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MATT LAUER
It's a boy
for *Today's*
cohost
and wife



**TRAGEDY
IN HOUSTON**
Inside
a family's
troubled home



**CARROLL
O'CONNOR**
Goodbye to
television's
Archie
Bunker

People

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JULY 9, 2001

Meg Ryan

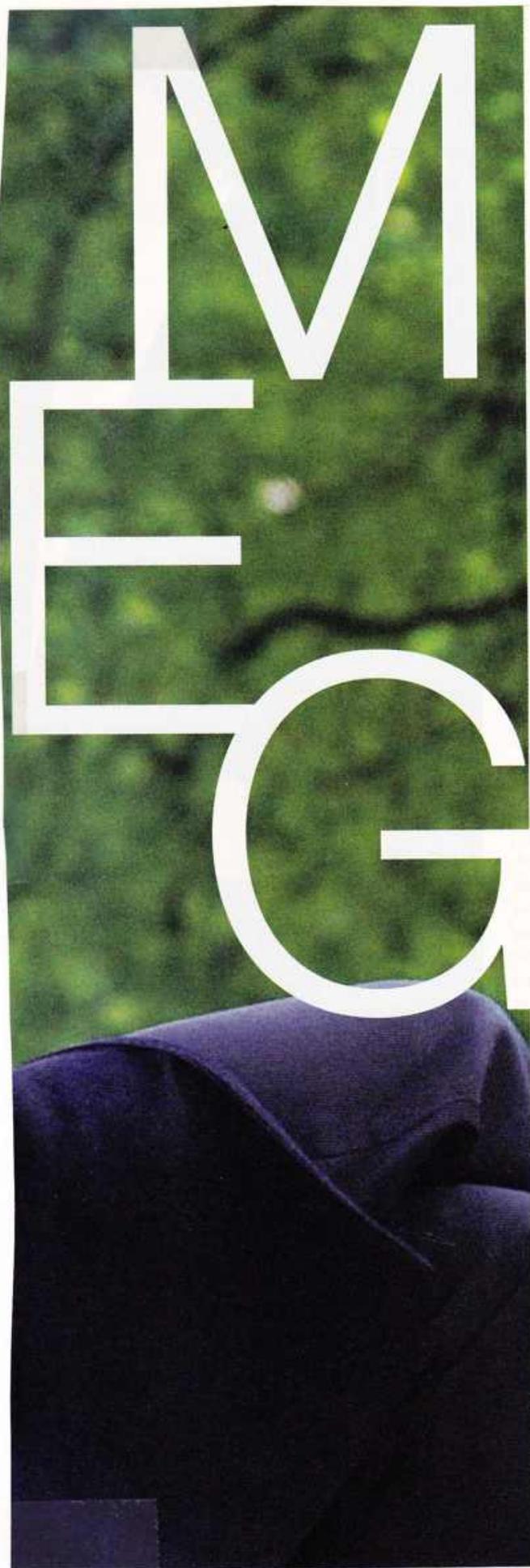
**NO
REGRETS**

Over Russell Crowe
and friendly with
her ex, Dennis Quaid,
she goes happily
solo—without
looking back

\$3.29



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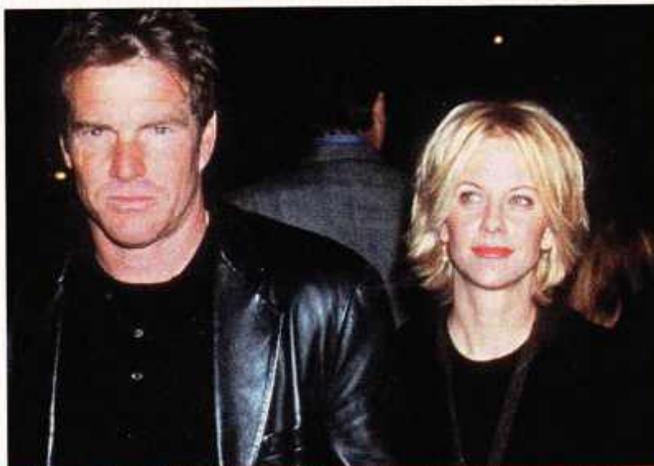


