

SOLO ACT

BEAUTY AND BRAINS

When Brooke Shields lost her love match, Andre Agassi, this spring, she found herself suddenly scared. How is the ultimate girl next door coping with the singles game, the suicide of her best friend, and a strained relationship with her mother? By getting back to work—on her sitcom, in a multiplexful of movies, and, of course, on her aching heart. By Nancy Jo Sales. Photographed by Sante D’Orazio

It’s a coup, you know,” she’s persuading softly into her cell phone. “It brings the level of the show up. If you’re talking about ten grand, we can find ten grand.” Brooke Shields is negotiating, pushing, insistently, sweetly, in a whispery voice not unlike Jackie O.’s. (JFK Jr., whom she once dated, told her she reminded him of his mother; you could start with the voice. The surprise is that some of Jackie’s steeliness is there as well.)

“You can make this easier,” Brooke is saying, still sweetly. She’s talking to one of the producers of *Suddenly Susan* about getting Monty Python veteran Eric Idle as a new character on the show. “He’s a comic genius,” she reminds, her eyes fluttering up momentarily to the ceiling, her palm going up—*paisano*-style; she’s part Italian—for the benefit of the viewer. *Don’t these people understand anything?* But her voice never wavers. She doesn’t have to beg; she’s talking as an equal. Brooke Shields is a producer now, too.

And it’s *her* damn show.

She clicks off the cell phone and makes one of her funny-goofy-Brooke faces. “If I’m so powerful, then give me what I want!” It’s still hard for her to stop being self-deprecating. “These are twice-my-age, married heads of studios”—she is

apologizing for being apologetic, for simply telling them what she has every right to want (and seems to be correct about).

But Shields is trying, really trying, to get past all that *stuff*.

It’s about time; she’d be the first to admit it. “I didn’t want to learn this at thirty-four! Twenty-eight would have been nicer.” But whatever she’s doing, it seems to be working. *Suddenly Susan*—on the hit list for three years now—saved her from becoming that *Pretty-Baby-Calvin-Klein-Jeans-Blue-Lagoon-Girl-Who-Once-Went-on-a-Date-with-Michael-Jackson-and-Bubbles-and-Is-Now-a-Slim-Fast-Spokeswoman*, that *Whatever Happened to Her, Anyway Girl*. She sighs. “Why does everybody always have to bring all that up?”

She is moving past it, and fast, with three movies coming out this year: *The Bachelor*, a romantic comedy with Renee Zellweger and Chris O’Donnell; *Black and White*, in which she plays a documentary filmmaker reporting on New York high school kids; and *Weekend*, an independent film that stars her opposite Gena Rowlands. (Plus, she just finished shooting *After Sex* with Eric Idle.) Brooke Shields is accomplishing that vaunted rite of passage in American celebrity: The Second Act.

Shields is coming into her own, finally. No apologies for that. As so often seems to happen, it has happened in the

midst of troubles: This April, she split from her husband of two years, tennis star Andre Agassi; a month earlier, her best friend and *Susan* costar David Strickland had committed suicide. "It hasn't been easy," Shields says. "But I would never waste my time feeling victimized, because it's just not interesting to me. It's what you do with each moment of your life, through the adversity, if you want to call it that."

Sitting in Payard, a French café on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, everything about Brooke seems light. Her voice; the way she wears her new self. (Dare we guess she's been cranking Madonna's *Ray of Light*?) She wears no makeup, and while her face has not a single visible line, she somehow looks her full thirty-four years. The only gravity is here—except, of course, in her size. Shields is comfortably substantial (six feet, size 10) and so impossibly beautiful, like some fairy princess who got zapped into a Banana Republic white button-down and a pair of Vivienne Tam pedal pushers, but she's too polite—much too polite—to complain about the loss of her tiara.

She has been a sort of living metaphor nearly since she was born. "Just recently I saw myself on this documentary series," she is saying, "and I sat there watching what was presented as my whole life, and I found it so devastating. To find yourself represented as having done this and been that—and as no wiser." Just the images, none of the inside; which is what she's finally finding out about now.

