

## ROAD TEST



# BABY IT'S YOU

One face, four portraitists

by Aimee Lee Ball

**T**here is a quite good photograph of me in a family album. My expression is intelligence and whimsy, my hair is curly poetry—and I am tightly wrapped around my Betsy Wetsy doll. That was the last time I took a good picture. I'm not unspeakably hideous, but I photograph like Imogene Coca on a humid day, and in every subsequent shot of me, there is a look that says: get out of my face with that camera. My smiles look fake, my nose seems vaguely reproving, and my complexion moves past pale, heading right toward fish-belly white. If I try to ignore the camera, my eyes look myopic, and if I attempt to vamp, my lips curl into something obscene.

Self-flagellation is the after-kick to self-portraiture. I always want to smack those who energetically proclaim to photograph badly, oh-so-transparently hoping for an instant pooh-pooing of such an idea by anyone regarding their obvious charm and appeal. A friend of mine one-ups all other claims rather handily: she is *so* unphotogenic ("How unphotogenic *is* she, Johnny?") that her parents refused to buy her school pictures. My own dear parents bought them all, and they spook me to this day: my lopsided and humorless expression at high-school graduation does not differ in substance from my grimace in the pictures at last year's Christmas dinner. I found a soulmate in the otherwise bad and boring *Heartburn*, when the film went into the operating room for Nora's . . . er, Meryl Streep's cesarean and she awoke from ether to say, "No pictures." It is the leitmotiv of my life.

But modern life seems to require occasional submission to professional photography: annual reports, resumes, book jackets, the mate-hunting ads that insist, "No response without photo"—all manner of self-promotion and personal cheerleading. Photographers push portraits as a thoughtful gift item, for a mother's piano or a significant other's desk. My mother has had to make do with Shalimar and lingerie all these years, and the desktop of my ex-SO was too cluttered with the debris of deal making for anything like the face of a loved one.

You don't necessarily get what you pay for with photographers. I have heard stories about the hiring of fancy, famous names who fit you in between Christie Brinkley and Mel Gibson, whose sessions involve high drama and hairdressing but who make you feel like a pain-in-the-ass prop in your own picture. As I cheerlessly did some comparison shopping, I had to make some tough calls: I passed on the fashionable Frenchman who charges a mere \$25,000 per sitting (perhaps he says *fromage* instead of *cheese*), and I declined to sit for a specialist in a service called The Nude You, whose portraits are presented as gifts "for husbands, lovers, or just for oneself" (!!!). I'm not a prude, but I have to be careful: I might run for president someday, and I've already smoked marijuana.

The While-U-Wait industry is a necessary substructure of a city where time is money. Eyeglasses, business cards, monogrammed iced-tea spoons, shoe lifts (and, for all I know, face-lifts) are available in express format. For fast photos, a passport photographer should be a court of last resort—ev-

eryone looks like Most Wanted material. But Playland Arcade (42nd and Broadway) has the kind of curtained photo booth you probably frequented at the mall with your best friend in junior high: four poses, five minutes, \$1.50. There are scissors hanging from a chain to cut the picture strip apart (or to defend

yourself from other patrons). The decibel level of the place will produce auditory damage if you linger (despite stern "No Loitering" signs), but you can get in a quick, homicidal game of Roadbusters, Assault, Punchout, or Final Blow. And if you're feeling reclusive, you can wear your Ray-Bans.