On Her Own

At the end of a tumultuous year that saw an end to both her marriage and a heated affair, Meg Ryan celebrates a new freedom

Talk about right time, right place: Bob Mitchell was in for one very happy surprise when he hobbled up to Onieal's bar and restaurant on April 19. A regular at the hip Manhattan hangout, the 41-year-old Off-Broadway producer—on crutches because of a broken leg—had just stepped inside when, from out of the din, a beautiful blonde in a skin-tight shirt ran up and wrapped him in a warm embrace. Seconds later, realizing that Mitchell was not, in fact, the old friend she'd mistaken him for, she apologized and quickly backed off. In a fit of giggles she returned to her gang of girlfriends (including singers Melissa Etheridge and k.d. lang), her margaritas (poured straight up in a martini glass) and a night of dancing. Mitchell, meanwhile, made his way to the bar, sat down on a stool and coolly informed the bartender, "Meg Ryan just gave me a big kiss."

Mitchell may be telling that story for years. But for Ryan, 39, the kiss was likely less memorable—unlike the ones she was doling out this time last year, when the British press reported that the girl-next-door star of *When Harry Met Sally . . .*, *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail* was



Ryan and Quaid (in L.A. in 1998) "make natural friends," says a pal of Ryan's. "Maybe that's a better format for them."



"Russell was trying to give her whatever she wanted," a friend says of Ryan (with Crowe in Santa Monica in '00). "He wanted to make it stick."

cheating on her husband of nine years, Dennis Quaid, 47, with her *Proof of Life* costar Russell Crowe, 37. Within weeks of announcing their separation on June 28, 2000, she and Quaid—whom Ryan had helped see through cocaine and alcohol trouble—filed for divorce. And amid the media frenzy that followed, Ryan's world turned upside down. She moved out of the \$2.9 million Brentwood, Calif., home she had shared with Quaid and their 9-year-old son Jack and into an \$8.9 million Bel Air home a few miles away. She closed her production company. She saw *Proof of Life* bomb at the box office. And she stood by bewildered while the world stood in judgment of her. Within months she had gone from America's Sweetheart to Scarlet Woman and finally—after reports that Crowe had dumped her—to Woman Scorned. Little wonder Ryan found the attention bizarre. "I haven't thought of myself as a famous person," she told *W* magazine last November, "until this recent episode in my life."

But as one close friend notes, Ryan was more than famous—she was a national icon of wholesomeness. "Meg was expected to adhere to this standard that others aren't," the pal says. "Her marriage wasn't supposed to fail. So when it did, it was almost as if she failed everybody." In fact, insists the friend, Ryan hadn't left Quaid for Crowe. That scenario, she maintains, "just has nothing to do with reality. Their marriage had had lots of problems for a long time. A big part of that was that they didn't see each other for long periods of time because of work."

Naturally, Ryan was hardly delighted to find herself cast as the villain—one of them, anyway—in an out-of-control media soap opera. "I definitely have moments of wanting to straighten it all out and tell everyone what really went down," she told *Harper's Bazaar* last January. "But, you know, who would I be proving anything to?"

