

The Sun-Herald

sundaylife

August 19, 2018

YES, YOU
CAN MEND
A BROKEN
HEART

DEBBY
RYAN

ON FAT-SHAMING
AND HER 20 MILLION
FOLLOWERS

GROWING UP IN EXILE / NEVER-LASTING LOVE / FIND YOUR DOSHA DIET
PIA MILLER'S FASHION FAVOURITES / MAGIC HAIR MASKS / FOOD & MORE

Invariably, there comes a moment in a typical celebrity profile where you're confronted by a rush of words to describe the subject. Maybe they're wearing a "burnt-orange summer dress" with their "long hair pulled back into a ponytail". Perhaps they have "cherubic lips" and "doe-shaped green or amber eyes, depending on the light". And naturally, they're not wearing a stitch of make-up but have "flawless skin". This is not one of those stories.

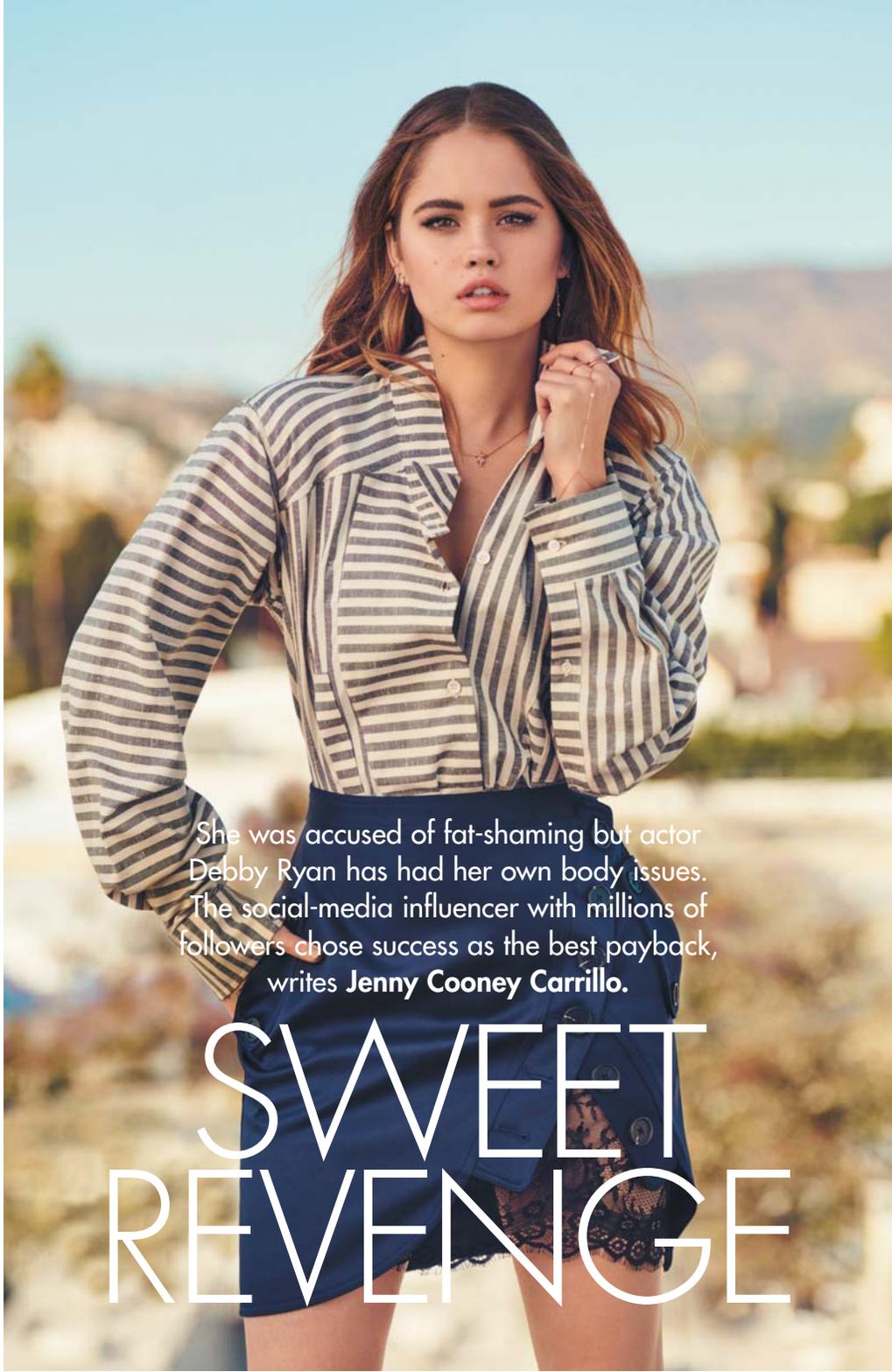
That's not to say that 25-year-old former Disney star Debby Ryan isn't all those things as she sits across from me at her favourite local eatery in LA's San Fernando Valley. But Debby, who stars in the Netflix comedy series *Insatiable*, has just told me, with so much humility and courage, about her own inability to describe herself that it feels almost disrespectful to do it for her.