She admits there's been a bit of therapy. "I grew so accustomed to voyeurism, to being watched," she says, "even my orthodontist appointments were filmed, my periods were on Page Six, my virginity became an issue."

"I lived," Shields says, "in a very controlled way, whether it was the public, or the social mores of my father"—Frank, a former Revlon executive, now a real estate agent in Palm Beach (with whom she is now close after years of estrangement)—"or this sort of be-a-good-Catholic-girl thing my mother presented to me amidst her wild kind of alcoholism. There was always this control, always this urge to be good, whether it was at piano lessons or in school or just, if there's a roomful of people, to accommodate them, make sure every single one of them gets your attention and you get their approval, at the risk of being sacrificed myself."

Her self: She was the Ivory Snow baby before she could walk; before she could know, really, that she had a "self," she was at the center of a national controversy for appearing nude (at twelve), as a child prostitute in Louis Malle's *Pretty Baby*. She was famous—even infamous—before she could have much of an idea what that meant.

"There have been times when people have said to me, 'But you're Brooke Shields,' and I'm not quite sure what that means," she says. "Whenever I would, say, walk into a room where there were people I admire—my peers!—I would always immediately think, Oh, they don't want me at this party, I don't belong here." (On a recent night at Madonna's house in L.A., in fact, our Lady of Lourdes scolded her, "Brooke, you don't have to apologize for yourself!")

"I don't know, I think maybe what I was imprinting was

that my mom was from Newark" (Brooke's mother Teri has endured her own share of public projections; if Brooke was the Nymphet/Virgin Queen, Teri was the Stage Mother from Hell). "She was a street-smart wild child who always wanted to be a member of the elite, and she knows the language and the manners. She is better and more classy than half the women who have trust funds on Park Avenue," Shields says protectively, "but she never felt like she totally belonged. There was this affirmation all the time, like, 'Look, I'm just this Newark kid,' and I just thought the other day, How interesting, I imprinted that somewhere upon my mind, even though I have been doing this"—the star business, show business—"for more than thirty years."

Thirty years: When Brooke had a Farrah Fawcett 'do, we in our thirties were flipping back our wings with spongy rollers; when she went to Princeton and dated (future Superman) Dean Cain, we were trying to make time with the boy down the hall in our dorm. If anyone is the girl next door, it is she.

"I had a crush on her when I was twelve years old," says Ben Stiller (like Shields, a New York showbiz kid; they met four years ago and became close friends). "I *still* have a

crush on her. And I'm just so impressed at the way she's taking chances and succeeding both professionally and personally. She hasn't had it easy, being famous since, like, thirteen and dealing with all this ridiculousness her whole life. To be as grounded and as aware of herself as she is, as truly nice and as funny . . . Did I mention I had a crush on her?"

As tied as she was to her mother (literally—Teri, obsessively afraid of crib death, would sleep with baby Brooke strapped to her chest with a cloth diaper, a fact Teri loved to repeat to the press), it was only through breaking away from her that Shields says she could finally start to "grow up."

"Andre and I grew up together," she says—not literally, of course; they met via

fax in 1992 after a mutual friend suggested they might have a lot in common. "We were both professional children who had never *been* children, we were too responsible too early, we had never been teenagers. So when we met each other there was this joy, and we just started to play. It was like finding a best friend in childhood. We've always felt like siblings, like we almost have the same blood. You wanna see his picture?" From her wallet—in which she keeps many snapshots surrounded by hearts and stickers, like a school-girl—she fishes a picture of herself and Andre at their wedding. She looks at it, wistful. "I think we even look alike."

"But when I met him, you know, things weren't good. . . ."

Brooke the Actress had become a bit of a joke by that time, with two film disasters in a row—*Sahara* in 1984 and the dreaded *Brenda Starr* in 1992. "I wasn't hip," she says ironically, shrugging, making a Brooke-the-Joke face.

