

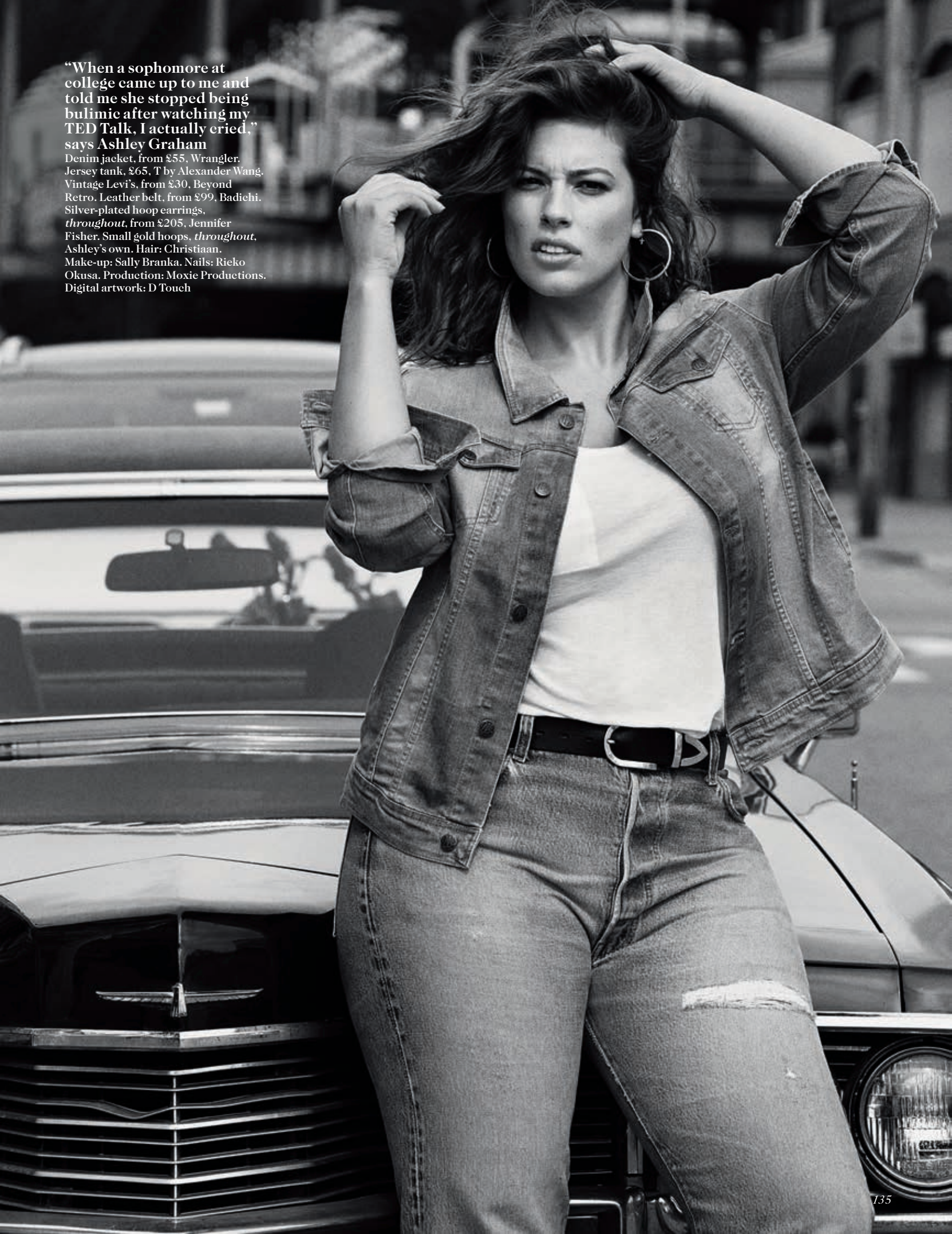
“I am so
HAPPY
with who I
AM”

FEARLESS AND FRANK, ASHLEY GRAHAM IS THE PLUS-SIZE MODEL ON A MISSION TO RESHAPE FASHION. CHRISTA D'SOUZA SPENDS A DAY TAILING A TRAILBLAZER

Photographs by Patrick Demarchelier. Styling by Clare Richardson

“When a sophomore at college came up to me and told me she stopped being bulimic after watching my TED Talk, I actually cried,” says Ashley Graham

