

MEGHAN: The other night, I was flipping through the channels on TV. This is a rarity with two children under the age of four. But I saw an episode of a game show called *Deal or No Deal*. It brought back a lot of memories.

Archival: Deal or No Deal

applause Meghan, open the case. *applause*

MEGHAN: Back in 2006... I had a short stint as a “briefcase girl” on the US version of the game show.

Now, my experience on the show – which included holding said briefcase on stage, alongside 25 other women doing the same – was ... for me, fascinating. I had studied acting in college, at Northwestern University. And, like a lot of the other women standing up there with me, acting was what I was pursuing. So while *Deal or No Deal* wasn't about acting– I was still really grateful as an auditioning actress to have a job that could pay my bills. I had income, I was part of the union, I had health insurance, it was great. And yet... I *also* studied International Relations in college. And there were times when I was on set at *Deal or No Deal* and thinking back to my time working as an intern at the U.S. Embassy in Argentina, in Buenos Aires... and being in the motorcade with the Secretary of Treasury at the time and being valued *specifically* for my brain. Here I was being valued for something quite the opposite. I mean you have to imagine – just to paint the picture for you – that before the tapings of *Deal or No Deal*, all the girls, we would line up and there were different stations for having your lashes put on or extensions put in, or the padding in your bra. We were even given spray tan vouchers each week, because there was a very cookie cutter idea of precisely what we should look like. It was solely about beauty - and not necessarily about brains.

And when I look back at that time, I will never - I will never forget this one detail – because moments before we'd get on stage with our briefcase, there was a woman who ran the show and she would be there backstage – and I can still hear her – she couldn't properly pronounce my last name at the time and I knew who she was talking to because she'd go, “Mark-el, suck it in. Mark-el, suck it in!” *Sigh*

I ended up quitting the show. Like I said, I was thankful for the job, but not for how it made me feel. Which was... not smart. And by the way — I was surrounded by smart women on that stage with me. But that wasn't the focus of why we were there. And I would end up leaving with this pit in my stomach, knowing that I was so much more than what was being objectified on the stage.

I didn't like feeling forced to be all looks and little substance. And that's how it felt for me at the time – being reduced to this specific archetype...

Clare: The word bimbo, it's a word that is used to cut down a beautiful woman to kind of say, well, she's beautiful, but maybe she's slutty or maybe she's silly or stupid.

MEGHAN: That's Clare Malone – a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, and host of the podcast *Just Like Us: The Tabloids That Changed America* – a series that breaks down the celebrity gossip of the early 2000s. A time period we'll be talking about quite a bit in this episode.

So we asked Clare, what comes to mind when you think of the word “bimbo”?

Clare: I mean, probably a blond woman with, you know, boobs like an inner tube, that kind of thing. Um, I also think of a New York Post headline that splashed across its page and said, “Bimbo Summit.” And it was a picture of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan. So three women that were young, beautiful and labeled as party girls back in the early 2000s. I think bimbo is a word that has, you associate it with someone beautiful or attractive, but it also has these other qualities attached to it which are negative. I mean, it's an insult for women.

Not only that, but it's also incredibly limiting.

Clare: It's always funny. It's like, woe to the beautiful woman, right? People are kind of like, oh, get over it. You're so beautiful. No one takes you seriously as a smart person. But I think it's, the stereotype affected women, I would say, in two senses. One, if you're attractive, you can't be smart. And two, if you're sexual, you can't be smart or you can't be anything more than that. Women are kind of reduced down to a one dimensional character.

MEGHAN: And this is not new. I mean, for decades... the dumb blonde archetype — this is a character of sorts, that many women have made careers from and played into — and it's persisted throughout pop culture.

Archival Waterfall

Goldie: Oh...

Dean: Yeah 'cause whenever I watch you on... I watch you on television you're always pretending to be so dumb. You know what I mean?

Goldie: Yeah, I'm not pretending, I really am dumb.*audience laughs*

Dean: You are?

Goldie: Yeah, I am, you know and what's more I'm proud of it. Dumb is beautiful.
audience laughs

Legally Blonde Clip

“You got into Harvard Law?”

Elle Woods: What, like it's hard?

Mean Girls Clip:

It's like I have ESPN or something. My breasts can always tell when it's going to rain.

Dolly Parton Clip:

Host: Dolly you also have recorded another song recently and it's a beautiful song, why don't you go sing Dumb Blonde?

Dolly: What? Do what?

Host: I mean, no, I, uh, no, that's not the way I should put it... wait a minute now...

MEGHAN: And this character, as I said, of the bimbo, it exists all over the world.

In Tamil cinema, she's known as the "loosu pannu."

In many Spanish-speaking countries also, there's, there's a character and an archetype that's often referred to as "la rubia tonta" – like the character Patricia from the Colombian telenovela, "Yo Soy Betty, La Fea" – aka the original version of *Ugly Betty*.

