



Glossed Weekend

FOR ONE WEEKEND EVERY YEAR, MODELS, STYLISTS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS TURN A ST. MICHAELS FARM INTO A FABULOUS FASHION CAMP. AND THIS TIME, **CHRISTINA IANZITO** WAS ON THE SCENE FROM BEGINNING TO END.

*Don't bend the knee!
Lean this hip out...Good.
Look over that way...Good!*

A teenage model named Ally does as she's told, sticking out her rear end and pouting at the camera.

"I hope I don't get frostbite," says the pretty 15-year-old blonde who's hard at work on photos for her "book." The problem is that the cold, damp fall morning on Maryland's Eastern Shore is turning her legs blue, which sort of clashes with Ally's red halter-neck dress, a \$10 thrift-store find from one of the stylists. But with just the right lighting, it could all look very *haute couture* — at least that's what photographer Joe Virgilio is hoping as he shouts out instructions:

*Put your head back....
Suck your stomach in....
Pivot at the waist....
Pull the strap off your shoulder....*

Ally's got her pout working full time. Meanwhile, here I am shivering under five unfashionable layers of clothing. My spirits aren't exactly lifted by the fact that I'm surrounded by girls too young to drive who look like walking *Cosmo* spreads.

The Young and the Beautiful have gathered at this 200-acre estate overlooking the Chesapeake at the behest of Lynda Erkiletian, the president and founder of T.H.E. Artist Agency, which — as the name is meant to suggest — is *the* agency representing models and stylists in the Washington area.

For the sixth year in a row, Erkiletian's invited several dozen models, photographers and makeup artists to use her gorgeous St. Michaels farmhouse for a weekend of portfolio building.

At left, *La Dolce Vita* on the Eastern Shore.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS USHER

I tag along for a look at Washington's fashion industry and get quite an eyeful.

At one point, a willowy runway model named Julie climbs into a tree and casually strips, donning only a wedding veil for a shoot. No one seems to think anything of it except me and my photographer, Chris Usher, who's practically hyperventilating as he climbs into the tree after her to take some pictures of his own.

Another model, James, a 6-foot-3 Matt Damon-look-alike, is almost roped into getting his body painted gold like a statue.

"Do you mind stripping down to your skivvies and I'll make a loincloth for you?" a stylist asks him.

"Not at all," he responds, politely.

A computer consultant in Richmond when he's not modeling or acting, James yanks up his shirt and pulls down his khakis to reveal tight gray underwear. This time it's my turn to hyperventilate.

By the end of the weekend, the photographers will have shot hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures. Later, Erkiletian and her small staff at T.H.E.'s K Street office in Georgetown will sort through the negatives for the best shots. Some of them will end up in composites, small cards with photos of the models in their best sultry poses. Composites, the calling cards of the industry, are often labeled with only first names ("Dawn," "Brad"), as though the models are rock stars, or dolls. And, regardless of age, they're called *girls* and *boys*.

They work hard, I discover, and it's not all glamorous. I follow Ally and company to a field of soybeans, where she stretches out seductively on her side. She now has on a sheer black bra and a pair of Erkiletian's sheer black underpants — Ally forgot hers — and leans strategically to hide her appendectomy scar from the camera.

"It's very Berlin," Virgilio assures. Virgilio, a criminal defense lawyer in Washington when he's not shooting models, takes some more Polaroids.

Ally's mom, Kim, a 37-year-old travel agent from Ol-



ney, Md., tries to stay out of the way. Decidedly unglamorous in a plaid vest embroidered with Winnie the Pooh, she doesn't seem worried about her daughter's youth being corrupted by the fashion business. She is concerned, though, that "there's a lot of rejection involved."

Ally spent a few months modeling in Germany — Europe's often a training ground for young American models — and was turned away by a cruel *fashionista* there. "The guy met us at the door, looked at her book and said 'Have a nice day,' and closed the door."

Still, she's getting jobs. "She's paying her way," her mother says. Agencies in Milan and Paris take up to 50 percent of the models' earnings; T.H.E. takes 20 percent. At first Ally didn't like to be poked and prodded and stared at all the time, she tells me, but that's the business: "You're their product."