Denim jacket, from £55, Wrangler.
Jersey tank, £65, T by Alexander Wang.
Vintage Levi’s, from £30, Beyond Retro. Leather belt, from £99, Badichi. Silver-plated hoop earrings, *throughout*, from £205, Jennifer Fisher. Small gold hoops, *throughout*, Ashley’s own. Hair: Christiaan. Make-up: Sally Branka. Nails: Rieko Okusa. Production: Moxie Productions. Digital artwork: D Touch





Overall effect:
Isabel Marant's
hardware-heavy
twist on the
boiler suit
is a gung-ho
approach
to daytime
downtime
Black cotton/linen
jumpsuit, £775,
Isabel Marant. Leather
boots, from £425,
The Frye Company

Graham is a combination of Cindy Crawford and the actress Eva Mendes, with a laugh like Ethel Merman's and the fluid, back-atcha articulation of a good chat-show host

Pinstripe wool blazer, £1,700, Giorgio Armani. Leather cap, to order, The Hat House





Abundantly fringed and generously studded is the Rodarte directive for leather

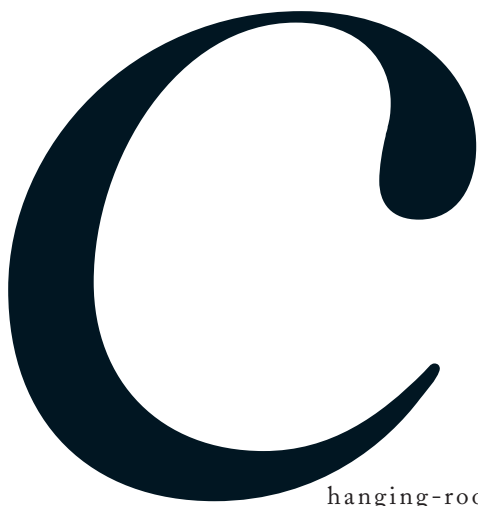
– wallflowers need not apply

This page: black studded leather jacket, to order, Rodarte. Black denim jeans, £200, J Brand, at Selfridges

Buckle up, double up: hard-working trousers get an instant update via this season's rock-star accessory, the wild-west belt

Opposite: black wool sweater, £790. Black wool-twill trousers, £630. Both Jil Sander. Black leather belt, from £132, B-Low the Belt





hanging-room etiquette dictates that when someone right in front of you is nude, you politely avert your gaze. But when Ashley Graham casually drops her towel and reveals her magnificent, size 18, 36DDD self in her entirety it seems rude, almost, not to stare. *Damn*, sister (and I speak as someone who worships at the shrine of skinny), that's some body you've got there.

It's a rainy Monday morning and Graham, 29, has just flown in to London from New York for the *GQ* Men of the Year awards, at which she will present the Model of the Year award to Bella Hadid. "The Hadid girls, they're big in the UK, right?" she says in her low drawl. "I haven't met Bella yet, but I know Gigi through *Sports Illustrated*." (Last year, Graham became the first ever plus-sized model to grace the cover of *Sports Illustrated's* famous swimsuit issue.)

Ashley Graham, who works out three times a week back home in Brooklyn – a mixture of weightlifting, Pilates and shadow-boxing ("good for my waist") – looks sleek as a seal in her maximum-support Enell bra, Nike top and XL Alala leggings, barely breaking into a sweat. Despite the fact that she landed late last night, we're starting our day off early with a workout session at the South Kensington Club in west London. On the treadmill – me huffing and puffing away on the lowest incline, willing the hour to end as Christian the trainer puts us through our paces – she chats away about how she thinks the whole BMI thing is "kind of bullshit... mine probably makes me morbidly obese"; how calories in, calories out, in her opinion, is a myth; how she only ever wears a string bikini on the beach: "My theory is that big underwear makes big girls look bigger." And, oh yes, how she's interested to hear I do hot yoga, because she used to, too. "I did two classes in a row and it gave me an orgasm. I'm not kidding. I looked it up – it's called a yogasm."

She tells me, too, how her 2.6 million Instagram followers love it when she posts pictures of herself working out (click on her hashtag #curvyfitclub for actual routines), the more intense the workout the better.

Which reminds her, would Christian mind videoing her for it? "Whoop, feel the burn, girl!" she hollers, punching the air as he obediently tracks around her, and a fellow treadmiller – an etiolated blonde *d'un certain age*, who looks like she's been going for hours – grimly pounds away, taking pains not to stare.

