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# PALM SPRINGS LIFE.

## EMMA STONE

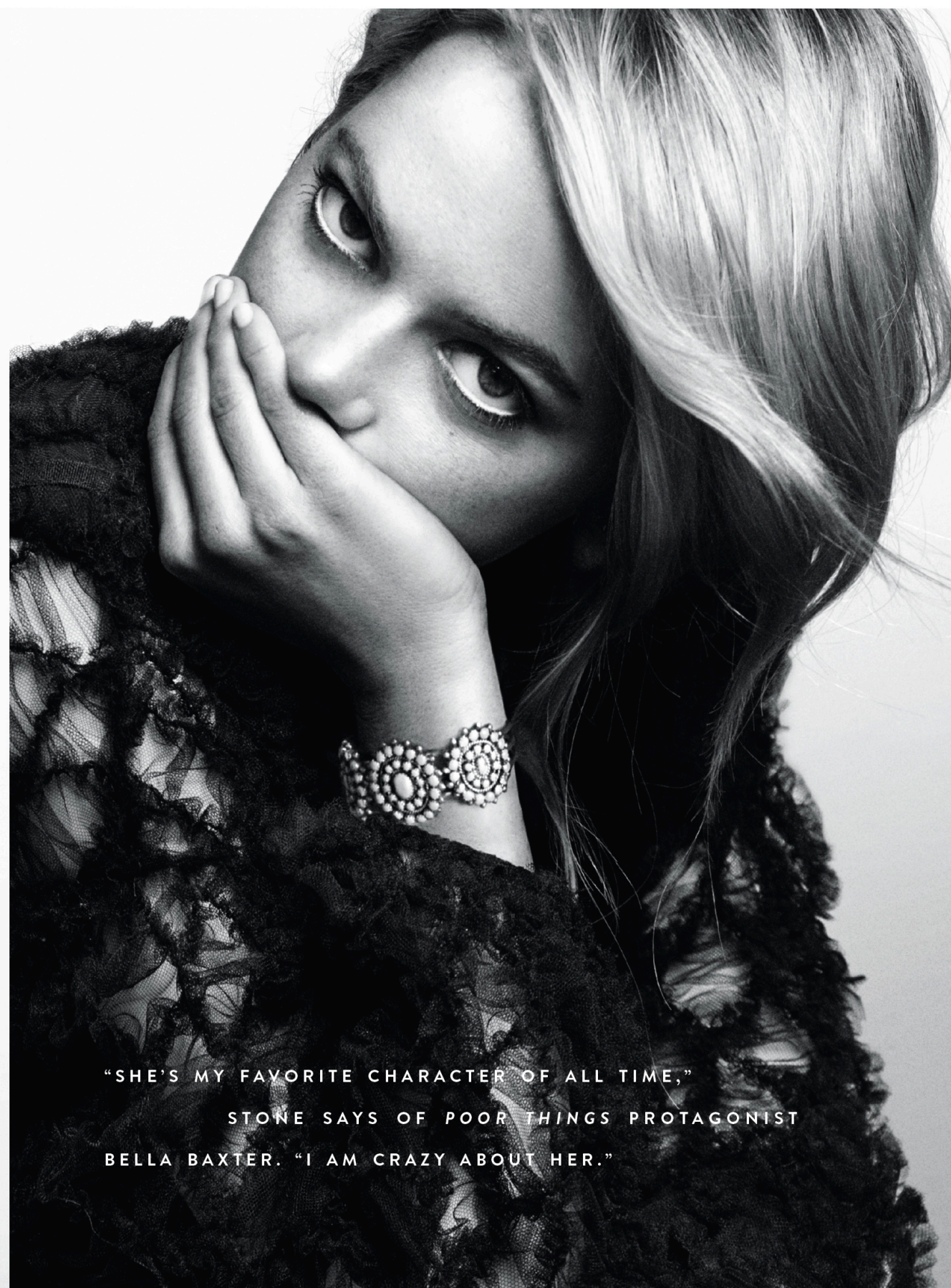
AT THE  
PALM SPRINGS  
INTERNATIONAL  
FILM FESTIVAL



LILY GLADSTONE  
HAS ARRIVED

JULIA WHELAN  
TALKS AUDIOBOOKS

EARLY WRITERS  
ON THE DESERT



"SHE'S MY FAVORITE CHARACTER OF ALL TIME,"

STONE SAYS OF POOR THINGS PROTAGONIST

BELLA BAXTER. "I AM CRAZY ABOUT HER."



