

CULTURE

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Extract

What a time to be trapped in LA. This was the Golden Age of Stupid, and Hollywood was peaking: 2003-06 in Los Angeles was 1966-69 in London, without cool music, cool movies or people who did anything. We had a few years to go before the recession, high fuel prices and the decline of LA into full-blown mental illness, so for now it was all snort, f*** and buy another chihuahua, a dog you'd surely only buy when blind drunk or on drugs. Logically, this moment in history chose the It kids to represent it; people who simply were. When you met the It girls, Nicole Richie was warm, sharp and funny; Lindsay Lohan was wide-eyed and sweet, but worryingly surrounded by Eurotoffs; and Paris Hilton dutifully kept up the "sexy" thing by being rude, which made you wonder how you'd bored her and how you'd struggle harder for her love. They were all smart, but boy had they inspired a million Queens of Stupid.

The It girls continued to hit the headlines, suffering tragically from confusion. Nicole pulled the wrong way onto the freeway. Britney got married for less than three days, while Paris explained her arrest on suspicion of driving under the influence with: "Maybe I was speeding a little bit... I was just really hungry and wanted an In-N-Out Burger." All of this was overseen not by their parents, but by their baffled, boggly-eyed pets.

The Golden Age of Stupid exploded as a newsless phenomenon that the media found amazing news. My job: to pretend this nothing was something. Something great.

I was summoned to spend a day in the life of Nicole Richie for a women's magazine. The angle: look how nice and thin Nicole is now. The summer story was "Swimwear", gearing up for the winter story, "Stop Eating All That Food or You'll Never Get Into Your Swimwear". It had been raining all spring, and palm fronds and trash littered the road as though there'd been a riot. When it rains, this most uptight of cities collapses, gibbering. Chevrolets weaving across the freeway, still houses panicking and falling down the hills. That day, the city felt more unthinged than usual. I drove along Hollywood Boulevard, past a man cycling with a parrot on his handlebars. A gold tramp in a gold suit jacket jitterbugged down the sidewalk. Oh, and there's Spider-Man, strolling in his blue and red Lycra... *Christ...*

The sun was climbing and the non-air-conditioned population was hot. So hot, I was using a tea towel to hold the steering wheel. I wondered why actresses never had sweat patches, and remembered the insect-like surgeon I'd interviewed who said that in the run-up to the Oscars he injected 16 doses of Botox into actresses' armpits to paralyse their sweat glands. Probably with his proboscis. Today, 32 injections seemed like a fair trade.

I knew I had no right to criticise any of this. I had no qualifications except A-level art. Maybe if I'd gone to a different school, maybe if I hadn't chosen physics, maybe if I'd

done any revision at all, instead of eating Kit Kats in the Parliament Hill San Siro cafe for two years, then maybe I might not be on my way to the Tracey Ross boutique on Sunset Boulevard to write about how great it is to wear a bikini.

Tracey Ross's boutique was hipper than hip, a place where a young starlet could lose pounds of ugly money by buying lime-green snakeskin passport covers, bracelets reading ASK FOR WISDOM and brooches that looked for all the world to me like diamanté Iron Crosses. I picked up a bracelet made from old string.

"It's adorable," said the assistant quickly, a warning I should buy it.

"Doesn't look very hard-wearing," I said even quicker, a warning I wouldn't.

"It's designed to break," she explained patiently, "so whoever finds it gets whatever you put into it. It's a pay-forward bracelet." My phone rang.

"Okay, so this is going to be a long day," the magazine editor chirped. You said it.

My interviewee stepped out of the changing room. Nicole looked amazing. At least that's what I wrote; I have no idea whether she did or not. She was freshly fatless and sprayed brown, so she looked healthy at least. By the following summer, when I interviewed her again — the angle: look how far too thin Nicole is now — I wrote: "Nicole is not emaciated." Yes, and she was beautiful, but she'd been completely fatless for 12 months and a friend would have said: *Make her eat, you bastards, before she desiccates.*

I hoped Nicole didn't die. She was witty and disarmingly friendly, with a nice smile, world-weary but still amused. Like Dolly Parton, Nicole was in on the airhead joke. Her excuse for arriving 40 minutes late was: "Sorry, I crashed my car again." The adopted daughter of Lionel Richie, she tipped wide-eyed from one ludicrous LA scenario to another, a skinny princess in a magic kingdom.

"What was your most indulgent toy?" I asked.

"A bunch of Fabergé eggs."

"Did your dad buy them for you?"

"No, I got them from Gearys," she said. Gearys, the Beverly Hills jeweller. "At the end of the year, my dad got the bill and I've never had a charge account there since." I asked her how old she was then, expecting her to say 16.

"Eight," she said.

"How did you get there?"

"Drivers."

Yes, Nicole was great, but boy did she have a cavalcade in her wake. Groomers, fixers and other random extras who'd all arrived that morning to be there for Nicole, turning up early enough to eat breakfast in the most visible seats of Hollywood's most visible breakfast joint.