Meet Ashley Graham, plus-sized supermodel, body activist, lingerie designer, swimsuit designer, public speaker and role model to, well, millions of women and girls "who've thought they were fat and ugly their whole lives". Probably best known as the lingerie model for American plus-sized label Lane Bryant, she has also appeared in campaigns for Marina Rinaldi, Levi's and Calvin Klein. Having co-founded the brand Alda – "a collective of models that represents beauty beyond size and challenges conventional notions within the fashion industry" (as it says on her glossy website, Ashleygraham.com) – she has also spoken at the UN's Empowering Women Summit (dressed in a midriff-baring leopard-print shirt, white heels and blue houndstooth pencil skirt which, on her, somehow worked); been a guest at the White House Correspondents' Dinner; hosted a TEDx Talk entitled "Plus size? More like my size", which has had more than a million online views; and appeared on the cover of *Forbes* magazine for 2016's prestigious 30 under 30 issue ("I'm up there with the creator of Tinder! Me and Tinder – it's *major!*").

A combination, in the flesh, of Cindy Crawford and the actress Eva Mendes (with maybe a dash of Renée Simonsen, the Danish model from the Eighties), with a voice like melted chocolate, a laugh like Ethel Merman's and the fluid, back-atcha articulacy of a good chat-show host (she moonlights as a judge on *America's Next Top Model*), Graham is the perfect ambassador for the plus-sized. If anyone is going to disabuse us of the notion that thin equals happy (and healthy), if anyone can make fuller figures more mainstream, it's her.

Although, can we maybe call it something else? In Graham's opinion, the label "plus-sized" (which generally starts at a 16 in Britain and a 14 in America) shouldn't even exist. Indeed, in her utopia, the fashion industry would be size blind and have no

labels at all; girls of all shapes would be represented on the catwalks, from skinny to curvy and "in-betweeny".

"It's crazy, right?" says Graham, now back in her clothes (skinny black jeans and black stretch-lace body from one of the Kardashians' favourite labels, House of CB). "When we're supposed to be talking about diversity for women, it feels so divisive and purpose-defeating, giving us yet another label. Meanwhile, those girls between the sizes of UK 8 and 14 have no modelling jobs. They might do random lingerie or swimsuit, but they're not big enough for catalogue, and no way do they do runway."

In an industry widely criticised for working with extremes, size-wise, there's no skirting the issue, there's nothing "in-betweeny" about Graham. She's a big girl: not just Marilyn Monroe big – *big* big. Or "brave" big (the adjective most people offered when I showed them an Instagram picture of her in a bra and pants for a recent lingerie show).

But despite the back fat and the solid shot-put thighs and, yes, the cellulite (all of which she's made a point of posting, unfiltered, alongside the hashtag #beautybeyondsize, "because the point is to make women feel better, not shittier about themselves"), the overall picture, thanks to her razor-sharp cheekbones, endless legs and well-turned ankles, does not smack of – here I'm going to say it – fat. There are no rolls around her 33½in waist, she goes in in all the right places, and she knows, as it were, how to work it. "Oh yeah, I'm a shapeshifter," she says, clapping her hands above her head and twisting her upper body towards me, Carmen Miranda-style.

We've finished in the gym and are now trying to find a taxi to take us to lunch. Oblivious to the row of young builders on their lunch break watching in silent, slack-jawed admiration as she sashays down the street, Graham explains how she went on *Good Morning America* in November 2015 and got on a treadmill and had an actual diabetes screening plus other health tests alongside a US size 2 model – and was found, shock horror, to be perfectly fit and healthy. "A lot of bodybuilders have high BMIs. It's not an indication of your overall health," she shrugs. "Like, why put more standards on women >144

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Wool/cashmere sweater,
£995, Burberry



“I was never pretty enough or thin enough to be in the really popular group, but I charmed my way through. I still do”

Opposite: vintage jumpsuit, from a selection, What Goes Around Comes Around. Cap and boots, as before

Straight from the shoulder: a personalised Rag & Bone bomber needs only classic black denim to make it sing

This page: khaki bomber jacket, personalised for Vogue, £480, Rag & Bone. Black studded leather belt, from £120, B-Low the Belt. Black jeans, as before



saying there's a maximum BMI? I just think we need to be healthy, and I am."

Brought up with her two sisters, Abigail, now 23, and Madison, 24, in Lincoln, Nebraska – "the number-one place in the US to start a new business and find a husband, apparently" – Graham attributes her indefatigable self-belief and optimism to her mother, Linda. "My mom's parents were farmers, so every summer my sisters and I would help out, hauling pipe and pulling maggots off the corn. We hated it, but it taught me the meaning of good hard work."

