

VEGAS

November 2005

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MODEL WITH A CAUSE
**PETRA
NEMCOVA**

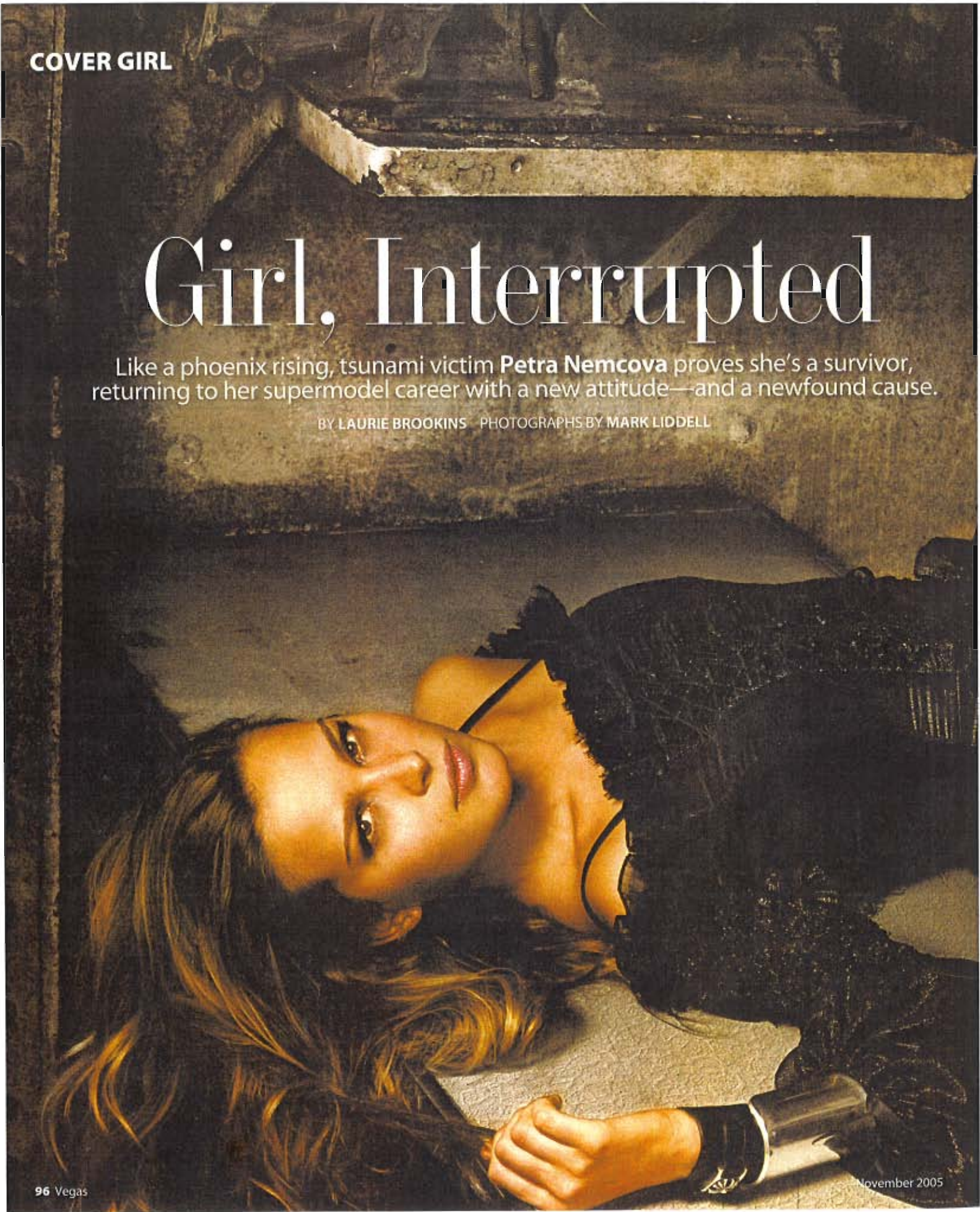


COVER GIRL

Girl, Interrupted

Like a phoenix rising, tsunami victim **Petra Nemcova** proves she's a survivor, returning to her supermodel career with a new attitude—and a newfound cause.

BY LAURIE BROOKINS PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK LIDDELL



Black shimmer dress with ruffles by Roberto Cavalli available at Roberto Cavalli, The Forum Shops at Caesars. Black stockings by Wolford available at Wolford, The Forum Shops at Caesars. Black satin sandals by Giuseppe Zanotti available at Giuseppe Zanotti, The Forum Shops at Caesars. Black leather cuff by Chrome Hearts available at Chrome Hearts, The Forum Shops at Caesars. Wide silver cuff by Robert Lee Morris available at Capri, Pool Promenade Shops at Bellagio.

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he's endured the unimaginable, and emerged a stronger person, she says. Of course, it may be a little easier for us to imagine what Petra Nemcova went through on that fateful day in December 2004—Hurricanes Katrina and Rita made sure of that, bringing floodwaters and tragedy nearer to our doorsteps, and via non-stop TV coverage into each and every living room, causing those of us who don't live in ravaged regions to think, What would I do?