FADE IN / FADE OUT ARCHIVAL

Patricia: *Tu no sabes lo que es para mi estar sin celular! Es como si me hubieran cortado el brazo – no, no es como si me hubieran quitado un órgano y tal, el corazón, el cerebro!*

Marce: *Ay, ese lo perdistes hace mucho tiempo.*

English translation:

Patricia: *You don't know what it means for me to be without a cell phone! It's as if they cut my arm off – no, no, it's as if they removed an organ, and such, my heart, my brain!*

Marce: *Ah, that you lost a long time ago.*

MEGHAN: In recent years... we've been able to reflect on how these depictions of women had been perpetuated by TV, by mainstream media as a whole... and still, the judgments and assumptions that we – and that I – admittedly have made, they might be harder to shake off. So, I wondered, how can we peel back the layers on the cultural script that is the "dumb blonde"... and leave with a deeper, and much more nuanced understanding of the women behind the archetype?

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INTRO

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<< INTRO THEME BEGINS >>

MEGHAN: I'm Meghan. And this is ARCHETYPES – my podcast about the labels and tropes that try to hold women back.

And today, I'm talking to a woman who built an entire brand out of being the “dumb blonde,” and who now... is defining herself on her own terms...

Paris: I am kind. I have a big heart. I'm an Aquarius. I love animals and I'm shy. I'm a tomboy. I'm an undercover nerd. I love cartoons and I'm a Girls Girl. *laughs*

MEGHAN: Some of you may not have *quite* picked up on that voice – but it's Paris Hilton! The real Paris Hilton. Not the archetype that you've come to know for so long.

She's coming up, right after the break. Stay with me.

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ACT 1
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Paris: I can see myself, it doesn't look blurry, but then when I look at you, it's all blur.

Meghan: Well, we're going to pretend like we're in high school and, like, you're just, old school phone call with a boy - No, you hang up. No, you hang up first.

Paris: Loves it. Yes.

Meghan: I've been doing a lot of conversations. I've been the most nervous about this one.

Paris: Really? Why were you nervous? I was so nervous too but why were you nervous?

Meghan: Why would you be nervous? Well, I'll tell you first.

Paris: Yeah you tell me first.

Meghan: I'll tell you first. Because I remember growing up in L.A. around the same age. And you were just so famous and so beautiful and so... All the things that I think, especially when you're young and especially in the nineties, that pop culture stuff, it was so influential. Everything was about trying to be sexy and hot and cool. And it was Carmen Electra and Singled Out.

Archival: Singled Out

Chris: Hello new host, Carmen...

Carmen: Hello, Chris.

Chris: How are ya?

Carmen: How ya doing? I'm great, I'm just...

Cheers and chants

Chris: I think the guys like ya, Carmen Electra.

M: I mean, there was this moment and you were in that Zeitgeist. And I was this nerd. So it was so hard for me to think about what you and I would talk about when so much of the identity, whether it was placed upon you or you adopted or embraced or used to build a career, was about *not* leaning into being smart. So that's why I was nervous. Why were you nervous?

Paris: I was nervous because I'm just such a shy person and we haven't met before, so I was shy about that.

M: Yeah.

Paris: But then I listened to the podcast with Serena and I was like, "Oh my God. I love her! She's so cool." You're such a Girls Girl. You're so... yeah.

M: Well, thank you. Look, I want this to be for anyone who's with me. This is a safe place. I want you to be yourself. And so if anything I can offer is for us to be able to go, okay, cool, you can be your tomboy nerd. All the things you just listed self that no one knows I don't think is part of how you would self-identify. And, and that's what I wanted to talk about. So, I just want to talk to you *you* – the real you.

Paris: Thank you. I appreciate that.

MEGHAN: The popular image that I had of Paris was *so incredibly strong*. Just based off of her time in the public eye... starting in the late 90s, after her family moved from Beverly Hills to New York City, she became this complete "It Girl" ... partying night after night, escapades splashed across tabloids, and... she was the Hilton Hotel heiress, who lived at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Being rich, famous, beautiful and privileged, that was how they crafted her entire identity.

News Anchor: Paris Hilton was the first, the original celebutante. Practically the inventor of that thoroughly modern phenomenon being famous for being famous.

MEGHAN: And she continued to grow that brand over the years – most notably, as I'm sure you guys remember, starring in her own reality TV show – which started in 2003 – called *The Simple Life*... with her friend Nicole Richie...

Archival: The Simple Life

Nicole: You don't have a driver's license?

Paris: No, I didn't bring one

Woman: No drivers license?

Paris: No, I have a license, but not with me.

Woman: Oh my god

Nicole: Can we give you.. Do you want gum?

Paris/Nicole: What can we sell? My \$100,000 watch? Do you want contact solution?

MEGHAN: This was the Paris of Juicy Couture sweatsuits, low rise jeans, anything and everything pink. Her hair – platinum blonde. And her chihuahua, Tinkerbelle, always in her arms.

Meghan: Didn't your Chihuahua go missing, at some point?

Paris: Yeah. Tinker Bell. Mm hmm.

Meghan: *Gasps* This is a flashback I can't even, how, how that still holds space in my brain somewhere is beyond me.

Paris: Mhm, I remember. It was all over CNN and everything was like, "Oh, my God this is -"

Meghan: Oh, my God, aww. Did you get your dog back?

