



Vintage Levi's jacket, £65, Rokit. Cotton T-shirt, £65, Marina Rinaldi. Shorts, Ashley's own. Leather sandals, £995, Christian Louboutin. White gold and diamond earrings; white gold and diamond ring, both from a selection, Chopard

*This self-proclaimed 'body activist' consistently and intelligently challenges the designers and buyers who refuse to take larger women into account*



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would I ever want to lie about that, or Photoshop the pictures?’

On the contrary, the self-proclaimed ‘body activist’ consistently and intelligently challenges the designers and buyers who refuse to take larger women into account. ‘It’s ugly that there aren’t enough clothes in stores for women that go up to a size 22 or 24,’ she says. ‘As a curvy girl you get the feeling you’re a second-class citizen. I want women to accept themselves. I have so many friends, skinny, really heavy and in between, who all have the same insecurities.’

So although she enjoys modelling, her ambitions are grander: her secret dream is to be a Bond Girl, starring opposite Idris Elba – ‘That would be a double first!’ Meanwhile, she is hoping to present her own motivational TV show, and plans to run self-esteem workshops and seminars around America and in Britain, as well as expanding her brand into skincare and developing her role as a designer for women of ‘all sizes and ages’. (Her collaboration with Marina Rinaldi has already been a global success.)

The crew breaks for lunch and I follow Graham, now wrapped in a blanket, as she weaves her way through a phalanx of paparazzi to her trailer. ‘Ashley, show us what you’ve got,’ shouts one photographer. She smiles sunnily for their cameras, then settles down for a lunch of chicken, broccoli and lentils.

The following morning, we meet again in a café near her home in Brooklyn; Graham dashes in drenched from a sudden shower, without make-up, hair clinging to her bomber jacket, dressed in leggings and a beige Champion sweatshirt. We sit side by side on a battered brown leather sofa as the café fills up with mothers and toddlers. Graham smiles at everyone; her default demeanour is upbeat and joyful, with a cheeriness that isn’t usually associated with the fashion world. ‘It’s known as an icy, cold, hard place,’ she says, and recalls a fellow judge on *America’s Next Top Model* instructing a contestant ‘to look less happy and more harsh, but I told her, “I think you should continue to be nice and bubbly, because that’s who you are.” I love talking to people, looking them in the eye. I think that makes people feel more at home with me.’ And it’s true: Graham is disarmingly friendly, and I soon feel as if I’ve known her for years. Perhaps it’s because she eats proper food, rather than existing on the fabled model diet of cigarettes, salad and Diet Coke. ‘I don’t know,’ she says with a hearty laugh, ordering black coffee and avocado on toast, ‘but I’m simply not able to adhere to strict rules around deprivation. I get upset, “hangry”, when I’m not eating. I would never go on a major diet and work-out spree just to be thin.’ As a young model, she says, she tried every fad diet to lose weight, ‘but it never worked. So I was like, screw this, I’m just going to be me.’ She consulted a nutritionist and found her own healthy weight. ‘Although I don’t follow a regimented diet, I know that if I OD on pasta three nights in a row,

feel fat, of course I do,’ she continues, ‘but I’ve come to a place where I’m like, the cellulite’s not leaving, and I’m not going to beat myself up about it, I’ll embrace it. Some women say, “I can’t get out of bed, I’m never going to find a man, or get that job that I want, because of the way that I look.”’ Those emotions don’t apply to Graham these days, but she can relate to them, because they dominated her teens. She grew up with two sisters in a staunchly Baptist household in Nebraska. Her mother, Linda, was supportive, but she describes her business-consultant father (from whom her mother has now divorced) as ‘a dark presence. My dad was very critical and harsh. He was physically there but absent emotionally’.

Graham was athletic, playing football, basketball and volleyball, but was diagnosed as dyslexic at the age of nine. She didn’t do well academically and was taunted by her father. ‘He thought I was stupid because I had a really low reading level and I wasn’t good at maths. His nickname for me was “Duh”. That puts a lot of pressure on a kid.’



Cotton vest, £57; cotton trousers, £195, both Marina Rinaldi. White gold and diamond earrings, from a selection, De Beers. White gold and diamond ring, Chopard

**‘I love my body. When I look in the mirror, I see a woman who is strong and ambitious, satisfied with who she is’**

on the fourth night, I’ll be craving some vegetables.’

To those critics who accuse her of promoting an unhealthy lifestyle because of her size, she points out that she works out regularly at the gym. Two years ago, she participated in an experiment on *Good Morning America*, along with a size-two model, which entailed both women undergoing a series of medical and fitness tests, designed to examine the correlation between health and weight. ‘I actually tested healthier than her,’ says Graham. ‘It proved that health comes in all shapes and sizes.’

‘I still wake up some mornings and



THIS PAGE: cotton vest, £57; cotton trousers, £195, both Marina Rinaldi. White gold and diamond earrings, from a selection, Dior Joaillerie. White gold and diamond ring (right hand), £3,900, Chanel Fine Jewellery. White gold and diamond ring (left hand), from a selection, Chopard. OPPOSITE: cashmere coat, £1,453, Marina Rinaldi. Knickers, about £25, Ashley Graham Collections



*She is the picture of glowing health, with olive skin, sloping cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes*

First spotted in a shopping mall close to her family's home in Nebraska, when she was just 12 and a size 16, she was subsequently signed by the prestigious Wilhelmina agency. An early assignment was for Jennifer Lopez's clothing line, JLo, and her ascent was marked by high-profile campaigns for companies ranging from Levi's to Calvin Klein and Marina Rinaldi. But at school she was bullied. 'Girls would call me "cottage-cheese thighs" and "thunder thighs". They'd be like, "Wide load coming through. Beep, beep!" I hated school.'

