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on style & money

The first time I met Nicola I wanted to pull out my pen, connect all her freckles and find the constellations in her skin. 'Proof of my South African childhood,' said Nicola, who was busy covering bits of herself with what was her outfit that day – a bed sheet. 'This shoot is gorgeous,' she purred. 'Very sexy. We like sexy. With you guys I get to give that come hither look,' said Nicola, turning on a pair of bedroom eyes and offering up the soft vulnerability of her neck, before breaking out into a wholesome smile, saying: 'Today my wardrobe alternates between underwear and bed sheets.'

It's more than a year later and although Nicola doesn't remember me, how could I possibly forget her. A lot has changed since our first meeting, she's engaged for starters, but clearly still as comfortable in her underwear as *siesies* at the beach on New Year's Day. I sit with Nicola in her blank canvas state, while she undergoes a lengthy make-up session that takes place throughout our interview. But even before she's made up, and without the benefit of the camera's filters, the kind lighting and the post-production Photoshop trickery, it's clear that this girl is gorgeousness personified. She wasn't the R4 million Face of Revlon's Absolutely Fabulous cosmetics campaign for nothing.

The export quality belter was always destined to go intercontinental. She left Durban for Switzerland at 17, then left Switzerland for Paris and London five years later where she started her career in modelling.

IN BED WITH NICOLA

Sweet dreams are made of this – meet South Africa's big-ticket export, Nicola Breytenbach

'Today my wardrobe alternates between underwear and bed sheets'

Today she lives in New York – the 47th floor of the Trump Tower if you're wondering – and it's not just Nicola's 5th Avenue address that attests to her making it.


'Donald's [Trump] on the top three floors 65 to 68,' says Nicola, picking a clump of mascara out of the corner of her eye, which makes her mouth form a perfect O. 'It has really beautiful views. During the day it's a concrete jungle, and at night when the city lights up it's just... wow!'

Donald Trump selected Nicola to appear on two seasons of *The Apprentice* and also asked her to judge the Miss USA pageant, which he also owns. 'Trump is nice,' offers Nicola. 'And I don't have to say that, either. He's not nearly as scary as everyone thinks. He's a very powerful, strong person who takes his business very seriously, but he does have a softer side to him.'

We speak about some of the other places that she calls home, a spot in Washington DC, a house in St Tropez, a ranch in Virginia. 'The ranch is huge. I've never seen a neighbour. It's all forest and woods. I don't know how big though, you'd have to ask Ben.' Ben is Ben Steiner, business tycoon, son of the aerospace giant Fairchild Corporation's CEO Jeffrey Steiner and Nicola's fiancé.

If there's any truth in the cliché that girls like guys with hot wheels then it's easy to see why Nicola is so enamoured. Attempting a mental inventory of their garage, Nicola gives me the breakdown: 'There's a Maserati, Ferrari, Porsche, that BMW from the Bond movie, Zee Three or something? A really old Mercedes convertible, a Porsche Carrera or Turbo... there's also a whole other room with about 15 motorcycles. Ben likes his toys.'

Now that she's nearing 30, Nicola has started considering her



'Trump is nice, not nearly as scary as everyone thinks. He does have a softer side'

career outside of modelling. Unfortunately her scene in *Blood Diamond* was left on the cutting room floor. However her business plans seem more promising and there's a strategy to turn Nicola into a brand. She's starting with a scent. 'I'm going to launch a fragrance. Nicola. They've made some samples and now I must choose one. I don't know the exact notes yet, but I know it won't be heavy. I like soft, floral, feminine scents.'

Meanwhile a female make-up artist is running her orange palms full of self-tan up and down Nicola's bare legs and I'm feeling awkward, not knowing where to look. 'There are a lot of men here today, but I don't get nervous, well not any more. It's been 10 years, and when you do shows and stuff you're in and out of outfits and it becomes second nature...'

Nicola is hushed by the only voice in the room that's deeper than hers - James Small's - which is barking into a cellphone in a tone that is Tom Waits to Nicola's Johnny Cash. If you're wondering what James Small is doing on set, then you're in good company. 'Just getting in the way,' he says in a rare moment that he's not on his cellphone.

Having given up smoking since our last meeting, Nicola reckons that she'll keep the voice though. 'I have nodules on my vocal chords,' says Nicola. 'Opera singers get them. I strain my voice because technically you're supposed to speak from here, the diaphragm, but I talk from my throat and it puts a lot of strain on it. But this is deeper than normal. I've been talking too much.'

Her lips done, she steps into her outfit which, along with the men's white dress shirt, is a pair of hyper-extended glossy black pumps. Nicola has transformed since I switched my dictaphone on, growing longer hair, fuller, poutier lips, she's had her face painted prettier and been given a golden hue (the stylist's table looks like a mechanic's workshop bench). Then she drops her robe, positions herself in front of the camera and the pulse of a digital camera along with the flash of studio lights brings out her game face. Everything is illuminated. □