A full-page background image featuring Emma Stone standing on the wooden deck of a ship at night. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved dress with a long, flowing green shawl draped over her shoulders. She is looking out over the dark, choppy ocean towards a distant, illuminated coastline under a dramatic, cloudy night sky. The ship's railing is visible in the foreground.

BURNING  
DOWN

THE  
HOUSE

In her new film, *Poor Things*,  
EMMA STONE plays a lab-baked science  
experiment set adrift in a complex and cynical world.  
It's her most challenging — and provocative — role yet,  
and it's earned her a Desert Palm Achievement Award  
at the Palm Springs International Film Festival.

STORY BY CLINT CARTER

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Director Yorgos Lanthimos approached Stone about *Poor Things* before he even had a script. She jumped on the part and the opportunity to serve as a producer.

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# EMILY STONE WAS

CERTAIN THE HOUSE was on fire. She was 7 years old, sleeping over at a friend's house. She couldn't see the flames, but she could sense the inferno closing in fast. "The house is burning down," she remembers saying. "No, it's not," her friend replied.

Emily lost it. "It for sure is! It for sure is!"

She was experiencing her first panic attack, and she'd go on to have hundreds more. "It feels like someone's squeezing you in a vice, but there's no one there," she says over a Zoom call in November. The actors' strike has just ended, so Stone is in the midst of a press blitz. For months, she's had to stay silent about her new film, *Poor Things*, which hit theaters Dec. 8. Now that she can talk, she's racing to make up for lost time. "I'm gonna grab a coffee really quickly just outside of my door," she says as the video flicks on. "I'm going to be literally right back. You won't even believe it. You'll be like, 'Did she even go anywhere?'"

She returns — lightning fast, as promised — ready to talk with chunky headphones over blonde hair. By all appearances, she seems as cool and unguarded as you'd expect Emma Stone to be, if not a bit more caffeinated. But she swears interviews are the most nerve-racking part of her job — far more so than performing. "Press gives me a lot more anxiety," she says. "It really does, because now I'm gonna go over all the things I said to you today."

The irony here is that Stone is famously charming, and despite being only 35, she's been doing this for two decades. Since moving to Hollywood as a teen, she's appeared in two dozen movies and had starring roles in three TV shows. Her latest, Showtime's *The Curse*, is a cringe-comedy spoof on HGTV reality television, and her new film, *Poor Things*, is jockeying for an early lead in awards season. For her role in the Yorgos Lanthimos-directed fantasy, Stone will visit the Coachella Valley this month to receive the Desert Palm Achievement Award at the Palm Springs International Film Festival.

To understand how Stone has amassed her impressive body of work, it helps to understand the role acting has played in her life. She began appearing in plays around the time of that first panic attack, and when she was 11, she threw herself into community theater. "Acting was such an amazing discovery when I was a kid, because it forces you to be present," she says. Anxiety is "always about the future or the past — something I said, something I did, what's going to happen." But as she discovered, acting and improv classes could free her from self-flagellation. "You really can't be anxious if you are in the moment."

In real life, people don't have grandiose origin stories. It's not like it is in Stone's 2021 film *Cruella*, where her character's diabolic nature grows directly from the pain planted while watching her mother get run off a cliff by dalmatians. That's just movie stuff. But let's suspend belief for a second, because if Stone's exceptional career could be pinned to one event, the fire-that-was-no-fire is it. That's when Emily Stone, the girl with panic-inducing anxiety, began to transform into Emma Stone, the Hollywood star with a Bafta, a Golden Globe, and an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role. And this year, she's racking up more.

Stone isn't overly sentimental about awards, but she acknowledges that her accolades have granted her a certain amount of creative freedom. "In the past, I would say, five years, there has been an opportunity to move into realms I never expected," she says. And she knows the moment won't last forever, so she's trying to capitalize on it by seizing roles that keep the fire burning in her belly.

STONE HAS AN UNUSUAL ability to manifest realities that are more impressive than the ones she imagines. Long before becoming an awards-season titan, she often





Willem Dafoe joins Stone on screen as the scientist who brings Bella Baxter to life. “She’s very passionate about what she does, very disciplined, but not a drag to be around,” he observes of his co-star. “She was totally on her game.”

professed that her only professional ambition was to appear on *Saturday Night Live*. “Other than *SNL*, I have absolutely no goal,” she told *BlackBook* in 2009. And wouldn’t you know it, she was invited to host the very next year.

For her opening monologue inside Studio 8H, the 22-year-old rising star walked onstage with nerves on full display. Her breath was quick and shallow, her face tight. “I’ve wanted to be on this stage since I was a little girl,” she said, fidgeting with her hands. “It is truly a dream come true, so I just want to say to all the 14-year-old girls out there...” Here, she pivots from Emily to Emma, the kid with anxiety to the actress with comedic wit and performance in her bones: “Drop out of school and move to L.A., because it *always* works out.”