She calls her mom "Marmie" — "I got that from *Little Women*." The two are very close, according to Ally, who admits, "I don't have many friends."

Obviously, Ally's not your typical high school kid. Right now her eyebrows are tall purple arches and her lips a dark blood-red. She looks like a cousin in the Addams family. ("Remember, this is going to be a black-and-white shoot," the stylist told me earlier, noting my troubled stare.)

When the shoot's over, Ally rinses off the underwear she's borrowed from Erkiletian; another model needs black lingerie.

IN POLITICAL WASHINGTON, THE BUZZ IS ABOUT ORAL PLEASURE AND IMPEACHMENT, IN FASHION WASHINGTON, THE FAVORED TOPICS ARE BUTT SIZE AND WHICH MODELS ARE HOT.

"It's a little wet," she warns. "You might want to hold off putting them on."

Lynda Erkiletian is the mother hen to all these beauties, even dispensing camera-ready underwear when need be.

"I don't really eat dinner," she says, petite and beautiful herself at age 41. "I pick."

We've driven to her farm in St. Michaels together ("It's getting to be the little Carmel of the East Coast," Erkiletian sighs, not unhappily) in her black convertible Jaguar — a fitting ride

for the perfectly manicured blonde with a ski-jump nose ("It's real. Puh-leez!"), cool sunglasses and thick-soled Chanel sandals.

Erkiletian grew up in south Georgia with five brothers and sisters, but has lost all trace of a Southern accent, save for a tendency to say "y'all." The family moved to Elmira in upstate New York when she was a teenager, which was when she discovered the world of clothes and the people who get paid to look good in them. At age 16, she started working for Tommy Hilfiger, back when he was a nobody with a shop called People's Place. A tiny 5-foot-1, she was spotted in the store and asked to be a petite runway model. She worked the catwalk and sang radio commercials while attending college in Elmira, but dropped out four months into her freshman year.

To her parents' chagrin, she followed a boyfriend to Washington, briefly singing backup for soul songstress Candi Staton on the road. She later got her cosmetology license and did up the faces of, among others, Nancy Reagan and Sugar Ray Leonard. "I'd always enjoyed doing hair and makeup and playing dress-up," she says.

Erkiletian started T.H.E. Agency in 1984, attracting hair

and makeup artists by offering them her clients in exchange for the chance to represent them. She began to take on models, building her agency's reputation by always paying them in advance. There weren't many, if any, legitimate agencies in Washington back then, she says. "They were, like, the scum of the earth."

Those were "the lean years." She was going through a divorce, and had to give up the title to her car to pay the models and stylists. "I'd go home and put the kids to bed and go back to work until three or four in the morning."

The investment was worth it. She's since become a pivotal player in the area's fashion business, representing 20 stylists and 400 models, 85 of them runway.

Unlike New York, the market here is mainly commercial, the look more professional than avant-garde. "Generally they're more sophisticated," says stylist Nora Garver of Washington women, "more conservative, but elegant." Still, she adds, "It'll never be a fashion town like New York."

The models who get the most work are in their 30s — the generic mommy and daddy, happy young couple or office worker whose image will make you want to buy a certain soap, car or phone service. T.H.E. has a woman who's in her 70s ("mature") and it has plus-size (sizes 14 to 18) and petite (5-foot-5 and shorter, sizes 4 to 6) models. Otherwise, women are required to be at least 5-foot-9, while men typically check in between 6 feet and 6-foot-3.

"Only one percent of the world's population has what it takes to be a model," Erkiletian warns. "Then you've gotta have the 'P' word — Professionalism."

Erkiletian lives in McLean, Va., with her second husband, Mike, a successful real-estate developer. They have seven kids between them: two from her first marriage, three from his and two, a 5- and 8-year-old, of their own.

"My children are my greatest accomplishment," she beams, warm and surprisingly unpretentious, or as unpretentious as a person can be with a Jag, Range

Rover, modeling agency, vast designer wardrobe and three homes.