Paris: Yeah, I got her back. Thank goodness some woman found her and saw her on the news and was like, "Oh, it's Paris' dog." *laughs*

MUSIC IN

MEGHAN: [*laughingly*] The fact that *that* memory from – what are we talking about? 2004! – is still imprinted somewhere in my subconscious is equal parts frightening and also just goes to show how influential a figure Paris Hilton was for pop culture, especially around the mid-2000s. This was really the time period, too, in which a lot of people got to know Paris as "the dumb blonde."

But as we know... the archetype... it never tells the full story. And in recent years, Paris - she's been doing something amazing - she's been reclaiming her narrative, most notably in her 2020 documentary called *This is Paris*.

Archival: This Is Paris

Paris: Alright 1, 2, 3 *that's hot*. This is Paris. *Paris Hilton*. This is Paris Hilton. How many voices do I have? *laughs*

MEGHAN: And I, too, was excited to talk to her, to find her one true voice in all of that, and to challenge my own preconceptions, to get to know the real person behind the persona...

MUSIC OUT

Paris: For me growing up, I was a huge tomboy and then I stopped being, I guess, a tomboy, or maybe I pretended to stop when I moved to New York. And that's when like my, my whole life changed. Because when I lived in L.A., I just lived such a sheltered life. My parents were so strict. I wasn't allowed to go on dates. Couldn't go to the school dance. I couldn't wear makeup. So then, you know, moving to New York City...

Meghan: How old were you when you moved to New York?

Paris: 15 and a half, so.

Meghan: Oh, wow. You were young.

Paris: Yes, and that just opened up this whole new world to me because, you know, I had never, you know, been to a club and been to a party or anything like this. And then all of a sudden, my sister and I moved there and all these designers and people are inviting us to the fashion shows and parties and clubs. And, you know, living at the Waldorf Astoria was just kind of easy to be able to sneak out of there, get in the cab and go to all these things and my parents were definitely not happy about that. *laughs* My parents were just so strict that that just makes you want to rebel and be the opposite. And it was just - it was so much fun. I think that if any teenager was able to go to these places and be invited to these events and parties and clubs and be able to get in, they would go too.

Meghan: Yeah. But at 15, when you're so impressionable and susceptible and you're out and about. I guess I wonder when you started going to all the clubs and that was a huge part of your lifestyle. Do you remember the first time in any of that, that you felt like someone was putting a label on you?

Paris: Yeah, definitely, just moving to New York...

Paris: And all of a sudden, Page Six was writing about me almost every single morning. I was waking up to stories...

Archival: Paparazzi

Paparazzi: So, Paris, Lindsay Lohan accused you of hitting last night. Is that true? You hit her?

Paris: Just getting that label put on me of party girl and dumb blond, spoiled, you know, rich heiress, just, you know, any like all the negative, you know, connotations or nicknames, I guess, that they could make up. It was, it was difficult because a lot of the times, people would just make up or invent stories just to make it more exciting. So just having to deal with that and then my mom and dad being so mad at me because they didn't know that I had snuck out the night before or whatever. So I was getting you know, most teenagers are not getting caught by like Page Six on a daily basis.

Meghan: Completely. But to that point, you are an heiress, right? Yes, you do come from a wealthy family. So those things in some ways, whether it has a connotation to it or not, those are rooted in truth. But the other pieces of it. I mean, that's where I guess the question mark comes in, because this is a really formative age. Where you're figuring out who you are, and you're so impressionable.

And I guess my question is was there ever a moment where when all this coverage is happening and they're reinforcing this idea and this label of you as the dumb blonde or the bimbo — was there ever a moment where you just heard it so much that you had to just buy into it and say, well, I guess, that's what I am? Or did you even get a chance to decide?

Paris: I just, I tried to not pay attention to any of that, but, you know, it's obviously going to affect you, even if you say it. It doesn't. I think what really affected me was, you know, when I got sent away to boarding school. And just being in there and just the way that the staff there were so abusive and just the things that they would say to me on a daily basis just, really made me just want to prove them wrong.

Meghan: I know you touch on this in your documentary, but for people who haven't seen it yet and they should see it, what sort of things were they saying to you?

Paris: Well, when I was 16, my parents sent me away to these places called emotional growth boarding schools. They thought it was just a normal boarding school. But at these places, they are extremely abusive. And some of the places that I went to have been shut down because of just the horrible things that have been happening and deaths and all types of abuse are happening at these, at these schools. Sorry, I get a little emotional when I think about it, but they just on a daily basis it was all about really breaking you down. So, "you're worthless. No one loves you. You're going to be nothing in life." They would say they would just do that to all of us all day long. It was very painful.

Meghan: I can't even imagine. I'm so sorry that that was something that you've had to experience. That is an immense level of trauma. It's staggering, I think anyone hearing that would, would never in a million years think you of all people would find yourself in an environment like that.

Paris: I thought I was gonna be riding horses, like I thought it was going to be like a beautiful place.

Meghan: I mean, the irony.

Paris: Yeah.