"Dysmorphia has been a dark passenger of mine for years," says the actress whose credits include the film *Every Day*, and the recent comedy *Life of the Party* with Melissa McCarthy. "I first noticed it at 13, when I was told to draw an image of my body, and the silhouette and shape of what I saw apparently did not line up at all with what everyone else saw."

Body dysmorphic disorder is described by the Mayo Clinic as "a mental disorder in which you can't stop thinking about one or more perceived defects or flaws in your appearance – a flaw that, to others, is either minor or not observable".

Debby sighs. "I don't know to this day if I've ever looked in the mirror and seen what other people see when they look at me. And I have never had a day, not one day," her voice catches, "where I looked in the mirror and thought, 'Cool.' It used to be all I wanted but I've accomplished a lot in 12 years, so maybe I don't need that to feel fulfilled any more."

In the 12-episode satire *Insatiable*, Ryan plays a high school student who has been cruelly labelled "Fatty Patty" by her tormentors. But when she finds herself in an altercation with a homeless man who punches her in



She was accused of fat-shaming but actor Debby Ryan has had her own body issues. The social-media influencer with millions of followers chose success as the best payback, writes **Jenny Cooney Carrillo**.

SWEET REVENGE

the face, Patty's subsequent broken jaw is wired shut for three months and results in drastic weight loss. Suddenly she's considered "hot" and embraces beauty pageants and revenge.

The irony isn't lost on Debby that, despite her own struggles, since the trailer for the series was released last month, over 200,000 people have signed a petition calling on Netflix to cancel the show for "body-shaming".

The social-media influencer – she has a staggering 8.1 million followers on Instagram, eight million on Facebook and four million on Twitter – took to Instagram to defend the show.

She revealed: "Twelve years into my own struggles with body image, struggles that took me in and out of terrible places I never want to go again and things I choose every day to leave behind, I was drawn to this show's willingness to go to real places about how difficult and scary it can be to move through the world in a body, whether you're being praised or criticised for its size."

When Debby arrives at the cheery cafe she has chosen for our interview, she ignores my outstretched hand and instead pulls me in for a hug. Her openness and enthusiasm are endearing, especially as she's likely to have endured a rough couple of days since the petition surfaced.

"What I've learnt from the reception to the trailer is that the size of the reaction is the size of the wound," she says philosophically, after we've ordered Earl Grey tea and sit in the corner.

"Clearly this is striking a sensitive chord but the humour is not in the fat-shaming. The redemption is in identifying the bullies and saying, 'This is not okay.' And just because this one thing happened to Patty that changed her on the outside, it doesn't solve her problems because she's not free of compulsion and addiction."

Debby enthuses about her huge affection for Australia and says she's a frequent visitor. "Anyone who knows me knows the only place in the world outside the US that I would live would be Australia," grins the actor, whose 2017 movie *Rip Tide*

was filmed 130 kilometres south of Sydney in the coastal town of Kiama.

She will be back in December when her boyfriend, Twenty One Pilots drummer Josh Dun, tours with his band. "For as long as we've known each other, travel's been a huge part of it," she says excitedly. "I can't wait to visit him this year and have more time to watch him play his drums, and to spend more time wandering in Australia and seeing my friends there."

The couple have been so under the radar that Debby declines to provide specifics of the length of their on-again, off-again relationship.

