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MARCH 11, 2002

Julia Roberts **SINGLE & LOVING IT!**

She's got a new guy
(again)! Is America's
sweetheart afraid
to settle down—or just
having too much fun?

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As She LIKES IT

New beau Danny Moder may be Mr. Right Now, but Julia Roberts still says 'I do' to being happily unmarried

No one does happy better than Julia Roberts. And at the Opium Gardens nightclub in Miami Beach last month, the girl in the jeans and pigtails was downright giddy: giggling, gabbing and generally glowing. One minute she was drinking Jack Daniel's with a group of pals, the next she was dancing with a buff blond in khakis and a T-shirt. The fact that he wasn't exactly light on his feet didn't seem to bother Roberts; the two partied until they left together at 5:30 a.m. "They were holding hands, kissing," says a witness. As they were over a shared bowl of chicken soup at the Cuban restaurant Puerto Sagua a day or so later. "They were quietly talking," says waiter Roberto Lazo. "They were *very* romantic." Right up until her beau left \$15 in cash on the table and headed out with Roberts for some afternoon window-shopping, leaving fellow diners to ponder whether a 33-year-old cameraman named Danny Moder might be, finally, The One.

"He's cute, very cute, a good guy for her," says one Roberts colleague of the low-profile L.A. native who has quietly but consistently been at her side for the past several months. "I



Roberts (with Danny Moder in L.A. last October) "is her own boss," says admiring pal Hector Elizondo.



Rumors that she dated *Ocean's 11* costar George Clooney (at the L.A. premiere in December) were "hilarious," Roberts said.

think she can settle down. I think she is ready now, actually. When she finds her true love—and this looks pretty real to me—she is going to settle down and want a family."

Tell that to Benjamin Bratt. Ten months ago Roberts and the 38-year-old actor she so openly adored parted because he wanted to settle down and have children and she did not. Why things would be different with Moder is unclear; Roberts isn't talking (she has yet to mention his name in an interview), and her close circle of friends are uniformly mute about the relationship. But never before has Roberts, 34, been so well-positioned to get what she wants. More than \$1 billion in box office sales and a Best Actress Oscar have lifted any career pressure. That allows her to pursue choice roles, such as her part as a reporter in Steven Soderbergh's low-budget drama *Full Frontal*, out in late March. The same holds true in her personal life; nine years after (briefly) marrying singer Lyle Lovett and proclaiming, "I want to have a family, raise kids," she has gained the confidence and self-knowledge to do nothing of the sort. "Julia keeps growing in her consciousness. She's matured," says her *Pretty Woman* costar Hector Elizondo. "She's someone who has overcome difficulties and now emerged a full-fledged human being, brave and comfortable with herself."

Unfortunately for Bratt, it took nearly four years together for her to realize that the white picket fence was everyone else's happy ending, not hers. "She's a bit of a gypsy," one source says of Roberts's unwillingness to commit. "You can't change who you are. It's like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole." After their breakup Bratt bought an Edwardian home in his native San Francisco and began a romance with Talisa Soto, 34, his costar in