What Nemcova did was a challenge far more insurmountable than it seems: She lived.

I first met Petra a couple of years ago when she appeared on the Summer 2003 cover of our sister publication, *Ocean Drive* magazine. As I spoke to her then, I remember thinking this was one of the sunniest people I had ever met—eternally optimistic and benevolent almost to the point of saintly. Fresh from her appearance on the cover of *Sports Illustrated's* annual swimsuit issue, it would have been effortless for

THE PETRA NEMCOVA STORY

Nemcova to cultivate such notoriety into the image of a party-girl supermodel; instead, she talked about not having enough time to spend with her boyfriend, how thrilling it was to meet a fan (she missed an L.A.-to-New-York flight because she was chatting with him), and that she someday hoped to work with children in some capacity.

Eighteen months later, the wave came and swept everything that Petra had previously known out with it. By now the details are well-documented: She and her 33-year-old boyfriend, British photographer Simon Atlee, had been vacationing in the beachside Thai resort of Khao Lak and were packing to leave on the day after Christmas. What happened next was swift and horrific—water rushed into their bungalow, and as Petra was thrust into the current, she heard Simon calling her name. The force of the water ripped her clothes from her body and shattered her pelvis; the broken bones rendered her legs useless, causing her to almost drown in the rolling water, but she found the surface and sought refuge in the branches of a tree, where she was rescued eight hours later.

Nemcova knows how lucky she was: More than 200,000 people are estimated to have died in the tsunami, with Atlee originally listed as missing and presumed dead until his body was found in March. By then she had transferred hospitals twice, from a local hospital in Phuket, Thailand, to another one 150 miles southeast in Hat Yai, and as soon as she could make the trip, to a hospital near her family's home in the Czech Republic.

"As soon as I could fly I wanted to get back to Czech," says Nemcova, now 26. "My family wanted to come to Thailand, but I didn't allow it because I knew it would be so difficult for them. You have to believe that good things come out of bad experiences, and for me that's been the ability to spend time with my family while I was recovering. I never had any time because of my job, but this brought my family, my friends and Simon's family together. It's crazy how something so horrible can bring so much love and goodness to people."

It's been almost a year since the events of that day. Nemcova had told Diane Sawyer in March, just days after Atlee's body was discovered, that she wasn't sure she'd ever return to modeling. "In the moment, I live day by day," she said at the time. She was also walking with the use of a cane, and doctors told Nemcova she'd require months, maybe years, of rehabilitation.

She proved them all wrong. "I recovered really, really fast," she says. "I was missing Simon and going through lots of pain, but I was trying to stay positive and appreciate what I had."

Such a declaration is perhaps the least surprising revelation about Nemcova's journey: Given her disposition before disaster struck, it's little wonder that perseverance and the power of positive thinking would be at the heart of a seemingly miraculous recovery. What was truly surprising was the mission she embarked on as soon as she was able. "Even while I was still lying in a hospital in Thailand, I couldn't wait to come back and help people; it was very frustrating to not be able to do anything," she says. "In May, I went back with my sister and a couple of my friends. It was a very hard trip, but also very inspiring."

And soon after, Nemcova returned to New York. "I got out of the car, and the photographers were just screaming, 'Welcome home!'" she remembers. "I felt a lot of love from people—throughout the whole recovery, so many E-mails and letters and phone calls, and back in New York, people stopping me on the street

and telling me how sorry they were. I have to thank all of them, because every one of them contributed to my healing."

Early in the process, Nemcova also came to an important realization. "There was one point where I was thinking, you cannot change the past, but you can make a difference for the future," she says.

That assertion has woven its way into Nemcova's life via two paths: She worked with the relief organization Give2Asia to create the Happy Hearts Fund, a foundation that is raising money to be directed toward children orphaned or otherwise affected by the tsunami. "We're helping rebuild a school for 900 children and build dormitories for those who were orphaned. We also want to help them deal with emotional and psychological problems," she explains.

A benefit will take place at Cipriani New York in December, but funds for Happy Hearts also will be raised through Nemcova's other venture, a book set for release this month. Co-written with Jane Scovell, *Love Always, Petra* (Warner Books, \$23.95) tells not only of Nemcova's ordeal, but also about her Czech upbringing and the lessons she's learned before and since the tsunami. All proceeds from the sale of the book benefit Happy Hearts.

"I wasn't sure if I wanted to do the book, because it was still very hard emotionally," she says. "But I learned a lot from people writing me and stopping me in the streets, saying, 'You made me stronger, you're such an inspiration.' I thought, if I can help five more people, that might be a wonderful thing. And with all the money from the book going toward Happy Hearts, that was two good reasons to do it."

And there was someone else telling her it was OK, she adds. "I still feel very connected to Simon," Nemcova says. "There have been many times when I've heard him say, 'Stop sobbing and get on with it. Be happy.' He was very funny and full of life, and he wouldn't want any of his family or friends to feel sad. He used to say, 'A day without laughter is a day wasted,' so that's how we're trying to live as well."

