JESSICA ALBA

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JESSICA ALBA IS DOING A JUICE CLEANSE,

and yet here she is, ordering samosas from one of the food trucks that line Santa Monica’s Pennsylvania Avenue daily to entice the nearby office workers from their desks. “We’ll have the coconut curry—two of those—and a mango chutney… and what’s aloo chaat?” she asks, camera-ready in bell-bottom jeans, a camisole and cardigan, and Rag & Bone boots, her skin faintly glowing. The guy behind the counter vouchers for it, so she orders one of those, too, and insists on paying.

It’s a beautiful day, because it’s always a beautiful day in Santa Monica. Alba’s office is located in Silicon Beach, an enclave of venture-capital-funded tech startups. The workers who congregate in the street to order Korean tacos and banh mi are wearing Ray-Bans and Alexander Wang, and it appears that the iPhone-adopter rate is about 99 percent. One of these buildings houses The Honest Company, an eco-friendly home goods and wellness brand that Alba co-founded in 2012, and more than a few of these well-dressed people milling around are her employees.

If Alba gave her name when we placed our order, I must have missed it. However, as soon as lunch is ready, the cashier softly calls out “Jessica,” and Alba thanks her graciously when she whispers that he’s thrown in a couple pieces of naan—“just so you can try it.”

Back in The Honest Company lunchroom, which is painted airy shades of blue and dotted with potted succulents, Alba unpacks the food before enlisting a colleague to help her find a bottle of Sriracha. As for the juice fast? “I never stick to them,” she says with a shrug, and digs in.

The Honest Company is neither a side business nor a vanity project. Just over two years old and fueled by $52 million in venture capital, the company employs almost 200 people, most of whom are crammed into this office. Though she’s the president, Alba sits at a desk in the middle of a row in an open space. Granted, it’s a hot pink design, with a white leather chair, but she has no more real estate than anyone else. Mid-bite of curry, she looks up to see a group of people exiting a conference room, and her brow furrows. “Why wasn’t I in that meeting?” she wonders, mostly to herself, and then summons over a few staffers to quickly set things straight. Make no mistake: Jessica Alba is the boss.

ALBA’S BUSINESS RESULTED from a meeting with author and activist Christopher Gavigan in 2008. Gavigan had written a book about toxins, and the subject resonated with Alba, who had allergies and often found herself breaking out or swelling up from things as seemingly innocuous as makeup or laundry detergent. With a shared belief that nontoxic products should be both affordable and effective, Gavigan and Alba recruited entrepreneurs Brian Lee and Sean Kane to launch the company with an initial range of 17 products, which has since grown to over 60 items, including household cleaning supplies, baby products, vitamins, lip balms, and shampoo and conditioner.

“I want the products in my day-to-day life to work, but I don’t want to expose myself and my kids to toxic chemicals, and it was virtually impossible to find those,” she explains. “Or if I did, they were all brown and boring and not cute. Things should be pretty, but they should also work, and they shouldn’t break the bank. Just looking around at the market, it became clear that you had to be wealthy in order to afford a better, healthier life for your family, and that’s not OK.” Alba points to an interloper in our lunch, a blue corn taco-looking thing that was certainly not ordered. “Are you going to get into that?” she asks. “I’m nervous—what is it?” She takes one bite, and then another.

After lunch, back at her desk, she arranges and rearranges a gift set to see how much product she can fit into one box, excitedly shows off sample fabrics for a blanket that’s in development, and consults on colors for a lip tint. When asked which one she likes best, she replies, matter-of-factly: “They’re all kind of shitty.” When one of her employees tries to explain that they’re vegan and made from natural red oxide, she points out that they are also “brown and tannish,” “not a cute color,” and therefore, something no one wants to buy.

Alba’s touch is evident in almost every area of the business, from the packaging design to marketing plans and office décor. For the new space, she wanted vintage tanker desks, and when no one could source them, she went on Craigslist and found them herself in an afternoon. She and Gavigan sit down with each new customer care agent that they hire and talk them through their duties, encouraging them to put themselves in that woman’s shoes. “The last thing she wants to do is call a company because her order is wrong,” she explains. “So talk to her like it’s the worst day of her life and it’s your job to turn it around.” She’s worked the phones herself before (albeit in the name of researching an acting role), but claims she’s not very good at it. As for what she’s learned about being a good boss and inspiring her employees, Alba is forthcoming. “I don’t think I’m there yet,” she says. “I’m just trying to get through it. I should think outside myself, but I’m just trying to make sure the lights stay on.” A power outage is unlikely. “Jessica’s different in that she dreams big—she has a 50,000-foot view of big ideas and big
inspiration, but she can actually drop down into the weeds and really identify and understand how to execute," says Gavigan. "I've worked with a lot of notable people, but Jessica has an X-factor that's really unique. I'm always surprised by her inner fire and determination. She's got something to prove, and she's always working to showcase her talents and accomplish her mission and life's purpose."

It's somewhat ironic that Alba might feel she has something to prove, since she's one of the most recognizable stars in the world. In 2000, she landed her first major role, starring in the James Cameron-developed television show Dark Angel. She played a genetically engineered superhuman and earned a Golden Globe nomination in 2001. She followed with dance-flick Honey, and action movies Fantastic Four and Sin City. According to industry website Box Office Mojo, Alba's collective box office gross is over $1.8 billion.