Unsure of her heritage ("My mom is German and my dad's mother looks black, but she refuses to confirm or own it, so that side is all a bit of a mystery"), Graham says as a young girl she was "big-boned", like the rest of her family, but always thought of herself as normal "because our mother [herself anywhere between a British size 16 to 20] wouldn't let us think otherwise about ourselves."

"We were also brought up in a Christian household where words had power. Mom would say, 'If you call yourself fat, you're going to be fat, if you say you're stupid, you're going to be stupid.' Knowing we had to watch what we said shaped and moulded me. Women can negatively compete with each other, going 'Oh, I'm so fat', or 'Oh god, my butt's so big!' Well, my baby sister and I, we walked around the house naked, there was never any of that."

That said, when she was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of nine, she remembers being miserable after getting prescribed Adderall, "which stopped me eating at school, and then the moment it wore off I'd get home and eat *everything*." It gave her an idea of what it might be like to have an eating disorder. "When a sophomore at college came up to me two years ago and told me she stopped being bulimic after watching my TED Talk, I actually cried."

She describes herself in her early teens as "loud and unapologetic, with big breasts and a thing for Scary Spice which kind of frightened away all the guys." She was also diagnosed with dyslexia "and was literally terrible at everything, except maybe English and Spanish. I was never pretty enough or thin enough to be in the really popular group, but I charmed my way through. I still do. Killing people with kindness, that's always been my thing."

Graham went to her first casting at the age of 14, for a bra commercial, "with my mom signing a piece of paper that said they'd airbrush out my nipples. I did it so well, I came back every month and it all went from there." By the age of 18 she had signed to Ford Models and was living in New York, where that self-belief temporarily faltered.

"I gained a lot of weight because I was eating out every single meal; I was insecure because everybody kept telling me to lose it – one casting agent even threw cash at me as an incentive. I tried every diet: cabbage soup, juice fasting, Weight Watchers... Can you imagine how hard that was for a girl who loves to eat? Plus I started dating all the wrong guys."

It was one particular guy, "who threw me down on the couch and chased me round the kitchen with a butcher's knife", who marked a turning point. That, and the notorious lingerie television advertisement she did for Lane Bryant, which was supposed to run during prime-time slots on ABC and Fox in 2010, but at the last minute got shifted to later in the schedule for being, allegedly, too racy.

"My perception is that it had something to do with me having much larger breasts or a butt or hips – somehow, in some way, it was too overtly sexual, in a way that other popular lingerie commercials weren't – but the media picked up on it. I was on Jay Leno's show. It was crazy, I was 21 years old. But that is when my career took off. And around that same time, I started eating sensibly, I started working out,

I started spiritually and mentally turning into the person I wanted to be."

It was while handing out mints in the lift before church (she is a practising Christian) that Graham met her future husband, cinematographer Justin Ervin. Famously, she insisted on celibacy until their wedding night in 2010, and the pair have just come back from celebrating their sixth anniversary on Martha's Vineyard.

We're now sitting in Farmacy, Camilla Fayed's vegan restaurant on Westbourne Grove, waiting for our shared starter of raw bruschetta. When it arrives – five doll-sized bits of cardboard (or so it appears to us) garnished with fresh flowers – Graham hoots with laughter. "God, I wonder what my pizza's going to look like?"

If given a choice, Graham prefers raw food and a green juice, but she also loves her red wine and will splurge on old-fashioned macaroni cheese or, for pudding, pizza crusts dipped in Nutella. "But I'm very aware of portion control, and I'm also aware of why I choose to eat certain foods. I ask myself, 'Am I eating this because I'm actually hungry or is this food some kind of reward?'"

I ask her if, as a poster-girl for plus-sizedom, she ever secretly fantasises about losing weight; if, deep down, she rather liked it when, after posting a picture of herself on Instagram where she looked a good couple of sizes smaller, she was viciously accused of being a traitor to the cause. "That was nuts, huh? It just shows what a good model I am that I can make myself look thinner, because I had not lost *any* weight. But do I sometimes wish I were thinner? God, in the old days, absolutely I did, but now I feel that to lose weight would be disloyal to myself. A lot of who I am is connected to my size, and I am so happy with who I am."

Only flagging very slightly after lunch – "I'll be fine after coffee" – Graham and I hit Selfridges for a little light shopping. As we make our way across the floor, a young girl approaches, wondering if she might get a picture. Graham happily poses with her – "I never say no, why would I? Without my fans I'd never be where I am now."

