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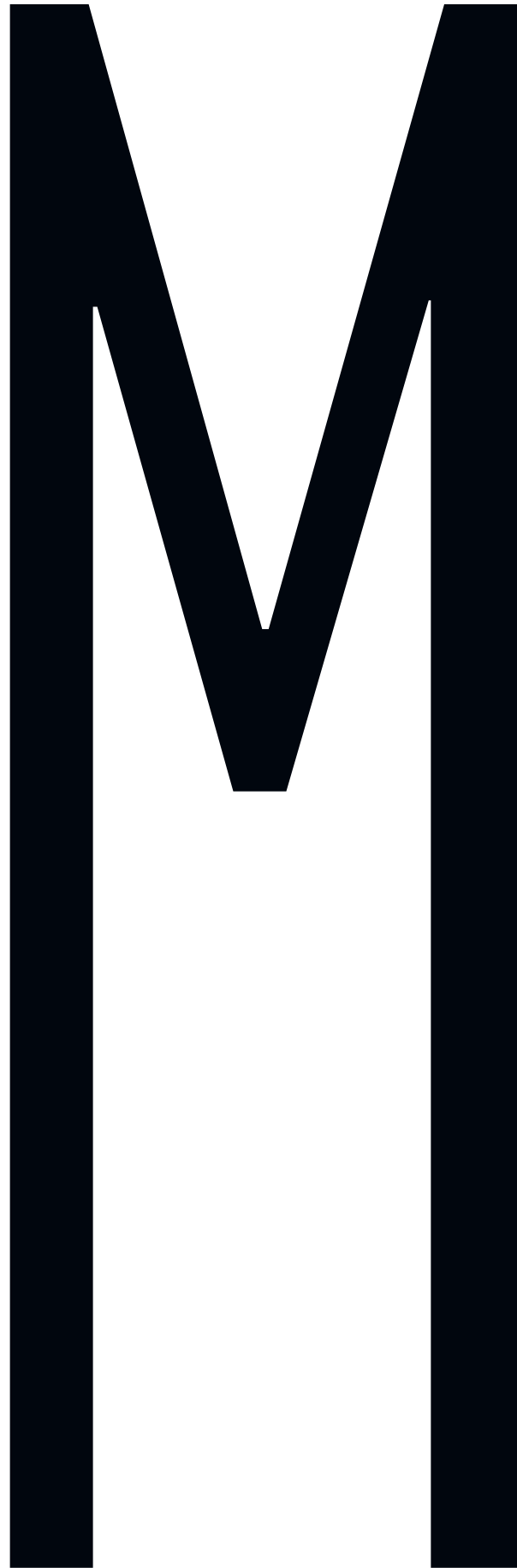


FOREVER

SIMONE

The greatest gymnast
of all time opens
up about life as a
newlywed, her
recovery from Tokyo,
and what's ahead—
including Paris,
peut-être

BY
LEAH FAYE COOPER



“I THINK **EVERYONE WANTS TO BE FAMOUS,** AND THEN WHEN IT HAPPENS, YOU ALMOST HIT A WALL AND YOU HAVE AN IDENTITY CRISIS. YOU’RE LIKE, AM I MADE OUT FOR THIS? **WHY DID I WISH FOR THIS?”**

“**MAYBE HE HAS** a crush on you,” Simone Biles says to me—playfully but also seriously.

It’s a Thursday evening in The Woodlands, a tony Houston suburb, and the greatest gymnast of all time and I are having dinner at Sixty Vines, known for its seasonal cuisine and 60 wines on tap. Biles picked the restaurant; it’s one of her favorites and she comes often. But as a succession of dishes arrives, compliments of the kitchen—seared bass, sliced tri tip, and later, sticky toffee cake and Basque cheesecake delivered by chef Mikail Sayeed himself—she notes this “has never happened before.” According to Biles, he must be trying to impress me, an unrecognizable writer, and not her, a two-time Olympian and holder of 37 Olympic and World Championship medals, the most in history. “I have a feeling it’s not about me,” I say, clocking at least three people stealing stares at—definitely—her, “but we’ll go with that.”