The world already knew Stone could hold her own in comedy. Early projects like *Superbad* (2007) with Jonah Hill and *The House Bunny* (2008) with Anna Faris demonstrated she had the charisma. Her *SNL* appearance proved she was not only funnier than viewers probably imagined, but also self-aware in a way that makes her easy to root for.

Stone was an instant favorite at *SNL*, and she returned to host a second time the following season. During her third appearance, she met her now-husband, *SNL* segment producer Dave

McCary. During her fourth, her mom and grandma tagged along to watch alongside the live audience. Last month, Stone returned to host for a fifth time. She’s only the sixth woman to do so, and at 35, she’s also the youngest member of the Five-Timers Club.

The connection may not seem immediately obvious, but the silliness and physicality that make Stone shine in sketch comedy also fuel her portrayal of the tender monster in *Poor Things*. Bella Baxter, a woman brought to life by a Dr. Frankenstein-like figure, enters with the mind of a child inside the body of an adult. With her Emma Stone features — foghorn voice, ivory teeth, tractor-beam eyes — Bella babbles, waddles, smashes plates, pees on the floor, and eats by sticking her entire hand in her mouth and regurgitating whatever she doesn’t like.

Having not yet developed the ability to regulate emotion, she’s easily excitable and shifts quickly through the gears of surprise, confusion, anger, and fear. (It’s easy to guess where Stone found inspiration; her real-life daughter was around 6 months old when *Poor Things* started shooting.)

Stone’s performance is funny, but there’s a darkness hanging over it. This is especially true of the film’s early scenes, which are shot in black and white and scored with haunting notes that bend in and out of tune as if struggling to maintain consciousness.



“Imagine being asked to operate from a place of joy and no shame and curiosity and exploration and adventure. It was such a gift,” Stone says. “I miss her all the time.”

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In one scene, young Bella toys with a cadaver in her creator's lab. She tugs the dead man's member a few times, which is almost funny until she grabs a scalpel and begins stabbing him repeatedly in the face. "Chop, chop!" she screams, grinning like a baby with a rattle.

If Bella's early scenes seem to put her on the edge of madness, later ones show a budding genius molded in the goth-funhouse image of Wednesday Adams. As the film progresses, Bella must learn to guard herself from shame, cynicism, and the men who want to possess her. And she must do it without the grounding of socialization. "For any character I've played before, everyone has a history — until Bella," Stone says. The character has no past and only a dim sense of the future. It's understandable why Stone, who's struggled with anxiety, would find that appealing. "She's my favorite character of all time," she says. "I am crazy about her."

That attraction was immediate, says Lanthimos. "As soon as I mentioned it to her, she was very excited," he recalls. "She just wanted to know everything about everything."

Stone and Lanthimos first worked together on *The Favourite* (2018), and after that, they shot *Bleat* (2022), a silent short intended to be viewed exclusively with a live orchestra. As a result, it's been shown only twice, once at the Greek National

Opera in Athens and once at the New York Film Festival.

For *Poor Things*, Stone signed on as soon as *The Favourite* was finished, and development spanned more than four years. There were periods when she and Lanthimos were in touch every day. "I would discuss everything with her," the director says — set design, costumes, character development. "That's how she ended up being a producer on the film."

When it came time to cast the disfigured scientist, Godwin Baxter, Stone and Lanthimos agreed on Willem Dafoe. So they called him together. Dafoe took the call from his office in New York and joined the project immediately.

While he had met Stone only briefly prior to rehearsal for *Poor Things*, Dafoe quickly discovered she was as delightful and talented as he'd imagined. "She has great actor's skill, but in a funny way, she doesn't have the typical actor's character — she's weirdly easy," he says. "I adore her. It's easy to play a character that falls in love with her in *Poor Things*, because you do."

After *Poor Things*, Stone and Dafoe joined Lanthimos in New Orleans for another movie, *Kind of Kindness*, scheduled for release sometime in 2024. They're still tight-lipped on details, but the movie has a core group of actors who each assume three different characters. In addition to Stone and Dafoe, the cast

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*Poor Things* is the third collaboration between Stone and Lanthimos, seen here hanging out on set between takes. Opposite: Mark Ruffalo plays a debauched lawyer and love interest who takes Bella on a romp around the world.

includes Hong Chau, Hunter Shafer, and Jesse Plemons.