Uncertain where to start, we begin flicking through the rails in the section containing Balmain, Cavalli and Valentino, Graham expertly nixing all prints ("I'm not a prints type of girl") and any piece with no hint of stretch. We pull some other items – a gold lamé off-the-shoulder number by Roland Mouret, a couple of more sober silhouettes from Roksanda and Stella McCartney, one from Balmain, but – although Selfridges goes up to a size 18 – we're slight beggars here.

She beckons an assistant over. Perhaps there might be some larger sizes in the back? The look of bafflement on the young girl's face as she shakes her head is the first indication I've had today of what Graham is up against, and it's hard not to feel aggrieved on her behalf.

"Yeah, well, that's the story of our lives," she sighs cheerfully. "And I'm not even that big. What about all the women out there who are one size bigger than me? Prada, Gucci, they only really go up to a 46 [a British size 14]. And Michael Kors, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, they go up further, but not in the high-fashion pieces. Asos is doing great for plus, but sometimes I feel like you can only wear it just the once. The really high-end stuff? When it comes to the 'cool factor', we're missing out." > 200

"Mom would say, 'If you call yourself fat, you're going to be fat, if you say you're stupid, you're going to be stupid'"

Never basic:
a favourite leather
jacket, lovestorn
vintage denim and
a white T-shirt
are eternally alluring

Leather Perfecto jacket,
£595, Schott. Jersey vest,
£26, Calvin Klein Underwear.
Vintage Levi's and leather
belt, as before. Menswear,
thanks to APC, Frame and
Schott. Thanks to Nathan's
Famous, Coney Island.
*For stockists, all pages,
see Vogue Information*



The times, they are slowly but surely changing. But even so. If the average size in Britain is a 14, if the plus-sized market has been estimated to be worth £7.9 billion by the end of 2016, then the retail industry is still missing a big sales trick. “I have tasked many of the designer brands to extend their sizing upwards,” says Sarah Rutson, vice-president of global buying at Net-a-Porter. “We could easily sell designer fashion in UK sizes 18 to 20, but most fashion houses don’t go past a 14. It’s not that we haven’t bought them, it’s more often than not that they are simply not available.”

Graham and I make our way back out to the middle of the floor, bypassing Marni (“Beautiful, but if it doesn’t show my shape I can end up looking like a refrigerator”), oohing and aahing over a full-length backless gown from Alice Temperley – “But I can’t wear a bra with it, and I have to wear a bra. Tit tape does not work on these titties” – before stopping in our tracks at an Alaïa sheath in faded raspberry. We hold our breaths to see what the tag says. It’s a 40 (UK 12). Rats. But hell, it’s stretch, she might as well give it a whirl. Stripping down to her thong and bra, Graham daintily steps into the dress and asks me to help her with the zip. I just about make it halfway up her back, but I’m worried that if I go any further I’ll hurt her. “You’re not going to hurt me. C’mon now, you’re nearly there...”

I manage to get it up a smidgeon higher, sweat breaking out on my upper lip at the thought of it splitting. With another saleswoman’s help I finally manage, with trembling fingers, to get it all the way to the top. Although it is almost illegally flattering – that shade is extraordinary on her honey-coloured skin, and my goodness can she make that waist of hers look teeny – it does appear uncomfortably, almost asphyxiatingly tight. God forbid, for example, she needs to pee. “Oh no, you can’t,” she murmurs, eyes trained approvingly on her gyrating reflection in the mirror. “The sheer dress I wore to the VMAs? My husband had to come into the stall with me.”

“I remember when I was assigned Ash as a client,” says Ian Loughran, Graham’s British agent at IMG. “My immediate response was, that’s just not my market, and then she walked through the door and my jaw dropped.” It was two years ago that Graham switched from the plus-sized division at Ford Models to IMG’s Curve division. “But we don’t have a separate division now. All of our girls are on the same main board regardless of size or age.”

“For 10 years I’d been told I was always going to be a catalogue girl, never a cover girl,” says Graham. “Well, I got with IMG and did five covers in a year, boom, boom, boom. See, if you have a pretty face doors will open, but your job isn’t just to walk through them, it’s to get invited back. Look, I hit the beauty jackpot, I get it, but that’s not enough, you’ve got to have more to have longevity in this business. It’s always been, ‘OK, so what can I do now?’”