Now a household name, she regularly tops lists with variations on the theme of hot women and beautiful people (Maxim, FHM, TV Guide, Playboy, People).

More than 10 years into her career (and two kids later), Alba is still show-stoppingly, well, hot. Though this year will see her reprising her role as Nancy Callahan in Sin City: A Dame to Kill For, Alba has also made a conscious effort to branch out and take roles that are against type. In Stretch, a microbudget film from Joe Carnahan (Smokin' Aces, NARC), Alba channels a tomboyish limousine company dispatch operator. In the action comedy Barely Lethal, she plays a villain opposite Hailee Steinfeld and Samuel L. Jackson, and in How to Make Love Like an Englishman, she's a knocked-up grad student in love with a professor. "I'm not as business-oriented with my acting career as I was before. I have this," she says, gesturing at the activity humming around her. "So now, acting can be about creativity and growing that side of me. I've played a lot of leading-lady types;
they were sweet, aspirational, not terribly complicated people. I needed to make sure I had staying power, so I went after tentpole movies that were going to be big and global. I really just want to work with directors who I think are cool, and on movies that I think are fun and characters that I think are interesting, whether that’s an indie or a big movie. It doesn’t matter if it’s a lead or a small role. Here, could you take a picture?*

She hands over her phone. On her desk sits a blue-and-white vase stuffed with pink-and-white flowers. Alba hoists it up and makes a wide-eyed grin. She photographs beautifully on the first snap, but I take two, as is custom, just in case. The flowers are a gift from Tory Burch, whom Alba had met a few nights before to talk business—specifically, over Alba’s concerns about being the only woman on The Honest Company board. The photo will serve as a thank-you.

She still has plenty to do, but there’s just enough time to get her nails done before she must go home to pack for a trip to New York to celebrate The Honest Company’s second birthday and promote *The Spoils of Babylon*, a satirical ensemble IFC miniseries that also stars Kristen Wiig, Tobey Maguire, and Will Ferrell. Alba plays a marine biologist named Dixie Mellonworth who nearly slaps the wig off Wiig in a fight over Maguire’s affections. Her lab coat and cat-eye glasses don’t disguise the fact that Mellonworth is indeed a sexy scientist, and in an appearance on *Jimmy Fallon*, Alba deadpanned, “Her melons are worth it.”

I CLEAR A LINT ROLLER and a cardigan off the passenger seat of her SUV and we make off for the nail salon Olive & June, in Beverly Hills, where Alba is evidently a regular. As she settles into a chair in the back, relishing a rare moment when the only decision she’s making is what color to paint her toes (she settles on dark green), the change in her energy is palpable.

In recent years, acting has become Alba’s escape, where playing a fictional character is a welcome break from the multitude of roles she already plays in her daily life. “I don’t have to be a boss; I don’t have to be a wife; I don’t have to be a sister,” she says of the compartmentalizing that happens when she arrives on set. “I can just be somebody else completely, and there’s something really liberating about that. There are no rules, no boundaries. I’ve always been such a control freak about everything, since I was little, and I was always so responsible. It’s been liberating to be able to play someone who’s a badass or promiscuous, because that’s the opposite of who I am. I don’t have a choice—I have to just dive in. It’s like a drug or something. When you connect with a complete stranger, and you’re both playing someone else and having an argument, or laughing—there’s something really neat about creating these genuine, intimate moments.”

Patrick Wilson, her co-star in *Stretch*, knows this firsthand. “Jessica is comfortable in her own skin, and easy to get along with. That helps when you’re forging a relationship in about five minutes,” he says. “Luckily, we felt very comfortable with each other so we could establish a rapport right away. She came in with tons of thoughts, questions, and character work she had already done. She was ready to roll.”

Alba’s return to *Sin City* was another immersive experience. “I wore wigs, I wore prosthetics, I had a scar on my face,” she recalls. “[Nancy] is a mess—she’s an alcoholic—so it was a really dark headspace to be in.” Prep for the film was physical—running, dancing, shooting, and archery—and in a way, it was a continuation of the stuntwoman training Alba received as a teenager on *Dark Angel*. “It’s nice to be able to use my body in a way that other people can’t,” she says. “It’s another tool.” That background, incidentally, has made her a badass in real life. “I know how to ride a motorcycle,” she admits. “I can do wire work like you see in circuses. I can shoot and load a gun, and I can disarm someone who has a gun. I know how to fight, too.”

Alba leans back in the pedicure chair. “In this last year, for sure, I had the most fun,” she says of her acting projects. “Now, I don’t feel like I have anything to lose. Before, I was so fearful of failure and judgment that I was scared to put myself out there. You don’t have to be a robot. You don’t have to be appropriate all the time. I used to be so hard on myself whenever I would act out, like if I had a little too much to drink and said something inappropriate to somebody—or to an entire party.” She smiles. “But you have to realize that as long as you don’t make a habit of it, tomorrow will be here, and everything will be OK. And as much as you think other people are defining you, it really doesn’t matter what they think.”

Her nails are done dry, but Alba is in no particular hurry to leave. She lingers in the chair as the late afternoon sun turns everything golden, a hue that seems made for her, reflected in the highlights in her hair and the bronzer shimmering on her cheeks. So much has changed since she first arrived in Hollywood, she concedes. Although, she adds, laughing, “I can probably still wear midriff.”