Wearing her sense of humor like a leotard is presumably one of the ways Biles has weathered a life and career marked by record-breaking highs and excruciating lows. After a two-year hiatus following the Tokyo Olympics, Biles returned to competition last August at the US Gymnastics Championships in San Jose, California. There, the 26-year-old won an eighth national title, becoming the oldest woman to clinch the victory and breaking the late Alfred Jochim’s seven-title record, which had been in place since 1933. Last fall, at the 2023 Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Antwerp, Belgium, Biles became the most decorated gymnast

in history, winning gold in the individual all-around (her sixth title and the most ever for a woman), gold in the balance beam and floor, and silver in the vault. At 26, she also became the oldest US woman athlete ever to win those medals. “I felt like I was back in my element and it was exciting,” she says, “but I was truly petrified. I had the training to back it up because we worked really hard, [but] I wasn’t as confident or as comfortable as I wanted to be.” Whatever impact the nerves had on Biles, they didn’t deter her from landing a Yurchenko double pike vault, a first for a woman in international competition. The move, which consists of a roundoff onto a springboard, a back handspring onto a vault, and two flips in the pike position, has since been renamed the Biles II, bringing the total of stunts coined after the four-foot-eight phenom to five.

“It was kind of surprising,” Biles says of her success back on the circuit, her modesty genuine. “Just taking [the] risk of allowing myself to be vulnerable in front of a crowd competing again was a win for me.”

Antwerp also offered a refreshing mix of nostalgia and normalcy. Biles competed in her first World Championships there 10 years ago but didn’t get to explore the city like she did this time around. She went to a café for an authentic Belgian waffle, “which was amazing,” she says, and explored the architecture and shops in Antwerp’s Old Town neighborhood. Like so many of the places Biles’s career has taken her, Antwerp is literally and figuratively worlds away from where she came from.

BORN IN COLUMBUS, Ohio, to a mother who struggled to care for her children as she battled addiction, Biles spent

her early years in and out of foster care. At five, Biles and her younger sister, Adria, were formally adopted by their maternal grandfather, Ron, and his wife, Nellie, whom she calls her parents, who raised the girls alongside their two boys in Spring, Texas, the Houston suburb Biles still calls home. (Her two older siblings, Ashley and Tevin, were adopted by Ron’s sister, Harriet.) When Biles was six, Ron and Nellie enrolled her and Adria in gymnastics classes.

“Honestly, for gymnastics, that’s kind of late,” Biles says. “Most people start in Mommy and Me classes as soon as [they] can walk. I truly was gifted, but I had to work for everything that I’ve had because of that delay.” Her parents had to work toward her success too. “Gymnastics is very expensive, and we’re so blessed that our parents could afford for us to do it,” she says, adding that it’s the only sport she and her sister ever pursued. Biles says she never worried about finances, but she’s still not sure if that’s because her parents didn’t have that concern or merely shielded her from any hardship. She is, however, keenly aware of the sacrifices her entire family has made on her behalf—“their time, their effort, [and] their money.”

“I just wanted to try to do college gymnastics,” Biles says, but everything changed after she watched Gabby Douglas, McKayla Maroney, Aly Raisman, Kyla Ross, and Jordyn Wieber dominate at the 2012 Olympics in London. “I saw those girls and I was like, I’m going to the same camps they’re going to; maybe I could do that.”

In 2013, when Biles was 16, she won her first all-around World Championship title, becoming the first African American gymnast to do so. Three years later, she stunned the world with her performance during the Summer Olympics in Rio, where she won four gold medals—an American record for women’s gymnastics at a single Games—plus a bronze. The rise to fame that accompanied her feat was exciting, intense, and a bit disorienting. It still is all of those things, Biles says.

“I think everyone wants to be famous, and then when it happens, you almost hit a wall and you have an identity crisis. You’re like, Am I made out for this? Why did I wish for this?” While the adjustment was challenging for Biles, it was

HEAD OVER HEELS

Simone Biles, photographed in Houston in November.

Previous spread: bralette by Gucci; skirt by Altuzarra.

HAI: MIKI NEMO; MAKEUP: SHEIKA DALEY; MANICURE: YESENIA GARCIA; TAILOR: JANELLE V. FLANAGAN; SET DESIGN: KENDYLL LEGIERE; MOVEMENT DIRECTOR: CHARISIA REDEGER. PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY BIRD HOUSE PRODUCTIONS. FOR DETAILS, GO TO VC.COM/CREDITS.

especially difficult for her parents. They've always wanted to protect their daughter from invasive fans, reporters, and photographers, "but everything is kind of out of their hands," she says. "I'm not saying that [people] scream and line up like I'm Taylor Swift, [but] I still get a lot of attention. When five people come up to me and they're rushing for a photo, I just get a little flustered. My anxiety kicks in." Nothing, then, could have prepared Biles for the aftermath of Tokyo in 2021.