It’s around 6pm, and we’re in Ashley’s hotel room with Loughran and “the seduction team”, as she calls the hair and make-up artists who travel everywhere with her. Graham is all ready to go in a black lace gown by American designer Tadashi Shoji, customised with a black grosgrain corset belt, slashed sleeves and a great big split up the thigh. Often she’ll wear two sets of Spanx on the red carpet for a “double suck” effect, but tonight it’s just the one pair, in flesh tone, maddeningly, rather than black, which means she has to keep a constant watch on that top right-hand thigh.

The next day I scan all the pictures on social media, wondering if that triangle of Spanx – which we ended up frantically filling in with a black Biro (in the absence, anywhere in the entire hotel, of a Sharpie) – made an appearance. It didn’t, of course, Graham’s a pro at showing the bits she wants to show and hiding the bits she doesn’t. Meanwhile, as I look at all the pictures of her more than holding her own alongside the implausibly, almost depressingly perfect Bella Hadid, I can’t help doing an internal fist pump for the cause. She has that effect, this warm, beautiful, dauntingly ambitious woman, and it will take her far. ■

solo – an arrangement that is novel to her, having worked alongside Pierpaolo (now in sole charge of Valentino) for more than 25 years. “In any case, this job is very hard,” she insists. “You can do it alone or with two, three or 10 others, there’s not much difference. Yes, you can share a little bit but it doesn’t mean it’s easier. There are five Fendi sisters. It doesn’t matter how many people there are, the game is the same and everyone has to work hard.”

As with any fashion “divorce”, rumours circulate of in-house squabbles. Whether that is true or not, it would hardly be surprising of so long a relationship, and in any case, lively discussions and passionate opinions no doubt fuel creativity. Regardless, there are no hard feelings between Maria Grazia and Pierpaolo – how else to explain the flurry of embroidered hearts strewn across both the Dior and Valentino collections? In addition to semaphores of love pinging between the two, he attended her show and was among the first to embrace her afterwards – “She did an amazing job, but I knew she would, she’s a great woman,” he gushed – and she attended his show, minutes before boarding a flight to Rome to celebrate her son’s birthday. If she is sentimental about the break-up, she doesn’t show it. When asked how he reacted to the news of her leaving, she smiles. “I think he was surprised, but not surprised... He knows me very well.”

Born and raised in Rome, with a mother who was a seamstress, Maria Grazia’s interest in fashion began as a young teenager from her love of rummaging in flea markets for military jackets, jeans and vintage handbags. “I would mix it all together, probably because I was looking for my identity.” She flitted through several style phases, from romantic hippy to shaven-haired punk. When she told her mother that she wanted to be a designer, she was unimpressed, and so alongside fashion school, Maria Grazia agreed to attend university, but left as soon as she could convince her otherwise.

Regardless of how invigorated she is by this new chapter, family has always been, and remains, central to her life. As with any long marriage, theirs runs to a familiar routine. Her husband is the cook, although she is getting better since she still wants to eat Italian food living in Paris. Her daughter teases her about how bad her English is (it isn’t, but Rachele studies in London and is fluent. At Dior, Maria Grazia speaks in English, because her French is “far worse”); and on the subject of her mother’s sense of style: “I have this memory of my parents going out for dinner,” says Rachele. “I was about eight and she was putting on leather and fishnet tights, and I was like, ‘Mum, where are you going?’ And she just said, ‘Out with your dad.’ And I remember thinking, wow.” By contrast, her 23-year-old son Nicolo prefers to avoid the shows. “He is very formal, just like my husband. When he was about five years old I went to meet his teachers, and he said, ‘Mama, please can you look more normal? If you can’t, then it’s better Papa comes.’” She laughs. Weekends are spent with her family, either in Rome, where her husband and son live, or visiting Rachele in London, a city she has always loved.

What she currently finds irritating: smartphone addiction. “When I go out to dinner it annoys me, people spend all this time to take a picture, and then post the picture. I think it’s a little bit strange. I think it’s better to speak to the people you are with, no?” And lately, the “see-now, buy-now” model. “I understand that people want it immediately but if you want to maintain the quality I think it’s impossible. I also think that it’s a little bit crazy – what, you can’t wait? *Really?* We’re not talking about bread here!” One gets the impression that she’s a perfectionist in everything she does. “I like things that are well done,” she nods. “Honestly, sometimes I’m surprised with what I see in fashion. Quality is the difference between something good and bad.”

Life, fashion and family, everything about her reads real – and then there’s that necklace. Dior has found its very own superwoman, and then gesturing to it. She laughs, “It was a gift from Rachele. She gave it to me and said it’s because I’m Supermamma.” She pauses, and adds, “Supermamma, to me, is more important than Superwoman.” ■