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Jennifer Garner
on babies,
Ben Affleck and
being stalked



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A flourishing career, an adoring (and adorable) husband in Ben Affleck, three children and a new film – the actress Jennifer Garner doesn't have much to complain about in life. Still, *Helena de Bertodano* feels no envy...

Mum on the run

Photograph by **Amanda Friedman**
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Jennifer Garner is on tenterhooks. She is sure she can hear rustling in the bushes around where we are sitting in the back garden of a house overlooking the Malibu coastline. She stops talking mid-sentence and sits alert, like a startled animal ready to flee.

'I thought I heard a paparazzi lens,' she says, eyes scanning the thick shrubbery around the house (it's rented for the photo-shoot). Garner, 40, who stars in the new film *The Odd Life of Timothy Green* – a fantasy drama about a couple who long for a child and suddenly find themselves the parents of a magical boy – shrugs and starts talking again. 'Usually I'd see the light on the lens so maybe it's

just the leaves.' But she remains uneasy. 'I could swear there is someone there.'

Since marrying the actor and director Ben Affleck nearly eight years ago, Garner has become one of the most photographed celebrities in America. Although already known for her award-winning performance in the thriller drama series *Alias*, as well as films such as *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and *Catch Me If You Can* (2002), her union with Affleck – with whom she starred in *Daredevil* (2003) – took her into a whole new stratosphere of celebrity. Pictures are published daily of her most mundane activities: taking her children to school, going to the gym, buying groceries.

'Seven cars followed me when I left home at seven o'clock this morning,' she says, referring to the paparazzi. 'I wish I could say that it doesn't bother me. But you wouldn't like it if you had it, and neither would anyone else. They sit outside my house every day. They wait for me at school drop-off and pick-up.'

We meet the week after the Oscars, in the wake of Affleck's emotional speech as he accepted the Best Movie award for *Argo*, paying tribute to his wife (who was previously married to the actor Scott Foley): 'I want to thank you for working on our marriage for 10 Christmases. It's good. It is work but the best kind of work and there's no one I'd rather work with.'

Some people interpreted the speech as indicating there was trouble in their marriage. 'I know,' says Garner, amazed. 'I had a friend call and say, "Are you OK?" I know Ben, I knew he meant it as the hugest, warmest compliment in the world. I think he was saying, "Look, what we have is really real and I value it above all and I'm in it with you and I know you are in it with me." That's the way I took it.'

In the audience, Garner was smiling. But later Affleck (who previously had relationships with Jennifer Lopez and Gwyneth Paltrow) felt obliged to qualify his speech: 'All relationships, to a certain extent, require your work. We work on it together, we try our best, nobody's perfect. She's more perfect than I am.'

'Poor guy,' says Garner today at the absurdity of it all. 'It's so horrible to put

'This is almost worse [than being stalked],' she says of the paparazzi. 'They stalk you on a more regular basis'

yourself out there - he didn't have to worry about it from my point of view.'

Garner sits on a garden seat, swigging from a bottle of water, her feet propped up on a bench in front. She is warm and likeable, leaning to touch my arm to emphasise a point and insisting she's not in a hurry when our allotted time is up.

For the past few years Garner has been juggling family and work - the couple have three children: Violet, seven, Seraphina, four, and Samuel, one. 'I definitely work less because Ben is so busy but we have three kids, that's just part of the deal. I want to be a mum. I'm happy for him that he's as energised about work right now as he is. He should be out there doing it. That's just what makes sense for our family.'

There is another rustling and Garner is back on high alert. She is perhaps more acutely aware of the paparazzi because she was stalked for seven years by Steve Burky, a born-again Christian from Pennsylvania, who sent her letters saying she would be 'persecuted' in a manner that may result in her death. She was granted a restraining order against him



Clockwise from above
Garner in *Catch Me If You Can*; *The Odd Life of Timothy Green*; *Alias*; and with Affleck in *Daredevil*



in 2008, which he violated: he was arrested in 2009 outside her daughter Violet's nursery school. He was charged with two counts of stalking, a judge ruled him insane and he was sent to a mental hospital with a court order to stay away from the Afflecks for 10 years.

'This is almost worse,' says Garner of the paparazzi. 'They stalk you on a much more regular basis.'

On the rare occasion she does escape the photographers, they soon track her down. 'Somebody always calls them and tips them off. They give random people their numbers; nannies in the park.'

Garner grew up in West Virginia, where most of her family is still based. 'I miss West Virginia very much,' she says today. 'It's really important to me that my kids spend a certain amount of time there because I feel there's something much more concrete about West Virginia [than Los Angeles].'

