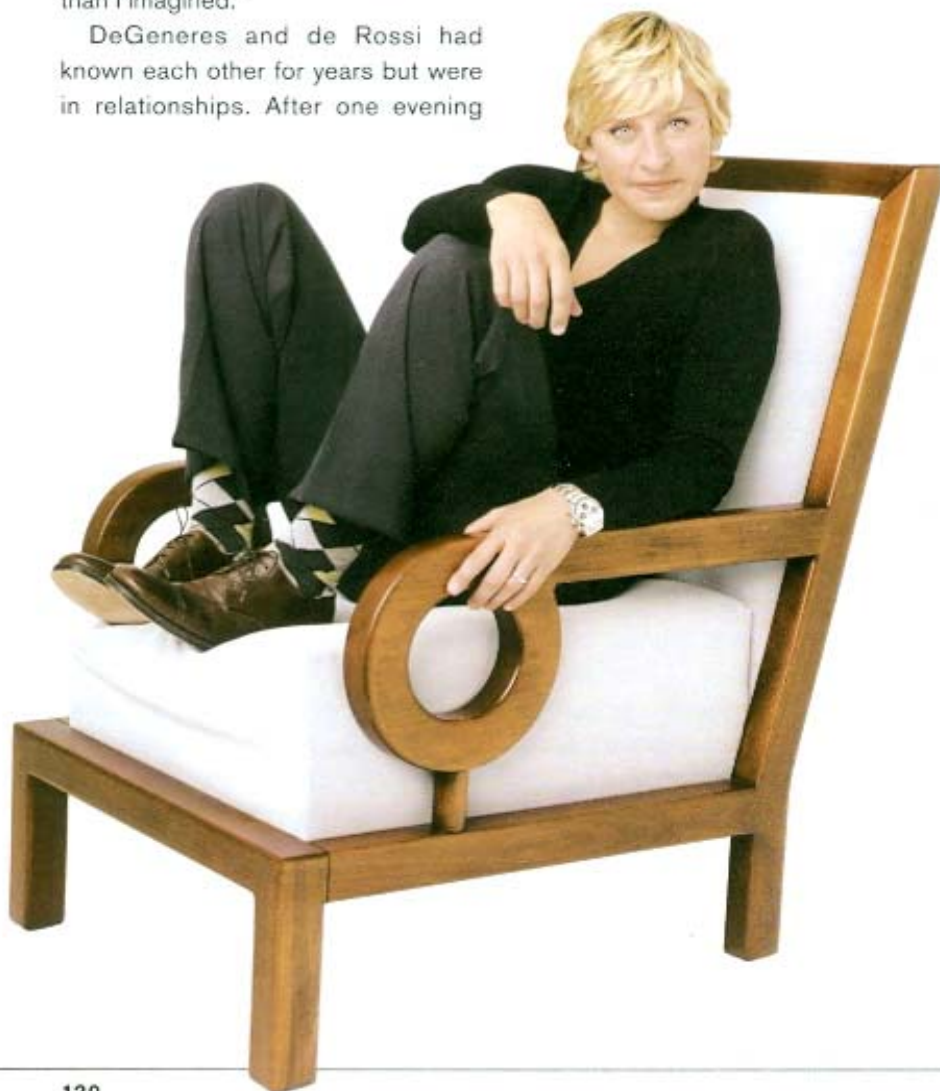
together they both just knew, and quickly moved in together.

A few minutes later the object of Ellen's affection emerges from inside the house: de Rossi, the lithe Australian beauty who will soon be costarring in the quirky new TV show *Better Off Ted* and possibly working on the movie version of *Arrested Development*. She is barefoot and wearing a blinged-out T-shirt that reads I LOVE MY WIFE, a wedding gift from the singer Missy Elliot. She is also nursing an elaborately bandaged finger. I ask which of the two women is more domestic. "Well, I sliced this finger cutting vegetables to put into a salad," she says cheerfully. "Then I really cut it afterwards, washing the knife. So I guess I'm not so domestic. But I try."

DeGeneres watches de Rossi with a mixture of bemusement, adoration and pride. It's the look of Spencer Tracy for Katharine Hepburn, Barack Obama for Michelle . . . the look each and every one of us would kill to inspire in our spouse. I finally think to ask them what their biggest domestic squabble is. Their brows both furrow as they contemplate the utter absurdity of having complaints about each other. These two really haven't been married long enough.

