J-Rod! Jennifer Lopez and Alex Rodriguez on Love, Beauty, and Redemption

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‘It was just one of those things where you feel compelled to do something you wouldn’t normally do,” says Jennifer Lopez, explaining how she and retired Yankee superstar Alex Rodriguez, who made their red-carpet debut as a couple last spring at the Met Gala, came to be a modern Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio—that is, if Monroe and DiMaggio had been happy, highly functional fortysomethings who had apparently done battle with their demons and emerged the victors. It was last winter as she was having lunch in Beverly Hills that she saw Rodriguez walk by. “I almost yelled out ‘Alex,’ but I am the shyest person when it comes to things like that,” she says. When she went outside, he was still there, facing away from her. “I could literally just have walked away,” she says. “But I walk over and tap him on the shoulder and say ‘Hey.’ “I had just come from a promo for my show, Shades of Blue [in which she plays N.Y.P.D. detective Harlee Santos], so I’m dressed like my character, like a boy—Timberlands, jeans, curly short hair. He looks at me. I say, ‘It’s Jennifer.’ He says, ‘You look so beautiful.’ ” She and I are sitting on a stone patio at Lopez’s new house in Bel Air, overlooking an infinity pool and a lush green lawn with a double-size swing, which she points out is perfect for her nine-year-old twins, Emme and Max. The house is light-filled, sprawling, and warm, with wood-beamed ceilings, stone walls, plush low-slung sofas, big pillows, bowls filled with cut roses, and artwork by collagist Peter Tunney. “GRATTITUDƎ,” one piece spells out. It’s a portmanteau of “gratitude” and “attitude” that could define Lopez. Wearing a cropped turtleneck sweater, skinny jeans, high Christian Louboutin boots, and impressive diamond earrings, she is as startlingly beautiful at 48 as she was at 28—if not more so. “We walked into this house, and I said, ‘This is where I want my kids to grow up,’ ” she says. “You have to imagine your life, and what you want to be in it, and I imagined we would be very happy here no matter what.”

Happy, naturally, has turned out differently from what she imagined. Just hours after Rodriguez met her in Beverly Hills, he called her, and they agreed to have dinner a few nights later. She told him that she remembered meeting him on a baseball diamond, 12 years earlier. Her then husband, Marc Anthony, had thrown out the first pitch of a New York Mets game, but the cameras captured Lopez and Rodriguez shaking hands and locking eyes. “You don’t have to say you remember if you don’t,” she told him. “Shea Stadium, during a subway series,” he responded. Just then, Rodriguez walks out of the house to join us on the patio. “I was telling her about the tap,” she says to him. “But there were two taps,” he says. She turns to me. “There was another very significant tap on the shoulder,” she says. Before we get to that tap, we talk about their first date, when they met for dinner at the Hotel Bel Air. “He was sitting there in his white shirt, very confident and manly, but then he was just so talkative!” she says. “I think he thought I was going to be this loud person, but I’m not. I just listen. So he’s talking, talking about his plans, about how he had just retired from baseball, about how he saw himself getting married again, all these things you wouldn’t normally talk about on a first date. I don’t know if he thought it was a date. I thought it was a date. Then I knew he was nervous because he asked me if I wanted a drink. I said, ‘No, I don’t drink,’ and he asked if I minded if he had one. He was nervous, and it was really cute.” “I didn’t know if it was a date,” Rodriguez says. “Maybe we were seeing each other at night because of her work schedule. I went in uneasy, not knowing her situation.” He continues: “It would be incredibly productive for me to sit with one of the smartest, greatest women in the world, especially for a guy like me who is coming through tough times, rehabbing himself, re-establishing himself to folks out there. I thought it would be a win-win no matter what.” Then: “She told me around the third or fourth inning that she was single,” he says. “I had to get up and go re-adjust my thoughts. I went to the bathroom and got enough courage to send her a text.” “So I’m sitting there and he’s walking back, and I get a text,” Lopez continues. “It says . . . ” She looks significantly at Rodriguez. “You can tell her!” he says. “ ‘You look sexy AF,’ ” she tells me. They both laugh. “And then it took a turn,” Lopez says. “The fire alarm went off, and we had to evacuate.” I laugh, thinking she’s being metaphorical. “No, really,” she says. “The fire alarm went off!”