The middle of three daughters, Garner describes herself as 'very definitely' a middle child. 'I'm a peace-maker, I can fit into a lot of situations. I'm pretty easygoing. I have a lot of patience. But I'm also a middle child in that sometimes I don't know what my own thought is -



because I'm so easily won over on a side, so in a debate I'll lose instantly. I'm also a middle child in that I am an actor: I think I must have had a need for attention.'

She is adamant that she doesn't want her children to become professional actors - at least, not before they're adults. 'Why does everyone think they need to be a star? It's ridiculous. The celebrity culture is so silly and the fact that people grow up thinking that it's something to aspire to just seems wrong. I don't mean to bash my life, I love my life, I just think it's not the only way to go. Why don't we celebrate teachers and doctors - people who actually do something?'

Jennifer's mother, Pat, was a teacher and her father a chemical engineer. Garner herself switched from chemistry to theatre at university. Graduating in 1994, she went to New York to find work. 'I got a job as an understudy [in *A Month*

in the Country, starring Helen Mirren] for \$150 a week. I was living on someone's kitchen floor on a futon for \$400 a month. I was so broke I'd eat noodles with canola oil and salt; not even butter.'

Determined to be a stage actress, her resolve crumpled when she realised how much more she could earn on screen. 'I was offered a miniseries that paid a couple of thousand dollars a week. My

snobbery went,' she says with a laugh. 'There was no question. I realised, too, that it was a different kind of acting and I saw how hard it was to do.'

Nowadays she lives in a \$17.5 million Pacific Palisades home. Designer clothes, however, don't interest her. 'I have my extravagances, but it's not really in my nature to think about clothes.'

Today she is wearing skinny Rag & Bone jeans and a yellow sweater with white stains down the front.

'I think it's toothpaste,' she says, picking at it. 'My daughter told me I need to wear more yellow because it makes people feel friendly.' She also has on a pair of brown leather loafers - 'I don't know who made them,' she says, taking one off and trying to find a name on the well-worn sole. 'They need some love because I wear them all the time.' She kisses the shoe loudly: 'Mwahhh.'

At first, says Garner, she thought it would be easy to be a working mother. 'I really thought when I was pregnant with my first that it wouldn't affect my work at all, it would just be a baby that grows up on set. And I was absolutely wrong. For women, the high point of their career and needing to have babies just don't really go together.'

The Odd Life of Timothy Green is Garner's first screen role as a mother. 'I felt that if I played a mother, it needed to be special. I had an incredibly emotional reaction to this movie.'

She is cast as a woman unable to conceive and, desperate for a child, she and her husband write down all the great traits their child might have had, put the paper in a box and bury it in the garden. A freak storm blows up in the night and they awake to find a mud-covered boy named Timothy, with leaves growing from his ankles, standing in the middle of the kitchen and calling them 'Mom' and

'Dad'. They accept him without question - not realising at first that his time with them is limited. 'They're lovely people,' says Garner, 'but they go momentarily crazy trying to protect their child.'

She hopes she is not too similar to the mother she plays. 'I'm not nearly as neurotic but there were times with my first child when I approached that level of neurosis. The child [in the film] helps the parents grow up. I'm a totally different person because of my kids - they force you to strip off any ugliness or vanities you may have in your life.'

Garner says she does not plan to have any more children. 'I am done. I really don't see how I could

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have more. My husband was keen on a fourth, but I think he has come round to my way of thinking.'

Affleck encourages her career. 'Ben's always saying, "You need to work, it's a part of you and you're a different person when you're working." I've reserved this summer [for work]. It's mine.'

Her phone rings and Garner spends a couple of minutes discussing her baby with her nanny. 'No, don't give him a bottle... I will feed him when I get home.' She puts the phone down: 'I knew it would be a boob question. We've timed everything for so long around my boobs. I need to wean this baby.'

She hands me her iPhone to show me a picture of Samuel, pedalling a toy car around their garden. 'I love this picture because it looks like he's driving a car and trying to pick up a chick.'

Despite her obvious devotion, she feels relieved that she can at last start looking beyond motherhood: 'The past few years have been about my family - a baby is so much work, a four-year-old is so much work. But now I feel a bit like poking my head out of the fog. It's been a lovely mishmash of fog but I feel my turn is round the corner. I don't know what it's going to be, but I'm ready for it.'

As she gets into her black Lexus hybrid and drives off, a surprising number of cars move off behind her. That evening I look her up online and see she is not exaggerating about the lurking lenses: the screen fills with photographs of her at the house where we just met. There is no story, of course - unless you count 'Jennifer sports wet hair' or 'Her grin is almost as glowing as the colours she wears' - but no one cares. It's a sighting of Jennifer Garner and that, as always, is a story in itself. ●

'The Odd Life of Timothy Green' is out on Friday



Garner and Affleck at the Vanity Fair Oscars party this year