"Well!" says de Rossi, anxious to help, "I do leave half-finished beverages everywhere. I usually have three cups of tea going at once. I'm Australian. That's just what we do. And anyway, I was going to thank her, in our vows, for picking up all the glasses—and say that she'd have to do that for the rest of her life. She took that on. But she's very good about it." They give each other That Look, and now I'm envious and bitter, hoping to come back in 10 years when they're bickering about whose turn it is to pick the hairball off the sofa.

My reverie is interrupted when de Rossi has to run to take a business call—she's developing a line of vegan (nonleather) shoes that are stylish. Exit, wife; enter, Betty, DeGeneres's mom. She is toting an ancient Chihuahua as if it's a wee fashionable purse. She lives in a separate house on the estate, as does DeGeneres's older brother, Vance, who co-runs Steve Carell's production company. Some people like having their family near them; Ellen really, really likes it. The spirited DeGeneres matriarch, who has taken Ellen's gentle ribbing for years, is as deeply affected by Proposition 8 as her daughter is. But I don't want to ask her about it—I'm terrified there will be more tears—so we talk, instead, about Ellen, the little girl who carted around a Baby Dear doll everywhere, who rescued strays, who was Betty's "rock"



THE "WOL" WARRIOR: BRUCE F. WOOD/GETTY IMAGES; ANJOU WOOD/GETTY IMAGES



Animal Magnetism

DeGeneres, who recently bought partial ownership of organic pet-food company Halo Purely For Pets, has long been involved in animal causes. We asked her about the roots of her obsession.

when she had breast cancer. But the comedian isn't so sure she wants her mom participating. "She won't remember anything," Ellen says. "She'll make things up."

"I won't make things up," Betty retorts, but I can see the gleeful calculation going on behind her round spectacles: What can I get away with here?

"Was it you who gave Ellen her sense of humor?" I ask.

"If I had my mother's sense of humor I'd be Don Rickles," Ellen says. "She's sarcastic."

"That's true," Betty says.

"Did you have a sense of destiny about your daughter—who she was, what she might become?"

"No! How could you know?" But in fact, Ellen was both a wit and a lover of mischief, if not a clown. "I remember she had a blind date with another couple, and they were out in the car. He came and rang the bell, and she answered the door. He said, 'Ellen?' and she said, 'No, she lives two doors down.' And he said, 'Oh, I'm sorry,' and then went to hunt down the 'real' Ellen."

These days there's no question

who the real Ellen is, or that this is her home. She gives me a tour, and while I ooh and aah—omigod! a koi pond!—she talks about the future, when she finishes with her talk show, perhaps 10 years down the road. "I don't need to be on camera," she says. "I'm not a workaholic. I love to spend time with my wife, my family, my animals." Though her Beverly Hills home is vast, DeGeneres dreams of a more pastoral setting. "We're looking for the right place to have a farm," she continues. "Someplace like Massachusetts or Nantucket, with seasons. We could get an 1800s farmhouse with land and rescue animals. Then I'm done."

DeGeneres is particularly eager to show me one part of the house: the art studio. "Isn't it amazing? Portia just decided one day recently she would paint—and look." She watches where my gaze finally lands. "I did that one for Portia," she says a little shyly. "I'm just playing around." It is a small, nondescript, gray canvas. On it words have been painted, then scratched into the paint with a palette knife. There is emphasis and urgency in the rendering. The painting reads:

I WILL ALWAYS LOVE YOU. ■

- What are your earliest recollections of animals?

Dinosaurs

- What was your first pet and what was his/her name?

A cat named Debbie

- Your mom told us you used to rescue pets in the neighborhood—any good stories?

I once tried to get a coyote in my car—I thought it was a dog

- You played a flaky fish called Dory in *Finding Nemo*. What did you love most about being a regal blue tang?

The food

- Tell me about your current menagerie—names please?

*2 dogs—Mabel and Wolf
3 cats Charlie, George and Chairman*

- What animal do you want to adopt next?

Anything

- Any other Halo products you're working on?

*Yes, but it's top secret ...
oh. OK, a chew toy*

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