The 200-acre farm is one of them, and Mike's presence is felt here, though he never joins his wife on these model retreats. Hunting magazines (cover story: "My 7 Most Memorable Shots at Big Deer") share a coffee table with *Elle* and *W*. One room, converted into a model changing



area for the weekend, is filled with the mounted heads of large game, including a warhog and something that looks like an angry bull.

But the beds are covered in poofy feather comforters, the chirping sounds of crickets drift through the cool autumn night, and there's often a fire warming the living room, which is decorated with plush leather armchairs, framed pictures of ducks and other appropriate trappings of country life.

Most of the models come here for the day on Saturday or Sunday, but the stylists and photographers settle in overnight. During the weekend, Erkiletian goes out of her way to make sure we're all well-fed and comfortable, assigning each guest to a bed or, in some cases, to a sleeping bag on the floor. Her 13-year-old daughter Jessica is here, too. She modeled for Tommy Hilfiger when she was a toddler, but is already officially too short for a runway career, which is totally *fine*, because Jessica wants to be an actress. She addresses everyone, including her mother, as "dude," zooms around the farm on her all-terrain vehicle and seems to have entirely skipped those awkward growing-up years.

The stylists have their war paint out: MAC and Bobbi Brown creams, glosses and lipsticks that can transform a fairly attractive teenager with a zit and an attitude into a head-turning *femme fatale* with a look that kills.

Applying the models' makeup and arranging their hair into sculpted perfection takes at least an hour, more often closer to two. I usually spend one to two minutes on my own makeup, but realize I've been coming up short. These folks are pros. In the past few weeks, one member of the group has groomed Walter Cronkite and John Glenn. Last year she made up Dee Dee Myers for *Vanity Fair*. You often get subjects with more power than glitter in Washington, the stylists tell me. Jefferson Wilson has done up the likes of Cokie Roberts and Donna Shalala. He admits that "a lot of this is smoke and mirrors." Look at Oprah on the cover of *Vogue*, for heaven's sake!

Bring on the smoke, I say. I prod one of the stylists into spending ten minutes on my face. It suddenly seems very,



very important that my skin tone be even and my lips rouged with just a touch of shimmer.

Nora, a stylist with T.H.E. for ten years, has been working on Marisa for an hour. "We're making a fairy," she says, and is now plastering the model's eyebrows with foundation so she can draw her own, wild lines. Marisa, 16, will wear an ethereal pink number for her shoot. But it's too sheer for parental approval, she whines. "My dad is going to kill me."

Alex, meanwhile, has peacock feathers attached to the skin around her eyes. "Very Miami." She's an 18-year-old from Paris, here to study at American University. Her scruffy-looking boyfriend slouches a few steps behind her, and she wears her hair pulled back tightly as she puffs, Frenchly, on her cigarettes.

Ally, made up for her second shoot, now has a fresh, clean J. Crew-esque look. A photo story will be told: Studious boy gets distracted by playful girl. She's shot with Robin, a hunky Australian model, through the open window of a boathouse. They snuggle each other like well-scrubbed coeds pretending to be in love, a pile of books thrown carelessly on the grass outside. The photographer has to remind Ally she's supposed to be "having fun" tearing Robin away from his homework.

Robin doesn't look like much of a student, but I'll buy it.

In political Washington, the buzz is about oral pleasure and impeachment. In fashion Washington, the favored topics are butt size and which models are hot.

Some of T.H.E.'s models do sporadic work with the Manhattan heavyweights, Elite Model Management and

A WILLOWY MODEL CLIMBS INTO A TREE AND STRIPS, DONNING ONLY A WEDDING VEIL. NO ONE THINKS ANYTHING OF IT EXCEPT ME AND MY PHOTOGRAPHER, WHO'S PRACTICALLY HYPERVENTILATING.



Ford Models. Ally's trying. "I have to lose weight," she sighs, now dressed in a Tommy Girl T-shirt, slim jeans and sneakers. "They want my butt down."

Her agency in New York wants her down to 105 pounds. At 6 feet tall and 125 pounds, she doesn't look like she can spare much flesh. Still, her mother supports her dieting and working out. "They ask for the 'chic heroin look,'" Kim explains. "It was my idea to put her on a training program and diet program."