*Kind of Kindness* will be the fourth film for Stone and Lanthimos. And their collaboration appears to be working. "I find her an incredible actress, but also a very unique presence," Lanthimos says. "And as time goes by, she becomes more confident and bolder and knows what she's looking for."

STONE WAS 26 WHEN she received her first of three Academy Award nominations. It was for her role in *Birdman*, where she plays the daughter of an aging movie actor trying to find relevance by performing on Broadway.

Her dad, portrayed by Michael Keaton, is haunted by an internal narrator who tells him he's washed up, and Stone's character fuels his self-criticism. In a pivotal scene, she tells him, "You're doing this because you're scared to death, like the rest of us, that you don't matter. And you know what? You're right. You don't."

Ironically, on the week of the film's national release, Stone made her own Broadway debut. She appeared as Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*. But unlike her father in *Birdman*, Stone's career was still rocketing upward through the Hollywood atmosphere.

During her time on Broadway, she received the Academy

Award nomination and a visit from director Damian Chazelle, who watched her sing and dance before pitching her as the lead in *LaLaLand*. That turned into Stone's most critically acclaimed role to date, and it earned her an Oscar. If accepting the statue wasn't exciting enough, it was presented by Leonardo DiCaprio, whose signed poster once hung on 12-year-old Emily Stone's wall. "It was a really beautiful thing," she says of the moment. And the award encouraged her to continue pushing. "In my mind, it was like, 'Keep going; keep trying things.'"

The morning after accepting the award, Stone left to begin shooting *The Favourite*, another success. When her co-star, Olivia Colman, won the 2019 Desert Palm Achievement Award at the Palm Springs festival, Stone came to the desert to present.

It wasn't her first time visiting. "I don't mean to brag, but yeah, I've been to Coachella," she jokes.

She likes how Palm Springs provides a new perspective on where she grew up. "I'm from Scottsdale, Arizona, where there's a kind of city code that everything needs to be various shades of beige," she says. (Her dad is a general contractor, so she knows this kind of stuff.) Scottsdale likes its buildings to blend into the mountains. Not so in Palm Springs. "The first time I visited, I was like, 'You can put a bunch of cool, colorful,





Bella's untethered evolution presented a welcome challenge for Stone. "The great thing about being an actor," she says, "is getting to dive into these realms and be not only allowed but encouraged to explore these other facets of humanity."

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midcentury stuff in the middle of the desert?" It looks amazing."

Those Scottsdale mountains — what young Emily saw as the background to a beige world — failed to root her. When she was 14, she presented her parents with a now-famous PowerPoint presentation that convinced her mom to rent an apartment for them in Los Angeles. When she registered with the Screen Actors Guild, "Emily Stone" was taken, so after a brief tenure with the name Riley, she switched to the more familiar Emma.

Had Stone not dropped out of high school, she would have been a senior when she landed *Superbad*. From there, she played a bass player in *The Rocker* and a nerdy sorority president in *The House Bunny*. And the roles kept coming. In 2009, she appeared in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, *Paperboy*, and *Zombieland*. The next year, she had her first starring role in *Easy A*, followed by *The Help*, *Friends With Benefits*, and *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (her first of three on-screen romances with Ryan Gosling).

In 2012, Stone assumed the role of Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider Man*, a \$230 million movie that returned more than \$750 million in international box office sales. She was a commercial success, and she had more work than she could handle. "In 2013, I did four movies in a row," she says. "I really wasn't well mentally by the end of that."

For Stone, acting has helped to fend off panic attacks. But mental health is something she still actively manages. It's taken effort to find the right blend of medication, therapy, downtime, and work. And it's an ongoing process. "It's interesting," she says. "As time has gone on, my anxiety gets smarter, you know?"

She's in a great place, but now her inner critic has become chillingly sensible. "I'll wake up in the middle of the night, and it's a very calm voice saying that everything's going wrong," she says. "It's like the voice of reason. It's so dark." She could easily be describing the narrator who haunts her dad in *Birdman*. And maybe, deep down, she's holding onto that voice deliberately.

The anxiety that fueled Stone as a child was deeply uncomfortable, but it was also her pack of dalmatians. It was the initial assault that helped reveal her acting superpower. And while she doesn't want to feel like she's stuck inside a burning house, she also doesn't want to lose the flame. That may explain in part why she's challenging herself with increasingly risky roles. You can put Bella at the top of that list: Her *Poor Things* character is primal, violent, and driven by an insatiable sexual appetite. "What's fulfilling to me at this point in my life is that it scares the shit out of me," Stone says. "And that doesn't always go well." That's what playing with matches is all about. There's always a little risk.