But Andre—the Dennis Rodman of tennis, with his wild hair and earrings—*was* hip. They were married in April 1997, at a million-dollar wedding in Monterey. The reception took place in what looked like a castle (Carmel Valley's Stonepine Resort). (Continued on page 182)

CAN
I STILL MAKE
A BABY?
HOW MUCH TIME
DO I HAVE? AM I
GOING TO HAVE TO
FIND A SIRE?"

BROOKE SHIELDS

(Continued from page 103) The fairy tale seemed to continue; *seemed*.

"I had absolutely given up, and gave into being cared for, and I was tired and scared," she says. "I didn't have an agent, I'd had foot surgery"—due, in part, to years of carrying her towering body in towering high heels; they basically had to break both her feet and put them back together, not a bad bodily metaphor for feeling crippled—"and I was bedridden for months. I was stuck." Andre was the one, she says, who started her on her interior journey. "He always attributed it all to me, but he incited it. He opened me up, keyed into, 'What are your dreams? Don't you realize that they're possible?'"

The first step was detaching herself from her mother, whom she fired as her manager in 1995. That same year, she took a chance at a new image and appeared on Broadway as the gum-smacking, feisty Rizzo in *Grease*; the reviews weren't bad, and the tourists went crazy. And then, her new managers secured her a guest spot on *Friends* as an obsessive fan/girlfriend of Matt LeBlanc's character. That's when NBC brass saw that—whatta ya know?—Funny Brooke was . . . *funny*, which got her, suddenly, *Susan*, and the best reviews of her life.

Critics praised Shields for her klutzy, self-deprecating (sound familiar?) portrayal of Susan Keane, a lovably neurotic thirtysomething reporter at a San Francisco alternative weekly. "I think the best compliment I've received was just recently, from Eric Idle," Brooke says demurely. "He said, 'You know, we're a strange lot, we funny people, aren't we?'"

The boost of support from *Susan* spurred Shields to seek new film projects. And last summer, she says, she experienced a creative breakthrough on the set of *Weekend*, with the help of one of her idols, Gena Rowlands.

"This last summer working with Gena, who is the quintessential female artist, we were playing mother and daughter, and she *is* my mother," Shields says. "I mean, they look so much alike, she does this thing with her mouth that *is* my mother's mouth—it's creepy. And I was going head to head with her in the film, and I had to get over the fact that it was Gena Row-

lands, because I had put her on such a pedestal since I was a little girl."

"I didn't even know she was nervous," Rowlands says now. "She asked me a couple of things that a younger actress would ask an older actress, but I spoke to her as one artist to another, just actor talk, that was it. I was very pleasantly surprised at how she has extended her range quite wonderfully. She had some very dramatic scenes, and she really comes through. I have a feeling she'll do more dramatic work."

Brooke's blossoming as an actress was causing her to grow, and perhaps grow away from Andre, who was coming out of a hard time of his own (his tennis ranking fell into the mid-one-hundreds during their marriage), throughout which, she says, with some pride, "I was there, I never left. But we were realizing that we weren't compatible, we didn't want to spend our days the same way, and what motivated me was the antithesis of what motivated him. I'd come home from work and want to rant and rave about what happened on the set that day, and it would just be noise to him. Meanwhile, he'd come home and there'd be nobody in the hotel room.

"And then in our free time"—of which they had little together, never having fully moved in together, either in Las Vegas, his home, or either of their homes in New York and L.A.—"it became a constant source of negotiation because one of us had to opt for the other to be happy. It would never just be, 'Oh, let's just go to a couple of movies and the flea market' or, 'Oh, let's just go to so-and-so's house and play charades.' His way of doing things and my way of doing things were so different, we always found ourselves in a compromise. We were sort of going"—she flutters her hands, depicting confusion—"I don't understand this, I don't understand this, how can we love each other so much, and it's not enough?"