THE GAMES KICKED OFF that July under unprecedented circumstances, and after a yearlong postponement. Athletes were largely relegated to their rooms and competition venues, and there were no spectators. Biles helped her team qualify for the all-around final and was the only athlete to qualify for the finals in all four individual events, but something was amiss.

On a vault, she completed just one and a half of an attempted two and a half twists and nearly fell when she landed. Afterward, she withdrew from the team competition, citing mental health concerns and a word that would become household-famous: the twisties, a disconnect between the mind and the body that causes a gymnast to lose track of motion through space. Though the average person watching from home probably chalked it up to nerves, "I knew right then and there something was wrong," says Biles's best friend, Rachel Roettger, from her home in Spring. The two met as six-year-olds in gymnastics class. The look Roettger noticed on her friend's faces wasn't nervousness, it was worry. "I texted her, 'Hey, what is going on? Are you okay?' I thought she was hurt because there's no way she should have landed like that. She texted me like, 'I'm not hurt, but I'm just going through some things.'"

One by one, Biles began withdrawing from other competitions: the individual all-around, the vault, the uneven bars, the floor. She competed in the balance beam, winning the bronze medal. Team USA, which included Jordan Chiles, Sunisa Lee, and Grace McCallum, finished second, behind Russia.

The criticism was scathing and relentless. And though many came to Biles's defense, "of course you have all the assholes that are like, 'You're a quitter,'" she says, "and they just ran with that." Biles was tempted to "go off" on those deriding her but ultimately decided that the only worthy fight was the one for her own well-being. Predictably, as pundits and trolls declared that the Olympian had selfishly let her country down, others "tried to put me on this pedestal as a mental health advocate," she says. "I was not okay with that. If I can be a lending hand and help people, then I'll be open, honest, and vulnerable," she continues, "but you cannot stick me in front of a crowd and say, 'Do everything she's doing.'"

Biles had a major source of support in her then boyfriend, Jonathan Owens, an NFL safety who at the time was playing for the Houston Texans. The pair had met in 2020 on an invite-only dating app.

"I had just broken up [with someone] and my friend was like, 'Get on Raya, get on Raya,'" Biles tells me as our spread continues expanding into burrata, Caesar salad, and brussels sprouts. "My guard went straight up when she said *dating site*," Biles says, but she matched with Owens the first week she was on the app. "The second week I met him in person," she says, "and the rest is history. We were hooked."

Owens's recollection is similar, with one added detail. "She doesn't like to admit it, but she messaged me first," he tells me over the phone. Because their relationship started at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of their early dates consisted of watching movies, playing games, and drinking sangria at each other's houses during quarantine. "I just noticed her laugh," Owens says of those initial interactions. "It was just contagious. We could talk all day and we'd stayed up late, and there just wasn't an awkward moment." Owens knew immediately that he liked Biles, but I ask, did he know he was falling for the greatest gymnast of all time? "A lot of people don't believe me when I say I had no clue," he insists. During the 2016 Olympics in Rio, Owens was at training camp at his alma mater, Missouri Western State University. He caught some basketball and a bit of track, but "I never once was like, Oh, let me check gymnastics out." Things clicked when he found Biles on Instagram. "I was like, man, she got a lot of followers, she must be pretty good."

WE GOT CLOSE really quickly," Raisman says of her time training with Biles before the 2016 Games. "We have very different personalities. When I was training, I was a lot more of a perfectionist," she continues, speaking on a call from her home in Boston. "Simone is definitely more laid-back than I am. That balance was really good for me; she was always making me laugh." Biles was always raising the competitive bar for the team too. "We always used to joke: Second place was first place because it [was] too hard to beat her," Raisman says.

Their bond strengthened under devastating circumstances. Both are among more than 200 women who came forward with sexual abuse allegations against former USA Gymnastics doctor Larry Nassar. He was ultimately convicted of various crimes and will spend the rest of his life in prison. "I'm very grateful for the support and how much our voices were heard," Raisman says. "But it felt like an open wound that wouldn't heal. So to have Simone, who understood what I was going through—we could talk about it, and we could relate when I felt like I couldn't relate to most people—it was really nice. It still is very nice to have that."