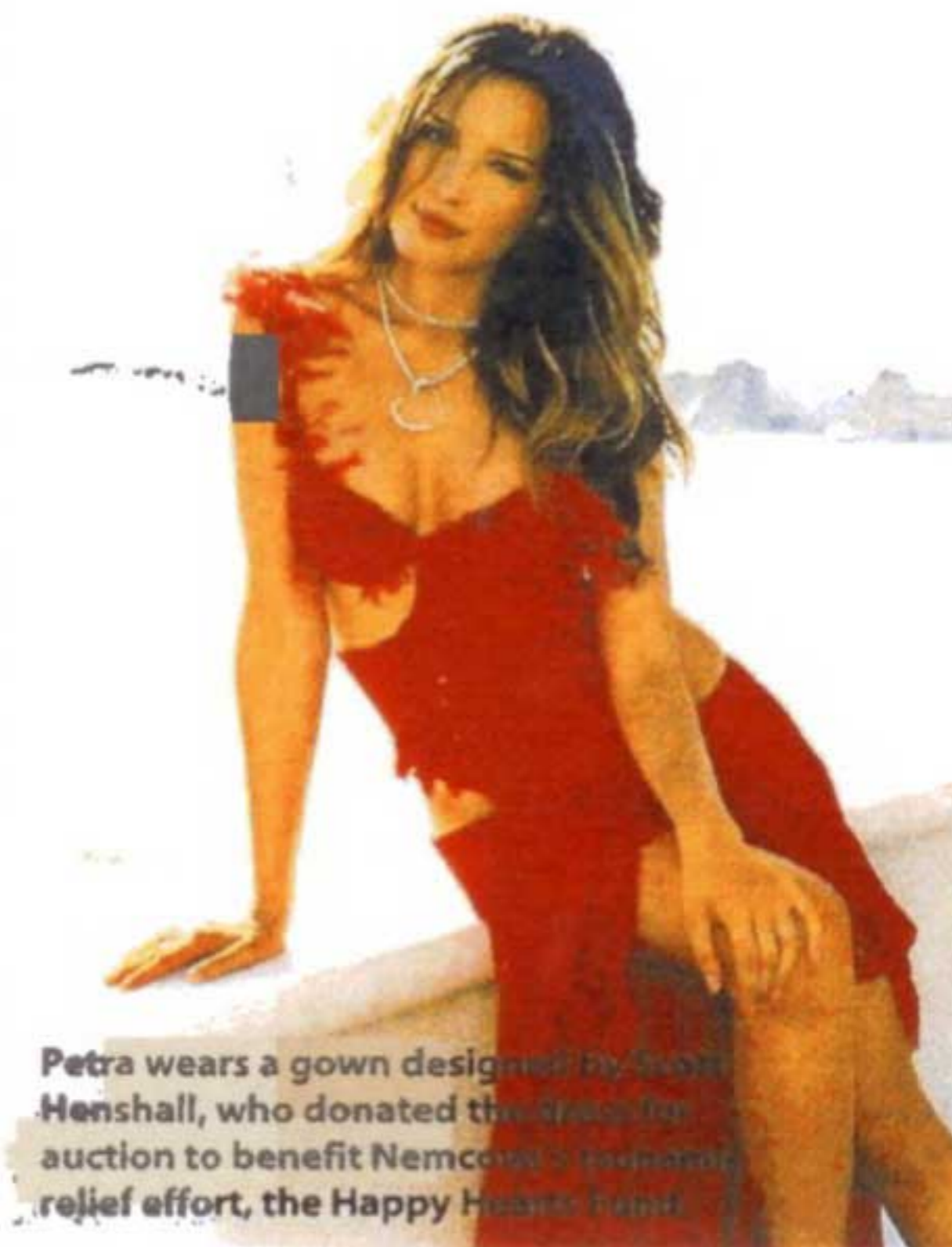
That also meant a return to work. She admits that the book and the December benefit are taking up the lion's share of her days before the end of 2005. But an appearance in the Bryant Park tents during New York Fashion Week in September—to premiere the Happy Hearts PSA she did for the WE network—proved Nemcova's inspirational value, moving otherwise stalwart fashion editors to tears. She says there are

modeling jobs in the works, but nothing ready to announce.

Ultimately, the photographs seen within these pages prove that her career is far from over. "I went back to work only about two weeks ago," she said during our talk in early October. "I was worried that it might be too soon, but I was happy to see people [on a photo-shoot set] who are like my family. It's all part of healing."

But she also admits her priorities have changed. "Modeling used to consume my life, but not anymore," she says. "One of the things the experience has taught me is that there are so many other lessons to learn."

And while Petra Nemcova doesn't necessarily want to be a teacher, she does find comfort in the notion that we all might learn some lessons from the girl whose once-sunny outlook today is tinged with more than a trace of wisdom. "I used to live for the future," she says, "but now it's about where I am today, and making the best of every day that you have." ♣



Petra wears a gown designed by Tom Henshall, who donated the gown for auction to benefit Nemcova's tsunami relief effort, the Happy Hearts Fund.

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