But about that other tap. This one was metaphorical. In August 2016, when Rodriguez announced his retirement from baseball, with his mother and his daughters Natasha and Ella in the stands, four runs short of 700 home runs, he said, “Baseball has a funny way of tapping you on the shoulder when you least expect it and telling you that it’s the end.” It’s a year later, and now, he says, “I’m thinking about one door closing and another opening, and if that first door doesn’t close, well, there isn’t that second tap.” Rodriguez’s story about the tap is a poignant reminder that this isn’t just another love story. It’s the story of two people with rich and at times tumultuous pasts, which are part of the reason they have a present as a couple. “We are very much twins,” he says. “We’re both Leos; we’re both from New York; we’re both Latino and about 20 other things.” “I understand him in a way that I don’t think anyone else could, and he understands me in a way that no one else could ever,” she says. “In his 20s, he came into big success with the biggest baseball contract [at the time]. I had a No. 1 movie and a No. 1 album and made history. We both had ups and downs and challenges in our 30s, and by our 40s we’d both been through so much. And more importantly than anything, we had both done a lot of work on ourselves.” Lopez, whose parents came from Puerto Rico, grew up in the Bronx, where she shared a bedroom with her two sisters. She famously left home at 18 to make it as a dancer, and burst on the scene in 1991 as one of the Fly Girls on Fox’s In Living Color, the hit comedy series. She quickly parlayed her luminous beauty, talent, and sheer workaholism into a series of starring roles, including Marisa in Maid in Manhattan, which grossed more than $150 million worldwide. Of their first date Lopez recalls, “I don’t know if he thought it was a date. I thought it was a date. . . . He was nervous, and it was really cute.” Being a movie star wasn’t enough for Lopez. She also released a string of hit albums and became a fashion icon. In 2003, she signed a lucrative endorsement deal with Louis Vuitton. “Now it’s odd if you’re a celebrity and you don’t serve as the spokesperson for a brand,” says Benny Medina, her longtime manager, whom Lopez credits with seeing the potential of celebrities as brands long before it was commonplace. “But back then there were plenty of snarky comments.” In 2013, Lopez was granted a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and the following year she became the first female artist to receive a Billboard Icon Award; her net worth has been estimated at more than $300 million. “There are people who put their feet in other people’s footsteps,” says Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas, who was once Lopez’s agent and is now a partner in her production company. “Jennifer had no footsteps in front of her, so much of the terrain had to be forged.”

There was a cost, Lopez learned. “When you have that type of success at a young age you have to navigate it, almost survive it,” she says. “I was the first Latin actress to ever make $1 million from a role, and you feel, Oh God, I have to do something great all the time.” There were the inevitable flops (most prominently Gigli, her movie with then boyfriend Ben Affleck) and three failed marriages, the last of which was with Marc Anthony, the father of her twins. And so her story isn’t just about astounding achievement but also about personal growth and resilience. “I was eviscerated,” she recalls about the press on Gigli. “I lost my sense of self, questioned if I belonged in this business, thought maybe I did suck at everything. And my relationship [with Affleck] self-destructed in front of the entire world. It was a two-year thing for me until I picked myself up again.” She has also conquered what was once her biggest fear: being alone. Last August, she broke up with dancer Casper Smart in an effort to learn how. “She’s a seeker,” says her close friend Leah Remini, the actress and anti-Scientology activist. “She’s always trying to improve herself, her relationships, be a better friend, a better daughter, a better mother, a better person. She’s not closed-minded.” If self-doubt and self-reflection aren’t what you’d expect from a diva, it’s striking how little diva there is to Lopez these days. Goldsmith-Thomas, who, in 2004, was diagnosed with Stage Three breast cancer, recalls that Lopez would show up for her chemo appointments. “She made me very popular on the chemo ward!,” Goldsmith says. “She’d bring clothing for everyone from her Sweetface line and she’d rub my bald head and talk about dreams. It was really important to talk about the future because she wanted me to know there was one. That girl saved my life.” Rodriguez tells me that Lopez is happiest at home, in pj’s, eating chocolate-chip cookies with friends. She and Rodriguez like to talk in terms of “reveals”: the unexpected moments that tell you who someone else is. An early one for him, he says, was discovering that Lopez was “the role model for health and wellness. She rarely drinks. She tries to get at least eight hours of sleep.” He adds, “That helps explain why she’s so beautiful.” She’s also been willing to take risks to stay relevant, no easy task in a world where female stars are widely believed to have an expiration date. In 2010, she agreed to become a judge on American Idol, which some people derided as a comedown. But it worked. “Viewers who knew only an attention-grabbing siren met a hardworking, self-made, empathetic single mother,” observed Forbes. “No one from my team wanted me to do American Idol except Benny,” Lopez says. “But I felt I had something to offer, and in the back of my mind, I thought, Maybe people will get to know me a little bit better.” She adds, “With reality TV, you can’t hide who you are. You just can’t. It’s going to come through.”