Coming forward with their experiences not only shocked the world, but it shocked those closest to the gymnasts too. "It was really heartbreaking to hear her side of the story and hear what happened," Roettger says. "I had no idea. I had no idea at all."

Dress by **Alaïa**;
sandals by **Giuseppe
Zanotti**; earrings
by **Jennifer Fisher**;
cuff by **David
Yurman**; bracelet
by **Mateo**.





Dress by **Loewe**;
sandals by **Giuseppe
Zanotti**; necklace
by **Chopard
High Jewelry**.



“WE ALWAYS USED TO JOKE:
SECOND PLACE WAS FIRST PLACE,
SAYS ALY RAISMAN. “BECAUSE IT WAS TOO
HARD TO BEAT HER.”

Biles doesn't address the abuse directly, but in discussing why she's been so outspoken against USA Gymnastics and the organization's failure to protect athletes in the past, she asserts that she's "been through hell and back." She could have dealt with that trauma privately, she says, but knowing that people listen when she speaks—a realization that she says took her a while to come to—helps her. "I wish everybody could have the outlets and the platforms and the confidence to speak out," she says. But she knows that's not the case. "Sometimes I'm speaking not only for myself, but I'm being a voice for others that can't."

Biles believes that USA Gymnastics has been moving in a positive direction. "When something like that happens, it obviously turns everything completely upside down," she says. "And then they make some of the rules so strict that it almost makes it hard for anybody to do their job. But I think their intentions are there."

Last year, Raisman tuned in with pride to watch her friend and former teammate compete in Antwerp. "For her to come back now," she says of Biles's post-Tokyo return, "it really feels like she's doing it for herself, and she's doing it on her own terms." Over the course of our call, Raisman repeatedly points out that Biles makes everything "look so easy." It's an accurate observation of her stunts and of her foray back into gymnastics, but neither are easy.

"I wish I could sit here and tell you it was glorious," Biles says of her time off following Tokyo. "When I took a break after 2016, I had the time of my life. I was doing anything and everything. But after 2020, it was kind of depressing until I started therapy and got help. I felt like a failure. Even though I was empowering so many people and speaking out about mental health, every time I talked about my experience in Tokyo—because it obviously didn't go the way that I had planned—it stung a little bit. But all in all, it was the best decision."

Biles remains a vocal proponent of mental health care. "I've always been in therapy [and] I've always been an advocate for medicine," she says, adding that

her mother, Nellie, is a nurse, and medication has never been stigmatized in her family. "If you need an inhaler, take it. If you have anxiety, take it. I'm no stranger to medicine." Years ago Biles was prescribed Lexapro for anxiety, and she continues to take the medication today.

W

WHEN BILES RESUMED training in late 2022, the gymnastics was largely mental. She tried convincing herself that she was cured from the twisties, that she wasn't scared to jump and flip and catapult herself into the air. "Well that was a lie," she says. "I was petrified." Biles eased her way back into a training routine, spending a few gym sessions just jumping on the trampoline, gradually working her way toward one full workout a day. By January 2023, she was back to the training schedule she currently maintains four days a week: Up at 6:20 a.m. and out the door by 6:45 for 7 a.m. practice. Home at 10:30, then lunch. She tends to her three bulldogs—Lilo, Rambo, and Zeus—then naps for an hour to an hour and a half. Then back at the gym from 2 to 5 p.m. Thursdays and Saturdays are half days, Sunday is off.

Biles is enjoying the regimen more than she anticipated. "I owe that to my teammates," she says, adding that most of them are much younger. "I didn't think I'd be having fun like this at my age in the gym, but they keep it fun. They've been bigger rocks to me than they know."

One of those teammates is UCLA standout Chiles, who trains in Texas during the collegiate offseason. "Seeing her do all of her skills that are named after her," Chiles says, "I'm just in awe." The two met about a decade ago at a national team camp. Giddy over the opportunity to interact with Biles,

Dress by **Fendi**;
sandals by **Giuseppe
Zanotti**; earrings by
**Chopard High
Jewelry**; bracelet
by **Ana Khouri**.

the current NCAA floor exercise and uneven bars champion remembers thinking to herself, This girl's going to be my friend one day. That premonition proved true. Biles helped the Oregon native make arrangements to train in Texas prior to Tokyo, and when Biles and Owens wed in Cabo last May, Chiles was among their 144 guests.