"It's odd because the one thing holding us together was a pure kind of love, the kind of love that gets dropped into the well and goes all the way down, and you assume that that equals marriage. But it doesn't, always."

She's got me a little teary now, and she hands me a tissue. "I'm sorry," she apologizes. "Don't apologize," I say, sniffing. "Oh, I'm sorry," she says.

She and Andre officially divorced in April. "It was so weird. It took just seven minutes to sign all the papers." They remain close friends, so much so that she says she called him recently and asked, "What should I do? Take the ring off? What should I do?" While I'll always be sad that it didn't work out," she adds carefully, "I'm not so sure I'll be sorry it happened the way it did, because I wouldn't be standing the way that I'm standing now, without him.

"I went from my mother to my husband," she says. "And now, it's just me." And without her best friend.

"With the death of my David"—Strickland, who played the boyishly silly music critic, Todd, on *Susan*—"it was the breaking point; it was, like, nothing works anymore," Shields says. She admits to having had a bit of a respite herself, after Strickland hanged himself on March 22 in a Las Vegas strip motel after a long battle with alcohol and cocaine.

"He's happier now," she says with resignation. "He was in terrible pain. He was one of these people who had such an intense love, and such a need to be loved." She says she had tried to help him. "Are you kidding? I'm the poster child for codependency. There were so many nights, staying up with him, out looking for him, worrying where he was. And then on the night he died, he called, sounding odd, but I was just, No, I'm not going to spend another night not sleeping—my heart can't take this anymore. I'm done. I'm going to bed."

Her voice becomes even softer. "People didn't get it," she says. "We were so close, they thought we were sleeping together, they thought he was the reason why I was going to get divorced—but no. He was just my best friend, and now he's dead.

"What all this has been," she says, "feels like a passage from innocence to experience. Acting is about inciting people to feel. Well, I think I'm now discovering what *I* feel. I'm only now starting to feel available to myself. I need not to answer to anybody for a while. I need not to make a phone call when I get home, not to ask if it's okay if I go here or there. There's like this whole type of . . . *conversation* I don't want to have anymore. I will be accountable, but just to myself." She exhales a long breath.

DESIRE

(Continued from page 149) we're capable of losing interest in sex in the first place: "It's an error to see [human sexual desire] only as a desire to relieve tension, only as something that comes out of the most primitive parts of our brains, the parts we share with reptiles and prairie dogs." Or chickens and New Zealand rabbits.

Every few hours at the couples workshop, Schnarch answers questions. To a hot-looking young married who says he's struggling because he realizes he needs validation in so many areas of his life, Schnarch says, Don't worry—you'll only be able to take on one issue at a time. Then he launches into an entirely speculative riff, his voice rising and falling like a preacher's: "You want your wife to ooh and ah and have an orgasm in ten seconds, and the fact that she can't hurts your feelings. You get to the point where you'd like her to have a good time but you don't need her to have an orgasm to validate you, then, when, God forbid, your child is born a mongoloid, and you were a jock and you need that kid to be good because that's your validation—that's a much bigger struggle than being able to handle your wife not screaming during sex. You get into bed and say, 'Look, I need you to be my rooting section. I'm tired of having sex like I'm on the playing field and you're in the bleachers—I want to be with you for a change. And I'm not telling you I'll be the most conscientious lover, because I'm real occupied with whether I'm okay or not.'" Schnarch grows quiet, and it's as if he's become the young man who sparked the speech, lying in bed next to his wife, a dark-haired, milky-complexioned Snow White: "But I'd like the woman I love to have at least one opportunity before she dies to lie in bed and relax and have the feeling I could hold her, and not be so caught up in whether I'm good or bad."