Meghan: Emotional growth. I mean, I can't. Now, when you think about the advocacy for mental health and our emotional well-being, the idea of even using those words and to know that that is the kind of program that's happening is so incredibly dangerous. And

so— you get there, you think you're going to be riding horses, your parents think you're going to be riding horses. You think you're going to be in a very different, almost like, bucolic bliss, I would imagine, where you're just becoming the best version of yourself. What was the first moment that you knew that was not what this was going to be?

Paris: Just as soon as I walked in, they brought me into a room with male, female staff and like, three of the other students and had me take off all of my clothes and do a strip search in front of all of these people. And right then and there I knew this was not like a normal school. And then, just walking around and showing me the rules and just looking at all of the kids and everybody was a zombie and it was just like something like out of a movie. Like, I just every day I was praying to God. Like, please, just, like, wake me up from this nightmare. Please get me out of here.

Meghan: What were your - what were you doing to survive through that? And also having just had from your very, you know, glitzy, fun, exciting party life in New York to that. What was the difference in your personality?

MUSIC IN

Paris: It was the most painful and horrific experience of my life, and it was for almost two years of my life. Going to these places and running away and just being so terrified of people and trusting anybody and it really just, it took away my childhood. It just made me feel like, like they tried to take the light away from me. And the only thing that kept me going in there was just thinking about who I wanted to be and what I wanted to become when I got out of there and I was just promising myself and saying, I'm going to work so hard and become so successful that no one will ever be able to control me ever again. And in there, I started kind of building this fantasy life and this kind of Barbie doll character, I guess, just to not think about the pain and just to think about oh, unicorns and butterflies and Barbie dolls and pink and sparkles. And I don't know, that was like the only thing that, like, kept me going because it was, it was miserable.

Meghan: Yeah, and, and, for you, why was Barbie part of the thing that you idolized or that was a bit of a North Star thinking about getting out of there?

Paris: I just always felt like Barbie had, like, this perfect life.

MUSIC OUT

Archival: Barbie Commercial

Barbie you're beautiful. You make me feel my Barbie doll is really real.

Paris: She's beautiful. She always is happy. She had her pink Ferrari and her Barbie mansion and just her little puppies and like, all the coolest clothes and shoes and. I don't know she was just -

Meghan: Ken Doll.

Paris: Yeah, the hot Ken Doll.

Meghan: She had the guy too.

Meghan: What I think is so interesting is what you're saying is you're doing the thing that a lot of young girls would do, even not in that kind of environment. Right. And think of it like rainbows and butterflies and unicorns and glitter and fun and, and that becomes the aspirational. And you said, you know, like a Barbie type thing to dream of. Right. And it is very I think when parts of your childhood are taken from you or robbed from you in that way, you start to dream of what it could be. What did you actually want to be? So you wanted to work really hard. You wanted to prove them wrong. What did you think? How did you think you were going to do that? By doing what type of job?

Paris: For me, I just, I wanted to do it all. I loved music and art and fashion. So I wanted to be a singer. I wanted to be a model, an actress, I just wanted to do so many things. So I just had all of these really big dreams and I just, I knew one day I would be able to do them.

Meghan: What were you telling yourself in those moments?

Paris: Just that I'm so strong. And if I can make it through this, I can make it through anything. And that I wasn't going to let what they said to me and what they did to me define who I was. I was going to do it on my own and do it myself.

Meghan: Then you get out of there.

Paris: Yes.

Meghan: And thank God.

Paris: Thank God.

Meghan: You survived it.

Paris: I survived that. Which many people don't. And then I went, moved back to New York, and that's when I just started working hard and trying to make my dreams come true and start building this brand and then getting offered *The Simple Life*.

Archival: The Simple Life

Nicole: I've always heard that people hang out at Walmart.

Paris: Why? What is Walmart? *crickets* Do they sell wall stuff?

Man: No.

Paris: That's when I think the whole Barbie doll character really went into, like, full force because. I had never been on a reality show. I'd never been on TV. I didn't know what to expect or what to do because this was the first reality show. So the producers just said, We want, Nicole, you to be the troublemaker and Paris, we want you to be the rich, dumb blond. And that's, you know, when I started, like really playing into that character.

Archival: The Simple Life

Man: So, I need you to write a script in about ten minutes.

Nicole: A movie script?

Man: No. We are doing an interview. Today is the Great American SmokeOut and then there's going to be...

Paris: What kind of Smoke Out?

Man: You now people quitting smoking

Paris: Oh.

Meghan: And the producers say we're going to have you be the... they said they want you to be the dumb blonde?

Paris: Yeah. Basically. But I feel like that was like how, I don't know. Like during that time, it was like, encouraged, almost. Like it was, like, cute to be, like, dumb and bubbly and that kind of like, blond thing. Like, I look at it now and I'm like, I think it's so much cooler to be smart and intelligent, but back then, it was almost like they wanted... girls to be like that in some way.

Meghan: Yeah it was glorified. And it's not specific to here and it's not even specific to that decade. This is something that happens globally. This idea of dumbing women down and women dumbing themselves down.

Paris: Yes, definitely.