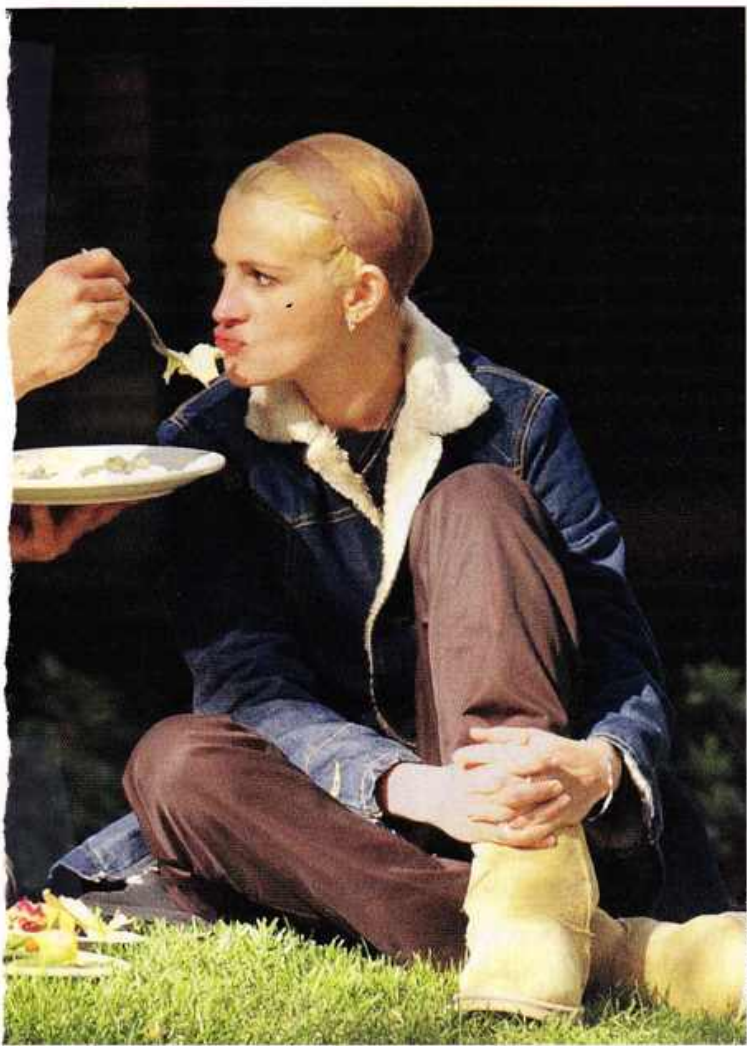
On the no-frills *Full Frontal* set (in L.A. in November), only Moder gave Roberts star treatment.



Piñero—and presumably a fellow round peg. "I'm done dating," the *Law & Order* vet says in last month's *Elle* magazine. "If I'm with you, there's an intent to be in a one-on-one, faithful relationship—and there's an army of women who feel that way too, I guarantee you."

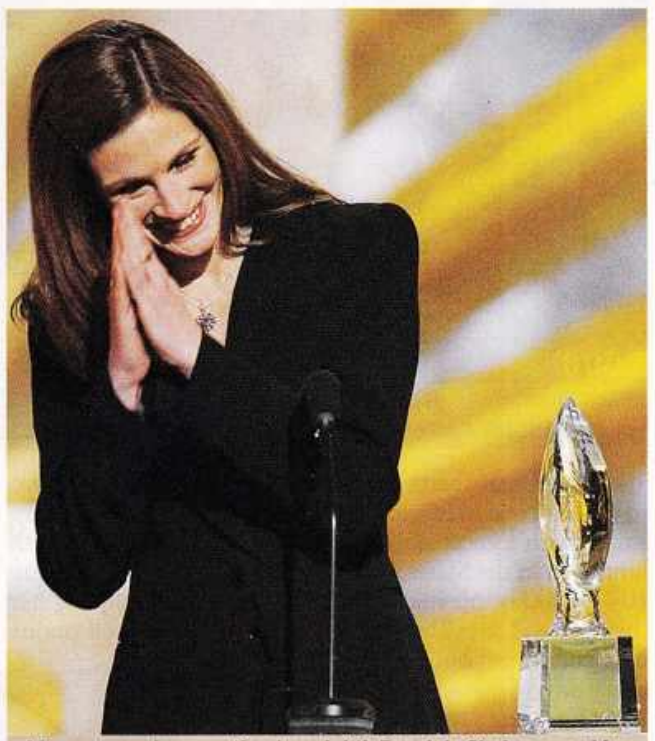
Roberts, meanwhile, has sworn allegiance to a different tribe—one stationed somewhere between the Smug Marrieds and the Thrilled to Be Single platoon led by her pal and *Ocean's 11* costar George Clooney, 40. "Julia's not a man-izer," says a colleague, pointing to her romantic record: broken engagements to Dylan McDermott and Kiefer Sutherland, followed by relationships with, among others, Jason Patric and Matthew Perry, a 21-month marriage to Lovett and, of course, Bratt. "She's a serial monogamist. When she's with her guy, she's with her guy." It's just that she wants to take happily-ever-after one day at a time. "I'm not a plotter or a planner," Roberts said when asked last year about marriage and motherhood. "I live for today."

