

BOND

AMBITION

NAOMIE HARRIS LOVES GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN. THE BRITISH ACTRESS DIDN'T LET HER HUMBLE BEGINNINGS STOP HER FROM TAKING HOLLYWOOD BY STORM. NOW BACK ON-SCREEN IN 007'S SPECTRE, SHE PROVES WHY WINNING AT LIFE IS THE ONLY WAY TO GO

BY JESSICA HERNDON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENNIS LEUPOLD | FASHION EDITOR: JOIEE THORPE

LADY OF MYSTERY

Naomie wears a **Blumarine** jumpsuit, **Cristina Ortiz** necklace and **Jimmy Choo** heels.



READY FOR ACTION
On Naomi: an **Altuzara**
dress and **Suzanne Kalan**
necklace and ring.

As Naomi Harris prepared to take the podium during the ESSENCE Black Women in Hollywood pre-Oscars luncheon in 2013, her excitement turned to dismay when fellow honoree Gabrielle Union shut the house down with a raw confession. “I lived for the negativity inflicted on my sister actresses or anyone, I felt, whose shine diminished my own,” Union divulged. “I took joy in people’s pain, and I tap-danced on their misery.... Real fearless and fierce women admit mistakes, and they work to correct them.”

“Gabrielle’s speech was so phenomenal, so real and so personal,” recalls Harris. “I was in tears.” The British actress of Jamaican-Trinidadian descent was so moved that she decided to nix the polite spiel she had prepared, as her words seemed to be “a bit of BS, really,” she says, her English accent heavy. “It’s not that it wasn’t from the heart, but it wasn’t entirely about the fact that no matter what level you get to, you’re still struggling. I didn’t want to get up there and say, ‘Oh, things are so wonderful. My life is amazing.’ I wanted to be truthful.”

The truth was that despite starring in more than 20 films, including the hugely successful James Bond and *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchises, she still carries baggage from her past. Her parents, who were teens when they had her, split before she was born. She says she had contact with her dad only intermittently throughout her young life. “It’s a huge rejection not to be wanted by your father,” she says. To start repairing her childhood wounds, she embarked on an intense weeklong course last May. “The big issue for me is trust, that I’m not going to be abandoned.”

Now, things are much sweeter for the 39-year-old. Armed with plenty of confidence, she’s riding the wave of a fruitful 2015: She starred in the boxing saga *Southpaw*, the thriller *Our Kind of Traitor*, and the latest Bond spectacle, *Spectre* (in theaters now), as the sharp and sexy Eve Moneypenny—a role she reprised after appearing in 2012’s *Skyfall*. “I’m at a point of being really open to wherever life leads me,” she says.

On the day we meet, Harris leads me to The Gourmandise School of Sweets and Savories in Santa Monica for a private cooking class. As we eye the menu, she ties an apron around her ridiculously petite waist and admits this is the first culinary class she’s ever taken. The actress is on a self-improvement kick that stretches beyond family troubles: She would love to be better in the kitchen. She says she dreams of whipping up a decadent meal just as her mother does. “I’m trying to step it up,” she says, while cautiously adding lemon and salt to the Romesco sauce we’re preparing. Perhaps if she’s successful, she’ll be allowed to help cook come Christmas instead of being left to wrap gifts. “My mom and stepdad throw a massive feast, but they keep me away from the kitchen because they don’t think I’m good enough.”

Catch her on a movie set and it’s a different story. Acting is what she is meant to do. “She’s got this range that’s impressive—but without straining to impress,” says Alfre Woodard, who honored Harris at her annual Oscars Sistahs Soiree in 2014.

“Naomie disappears into the moment to become a real person you believe no matter what character she’s playing. Even if it’s something fantastic like Moneypenny, where she’s strong, smart, beautiful. Or the role of the social worker in *Southpaw*, which was very hard to do because Jake [Gyllenhaal, who played a boxer] kicked ass! She pulls at your heartstrings.”

It’s this sincerity that fellow British actor David Oyelowo, who worked with Harris in TV dramas that aired in the U.K., lauds most. “There is a moment in the miniseries *Small Island*, where I’ve married her, and I’m expecting my due on our wedding night and I stand before her in all my glory. I had a patch keeping my dignity covered,” he says with a laugh. “Oh, my God, she was so mortified. What I love about her is her sweetness despite her being this sexy, beautiful woman. It always impresses me just how thorough she is. She is someone who leaves no stone unturned.”

Being assiduous is what makes Harris such a force on-screen. But she also knows when to take a step back. After playing Winnie Mandela in 2013’s *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*, she says, “I didn’t want to go on any harrowing journeys. I was like, ‘As light as possible please.’ It had just been too dark, that character.... I did so much research to find her, and I obviously met her. I felt like she got under my skin in a way that no other character had, and that was great because I was able to channel her, and I’m really proud of my performance. But it also meant that it was difficult to let go of her.” So Harris took the lighthearted family route with her turn as she-wolf Nisha in Andy Serkis’s *Jungle Book: Origins*. “I got to run around on all fours and howl,” says Harris of the motion-capture film, slated to hit theaters in 2017. “It felt so liberating and was so much fun.”