As Lopez was becoming J.Lo, so Alex Rodriguez was becoming A-Rod. He was just 18 and the youngest player in the league when he made his debut with the Mariners, in July 1994. He turned in a series of impressive stats that galvanized the baseball world—like becoming the youngest player to hit 500 home runs. For the 2001 season, he was offered a record-breaking 10-year $252 million contract by the Texas Rangers. In 2004, Rodriguez was traded to the New York Yankees, and in 2007 he negotiated another 10-year deal. Like Lopez, Rodriguez is not a child of privilege. He too was born in New York City. When Alex was eight, his parents, immigrants from the Dominican Republic, moved the family to Miami, where his mother became a secretary in an immigration office and waited tables at night. When he was 10, his dad moved out of the house. As with Lopez, success made him feel not comfort and security but a near-desperate drive to succeed even more. (And you can see how questions such as CAN ALEX RODRIGUEZ PROVE HE’S WORTH $252 MILLION? would foster that attitude in a young athlete.) “My No. 1 goal was to give R.O.I. [return on investment] to owners who believed in me,” he recalls. In 2008, his marriage to Cynthia Scurtis, with whom he had daughters Natasha and Ella, broke up, due to his relationship with Madonna, and his dates with stars from Kate Hudson to Cameron Diaz became tabloid fodder. Plus, there were the injuries: two major hip surgeries, two knee surgeries. “We’re both like this,” Lopez says. “We put so much pressure on ourselves to be great, to be the best all the time. We understood that about each other. When we came together it was ‘Oh my God, I was the same way.’ ”

Rodriguez’s career was ultimately sidelined by the steroid scandal, which rocked Major League Baseball in the mid-2000s. Rodriguez had earlier admitted using performance-enhancing drugs during his time with the Rangers, but adamantly denied he’d continued the practice while with the Yankees. After a protracted fight with both the Yankees and the M.L.B., Rodriguez was suspended for an entire season—one of the largest penalties in baseball history—in early 2014. “I was hoping the suspension would be shorter,” he says today. “I remember when Tony Clark, the head of our union, called me and said, ‘It’s a full season—it’s 162 [games],’ it was a knife to my ribs.” Rodriguez says he didn’t leave his house for seven days. “I thought I’d played my last game. I grew a beard—as much as I can grow it—and didn’t want to see anyone, including my kids.” I ask him what he learned during that year. “Do you have enough time?” he asks. As he talks, Lopez nestles into him. “I started brushing myself off, thinking, How do I come back into the world?” he says. The year off, he realized, could give him the chance to heal not just his body but also his mind. “I felt I could work on myself, understand why I kept making mistakes. . . . In a weird way, 2014 will be the best thing that ever happened to me. It forced a paradigm shift.” He continues: “I remember thinking one night . . . Don’t know if I told you this, babe [he says to Lopez] . . . In the middle of this craziness, I remember it’s three A.M., four A.M., and like many nights, I couldn’t sleep. I’m not a crier, but I’m bawling. . . . My pillows are now soaking wet, and it’s the middle of the night, and I’m thinking I’m the only fucking asshole that gets pocket aces and figures out a way to lose the hand. I was so angry at myself, so pissed off, that it was hard to breathe.” “How did you get through?” I ask. “Help,” he says. “The work I did, that was one of the most painful and most rewarding experiences of my life, and it continues to this day. I tell myself, ‘I’m rounding first base and going to second base. It’s a process.’ ” He says he decided to do like Rocky Balboa, to try to make the team “as a broken-down 40-year-old that didn’t have a lot of allies.” And he succeeded, finishing the season with 33 home runs. “I did that at 40 and 100 percent clean, and no one can take that away from me,” he says. “It told me everything about who I was.” When he retired, he agreed to stay on as an adviser to Yankee owner Hal Steinbrenner and as a mentor to younger players. “From where I came from, that honor is like hitting 800,” he says. This, to Lopez, was a reveal. “The most impressive thing to me was how he did pick himself up and take that opportunity to make himself a better person,” she says. “The hardest times prove who you are. That’s what I love and admire the most about Alex. He doesn’t let anything beat him. He just comes back stronger.” Each believes that if they had been single when they met, 12 years ago, the relationship wouldn’t have worked. “We had to grow and discover ourselves first,” she says. But it also works for another reason. As Goldsmith-Thomas says, “They weren’t afraid to dream, and they are still dreaming, both of them.”