Living in these two distinct worlds was confusing, she says. 'As a model, people are telling you you're beautiful, and at school, people are telling you you're ugly. They would say, "You're not really a model, you're a fat model." It was humiliating.' How did she cope? 'I think I just put my head down and internalised it.' In an attempt to cheer her up, her mother would take her shopping, 'which would be very depressing, because clothes I liked would never fit me'. But her mother would point out: 'Ashley, you've made more money than some doctors. Why do you care about these girls calling you fat?'

The confusion Graham felt about her appearance and weight was compounded by a profoundly traumatic sexual assault by a family friend when she was 10. 'I think that that was a pivotal moment in shaping my relationship with men.' Understandably, her teenage years were troubled. When, aged 17, she moved to New York to further her career, she started taking drugs: 'Ecstasy, coke, all of it. I was never addicted but I tried everything.' She also drank heavily. 'I almost got kicked out of my agency because I came in one day with tequila on my breath. I was told, "You're not a professional and you shouldn't be in this agency," and it freaked me out to the point where I was like, "I could lose my career."'

Although she stopped taking drugs and cut down on drinking, she was unable to rid herself of an abusive relationship with an alcoholic she refers to as Carlos, who on one occasion chased her around her kitchen with a butcher's knife. 'I was distraught and locked myself in the bathroom,' she says. Instead of calling the police, she phoned her mother, who demanded to speak to Carlos. 'I don't know what she said to him, but he started crying and put the knife down.'

What's interesting, spending time with the self-assured woman beside me, is that even after this attack, she couldn't summon the courage to split up with her boyfriend. 'I was too insecure,' she says. 'As a child I had been told I was dumb, and then I was told, "You did this to me," by that guy when I was 10 years old.' Meanwhile, she

continued seeing Carlos secretly. 'I thought that he was the only man I could have.'

Finally extricating herself from the relationship, with the help of a close friend 'who told me that I deserved better', Graham made two decisions. 'I regained my power by stating to myself, "I'm not having sex until I'm married," and I went back to my Christian roots.'

She joined a non-denominational church in Manhattan, which she credits with changing her life and providing a stabilising influence. 'Church was the place I needed to go and find myself, because I had lost Ashley,' she says quietly.

It was also the place where she found her husband. Volunteering at her mother's suggestion, she was working at the church, operating the lift, one Sunday in 2009 when the cinematographer Justin Ervin came in. 'We rode it up and down, and up and down, he was super charming and then he asked me out for coffee.'

So what was it that drew her to him? 'He was consistent. To finally have a man talk to me about who I am was eye-opening and refreshing and intriguing,' she says. In retrospect, she reflects that by the time she met Ervin, she had built up her self-esteem, which

meant she was open to having a healthy relationship. 'I had never known before how to have full-on communication with a man because I never had it with my father or with boyfriends growing up, and I didn't have it with my agents, because they were always picking apart my body.' There were never any negative comments about her size from Ervin. 'I once asked, "Am I the curviest girl you've ever dated?" And he was like, "Yeah, but I hadn't thought about it." And that was that.'

Sticking to her commitment, the relationship remained chaste until they walked down the aisle in August 2010. Today, they lead a happily domestic existence in a brownstone in Brooklyn. 'Last

night he made a dairy-free Alfredo pasta with vegetables and chicken. It was delicious.' She pauses for effect and flashes me a mock-guilty eye-roll, 'but then my assistant ordered a Nutella cupcake and a chocolate pudding pie and we just all dived in; why not?'

Towards the end of our conversation Graham glances at her phone and gasps: she has just been included in *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential list, along with the Oscar winners Viola Davis and Emma Stone. 'I'm so proud of myself,' she says, 'to know that I'm making an impact in millions of people's lives.'

Why does she think she has been singled out? 'I've been told I'm a pioneer and a trailblazer, that I changed the game, but to me, I'm just a model who happens to know how to talk to women about loving the skin they're in,' she says with a shrug. 'I'm trying to convey that confidence and feeling sexy is about being comfortable with who you are.' □

**'I want women to accept themselves. I have friends, skinny, heavy and in between, who all have the same insecurities'**

Wool and cashmere blazer, £1,088; dress, £530, both Marina Rinaldi. White gold and diamond earrings, from a selection, Chopard



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Lace dress, £527, Marina Rinaldi. Velvet sandals, £395, Rupert Sanderson. White gold and diamond necklace, from a selection, De Beers



*'Confidence is about being comfortable with who you are'*

Cashmere top, £242, Marina Rinaldi. Denim shorts, £139, Good American. Leather sandals, £535, Manolo Blahnik. White gold earrings, £3,950, Chanel Fine Jewellery. See Stockists for details. Hair by Teddy Charles at the Wall Group. Make-up by Romy Soleimani at Streeters, using Clé de Peau Beauté. Manicure by Honey at Exposure NY. Prop stylist: Todd Wiggins at Magnet Agency. Flowers by Adore Floral Ince (www.adorenyc.com). Production by Kranky Productions. Stylist's assistants: Lucy Kebell and Julianna Alabado. Help save the Elizabeth Street Garden, New York (www.elizabethstreetgarden.com). Ashley Graham is an ambassador for Marina Rinaldi

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