She also took her current role in *Spectre* for the pure joy of it. “It’s completely amazing and life-changing,” she gushes. “It’s a franchise I grew up watching, and I never thought in a million years I would be part of it.” She’s proud to continue the tradition of strong Black female leads in Bond films, like Grace Jones and Halle Berry. “That’s incredible,” she adds, “and feels like such an achievement.”

Gone are the days when Harris was living on welfare while being raised in North London’s Finsbury Park by a teenage single mother. Determined to provide for her daughter, Harris’s mother eventually went to college. “We would come home and do our homework together,” remembers Harris, whose mom became a successful writer. “I grew up reading her scripts.”

By age 9, Harris was enrolled in the Anna Scher Theatre school and began booking TV roles. After studying social and political science at the University of Cambridge in London, she attended Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. “I always knew I was going to be an actress,” says the star, who still lives in North London. But after drama school, she went nine months without a gig before landing her breakout role in Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later*. “At the time I thought my life was coming to an end,” she recalls. “Looking back, it’s like, little did I know that that’s the life of being an actor.” Boyle’s 2002 zombie horror film “changed everything,” she says. “I had agents from the U.S. coming over to the U.K. to sign >



WHO'S WATCHING WHOM

Naomie wears a **Marc Jacobs** dress and **Cristina Ortiz** jewelry and holds a **Jimmy Choo** clutch. On him: **Nick Graham** shirt and tie and **Armani Collezioni** pants.

me, and I went off to do *After the Sunset* with Brett Ratner. Then my career just started from there."

Roles in films like *Miami Vice* and *Street Kings* followed. While appearing in the National Theatre Live production of *Frankenstein* opposite Benedict Cumberbatch in 2011, Harris caught the eye of director Sam Mendes and casting director Debbie McWilliams. They offered her the part in *Skyfall*. Daniel Craig, who has played James Bond in the last four 007 installments, was one of her early champions. "I certainly didn't need any encouragement for her to be cast," he says. "I had admired Naomie's work for a long time, and I knew that she would be perfect as Ms. Moneypenny. She has great integrity as an actress and a tremendous range. I always look forward to the days she's on set. She is a consummate professional."

Silenced were those who said she "shouldn't be an actress because it's such a precarious profession and you'll never be able to make a living out of it," Harris asserts. "But I've always followed my gut. I have to continue to do that because it's always steered me right."

At 38, she says her gut was telling her to deal with her father's absence, which left her struggling with issues of abandonment. Her answer was the Hoffman Process, which is a retreat program for people who feel stuck due to negative behaviors developed in childhood. "Some of the stuff happens when you're so young, and you don't even know what you're missing out on," says Harris. "You get into habits of relating that aren't necessarily healthy. I just wanted to get that perspective of my childhood. You have to delve into the fire and experience and discover where an issue really lies and deal with it."

These days the actress is "the happiest I've ever been," she says. "I was able to reach a point of forgiveness for my father, which has been incredibly healing for me. I think the thing I was asking of my dad—to be able to father me at 18 years old—he was not capable of doing. A big part of the healing experience was understanding where my dad came from. Now that I am older, I'm able to understand the decision my father made

not to be part of my life when I was growing up. I have learned to put myself in his shoes and have empathy for his choice. There is no animosity between us."

Has her poor relationship with her father affected how she dealt with men? "There were areas of damage I wanted to heal so I could have better relationships," she says. "But every relationship is a reflection of your relationship with yourself. It's never really about the other person." While she'd rather not dive into the minutiae of her dating life, discussing men brings the sass—and a childlike giggle—out of the polished Brit. It's no surprise the ability to commit is a trait she looks for, but she's also into a straight-talkin' fella. "Honesty is really hot as sh--!" she says.

Her desire to keep it real and continue on a path of self-improvement is why she'll remain such a dynamic artist. "I don't quit," says Harris, who could have easily thrown in the towel after feeling extremely lonely at Cambridge due to the lack of racial diversity. "In the U.K., race is very linked with class," she says. "I'm from a working-class family. I was in an environment with people from privileged backgrounds. It was difficult to find ways to relate." But she was determined to go the distance. "I wanted to achieve that degree, and I'm really proud of it," she continues. "It's important, as a Black woman, to have that. It puts out a good message and inspires young people. Where I come from, people don't usually end up at Cambridge, but I did that. To be able to say that, you have to walk that." Still, she acknowledges, "I'm in a process of growth for greater strength and connection to myself, but there's still so much growing to do. I like to take a breath and ask, *What do I feel inspired to do next?* That's how I do it." □



Jessica Herndon (@SomeKind) is a Los Angeles writer. Her work has appeared in *People* and *Nylon* magazines and in the Associated Press.

HERNDON: COURTESY OF SUBJECT



“
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AGENT PROVOCATEUR

On Naomie: a **Halston** gown and **Cristina Ortiz** ring.

For clothing details, see [Where to Buy](#).

Hair, Kim Kimble using Kim Kimble Beauty/SixK.L.A. **Makeup**, Motoko. **Manicure**, Maya Apple. **Prop stylist**, Dorcia Kelley/kellemiles.com.