In fact, by last week, when Ryan and Jack were traipsing through

BRUCE W. HARRIS

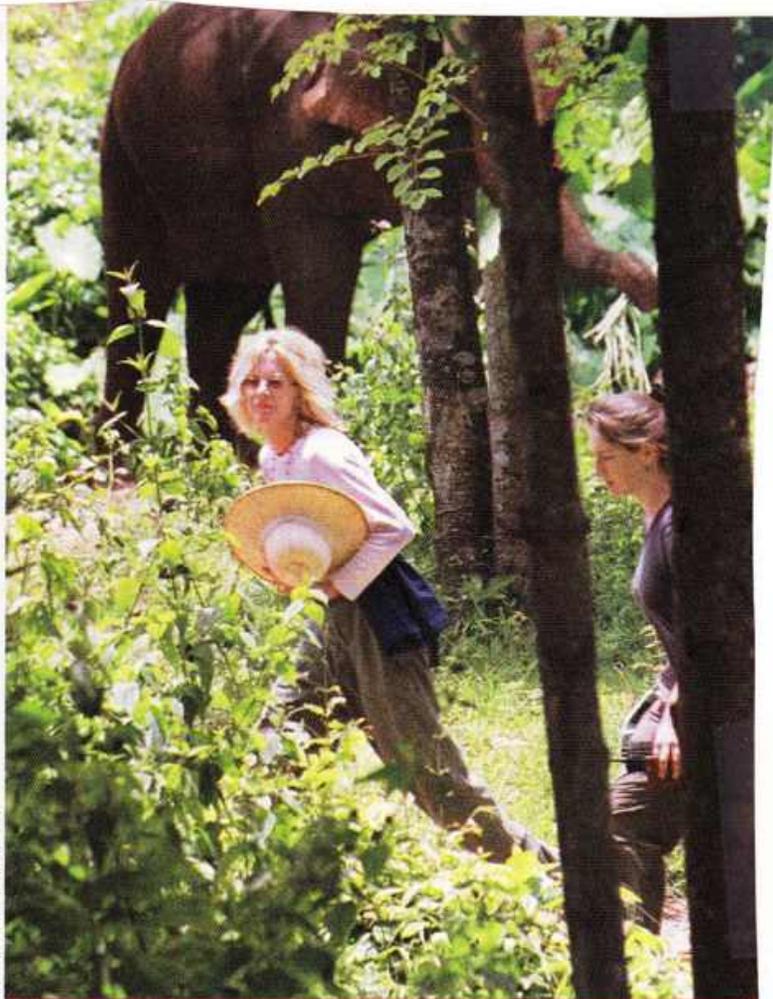
ANDREA RENAULT/GLOBE PHOTOS



“ Now is the moment for her to define herself as a solo person before she goes into her next relationship ”



Ryan (with actor-producer pal Griffin Dunne in Manhattan in April) has become a regular in the city, from its stores to restaurants. Says one shopkeeper: "She always says hello."



LEON SPACHBERG/REX FEATURES

Ryan (in Thailand in June) was "very easy" and inquisitive, says guide Lek Chailert; she had "no complaints" about sleeping in a hut without toilets.

Thailand—where the only available males she encountered were the elephants in a TV documentary she was making—proving her sense of balance on a mischievous 4-ton beast seemed her only concern. Sitting bareback on the neck of a 28-year-old female named Sao Yai, Ryan was "a little scared," says conservationist and guide Lek Chailert, when the elephant dipped down into a deep river sending water rushing around Ryan's knees. "But then she just laughed," she adds. "Sao Yai is very humorous. She was joking with Meg." And earlier this year, in Los Angeles and in Manhattan, where Ryan stayed in her three-bedroom Fifth Avenue apartment while shooting the romantic comedy *Kate & Leopold* this spring, the actress seemed bent on proving nothing at all. Says a neighbor in her building: "We see her all the time, in the lobby getting her mail, waiting for the elevator. She's very friendly and approachable. She goes shopping at the supermarket and carries her bags home by herself. She stands in line for coffee. She stands in line for take-out food. The doormen all adore her. She's adorable."

And content, apparently, being Single in the City. "She is coming from a very strong, positive place," says costume designer Donna Zakowska, who befriended Ryan while working on *Leopold*. "For some people, seeing her transition into being single could be a negative thing. But she is not looking at it that way. Now is the moment for her to define herself as a solo person before she goes into her next relationship."