Meghan: And this is you now as an 18 year old, on a path where the media is defining you. You're now creating a career with that. So I'm assuming that whether it's painful or not, people that you know personally, are they interacting with you as though you're a dumb blond?

Paris: No. Everyone always says, who's my friend, is like, wow, you're like a completely different person when I'm with you than when you're on TV. It's like, not even the same. Like, my voice. Everything just changes. Like, I have... a naturally very low voice.

Meghan: I know.

Paris: But then on the show it's like "hi" it get gets very high and I'm like ugh—

Archival: The Simple Life

Paris: *high pitched* Thanks b*tch have a great day! This is fun!

Meghan: *laughs* I can't, that can't even feel comfortable at a certain point. Nothing feels worse than not being yourself... So do you feel like it's a character that you created or it's a character that they created that you had to adopt? Or it's a character that you created as a defense mechanism.

Paris: I think it's all of those above. Like when you think about... I never even thought about it until recently, when, after the documentary and everything. So I feel that.

Meghan: Yeah.

Paris: Yeah. It was definitely a mixture of all those.

Paris: And also, I'm kind of I think, a reaction to having a mask to kind of protect myself in a way. So it could be like, they're not talking about me. They're talking about this character that I created. So it would kind of help, I don't know, the pain of the media just constantly just being mean and just very vicious and cruel to me for so long. And I think I just with that character, it just kind of like shielded me from ever really having to feel anything. I was like, they're not talking about me personally. They're talking about something that I created.

Meghan: Yeah. There's actually, there's a clip from a 2009 interview where you talk about how this was all just a caricature ...

News Archival

Paris: With the character, it's mostly this kind of this blonde...bubbly, kind of Barbie airhead. And in real life I am the exact opposite.

News Anchor: You actually knew what Walmart was.

Paris: Yes, I know exactly what Walmart is.

Paris: You know I only assumed like, oh, we're going to do the show, you know, one season, I had no idea. And then we ended up having to do that...

Meghan: You did five seasons, right?

Paris: Five seasons. Yeah. So people just that's what they expected. And when I would do interviews or go on Letterman or any of these talk shows, I would play the character because I was like, that's who people think I am.

Archival: Late Show with David Letterman

Paris: Now you're making me sad that I came because you're hurting my feelings

Letterman: Oh no no. Please no no - don't be sad. Are you really sad? I'll buy you a parakeet.

Audience laughter fades out

Paris: So I almost got like stuck and lost in the character where I at some points it was like the lines got blurred or I it's like I forgot who I was and I don't know, makes me sad because I used to be such a free spirit and I was just so like, I don't know, just like, not so closed off. And I feel like with just so many things that have happened to me over the years. I've just. Closed off in ways in my mind that. And I wish that didn't happen. I think it's just from going through trauma and life, it really, really affects you.

Meghan: Yeah. I mean, for me when you say it's sad, I think it's, I think it's so sad. You don't even get the opportunity to like, it makes me emotional even thinking about... you don't even get the opportunity to start to think about the woman that you want to be with a blank slate, so then you come out into the world and they cast you in this thing that you end up feeling trapped in. Was there ever a point that you thought you wouldn't renew and do another season?

Paris: We just had so much fun doing the show with my best friend, getting to do all these random jobs and just laughing the whole time. So that was...

Meghan: Well, that's good!

Paris: ...so much fun.

Meghan: That's a silver lining in all of this.

Paris: We had the best time. Like I, that show, I still watch it. It's so timeless, it's so funny, and it was amazing experiences that I never would have had in life. So I'm so happy that I did it.

Meghan: Wow. And maybe that was in some ways part of the healing coming out of it, right? Because even though you're playing this caricature, this, you know, playing into the dumb blond of it all, you were free?

Paris: Yes, definitely. Grateful for that.

Meghan: Did you feel like you ever had the opportunity to show people that you were smart? Or were you scared of ever even giving a... inkling of that? Because perhaps it would have affected your career, or your deals or anything like that?

Paris: Yeah, it was definitely like a huge part of my brand and everything that I was doing, but deep down I always knew there was so much more to me. And now, people are finally seeing that and seeing that other side and all of my advocacy work and just I

don't I've, I love being underestimated. And what I always like to say is that I'm not a dumb blonde, I'm just very good at pretending to be one.

MUSIC IN

MEGHAN: Coming up... Paris reflects on the fallout of playing into this persona for decades... and actor and comedian Iliza Shlesinger reveals the *deep truth* about the dumb blonde...

Iliza: First of all, almost no one except for like ten people in Sweden are naturally blonde. I'm like, look at the eyebrows!

There's more to come, as you can see. Stay with me.

MUSIC OUT

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ACT 2
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AQUA: BARBIE GIRL

"I'm a Barbie girl, in the Barbie world. Life in plastic, it's fantastic"

MEGHAN: That song, which I bet you remember, was called "Barbie Girl," from 1997. And it helped cement this popular concept of a plastic blonde doll, without a singular thought in her head.

But this idea of the "dumb blonde," that's been around since at least the late 19th century...."