The next night, Lopez is performing her smash show All I Have in Las Vegas. Onstage, she moves seamlessly from the best kind of sexy—with a sense of humor—to a festive Latin-inspired segment, to an utterly moving testimonial to her children, in which she sings Lee Ann Womack’s “I Hope You Dance.” She’s an incandescent performer, partly because, as Remini says, “there is nothing Jennifer does that she does half-assed. When she is in a project, she is in it, devouring it.” “A-Rod’s in the house,” someone from the audience yells. She laughs. Yes, A-Rod is in the house. Although he’s seen the show many times, he’s still watching every detail. He nudges me, pointing out a middle-aged woman in a pink pantsuit dancing ecstatically to “Jenny from the Block.” Then he points out a gay couple in the front row practically swooning after one gets to touch Lopez’s feet. During a segment that’s all New York, with Lopez in a sequined baseball jersey, he nudges me again. “If you look closely, you’ll see what number she’s wearing on her jersey,” he says. It’s 13, his Yankee number. He says, “We are very much twins.” She says, “I understand him in a way that I don’t think anyone else could.” Earlier that day, she and Rodriguez were in Los Angeles at the premiere event for this season’s Shark Tank, in which Rodriguez will be the first Latino shark. At a panel where the sharks discussed the show, the investor and Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban says, “A lot of us were pleasantly surprised that when Alex came in, he knew his stuff cold.” During the red-carpet interviews, Lopez, who is impossibly glamorous in a floor-length tweed coat and aviator sunglasses, hangs at the back of the crowd. “Does it feel weird to be in the background?” I ask. “Noooo,” she says. “I like it. Because I’m out there enough. Some people, it wouldn’t work—they can’t stand not being the one in the spotlight. But not us.”

Their story is also a merger of business empires. Lopez, who back in 2002—way before everyone else was becoming an entrepreneur—launched her fragrance Glow by J.Lo, now has a big portfolio of business interests, which range from her production company to sprawling property holdings. Rodriguez seems to slot right into her world. From a young age, he sought out mentors who could help him build a business that would one day replace his baseball income. During his suspension year, he took investing classes at Columbia and marketing classes at the University of Miami. Today, A-Rod Corp is an investment firm focused on a broad array of industries, including real estate, sports and wellness, media, and entertainment. “I don’t have your traditional formal education,” he says. “Mine comes through reading and passion and grit and collecting a lot of information from my mentors. I’ve never been afraid to say, ‘I don’t know. Can you explain that to me?’ That’s echoed by hedge-fund billionaire Marc Lasry, who has invested with Rodriguez for the last decade. “What’s interesting about Alex is that he’s a sponge,” Lasry says. “He really wants to learn.” Another mentor of sorts is Mary Callahan Erdoes, the C.E.O. of J.P. Morgan Asset & Wealth Management, who met Rodriguez around the time that Lasry did. “You might be expecting something different,” she says. “But from the first day, he had his notebook out. He’s incredibly curious and serious. There’s no nonsense and no pomp and circumstance.” That’s true to this day, Erdoes says, whether he’s attending a JPMorgan-hosted conference on Brexit or a meeting with a hedge-fund manager. “He sits in the front of the room with his notebook out and his hand up, asking questions,” she says. Rodriguez’s innate curiosity—about business, about other people, about fresh concepts—makes him stand out in a world where many people lack that trait. “The real reason people do deals with Alex is that they like him and he’s smart,” says Lasry.