So where does that leave Hollywood's bachelorette No. 1? Anywhere she wants to be: taking a walk, just her and her eight or so dogs, near her 51-acre ranch in Taos, N.Mex.; schussing down the slopes at nearby Angel Fire ski resort; or blissfully submitting to an impromptu leg massage on a couch at what one witness likened to a "pajama party" after a performance in Manhattan on Nov. 19 benefiting summer camps for seriously ill children. While Gwyneth Paltrow and Meryl Streep chatted at a postshow



JFK DIRECTOR/BAUER-GURTIN

“Julia keeps growing in her consciousness. She’s matured.”



ANDREW HUNTER

After nervously accepting her eighth People’s Choice award in January, Roberts admitted she still gets “flustered” onstage.



MATT BARNHILL

At a New York City benefit last November, “she seemed relaxed and happy,” says a guest about Roberts (with Gwyneth Paltrow).

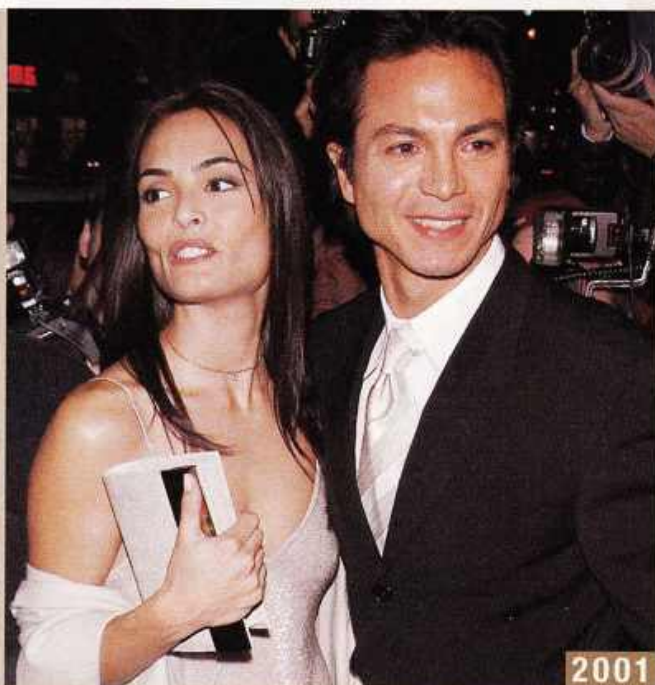
cocktail party, Roberts spent the evening on the couch with pals including her sister Lisa, 36, an actress in Manhattan, and her spokeswoman Marcy Engelman, 40. “They were all kind of splayed across each other,” says a guest. “They were just talking and laughing, like a girls’ night out.”

That kind of female bonding is crucial to Roberts’s peace of mind. Over the years, it seems, it has been the girls in her gang who have provided the stability that has eluded her in romance. While men have come and gone, Roberts’s mother, Betty, 67, an acting teacher, Lisa, Engelman and Roberts’s former agent turned business partner Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas, 42, always stick by her. “Whenever there is an event or an occasion, they’re there,” says one source. “That’s her core group. Them, and now Danny.”

But don’t expect her to wax rhapsodic for this guy as she did for Bratt. “I’m never going to talk about a man again for the rest of my life,” Roberts told *Esquire* in December. In this case, she has a good reason: Moder is still married. A 1987 Santa Monica High School graduate, Moder filed for divorce from his wife of four years, makeup artist Vera Steimberg Moder, 29, last October—six months



2000



2001

"He's disappointed at the way it ended with Julia. It hurt him a lot," a friend says of Benjamin Bratt (with Roberts at the Manhattan premiere of *The Next Best Thing*). But with new love Talisa Soto (at the New York City premiere of *Piñero*), "he's moved on."

after meeting Roberts while making *The Mexican*. Drawn to the man one of his pals describes as "vivacious and lively, smart, with a good sense of humor," she kept in touch with him back in the States. When Roberts and Bratt were quietly breaking up in May 2001, "Dan was helping her through it," says the friend. "Vera found his cell phone bills and found out he was calling Julia every day."