Some people trace its origin to a British burlesque troupe, which featured four blonde women parading around in tights... who were rumored to have been nicknamed "dizzy blondes."

But as we've been talking about with Paris, this archetype, it really had a resurgence in the early 2000s. It sort of felt like the dumb blonde was everywhere.

Really, for anyone who grew up in this moment - you couldn't avoid seeing this characterization.

MUSIC IN

Iliza: Remember all the blonde jokes? Oh, God. Like, how do you drown a blond? Like, put a scratch and sniff sticker at the bottom of a pool.

MEGHAN: That's terrible, I can't believe people would say stuff like that. That's comedian and actor Iliza Shlesinger... who, for the record, is blonde. But is very much not dumb. Her comedy

is full of social satire, and pointed observations about human behavior. And our conversation, it was no different...

MUSIC OUT

Iliza: And what's funny is the women you're making fun of and I guess like I would be one of these, are women who dye their hair. First of all, almost no one except for like ten people in Sweden are naturally blonde. I'm like, look at the eyebrows! But it is, the shaming of a woman who deigns to extend herself, to make herself the type of attractive that Western culture and men said was attractive.

Meghan: Right, but curious to hear your thoughts on this idea of, when I hear the word bimbo, I have a very negative connotation to it. I don't see that as an aspirational thing for women. I want our daughters to aspire to be...

Iliza: Slightly higher.

Meghan: Yeah. I want my Lily to want to be educated and want to be smart and to pride herself on those things and, was there ever a point in your life where you thought like, oh, I kind of like dumb myself down?

Iliza: No, never been that hot. I would love it. I think every woman has to be honest, though. If you could be so hot that you didn't have to think, it doesn't last forever, but like, that's what you want. That's what you want is to be so gorgeous you're like, I don't know why doors just open. It was just free. Like, that's at least for a little bit. And then, you know, you start to get undervalued and then you'll get thrown away. But, it was never an aspir- you always want to look your best. And when you're young, being young sometimes is enough. It doesn't matter, necessarily, what you look like. Uh, but that was, yeah, we all want to be good looking, but if you are smart, you'll always know there's more to this. You'll always feel undervalued if you're not spoken to in the right way. If you're smart. Like it bothers me if somebody speaks to me like there's something wrong with me.

Meghan: Yeah.

Iliza: And then, and then I don't become so pretty.

Meghan: Well, and I think that starts young. I don't know if that ever really goes away.

Iliza: Sure, I don't think so either. And I will tell you, I was you know, I had boyfriends, but it wasn't, I wasn't this gorgeous homecoming queen. But then when I got into comedy, all of a sudden overnight, it's like, well, she's too hot. I'm like, yes, compared to the bog trolls you do open mics with, yes! But compared to a room of actresses like I'm very normal looking and compared to a room of models, like I'm the one refilling the water. So it just depends on where—

Meghan: Perspective!

Iliza: But it's getting, it was getting used against me. All of a sudden it's like she's the hot cheerleader. I'm like, was my high school mascot. And, it's just an example of how they take it away from you any way they can.

Meghan: How did that feel?

Iliza: I'm fine. I'm sitting here now. I'm fine.

Meghan: Yeah, you're doing great.

Iliza: That's fine. It was the ugliest men saying it. I'm like, I'm still not going to sleep with you, but thank you so much for that weird backhanded compliment.

Meghan: Cheers for making me feel like that. I think what was so funny is, like, you look back at your childhood moment, where for me again, it's like, oh, okay, well, I'm not the pretty one. So your equity was in being the funny one and mine was at that age... 10, 11... I was like, I was the smart one. I'm the smart one. I'm the smart one. That is all you have to hold on to. So in any other moment, no one cared if I came to the party. I had a crush on this boy named Chris. Wonder what he's doing these days...

Iliza: Yeah. You hear that, Chris? Now what? I'm sipping on iced coffee in an underground studio with a Duchess. Where are you?

Meghan: I couldn't get Chris to look in my direction! You know? And but, like, those are the things that sort of inform how you go, okay, well, if you could be prettier or if I could be funnier, but again, that's that angling constantly as a woman to try to be something that is desirable to your point at the beginning.

Iliza: You know, we fault women for playing into something, and it's like, well, you said this was bad. You made her this and you wanted her to be this. And then when they became that, we're always like, you have to be something else. And that goes for body types, achievements, archetypes.

MUSIC IN

MEGHAN: The irony! Right? We tell a woman to be one way then we ridicule her for following suit. Again, it's so *easy*. But, *easy* often means accessible. And that's exactly why archetypes – including the bimbo or the dumb blonde – this is why they flourished in the reality TV boom of the early 2000s.

Clare: Reality TV isn't supposed to be challenging. We're not going there to like, see the anti-hero. You know, it's not HBO. It's something that you turn on while you're, like, hungover or something.

MEGHAN: That's New Yorker staff writer, Clare Malone, again. And Clare says reality TV rose to prominence in the early 2000s, in part because of the writer's strike. But also, its success was that it was so easy to consume. And a lot of that has to do with its reliance on - you guessed it! - stereotypes.

