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At 15 Leelee Sobieski worked on Stanley Kubrick's swansong. At 18 she got her first million-dollar pay cheque. And then she went AWOL. Now aged 24, the lanky beauty is back on the Hollywood circuit. Matt Mueller wants to know where she's been...

photography Doug English





"People think of Stanley Kubrick

as this master filmmaker but he was so cuddly and vibrant and warm. I just wanted to cuddle him... Tom Cruise was wearing a silk vest in our scene and it was really soft against my bare stomach and I liked twirling around it – I thought he was really cute."

Leelee Sobieski is pottering around the kitchen of her house in the Hollywood hills, eating breakfast and nursing the kind of nasty cold where even laughing makes you cough. Last night she had to decline an invitation from former porn star Ron Jeremy, with whom she worked on her most recent film *Finding Bliss*, to watch Harry Dean Stanton's mariachi band. "Ron's my new best friend, but I have to take care of myself at the moment." At the photo shoot, she doled out cash-and-carry quantities of Emergen-C Immune to help everyone ward off her germs. "I'm sure I'm sick because I just finished *Bliss*," she laughs, and coughs. "All of a sudden you let your guard down and your body's like, 'Oh, now I can be sick!'"

Finding Bliss is the latest in a streak of films Sobieski has made since coming back from a three-year period of self-imposed exile. A romantic comedy about a gawky, sexually naive filmmaker who is forced to take a job editing porn movies, *Bliss* was shot in Spokane, Washington State, with Sobieski wandering around wearing summer dresses in icy February temperatures. "I was taking little heat packs and putting them in my bra," she grins. "It was super-cold."

In person Sobieski sends out a peculiar aura of jaded innocence. Like some refugee from a Disney teen-queen drama, she liberally drops "super" into her sentences; but at the same time is capable of being sanguine about having been a child actress in an industry that loves to feed on its own young. She was a fiercely bright child, getting the equivalent of a high school certificate at 15, which meant she could do more hours on set. "My days were very, very long but my mom would be there to enforce the rules and protect me..." She then alludes to Britney Spears' meltdown: "It's really easy – as we can see by a lot of the stuff that's been going on lately with people who've been performing for a long time – to take the wrong steps... But I was always super-protected."

With her strong, aquiline features and Gallic-Slavic heritage, Liliane Rudabet Gloria Elsveta Sobieski ("Gloria wasn't originally there – I added it as a kid because I needed a normal name in there") was originally talent-spotted in her school cafeteria by a casting agent for *Interview With The Vampire*. She missed out on playing the child bloodsucker to Kirsten Dunst, but hit the ground running with a succession of chewy roles in space-rock blockbuster *Deep Impact*, Drew Barrymore-starrer *Never Been Kissed*, Merchant-Ivory's *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* and, most memorably, coming on like *Lolita* in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Sobieski remembers the legendary maverick as "a great guy – he couldn't have been any more wonderful towards me. He was like the head wizard in *Harry Potter*." Dumbledore? "Yes! People think I'm really weird for saying that because they think of him as this master filmmaker but he was so cuddly and vibrant and warm. I just wanted to squeeze him!" She felt similarly tactile toward her co-star Tom Cruise: "He was wearing a silk vest in our scene and it was really soft against my bare stomach and I liked twirling around it – I thought he was really cute."

At her teen A-list peak, she earned a \$1 million pay cheque for demented foster-parent thriller *The Glass House* – and then vanished completely from screens. During what she calls her "three-year pause", Sobieski enrolled at New York's Brown University to study Fine Arts, completed the first year, took the next year off to "live with my [now ex-] boyfriend and cook him tortillas and eggs in the morning", and then went back to Brown.

Did she feel the need to take a step back from her career? "At that time I did," she admits. "But more than that, I just fell in love. I didn't want to push that away with time constraints and distance. It sounds kind of crazy to take time off in the middle of everything, but it was super-important."

Still only 24, she admits that refocusing on her film career has felt like starting over again. "It was stressful, but everything in life can't come so easy or you don't appreciate it," says the actress, who's had to work her way back up the industry food chain from indie projects to a plum role as a student of Al Pacino's psychiatry professor in upcoming thriller *88 Minutes*. Describing herself as a "super-positive freak", she's also painting, writing and carting her laptop and lap-dog Nina Simone back and forth between LA and New York, where she recently bought an apartment.

"It's hard because I went away for such a long time but little by little all of these things that I've been working on are coming out," she enthuses. "I'm happy the way everything is at the moment and I'm happy for it to change. I live in the moment." *88 Minutes* is released in the US on April 18



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