The day after I saw Lopez’s show in Las Vegas, we meet at one of Rodriguez’s latest investments, which he discovered when he was looking for a place to work out in Las Vegas—members of Lopez’s crew had raved about it. Called TruFusion, it offers more than 65 styles of instruction and 35 to 40 daily classes in yoga, Pilates, kettlebell exercises, and battle-rope workouts in heated rooms. Last June, Rodriguez purchased a major stake in the company, and now owns the development rights for all of Florida. President and C.O.O. Jonathan Fornaci says the classes can be so hard that he sees some professional athletes take breaks during them, but “Alex kills it. And immediately afterward he’s drilling down, asking questions that any private-equity analyst would be asking.” I’m warned that the “Down N Dirty Bootcamp” will be hard and sweaty, and it is precisely as advertised. At one point, confused by the welter of instructions—Left! Right! Kettlebell! Weight! Sandbag!—I look over at Lopez and roll my eyes in desperation. “I get confused, too,” she says. “Just watch everyone else.” During some particularly brutal leg lifts, I give up. She does not. In fact, she starts singing. At the end, we’re all sitting on our mats, drenched in sweat and exhausted. Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin”’ is playing.

It’s clear as day that neither of them is hitting Pause. After Vegas, she’s off to New York, where her children are in school, and he’s off to Atlanta, where he’s filming a pilot for a CNBC reality show that will help retired athletes who are struggling financially. Rodriguez says he keeps himself grounded with some key words: “Gratitude and appreciation. When someone offers me a job, I thank the Lord that I have work, and I beg for more work.” And he adds, “We’re really good at reminding each other.” They begin to tell me a story, one in which Lopez is in the bath, and Rodriguez is sitting by the fire in a robe. Looking at my face, he starts laughing. “You’re like, ‘Where are you going with this story, and is it going to get R-rated?’ ” But it’s not R-rated, not at all. He says he got hot from the fire and went to sit on the patio outside their room, with a book and his feet up, in the crisp air. Lopez breaks in. “I came out and said, ‘What are you doing out here?’ He said, ‘Living the dream.’ ” It’s clear from the story that he said it in a way that was free of irony. “I thought, Wow, this person is different,” Lopez says. “Because a lot of people I’ve met in my life, they don’t appreciate what they’re doing and how amazing it is . . . not the greatness of the house, but the moment of sitting there with someone you love, with a family, with healthy kids.” All over the house are pictures of their four children as one family; when I ask Rodriguez which of his businesses he’s most passionate about, he responds, without missing a beat, “My daughters.”

As we drive from TruFusion to a little restaurant in a Vegas strip mall called Greens and Proteins, they say that early in their relationship they’d text each other using the hashtag #bloodinbloodout, after the Mexican gangster film that is in some ways about the unbreakable ties of family. At the restaurant, a few people turn and stare, but mostly we’re ignored, probably because no one can quite believe it’s them. He’s in workout clothes; she’s wearing a cropped pink sweatshirt, no makeup, and has her hair pulled back in a bun. When we sit down, Rodriguez asks what surprised me the most about spending time with them. I answer that I was surprised, even shocked, by their genuine interest in other people. But when I walked behind them as they left TruFusion, their hands were touching and they were talking intently. It was normal and natural and easy. And that’s an even better answer: I’m most surprised to see that, out of two often surreal lives, they are managing to make one wonderfully real life. Our essential brief on culture, the news, and more. And it's on the house.