Out of the dressing room came the woman who created size zero: stylist-to-the-stars Rachel Zoe herself, hovering over Nicole like a moth-eaten crow. Maybe crow is a little

Jane Bussman is a British comedy writer who ended up on the trail of child soldiers in Africa, but before that she had to contend with the It girls of LA and their pooches





harsh; maybe boil-in-the-bag Brigitte Bardot getting done by a crow better describes Zoe. Either way, it didn't matter, because Zoe was heralded as a genius in Hollywood, a town where you're a genius for borrowing ideas from before 1990. Today she was styling Nicole Richie as a slapper.

"OH MY GOD EVERYBODY STOP WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND SEE HOW CUTE SHE LOOKS!" bellowed one of the cavalcade. The Crow had transformed Nicole into a child prostitute with a tattooist. Nicole pointed to a small pair of pointe shoes etched on her stomach.

"I got the ballet shoes when I was 14, and I showed them to my dad," said Nicole, "and I told him I'd done it for him because of his song Ballerina Girl."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing." She looked at me with her huge "Who, me?" eyes. "Then he said 'Please don't do me any more favours', and burst into tears. When I was 14 I told him I was a lesbian. I make him cry all the time."

We wandered around the shop.

"How did you meet Rachel?" I asked Nicole, but before she could answer, Rachel swooped.

"I helped her choose an outfit for Oprah's show, and we fell in love," Rachel said, staring me straight in the eye with no hint of humour. Nobody sees the funny side in Hollywood unless they are lucratively contracted to do so. "The clothes we chose got Look of the Week in Us Weekly magazine."

"How much does that cost? Look of the Week?" I said. "What do you need to be in the running?"

"A Fendi or Marc Jacobs purse is \$1,500-\$3,000; shoes, Chloé or Stella, maybe \$500-\$1,000; Oscar de la Renta cocktail dress... several thousand. The free samples don't fit Nicole; she's a straight size zero, 24in waist," said Rachel. I hated her for being proud, I hated her because I could count Nicole's ribs, which would surprise you if you'd seen the huge plate of fried breakfast she'd eaten that morning. The cavalcade had all eaten huge breakfasts. I knew this because they left me with the bill. Hollywood was notorious for Celebrity Eating — consuming a high-calorie meal in the presence of a journalist or paparazzo. I always played along, writing that the celebrity couldn't possibly have an eating disorder or drug problem, what with the big ol' plate of chow they had just sucked up. I played along today because I liked Nicole, and I reckoned that if I interviewed her every 12 months, she'd eat once a year.

"So Rolling Stones," exclaimed Zoe, pointing at Nicole's new outfit — clown pantaloons with a bikini.

"So Rolling Stones," deduced Zoe's assistant all by herself.

I wanted to run away. I had a part in this; I was complicit in her torture and demise. Right on cue, I found a picture book about the Taliban, somehow stocked alongside all the Kabbalah literature. Nicole picked up the book, but Zoe snatched it away. "No, Nicole! It might look political!" she scolded, glaring at me for trying to damage her client.

KATIE LEE ALAMY

"Would you mind running to Coffee Bean? Nicole likes a black vanilla ice-blended."

"So Rolling Stones," said Zoe's assistant.

"Black vanilla ice-blended, please," I said to the woman in the chrome-and-concrete Coffee Bean, ignoring the actor Luke Wilson at the sugar stand because I fancied him after The Royal Tenenbaums. "Dude... sorry... you're so awesome," a man in wraparound shades said to Luke.

We waited while they made Straight Size Zero Nicole her sugary drink. LA was hurting my logic boards, and it wasn't even tea time. Trouble was, LA made the law, it was you that was crazy, and Coffee Bean on the crest of Sunset Plaza was not just another coffee house, it was the peak of LA's achievements, a sunbathed temple where you could worship the people you were supposed to aspire to. Right out front were three of the hottest girls in LA, and thereby the hottest girls in the world. Blonde, firm, smooth and long, they all sat splayed in pastel Juicy Couture tracksuits, the high priestesses of Los Angeles.

At their feet, they had pocket puppies, a strain of ultra-tiny chihuahua that looked like a hamster being taken from behind; chihuahuas had had to get thinner and stupider to keep up with the times. LA was infested with them; even Adrian Brody had a chihuahua, and he'd done a movie about the Holocaust. I'd been trained to satirise stuff like this, but you couldn't satirise a creature stupid enough to strangle itself: the pocket puppies ran barking at each other, and as their leads snapped tight, both dogs flipped up in the air with a yelp. You'd think they'd remember this happened the last time they picked a fight five minutes ago, but then you're not a chihuahua.

The three girls were friends who'd come to suck iced coffee together. They all sat with their backs to each other, talking on their mobile phones to other people. *It's not them, it's me. They can do that if they like. Maybe they're retarded.*

"I am in such an angry place right now," said one of them. "Because she is coming into the workplace and using drugs in front of her co-workers. And that is totally selfish, I mean, I smoke pot at work, but she is just selfish."

"The blood tests are exhausting me. I am having a lot of blood work done and they're not finding anything wrong. I'm telling you, I'm going to find a new homeopath..." explained another. *Steady, Jane, steady.*

"Black vanilla ice-blended for Jane?"

"Here! Thanks. Can I get a receipt? Brilliant, thanks, bye..."

Me and the assistant took the greasy cold coffees back to the cavalcade. ☑

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Taking on LA: Bussman with her Latin tattoo, 'Come on if you're tough enough'