"I'm in love and very happy," she says. "We've evolved and grown so much in our careers, in the relationship, as people since we first met," she says proudly. "It's cool and special to have that support system and we are each other's biggest fans."

That includes Josh returning the favour by accompanying her to offer support. "He visited me every month in Atlanta with our puppy while I was making the show," she beams.

Deborah Ann Ryan was born in Huntsville, Alabama, but spent most of her childhood in Europe with her older brother Chase, her mother Missy, a schoolteacher, and her father John, who worked closely with the US military. She lived on an American military base in Germany for three years until she was 10, when the family moved back to the US and settled in Keller, Texas.

"It was an adventurous childhood," she reflects. "When we weren't on the base, my mom home-schooled us often and we'd travel around Europe while she was creating curriculum like 'mummifying Barbie because we're learning about Egypt'."

Ryan performed in theatre productions on the military base and later at her Keller school, but quickly realised she wanted more.

"I can't believe I'm going to tell you this," she giggles with embarrassment, "but when I was 12 years old, I prayed for boobs and an agent. In four months, I went from size AA to CC and also got an agent, so there is a god!"

"I emotionally ate and was dealing with a full-blown eating disorder... everyone online was calling me fat and speculating I was on drugs."

Her first professional job, booked on her 13th birthday, was the production *Barney: Let's Go to the Firehouse*, in nearby Dallas-Fort Worth. "I had three lines: 'I lost my dog'; 'Barney, can you help me'; and 'Thank you,'" she recalls. "But I loved every minute of it!"

In March 2008, Debby moved to California after being cast in the Disney Channel show *The Suite Life on Deck*, which ran for three seasons. In 2011, she co-produced and starred in her own Disney series, *Jessie*, and when it ended in 2015, she and her band, the Never Ending, opened for Fifth Harmony, discovered through the US version of *The X Factor* on a world tour.

As a key member of that first wave of young actors who became famous thanks to Disney shows – including Miley Cyrus in *Hannah Montana*, Selena Gomez in *Wizards of Waverly Place* and Demi Lovato in *Sonny with a Chance* – Debby understands why people would be curious about her reaction to Demi's apparent overdose.

"Demi's story is not my story and I don't know enough to speak deeply into what happened to her," she carefully points out. "But I do think it's really important to talk about the fact that there's no number of engagement rings or number of followers or a number on a scale that can bring you what you're looking for. We need to just give grace to the people around us and remember nobody owes us their secrets."

Debby's social networks are a mix of fun personal photos (including a birthday wish and flashback photo of

her and Josh posted two months ago), promotion for *Insatiable*, and carefully curated mentions of designers such as Max Mara, Diane Von Furstenberg and shoe guru Stuart Weitzman. After I compliment her on the espadrille sandals she's wearing, she finds me on Twitter the following day and DMs a link to the brand, Chloe Gosselin.

But social media hasn't always been her friend. Debby admits she was devastated four years ago when she was viciously trolled after gaining weight.

"I'd gone through heartbreak and my close friend was going through cancer and I emotionally ate and was dealing with a full-blown eating disorder," she says. "I put on 12 pounds [5½ kilos], which isn't much on the Hollywood scale, but everyone online was calling me fat and speculating that I was on drugs. It enraged me so much."

She still remembers some of the incidents. "There were casting directors who looked me in the eye a few months later and said, 'How are you? You look great!' And I knew for a fact that I'd been rejected from reading for them because I'd gained weight. There were also fashion designers who were commenting on my Instagram photos – 'Love you babe' – but I knew that they had not allowed my stylist to borrow a dress for me."

Despite this, her Patty's desire for revenge is one aspect of her *Insatiable* character Debby can't embrace. "The Patty in me – who will forever live inside me, and I will forever live inside her – sees my face on billboards right now, looking down at the people who said and did horrible things to me, and there's not even a tiny part of me that can say, 'Ha! Now I'm on a billboard looking down on you!'"

"All I can think about is marking and celebrating the days of going without being unhealthy and falling back into bad habits. The redemption for me is that this whole struggle can now live outside of me on the show, and is no longer hidden."

For Debby Ryan, that's the only accomplishment that really matters. •

Insatiable is available now on Netflix.