By most accounts, Ryan's quest for self-definition began long be-



Crowe (filming *A Beautiful Mind* in March) "is very serious, a perfectionist," says a colleague.

fore last summer's controversy. As early as 1998, Ryan had spoken openly of "the danger" posed by the film careers that caused her and Quaid to lead largely separate lives. "That can be really disastrous," she said, "going off and having fun everywhere else but not together." By the time she arrived in Ecuador to film *Proof* last spring, the two were in serious trouble. And Crowe proved just the tonic for her malaise: a bad-boy ladies' man known for his bar brawls but also a gentle romantic who writes songs and poetry and spent hours just talking to Ryan—and listening. As Ryan later said: "To be heard—and really seen—is the ultimate turn-on."

Sufficiently ignited, Ryan did little to hide her feelings for Crowe once she and Quaid formally announced their split. "They seemed crazy about each other," says her friend. "They had great talks, they e-mailed each other a lot. He called her all the time." In early September the two were holding hands and kissing as they shopped in Santa Monica. A week later they were in Australia, taking in a rodeo in Nana Glen, a bushland hamlet where Crowe owns a 560-acre farm, and touring the country in his black BMW. The pair even conducted a make-believe house hunt through Sydney. "It was sweet," says Ryan's friend. "He'd point and say, 'How about that one?'"

For her part Ryan was "extremely infatuated" with Crowe, says a pal—and with reason. "He's a tough thing to resist," says her friend Carrie Fisher, adding with a laugh, "I was just glad I had a friend that got him. If I can't have him, I want to hear what he's like—at some point, when she's willing to talk." When, on Dec. 7, Ryan and Crowe strolled hand in hand through the tony furniture shops in L.A.'s Pacific Design Center, they "seemed happy," says someone who saw them buying a pricey Oriental rug at J.H. Minassian & Co. "Definitely a couple." They could not have been pleased, of course, when in subsequent days *Proof*

“Russell wanted to marry Meg and have kids with her”

of *Life* proved less than lively at the box office—and director Taylor Hackford declared their high-profile romance “disastrous” for the movie’s performance. The comment incensed Crowe, who later grumbled at the film’s London premiere, “He’s a f----- idiot.”

But bad box office wasn’t Crowe’s only problem. By late December colleagues and friends noticed a cooling of his and Ryan’s public ardor. “I think it was your typical costar fling, destined to run its course and burn out,” says one *Proof* crew member. But in fact, says Ryan’s friend, Crowe’s affection was only burning brighter: “Russell wanted to marry Meg and have kids with her.” For her part, she adds, Ryan felt that Crowe’s attention and gifts—



At first, the songs Quaid (in *Austin* in April) wrote after the breakup “were maudlin,” he says. Now they’re “joyful.”

including a puppy and a vintage 1963 Buick Riviera—were “too much too soon. It was overwhelming.” Still negotiating peace with Quaid and determined to protect Jack as much as possible, she reportedly began to back off. “She’s not dumb,” says her friend. “She was not looking to get into another relationship right away.” Reports of Ryan’s tearful refusal to go quietly, the pal says, “got it backwards.” On Dec. 21 Ryan, looking fatigued, checked solo into the St. Regis Hotel in Aspen, where she stayed a few days getting massages and wandering alone through shops “aimlessly,” says an observer, “like she was passing time.” Then she headed home to L.A. for a quiet Christmas with Jack, who spent half the day with her, half with Quaid.

Crowe handled the breakup differently, heading for Australia, where he threw rocking Christmas and New Year’s bashes and partied with various lady friends. But despite appearances, says Ryan’s friend, he still hoped to salvage the romance: “The guy is probably used to getting everything he wants. I don’t know that he could figure out what else he could do to make it work.” When Ryan turned down his request to accompany him to the Golden Globes on Jan. 21, the surly star—by now taking precautions against kidnapping threats—showed up late, left early and, as gossip columnist Liz Smith reported, ended the evening at the Hotel Bel-Air with Courtney Love. More disturbing to Ryan was his failure to publicly deny the Russell-dumped-Meg reports. “Nobody corrected the misperception,” the friend says. “He never came to her aid. It still works to humiliate her.”