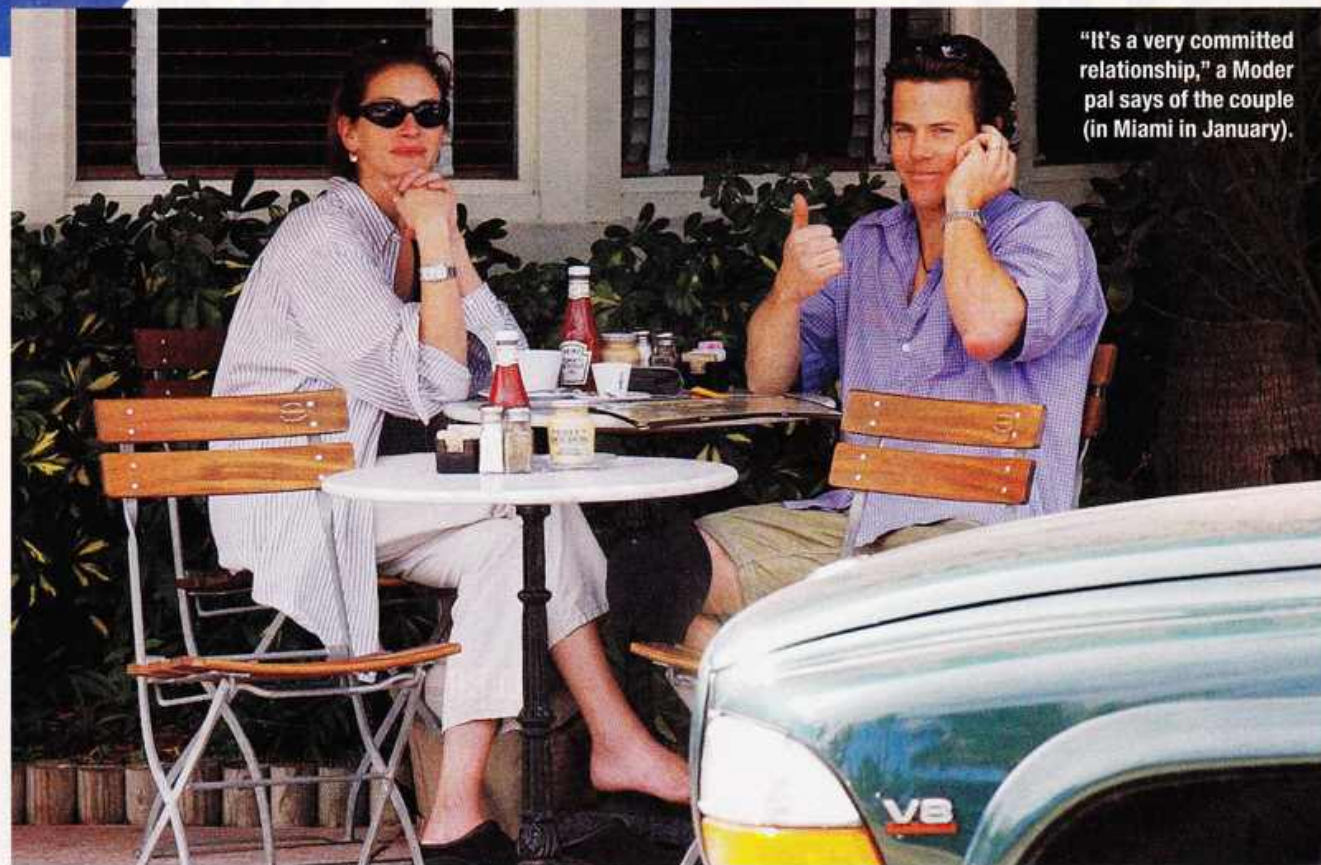
At least one purpose of the calls, says the source, was to help him get work on a low-budget film called *Grand Champion*. Starring Roberts's 11-year-old niece Emma (the daughter of her estranged older brother Eric, 45) and written and directed by longtime friend Barry Tubb, *Champion* was filmed last May and June in the tiny town of Snyder, Texas. The cast and crew stayed at the modest motel-style Beacon Lodge, where Moder had room 22, with Roberts, acting as Emma's guardian, next door. On a circle of grass enclosed by the motel, she and the *Champion* gang "barbecued and played music and football," says Beacon owner Shirley Schulze. Roberts was "very sweet and low-maintenance," Schulze adds. "A maid would come by, and she'd just tell her to leave fresh bed linen and she'd take care of it." Though now and then Roberts and Moder sat outside their rooms chatting and sipping soft drinks, their friendship, says Schulze, seemed just that: "It was innocent."



