

# Kerry's Choice

She's been the leading lady to two Oscar winners, yet for actress Kerry Washington, taking the lead in her own life

has been challenging. Now, having faced her personal demons, she tells Jeannine Amber she's poised for new heights



PHOTOGRAPHED BY DANIELA FEDERICI STYLED BY AGNES CAMMOCK

Kerry wears an Elie Saab dress, a Michelle Flaherty belt, Yves Saint Laurent shoes and a Lorraine Schwartz ring. ▷

It was the fall of 2004. *Ray* had just hit theaters, and Kerry Washington, the wide-eyed talent who shone opposite Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles's beleaguered wife, was beginning to feel the heat.

Suddenly people were coming up to her—in the street, at the grocery store—acting as if they knew her and wanting to chat. “I love what I do,” says Washington, sitting in a corner booth in Angelica's Kitchen, a vegan restaurant in Manhattan's East Village, where as recently as 2001 she supplemented her acting with a part-time job as a hostess. “So I like when people want to talk to me about my work.”

But sometimes things get weird. Like the time a man called “Hey, Kerry!” to her on the street. Although she didn't recognize him, she responded warmly, thinking he must be someone she had gone to college with. “I let him into my personal space. Then he starts saying, ‘Your ass was incredible in [Spike Lee's] *She Hate Me*,’ ” she recalls with a shudder. “It made me realize I wasn't always going to be in control of who knew me, how they knew me, or what they thought of me.”

To another actress, these intrusions might be tallied up as the price of blossoming fame. But Washington, who is by her own admission very sensitive, finds these encounters completely unnerving. “I used to be the girl who would show up at the airport in pajamas, because no one was ever trying to take my picture,” she says. “Suddenly I was losing my anonymity, and I became really scared, scared of my career. I felt trapped and powerless, as if I had put myself in a corner.” At the same time, Washington's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer (she's currently in remission). So despite the swirl of accolades and awards shows that came in the wake of *Ray*, the actress, who turned 30 this past January, found herself sinking into depression.

In December 2004, Washington and her then fiancé, actor David Moscow, flew to Thailand for a vacation. Before making their way to their beachfront hotel, they dropped by to see some of Washington's extended family living in Bangkok. The family persuaded the couple to spend the night. The next morning a tsunami, which affected several countries surrounding the Indian Ocean and would kill almost 300,000 people, struck the village the couple had intended to visit. Washington awoke to find their hotel had been completely destroyed. “It was just...gone,” she says. That moment changed everything.

## AFTER THE STORM

Washington says that when she woke up the morning after the tsunami, she thought, *Okay. As scared as I might be about all the unknowns in my life, I'm alive. I should embrace the adventure rather than have it put me in a corner and shut me down.*

“So I started looking for ways to be a positive participant in my life, rather than letting my life control me,” the actress says. “Like, with my mother's breast cancer. I thought, *Here's an opportunity for us to move closer together, for me to support her the way she has supported me my whole life.*”

“The other thing it affirmed for me is to trust my instincts,” she continues. “As women of color, we're constantly feeling like we have to make choices for other people. What will make *him* happy? What will make *them* happy? But when I decided to stay

in Bangkok for that night, it didn't feel like I was ‘supposed to.’ It felt like there was so much love coming from my family, and I should just move in the direction of the love I deserve. Since then I've really tried to stay in that frame of mind—to trust my intuition and go where the love is. That's my guiding light.”

If recent history is any indication, Washington's light has served her well. In a profession often criticized for its dearth of opportunities for Black women, she's been tapped for an array of roles, starring in everything from action-packed blockbusters like *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, which opened last month, to gritty indie flicks like *The Dead Girl*, in which she mesmerized audiences as a young woman laid bare by her friend's murder. Unlike some of her contemporaries, whose celebrity often overshadows their attempt to inhabit a character, on-screen Washington virtually disappears. It's not an actress we see, it's a desperate Ugandan wife in *The Last King of Scotland*, a charismatic shoplifter in *Lift*, a manipulative temptress sashaying into the life of another woman's man in *I Think I Love My Wife*.

“I used food as a way to cope. It was my best friend. There was a lot of guilt and shame.”

Her acting appears effortless, but Washington's preparation is intense. For her role as a transgendered prostitute in the upcoming *Life Is Hot in Cracktown*, Washington spent months working with transgendered activist Valerie Spenser. At her own expense, Washington paid Spenser to show up on set every day to ensure the actress's performance rang authentic. “When I'm working, I give myself over to my characters,” she says. “I literally lend my life to them.”

## THE PRICE OF PERFECTION

But all this focus can take its toll. For years as a college student, Washington, who has the petite frame and high forehead of a ballerina, suffered through what she describes as an abusive relationship with food and exercise: compulsive overeating followed by endless workouts to erase the damage. “I used food as a way to cope,” she says. “It was my best friend.” Washington would hide in her dorm room, bingeing on whole pizzas, pints of ice cream, entire jars of peanut butter, and plates of fries. “I'd eat anything and everything,” she says, “sometimes until I passed out. But then, because I had this personality that was driven toward perfectionism, I would tell people I was at the library, but instead go to the gym and exercise for hours and hours and hours. Keeping my behavior a secret was painful and isolating. There was a lot of guilt and a lot of shame.”

Washington finally sought help after her dance teacher, sensing something was wrong, approached her. “I started therapy, which I still do today,” says Washington. “I also see a nutritionist and I meditate. Learning how to love myself and my body is a lifelong process. But I definitely don't struggle the way I used to. Therapy helped me realize that maybe it's okay for me to communicate my feelings. Instead of literally stuffing them



Kerry wears an Oscar de la Renta dress.

down with food, maybe it's okay for me to express myself.”

These days it appears that Washington has no problem speaking her mind. She's wildly expressive and deeply analytical, her language laced with literary references, metaphors, yoga terminology and plenty of self-help-y affirmations. Warm and thoughtful, she's charmingly optimistic, even in the face of her recent breakup with her fiancé, with whom she had been living for almost five years. Although the relationship was interracial (one African-American blog dismissively described him as her “Something New”), the split had nothing to do with race. “I have relatives who are from Nepal, Thailand, Puerto Rico,” says Washington. “So it wasn't a huge departure for me to be with someone who wasn't Black. I know people were making comments about it online. But I don't live my life based on bloggers; I live my life based on what my heart is telling me to do.”

Washington says the breakup last February was mutual and amicable and based more on the couple's sense that things just

weren't working than on who did what to whom. “When we were planning the wedding, I didn't even feel like picking out a dress,” she says. “But I didn't rush things; I let my intuition guide me. We realized that even though we love each other on a very profound level, we were doing emotional gymnastics to try to work things out. We thought that instead, maybe we should walk away. Of course, that doesn't mean it hasn't been painful.”

Still, Washington is determined to keep following her light. “No matter how bad things are—whether it was the period when I first sought out treatment for my eating disorder or when my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer or when the engagement dissolved—I know the other side is going to be better,” she says. “Maybe even miraculously better. I hold on to that.” □

**Jeannine Amber is senior writer for ESSENCE.**

➤ VISIT [ESSENCE.COM](http://ESSENCE.COM) TO WATCH EXCLUSIVE BEHIND-THE-SCENES FOOTAGE OF OUR COVER SHOOT WITH KERRY WASHINGTON.

HAIR: YUSEFF/FACTORY DOWNTOWN. MAKEUP: SHAWNELLE PRESTIDGE/WALTER SCHUPFER. MANICURIST: JIN SOONJED ROOT. FOR CLOTHING DETAILS, SEE WHERE TO BUY.