## THE AUTHOR

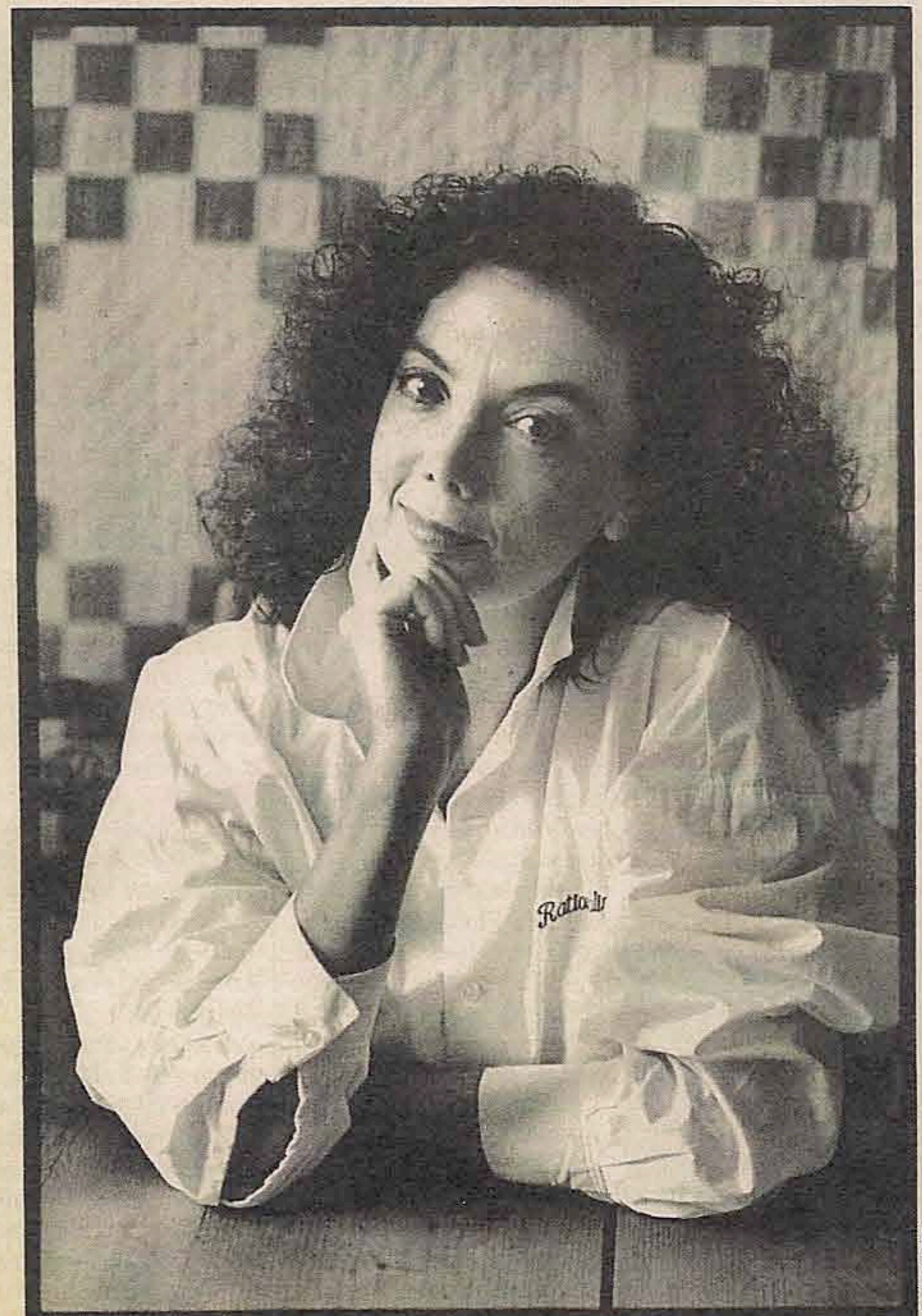
"Don't get your hair done," said Jill Kremenz the day before taking my picture. (Heh, heh, heh—I'd like to see any hairdresser try to *do* my hair.) "Don't have your hair cut, and wear something you feel comfortable in." By the time of our appointment, I was still considering various comfy outfits, in the meantime wearing a big white shirt with the words "Rationalize Everything" printed on the pocket. "I like it," she said.

"But this is my wait-until-Jill-gets-here-so-I-won't-get-hot outfit," I said. "I like it," she said.

When Kremenz was starting out in her career, she wrote to people like E.B. White and Joyce Carol Oates asking to take their pictures (most authors, she says, had only been photographed by inept amateurs who'd been told that the light should be over their left shoulder, which meant a lot of dust jacket photos of squinty, shadowed rac-

coons). Along the way, she became known as the writer's photographer, a reputation broadened when she married one (Kurt Vonnegut). She likes to see people in their own home or office—when she got to my apartment she walked around like a surveyor, scouting out diffused light before deciding on several settings in front of an old quilt and leaning on the back of a bentwood chair, even playing with a wall-

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hung straw hat. She works with two cameras 'round her neck—no tripods, no klieg lights, no no-seam—and she works small, crouching in a catcher's stance, crowded into a windowsill or a door frame. It was a calm, pleasant hour in calm, pleasant company.

A few days later I went to Krementz's Turtle Bay office. She took one set of contact sheets, I took another, and we marked our preferences with grease pens. I'd been vacillating between humility and self-absorption ever since I started with this picture-taking assignment (confronting so many images of myself, I am forced to acknowledge that Michelle Pfeiffer and I are not related by blood), so sitting with a photographer examining my pores and cheekbones

was a sweaty business. But Krementz was straightforward and matter-of-fact, quickly eliminating the blackmail material, issuing a definitive vote. Now I just have to write the book.

**Jill Krementz**, 228 E. 48th St., New York NY 10017; 688-0480.

Sample prices: A book jacket shooting is \$500 plus expenses; black-and-white prints are \$25 each, 5 by 7, matte finish. Corporate portraits are \$3,000 plus expenses. The price is higher because the subject gets complete rights to the photograph. Krementz retains rights to author's photos. Besides, Krementz says, she builds into the price the fact that she will have to hire an assistant and that the client will probably cancel at the last minute to do a leveraged buyout.