Vera Moder (in L.A. last August) hails from South America.

Roberts's idyll was jolted back into reality on June 28, when the news finally broke that she and Bratt were no longer an item. While promoting *America's Sweethearts*, Roberts gamely fielded questions about her love life, telling David Letterman that "I've been practicing in front of the mirror: 'Hi, I'm Julia. I'm single.'" Back in L.A., however, Vera Moder wasn't buying the act. According to one family friend, the marriage was already strained: "They were both on location a lot." Still, when her husband moved out of their Woodland Hills, Calif., home in late June, says another source, "Vera was devastated. She tried to reason with him. She said, 'Look at Julia's dating life. Are you going to give up four years of marriage for a fling?'"

The youngest son of Mike Moder, 65, a Hollywood producer (*Beverly Hills Cop*, *Crimson Tide*), and his homemaker wife, Patty, Danny did not see it as a casual affair. But his family, including four L.A.-based siblings, "were resistant to Julia because they all loved Vera," says a friend of the Moders'. When Patty died on Aug. 20 at age 63, Roberts had to walk a fine line between comforting her new beau and offending his grieving family. She apparently succeeded: At the end of August the Moder clan invited Roberts to their vacation home in Big Bear, about 100 miles from L.A. "They went water-skiing," says a friend, "and Julia went with them." Despite their sadness over



"It's a very committed relationship," a Moder pal says of the couple (in Miami in January).

PHOTO: PHOTOFEST

"Julia's not a man-izer. She's a serial monogamist,"

the end of Moder's marriage, he adds, "they do like Julia."

A month later it was clear to much of Austin, Texas, that Julia likes Danny too. At Goodie Two Shoes clothing and gift boutique in the hip shopping district of SoCo, in between picking up a \$28 silk wrap skirt (Moder paid with a \$100 bill) and "dancing around to the Jennifer Lopez music on my CD player," says saleswoman Noel Conley, Roberts "was kissing on her boyfriend. They were whispering and giggling." As they were at Therapy, where Moder chatted with saleswoman Sue Kutsche while Roberts browsed. "He wanted so badly to buy her a silver necklace or a belt buckle. So she tried some on for him," says Kutsche. "He's so dynamic and outgoing," she adds. "He's a perfect cover for her. She can be very low-key while he charms people."

They've left a trail of public displays of affection from coast to coast. In October, at her birthday party at the Malibu home of producer Jerry Weintraub, she twirled with him on the dance floor (when Emma let her cut in) in between chatting with pals Clooney, Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston. In November it was just the two of them, hand in hand, buying bubblegum and candy at the Four Seasons

hotel in Chicago, where she was narrating—and he was filming—a documentary about three centenarian women who have been best friends since childhood. Over the holidays they were spotted in Dublin and at the Adobe Bar in Taos. And a few weeks ago in Miami they shopped on the chic Lincoln Road, had drinks (champagne for her, beer for him) at the News Cafe and retired to the posh Loews Hotel after late-night partying.

Roberts presumably helps with the tab for such high living. "He's not a multimillionaire," notes one of his friends, adding that Moder is careful to "retain some sense of self." When they are in L.A., says the source, the two stay at Moder's modest apartment in Brentwood. "Some people might think it's an unusual match, with Julia being such a big star," he adds. But as he sees it, Moder's lack of fortune and fame is a plus: "Julia just wants to have a normal life."

Whatever that means. Her pal Elizondo is convinced that one day, Roberts will "no doubt" settle down. Maybe she'll even have the "whole gaggle" of kids she says she wants. But if for now just hanging out having fun is enough for her, it's also enough for her friends. "I take my hat off to her," says Elizondo. "She's a stand-up lady." Come what may, he says, "she'll do fine."

• Karen S. Schneider

• K.C. Baker and Elizabeth McNeil in New York City, Denise Sypsteyn in Miami, Zelig Pollon and Inez Russell in New Mexico, Anne Lang in Austin, Bob Stewart in Snyder, Rachel Biermann and Lorenzo Benet in Los Angeles and Lauren Comander in Chicago