All weekend I hear stories of the sad souls who let their derrières grow, or shrink, to the wrong size. One poor girl who was "hot last year" got kicked out of Elite in New York because she got too tan and her "butt was too big." I meet the 15-year-old on Saturday. Her butt is microscopic. Another model had an eating disorder for ten years and ended up having to get tens of thousands of dollars in treatment.

"I'm just oblivious," Erkiletian marvels. "I can tell when there's alcohol or drugs, but I can't spot an eating disorder."

Whether a girl's got a fast metabolism or bulimia, the end result — a Kate Moss body — is all most eyes can (or want to) see.

"There's so much you can do with her," I hear one of Erkiletian's staffers say admiringly to another, as they pore over a book of photos. "I mean, she's literally a hanger."

The photographers and stylists, though, can eat as much as they want. On Saturday night Erkiletian takes us all out to a seafood place on Tilghman Island called Harrison's, where we order up fried oysters, crabs and coleslaw. The locals, in baseball caps and T-shirts, gawk at the 25 fashion types.

"Did you all come up on a bus?" one beefy guy asks a handsome photographer.

"No," he replies, "I came in my agent's Range Rover."

Julie, a 5-foot-9 runway model with brown hair cropped short and hazel eyes, pulls down \$60 to \$175 an hour for a lingerie or swimwear show. It's nice work if you've got the figure and the shoe budget for it (Neiman Marcus asks runway models to bring ten different pairs of shoes, including "high heeled strappy sandals" in gold, silver, nude and black). But Julie's tired of the runway rat race. She wants photos that can get her less-stressful print work.

For some reason, this involves getting naked in a tree. Not that Julie seems to mind. At 33, she's cool and apparently fearless. She climbs up a tall painters' ladder to a broad tree limb, strips off her sweat pants and shirt to reveal a perfect 34-24-35 body. She then lies down on a towel, straddling the branch. A stylist kicks off her shoes, follows her up the tree and helps arrange her wedding veil,

made by Julie's mother years ago. You'd think Julie'd be worried about getting rain and dirt on it, but photographer Karen Turley assures me that "she doesn't care, she's going through a divorce."

The veil is Julie's only covering. "I doubt this is what Lynda had in mind when she said 'a bridal [shoot],' " Turley observes.

Older models like Julie tend to be more professional and confident than the 15-year-olds. Dawn, a 32-year-old Michelle Pfeiffer clone, even helps the stylist pick out her clothes for a shoot.

"I have black capri pants," she suggests, trying on a black coat with fur collar. "Very Jackie O."

The youngest model of all is Peyton, age 12 and just 68 pounds, here with her 15-year-old sister Brittany. The sisters were extras in the movie *Washington Square* with Jennifer Jason Leigh; Peyton is in *Enemy of the State* with Will Smith and has modeled for *Girl's Life* magazine; Brittany's done shoots for *Baltimore* magazine and is "going places," someone says.

"She's hot."

Their mother is here, too, with armloads of suitcases. Brittany flew down from Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts for the day.

"Washington is very conservative, very safe," Mom says, dressed in a pink turtleneck and a flowered frock. She confesses that other mothers with less-lovely offspring do question her sending a prepubescent daughter into the fabulous-yet-decadent World of Fashion. "When you call up and say 'She can't go to this slumber party [because of a modeling job],' there's sort of this, 'What are you doing with your kids?'"

Model moms are a weird mix of overprotective nurturing (Peyton's has carefully sewn little blue-and-white name labels into all of her clothes) and respectful awe that they've produced such gorgeous kids. Right now her daughters' earnings go into a college fund. If they make it big, though, they'll put college on hold.

Peyton curls up in a leather chair by the fire playing with a Gameboy before her shoot. "Peyton likes the sitting around as much as the actual work," her mother tells me. Not to mention the compliments.

"She's sooooooooo beautiful!" they tell her, as a stylist puts a shimmery pink blusher on her little cheeks. "She's sooooooooo precious!"

"I bet you get sick of people telling you that," I say.

Peyton smiles shyly, and replies, "No." ■