As far as I know, Schnarch has no clue whether his questioner wants more adulation in bed, but then, don't a lot of people? As a matter of fact, I don't, I think, as I sit there taking my sexual inventory. I never was one of those needy girls who had to sleep with boys to get them to like me. Hell, I've been sexual in my own right since I was fourteen. I was a regular Sam-I-Am of

orgasms: next to the pool table, on the covered bridge, in the woods, by the lake, under my parents' noses, whenever and wherever I could finagle a few moments for my boyfriend to get his hands in my pants. Guys never had to worry about any prolonged will-she-or-won't-she with me. No way, I performed. . . . Whoa—wait a minute. Here I've always seen myself as this free-loving, earthy type who just grooved on her own orgasms, but part of my pleasure was clearly the affirmation (I imagined?) my "skill" elicited from men. This is how it works with Schnarch: You're listening, listening, throwing up blocks like a linebacker—I'm normal, I'm better off. And then, suddenly, Schnarch finds a little daylight in the clutter of your defenses and darts through, and you see your sexual story is more complicated than you thought.

I would later come to think I'd clung to my orgasmic, uh, acumen because I was afraid to take any genuine initiative in sex, to be anything other than the eager reactor. "Marriage isn't about anxiety reduction," Schnarch says. "It's about anxiety enhancement. Pop psychologists who teach us about comfort and safety teach us to have the most boring sex you'll ever have." All I knew at the time was that I'd put an uncommon amount of energy into viewing myself as an orgasm aficionado—and something seemed off about that.

Another one of Schnarch's favorite sayings is: "Sex is leftovers. You decide what's disgusting and perverted, I decide what's disgusting and perverted, and we both do what's left over." When I hear this, I initially (and predictably) think, he's obviously not living on the East Coast anymore, because the women I know do just about everything. Once again, though, the more you reflect upon his one-liners, the more resonant they become. No matter how liberal one is about what she'll put where, what's more relevant, I think, is the tendency to get stuck in one emotional position in bed. Early on researching this piece, I came across a journal article entitled "Traumatic Masturbatory Syndrome" that discussed the case of a sixty-two-year-old man who could only climax by rubbing against his "bed clothes or pillow without manual guidance. He learned at age eight, from his priest, that any pleasure from touching his penis was the equivalent of 'recruci-

"I still have the dream of falling in love and getting married again; maybe it's archaic, and maybe it's one of the things that needs to be changed. But I dream of being who I am first, and then being who I am within the context of someone else."

And now that she's divorced at thirty-four, there's the increasingly pressing question of children, which she says she has always wanted. "Every time I go to the doctor I say, 'Can I still make a baby, can I still make a baby?'" She laughs. "How much time do I have? What am I going to have to do, find a sire?" You know, it becomes a medical choice; I don't have a moral issue with doing it on my own if I have to. I grew up with a single parent—and though it's not my ultimate goal, I would definitely do it alone. I was telling David just before he died, 'You know, I'm just gonna do it, I'm just gonna have a baby.' He said, 'Okay, Madonna.'

"I love men, I think men are great," Shields says, "but I don't rely on them."

She and her mother, who lives alone in New Jersey (and has stopped drinking) have become close again, "but I can look at her and think, My God, she's tragic. There's a tragicness," she says. "Because she never got to have a conversation like this one, where she could take account of herself.

"But you know," Brooke continues, "I feel I'm coming into a new thing. The last day on the set of *After Sex*, I had this very difficult scene. My character had to completely lose it because her husband's left her. It was this very emotional thing. And I was so nervous, I was praying, Oh please, please, please, just let me be available to myself because I'm so used to being cut off from myself. All day everyone was asking me, 'Are you okay?' because they're so used to me being so bubbly—I'm the one who puts tape on the gaffer's back and knows about the electrician's daughter going to her dance rehearsal tomorrow.

"But no one got in my space. They saw me working, and they didn't bother me, and as a result it was one of the best things I've ever done in my life. And afterward at the wrap party, Eric [Idle] came up to me and said, 'I cried, you made me cry.' A woman said, 'I had to walk away from the monitor because it looked too real.' And I said, 'Yeah, you know what? It was real.'" ■