MUSIC OUT

Clare: You think of any sitcom and it's like the goody two shoes sister, the bad boy brother, the stern father, the nagging wife. You know, TV is filled with these archetypes, these stereotypes. And reality TV was mimicking that. So I think it's a lot of people like playing parts in this sort of merry-go-round of stereotypes that lead to a lucrative career for them. Like, I think we really have to remember that a lot of this comes back to money.

I always think of someone who was really good at that, was Paris Hilton, who kind of understood her value in the world. And I mean that in like a market capitalism sense of the word, she knew that her value was in her beauty and in her ability to kind of make herself accessible and interesting to the public by playing up that kind of dumb blonde, bimbo trope. It's a clever way to exploit and cut yourself in on a stereotype that would otherwise hold you down. But it's obviously, it's not everyone who gets called the dumb blonde that gets to cut themselves in on the deal.

MEGHAN: But Paris really did cut herself in on the deal, so to speak. She parlayed her *Simple Life* fame into so many other opportunities – launching her own luxury hotels, several product lines including perfume, watches, shoes, handbags, even clothes for dogs.

And back in 2016, she also started investing in cryptocurrency... and more recently, she launched her very own NFT collection. And if you – like a lot of us – are still just a little bit confused about what that actually means, here's Paris explaining the digital asset to Jimmy Fallon...

Archival: The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon

Jimmy: Can you explain what an NFT is?

Paris: Well it's a non-fungible token...

Jimmy: Non-fungible?

Paris: Yes, which is basically a digital contract that's on the blockchain. So you can basically have - sell anything from art to music to experiences, physical objects...

You could try something like maybe sell one of your jokes or something?

Jimmy: I couldn't even do that to my audience tonight, are you kidding me? [fade out]

MEGHAN: And *in addition* to all these business ventures, she's also made a name for herself now as an [advocate](#). Lately, she's been standing up against child abuse, supporting [legislation](#) aimed at regulating residential schools, like the ones she went to as a teenager, and protecting the kids in them.

Paris: I've had thousands of people write me letters, come up to me on the street saying, I went through the same thing that you went through at these schools, because these schools, there's thousands of them around the world and there's 150,000 children every year that are being sent to these places. So I've just, ever since that.

Meghan: Still.

Paris: Yes, still. Still. It's just people search online, breaking code silence or troubled teen industry. You can see all – everything that's happening. Now I'm pushing for federal legislation and going to D.C. and yeah, it's just been so empowering. Just really turn my pain into a purpose. And I almost think that maybe God made me go through this and gave me this special gift so that one day I could be the hero that I needed when I was a little girl and help save these children from having to go through the torture that myself and so many others went through.

Meghan: So you've transitioned now, I think, in a really strong way, even though some people might still associate you with the Paris Hilton persona that they have grown to know for so many, I guess decades now almost.

Paris: Yeah, that's crazy.

Meghan: That's a, that's a yeah, that's a tough one to turn people's minds around on. And what's so great is that you've made this very brave choice to talk about this childhood trauma, to reclaim your own identity. I, I almost feel silly asking this question, but I have to – would you still define yourself as someone who identifies as the dumb blonde persona and archetype?

Paris: Not anymore. Definitely.

Meghan: Yeah. When did that change?

Paris: I think, just like I said with the documentary, there's all of those walls coming down, like walls coming down that I had built around my heart.

Archival: This Is Paris

Paris: I'm not alone and it's not me and it's not my fault. And sometimes I feel like, this robot. And this character that I did and talking with them, like I started remembering who I was before. And just - it makes me sad that they took that away.

Paris: There was no time to think about my mental health, how I was feeling inside.

Meghan: Or who actually were.

Paris: Yeah, it was hard to even know.

Archival: This Is Paris

*When I look around my life it's like. It's like a cartoon. I don't know, I've created this fantasy world cartoon. But the thing is I don't give a f*ck about any of these things...I've - I love just chilling and like being at home. And then all this other stuff is just a part of the character.*

Meghan: Well I think most people at that age are figuring it out. Even in our thirties and forties we're still figuring it out. And just in the same way that when we're reinforcing that archetype and that stereotype that you were playing through that show for so long, and you're like a machine just doing it. It's a brainwashing exercise for people who are seeing it. But it sounds like, as you're describing, it also ends up being this brainwashing exercise for yourself of who you even are.

Paris: Yeah I just feel that it wasn't a good feeling for people to think of me in a way that I wasn't. And I'm thinking about having my daughter one day and what I want her to be like. And I, I don't want her to think it's cool to pretend to be a dumb blonde or to dumb herself down for society or for anything like that. I want her to feel free to be whoever she wants to be and feel strong and brave and not let the world take that away from her.

Meghan: Yeah. Sounds like to me maybe it takes one to know one, but it feels like you're a bit of a people pleaser. And I wonder if you ever find yourself even as strong as you are now, as clear as you are on how you are, that because people want that Paris... Do you ever find yourself slipping into that dumb blonde persona just to make them happy, and then do you catch yourself?