Perhaps it shouldn’t. His gruff exterior aside, Crowe’s re-



"A wonderful mother," says *Kate & Leopold* writer-director James Mangold of Ryan (in Los Angeles in December with Jack). "She's embracing the world."

LUDWIG MATHERN

gard for Ryan seems undeniable. "Meg is a beautiful and courageous lady," he told *Melbourne's Herald Sun* in February. Though he attributed their breakup to her need to be in the U.S. and his to "wake up in the sun [and] walk around under the trees" on his farm in Australia, he sounded regretful. The romance gave him "a lot of light, mate," he said, adding, "I'm an expert at unrequited love."

Ryan, meanwhile, seems to have become an expert at healing. Since her breakup with Crowe, she and Quaid have settled into a friendly relationship. For Jack's birthday in April, the two were together in Montana, where Quaid has kept the 100-acre ranch he owned before marrying. And in May, Ryan had her arms around both her son and her ex on a Sunday stroll in Beverly Hills. "Dennis is a good guy," says Ryan's friend. "Meg talks sweetly about him. He is a good dad, and both he and Meg are absolutely hands-on parents." To protect Jack, says a source close to both of them, they have agreed not to let dates spend the night at

their homes or become too involved in Jack's life for another year.

Not that there seems to be anyone on the horizon. Last winter Quaid was seen with (and kissing) Andie MacDowell, 43, his costar in the forthcoming drama *Dinner with Friends*, but MacDowell's rep denies any romance between the Montana neighbors. Like Crowe, Quaid has his own band—the Sharks (named by Jack)—who appeared regularly in Quaid's home state of Texas while he filmed *The Rookie* in Austin this spring. (Among their numbers: a cover of the Rolling Stones' chestnut "It's All Over Now.") He has also been spotted in clubs from Milan to Manhattan (where he did a bar-top boogie at the hot downtown bar Hogs & Heifers in January), happily hanging with any number of beautiful women.

So, for that matter, has Ryan. She attended a black-tie benefit for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria in March with Melissa Etheridge, danced until 3 a.m. at the gay singer's champagne-and-caviar birthday party at Santa Monica's Buffalo Club in May and sang backup on "Heal Me" on Etheridge's new album *Skin*. The relationship, however, has not gone beyond strictly platonic. Says her friend with a laugh: "Believe me, there's nothing intriguing there."

Though more complicated than she appeared to be a year ago, Ryan is still Ryan—not the cute blonde innocent she has played so often onscreen but still the \$20 million-per-picture superstar who, as producer Sam Goldwyn Jr. puts it, "I would get down on my knees" to work with. Over the next few months, she could choose to date or, as one friend says, "take a break and reflect." She could get funky and move to Manhattan's Greenwich Village (she recently put her \$7.2 million Central Park co-op on the market and is looking at lofts downtown). But one thing is certain: She won't disappear. "If people in the Bible Belt think what she did was wrong," says leading casting agent Mike Fenton, "it may be hard to get really big [box office] numbers for a while. But it will soon be forgotten." Agrees producer Robert Cort (*Runaway Bride*), who is talking to Ryan about playing female boxing manager Jackie Kallen: "Meg Ryan is rock solid."

- Karen S. Schneider
- Bruce Stockler in New York City, Michelle Caruso, Vicki Sheff-Cahan and Julie Jordan in Los Angeles, Vickie Bane in Aspen, Matt Birkbeck in Princeton, N.J., Anne Lang in Austin, Simon Perry in London, Dennis Passa in Sydney and Karen Emmons in Thailand



For more photos of Meg Ryan, go to www.people.com or AOL (Keyword: People)