## THE EXECUTIVE

There are smelling salts at Bachrach Photographers—homage to the anxious brides hoping for coveted spots in *The New York Times* announcements (the women's sports pages) who forget to eat and fall in a swoon under hot lights. The place seems to have been frozen in 1947. Personally, I like anything old better than almost anything new, but the Aunt Harriet furnishings could be updated without sacrificing any of Bachrach's hoary reputation. The visual equivalent of name-dropping is everywhere: the framed faces of Ed Koch, Harry Helmsley, Lee Iacocca, Chuck Scarborough, Larry Tisch, and Frank Perdue line the walls. (There is a woman's wall too: Liz Claiborne wears her unfortunate Brobdingnagian eyeglasses. And Connie Chung looks, well, Connie Chung-ish.) There are gender-based dressing rooms and studios—women are given more space to allow for

Steinberg/Tisch-size bridal parties, and they're offered hair spray, powder, cold cream, cotton puffs, and ironing boards. My dressing room had portraits of a dewy-eyed deb and somebody's terrier.

A friend of mine likened his picture-taking at Bachrach to visiting the undertaker while still breathing—they adjusted every hair of his mustache. Not Roupen Agopian, who "does" the ladies. (There really is a Bachrach, grandson of the guy who started it all, but he works out of Boston.) A business-suited and courtly gentleman of Armenian birth, Agopian acted as if we were to take tea together, chatting about local politics, only incidentally offering a thought about smiling or using my hands for the camera.

The Bachrach people don't do much coaching before a session, beyond the suggestion that men with heavy beards should make morning appointments, and they don't encourage women to exaggerate or enhance a natural look for the camera. Bad idea. In my pictures I developed Jay Leno's chin and something like moon craters below my eyes. I DO NOT HAVE MOON CRATERS BENEATH MY EYES IN REAL LIFE. What I have is the Ball family inclination toward Zhivago darkness around the eyes on less than eight hours' sleep (ge-



## THE SIREN

netically transmitted, I am sure, from grandparents awakened in the middle of a Russian white night to the words, "Meyer! Lena! Grab the samovar. We're going to America!").

Bachrach used to do some automatic, unsolicited retouching. But people with large unsightly neck warts would call up and say, "Where is my large unsightly neck wart?" so now they'll do major retouching only at the customer's request or, in my case, begging. And if you truly hate all the proofs, Bachrach offers another sitting free of charge.

**Bachrach Photographers**, 48 E. 50th St., New York, NY 10022; 755-6233.

Sample prices: A sitting and six black-and-white glossies are \$157.50 (all from the same negative); 25 prints are \$277.50. Color portraits range from \$295 for an 8-by-10 print to \$2,560 for a life-size full figure.

When Beth Green worked for UPI, she photographed prizefights and NFL strikes. When she set up her own studio, she did a 180-degree turn and made it For Women Only. She won't exactly turn away a client with facial hair, but her specialty is the kinder, gentler sex—she's even got a system of backlighting a woman's hair so she looks glamorous but not Connie Chungish.

Green works out of a studio on Riverside Drive—she spread my jewelry options on her bed (rejecting gold hoops as too *West Side Story*) and offered seedless grapes or lemonade with a straw ("neat food"—capable of human consumption without the smudging of lipstick). She usually shoots a few rolls of black and white for business portraits, in-

cluding the obligatory but seriously dull "talking head" with library shelves as background, and then, as her subject relaxes, she shoots some sexier stuff in color for family and friends. Her suggestions about appropriate gear are sound: collarless blouses look ostrichy, and no chokers around necks that are less than perfection. She works to the soundtrack from *Beaches*, and when she likes what she sees in her viewfinder she bops around the room shouting an orgasmic "Yes! Yes!" A stylist is part of the package—Kathleen Murphy contoured my cheeks and fluffed my hair while I sat on a stool in the bathroom leaning against the shower door. I was digging make-up out of my pores for two days, but it did give me a polished look—definitely

"done" but flattering, the way I'd look if elves followed me around all day, smoothing hair wisps and powdering my nose.

The pictures produced a split personality: the CEO me and the black-lace T-shirt me. Green sent a huge array of poses on big contact sheets, some of which I actually didn't hate, which is my highest form of compliment, and one of my friends thought she did the best at capturing my essential weirdness.

**Beth Green Studios**, 60 Riverside Dr., New York, NY 10024; 580-1928.

Sample prices: A sitting is \$150, plus \$75 for the stylist. Black-and-white glossies in 8 by 10 are \$25 each for the first five prints, \$10 each for extra prints. In color, the first 8-by-10 print is \$85 and extras are \$65.



BACHRACH