Paris: Yeah. A lot. Like when I get shy or uncomfortable, like my voice will go up or, you know, people will come up to me and want me to, like, say, "that's hot" and "loves it" and like, they want me to be that character. So I feel like it will always kind of be a part of me because it's just been like almost half my life doing that. But I am so proud of just the business that I've built and everything that I've created. And business people I respect are coming up to me and saying like, I'm blown away by what you've created and what you've done. So I - I love now that people are realizing that I wasn't the dumb blonde.

Meghan: Surprise!

Paris: Yeah, exactly.

Meghan: I think for you, not only it's, as you said, turning your pain into purpose, but this is going to be part of your life's journey. Now, that advocacy. And it sounds like what makes me the happiest because getting to the other side of things and I think probably for you realizing that it is never too late to fully discover who you are.

Paris: So true.

Meghan: And own that... is beautiful. Are you having fun?

Paris: I've never been happier in my life. I feel so fulfilled. I can't wait just for the next phase. Like starting a family. That's always been my dream. I just never found the person that I could trust to do that with. But now that I have, I just. I can't wait. We're so excited and we're moving into our new house in three weeks, and...

Meghan: Oh my gosh, great! Yeah, you found your Ken doll and they used to have this Barbie sets with like the two kids in them, do you remember?

Paris: Yes

Meghan: So in some ways you are, you're the modern version of that childhood, that childhood - that childhood dream. But I think that's just so good, because you've had a tremendous amount of sadness that you've had to internalize. And there's nothing better or, I think, more inspiring for people to know that even if you're labeled something, it doesn't have to define you forever.

Paris: No.

Meghan: And even if you bought into that label for yourself. You can change your mind.

Paris: Exactly.

MEGHAN: Paris has made a lucrative career off the dumb blonde trope. And the conversation - it reminded me of another woman who's made a multi-million dollar — and multi platinum — career off of this caricature. None other than Ms. Dolly Parton, who most famously summed this idea up in her song, Dumb Blonde.

Dolly Parton: Dumb Blonde [clip] Don't try to make me feel sorry for you. Just because I'm blonde, don't think I'm dumb, cause this dumb blonde ain't nobody's fool...

MEGHAN: And like Paris, with a decades-long career under her belt, I think we can all agree — that Dolly's lyrics? They bear true. Pigeonhole her all you want — but don't underestimate her. She's nobody's fool.

MUSIC IN

Meghan: If you can use three words to describe yourself as a little girl, what would those three words be?

Paris: Fun. Playful. And curious.

Meghan: And specific to you – because of your time at this school and the work that you're doing to correct that – what three words would you describe yourself when you were at that boarding school?

Paris: Terrified. Miserable. And lonely.

Meghan: And three words to describe the woman that you've become today.

Paris: Strong. Brilliant. And brave. *laughs*

Meghan: I love all of that.

Paris: Yes.

Meghan: Thank you so much for taking the time and for being you just for being so genuinely yourself. And I'm just grateful for your time and so excited for you to become a mom because it's the greatest.

Paris: Aw, thank you. This was just so awesome.

Meghan: Bravo on everything you're doing.

Paris: You too, sweetheart.

Meghan: Thank you. Bye.

Paris: Thank you. Bye, love!

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CLOSING THOUGHTS
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Meghan: Well, well, well. Okay. You heard me at the beginning of this episode talk about how I was nervous for this one. Nervous because, well, I'm embarrassed to admit it... I had a judgment about Paris. And I don't like having judgment. It doesn't feel good. But I had to be real about that. Because when I grew up, she was beautiful, rich and famous. "What could possibly be wrong with her life?" I would think. And because my entire sense of self-confidence was wrapped up in being the smart one and not the pretty one, I found the way to project all of my judgment and envy onto her. "Who would want to act stupid?" I would think. Envy can be a very dangerous thing, as can judgment. I was ashamed to admit that I harbored either of those feelings. So I talked to her. And while she admits that she played into this dumb blonde persona that she in part co-created with the media, she also revealed years of trauma that likely made it less easy to carve out her own *owned* identity. Being dumb, playing the archetype of the dumb

blonde, that was a safety mechanism. It was expected of her. It was a mask. And as the woman she is today, the smartest thing she has done – outside of finding entrepreneurial success – is finding herself. In our conversation, I found her to be refreshing. And look, I know she's made mistakes. I've heard about some of them, others not. This is not to be framed as the defense of Paris Hilton. But it is the humanization of her. Because that's where we leave judgments at the door. That's when we can see a woman behind the archetype. I'm sorry for having judged her. I didn't know her. And as I assured her, I wasn't looking for a gotcha moment. I was looking for a got *you* moment. As in the real *you*. And I think we did.

Thanks for spending this time with me today. I can't wait to be with you again next week. As ever, I'm Meghan.

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CREDITS

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The podcast is a co-production between Archewell Audio, Gimlet and Spotify

Meghan, The Duchess of Sussex is our Executive Producer – alongside Executive Producers Terry Wood and Catherine Cyr

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Gimlet's Executive Producers are Matt Shilts and Katelyn Bogucki. Executive Editor is Andrea B. Scott.

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