IF I'M GOING to be honest, obviously he's very fine," Biles says of her initial attraction to Owens. "[But] besides his looks, he was so sweet and kind, and I think what I liked about him was his confidence. He truly believes he's the best at everything," she says, clearly amused. Owens proposed on Valentine's Day 2022, and last April the couple had a small civil ceremony in Houston followed by a May celebration in Mexico. Over the course of that weekend, Biles wore four dresses by Galia Lahav.

"We could have had so many more people," Biles says, "but we really wanted to make it as intimate and as special as possible." She and Owens deftly curated their guest list. "I was like, 'Not to knock your football coach from third grade, but baby, when was the last time you talked to him?'" Their vision was realized. "I've never had so much fun in my life," Biles says. "I was 19 when I won my first Olympics, and I was like, How am I supposed to top this? My wedding topped it. It was the greatest feeling ever."

After the wedding, Owens flew to Green Bay to officially join the Packers. "I cried a lot," Biles said, adding that while she knows they can handle the distance, she wishes she could spend more time with her husband. "We're both so busy, so it's not like I'm sitting [around] waiting for him to come home, but it's just hard." Still, "we love being with the Packers organization [and] Lambeau," she says, naming Green Bay's legendary stadium. "The fans are...I wouldn't even call them crazy; they're dedicated. They love their players as if those are their children."

W **WHEN BILES GOT** back in the gym, she was sure that she wanted to go after a spot on the 2024 Olympic team. Her training and competition schedule suggest that's still the case. During an October 2023 episode of *Today*, when Hoda Kotb asked if wagering \$100 on Biles's return was a safe bet, the gymnast told her, "I think you'd be pretty lucky." She's much more coy about the decision over dinner, though.

"If I don't make it to Paris, it won't absolutely crush me," she says.

"So nothing definitive?"

"Correct," she says.

Sport has shaped Biles's life, but many other things fill it.

She adores spending time with her one-year-old niece, Ronni, and evenings drinking wine over FaceTime with her mother-in-law. The newlyweds are building a home in Spring and have a place in Green Bay, where she's become a box seat and sideline regular. Biles's reaction when Owens recovered a fumble for a touchdown during the Thanksgiving Day game against the Detroit Lions? An exclamation-point-heavy message on X (formerly Twitter): "That's my husband!!!!... My Mans My Mans My Manssss."

The following week, when the Packers played the Kansas City Chiefs, Biles arrived at Lambeau to a frenzy—over both her and Taylor Swift, who was there to support her boyfriend, Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce. "It's a little bit weird because I'm like, This is definitely not my gig," she says of seeing posters with her face on them. "But I know how excited [the fans] are." Though a Biles-Swift photo op would have definitely gone viral, "there was no selfie," Biles says. She and Swift were sitting in different sections, "and I'm not sure they were exactly happy that the Packers were beating them."

Currently, Biles is especially passionate about the work she's doing with Friends of the Children, a nonprofit that pairs kids in foster care with long-term mentors. "I'll always advocate for foster kids," she says. "I was a foster kid and something very out of the ordinary happened to me." While Biles knows she's an anomaly, she's hopeful that with enough support, more kids in foster care will graduate from high school, attend college, and go on to live full, successful lives. "We're opening a chapter in Houston," she says of the organization. "I think the kids deserve that."

A **AS BILES AND I** move on from the brussels sprouts to the deserts, she tells me that she's taking her friends out the following night. "I'm doing a little party bus," she says, sharing that they'll be headed to Ciel, a restaurant and lounge in central Houston featuring Vegas-like entertainment. "I'm so excited," she says, and understandably so. For every skill Biles mastered and medal she won, there was a birthday party she didn't go to or a school dance she skipped. "I used to be really sad about it," she says of all the moments she missed out on, "but [they] come back to you."

Dress by **Saint Laurent** by **Anthony Vaccarello**; sandals by **D'Accori**; earrings by **Schiaparelli**; bracelet by **Charlotte Chesnais**; ring (right hand) by **Mateo**. Throughout: wigs by **Parfait Tailored Hair**; makeup products by **Lancôme**; nail enamel by **Olivia Rae**.

For the past two hours, Biles's confidence has radiated across the dinner table. That self-assuredness "took a while to grow into," she says. It's palpable, but so is the faith and humility that keeps her grounded. "I never thought I'd be who I am," she says, "but look at God's blessings." ■

