

HAUNT A HOTEL | CHASE FALL COLOR | RENT A LIFE

Spirit

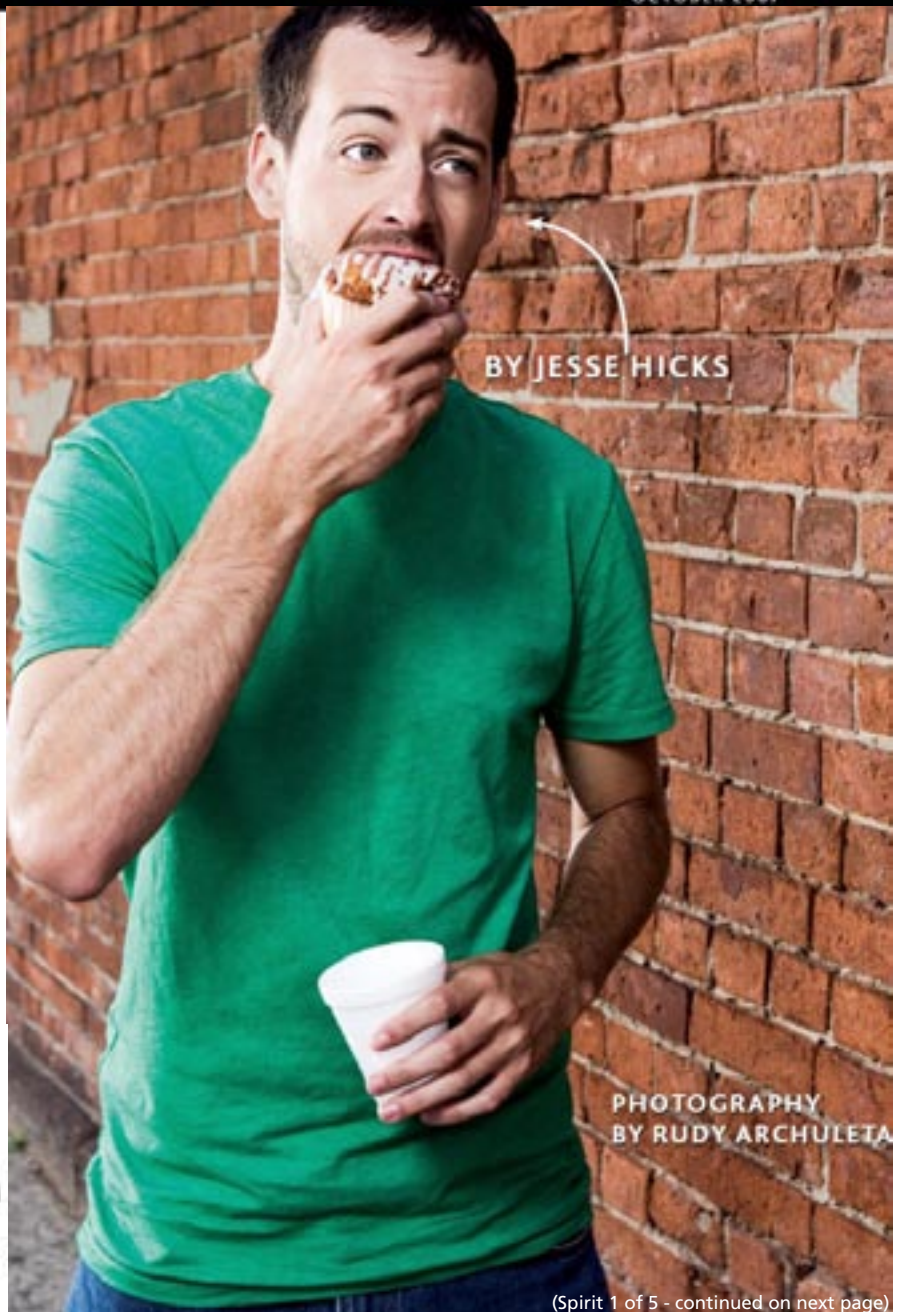
OCTOBER 2007

SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

EXTREME MAKEOVER

Here I was: broke, skittish, unsatisfied, and desperate to change. So I did. For one day.

You can do a lot trying to change your life. Parachute from a plane at 13,000 feet. Scale the heights of Mount Everest. Retreat into contemplation in a Tibetan monastery. Take a Tex-Mex cooking class. Me, I was standing in the dark in the cheapest hotel room I could find in New York City, fumbling for the light switch.



BY JESSE HICKS

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY RUDY ARCHULETA

The Life
RENTAL

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The fluorescent light came on to a bug-zapper hum, revealing Spartan, cramped accommodations. Through the window I could see the razor wire fence that circled the hotel.

You might, with little sympathy, say this is one of those “quarter-life crisis” stories, in which our young hero first measures himself against the George Clooney Index and comes up woefully short. Our endearing beta male then decides it’s time for an upgrade.

I was bored with my black-and white life and wanted to try on a Technicolor dream. After a four-hour pilgrimage by bus, I’d come to New York to rent myself a new life.

That was me. I was bored with my black-and white life and wanted to try on a Technicolor dream. I wanted the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Or infamous. I wasn’t fussy. I only knew that I was ready for a change. After a four-hour pilgrimage by bus, I’d come to New York to rent myself a new life.

I wasn’t alone, either. I was one of millions of Americans foregoing the responsibilities of ownership for the freedom of the rental life. “People are more interested in collecting experiences than in collecting possessions,” says Milton Pedraza, CEO of the Luxury Institute, a ratings and business intelligence firm. And the trend is on the rise. Luxury consumers in 2005 spent an average of \$22,746 on “life-changing experiences,” almost twice as much as the previous year, according to Unity Marketing.

Naturally, the trend away from ownership has opened up the rental economy, and businesses have rushed right in. Los Angeles-based art retailer GhettoGloss rents works by such celebrities as author and director Clive Barker, musician Mark Mothersbaugh, and actor Benicio del Toro, among others. Bag Borrow or Steal, a three-year-old company generally considered

a pioneer in the “borrowed luxury” market, loans high-end accessories via mail. The company recently raised \$15 million in venture capital to expand its product offerings. Perhaps more tellingly, it’s spawned a host of imitators. Even Fido is up for grabs. FlexPetz, a new company based out of Wilmington, Delaware, offers “a shared dog ownership concept” for consumers who want the benefits of canine companionship without the responsibility of possession. For a starter fee of \$250 and a monthly charge of \$49, members can schedule an appointment with their favorite pooch for at least two days a month.

But it’d take more than borrowed puppy love to upgrade my life. I needed a radical overhaul. Before the day was over, I’d be someone else. Someone better.

MY FRIENDS - the ones who label me “skittish,” as though I were a nervous housecat - couldn’t understand why I needed an upgrade. They were comfortable people, set in their lives, and I could never adequately explain my restlessness.

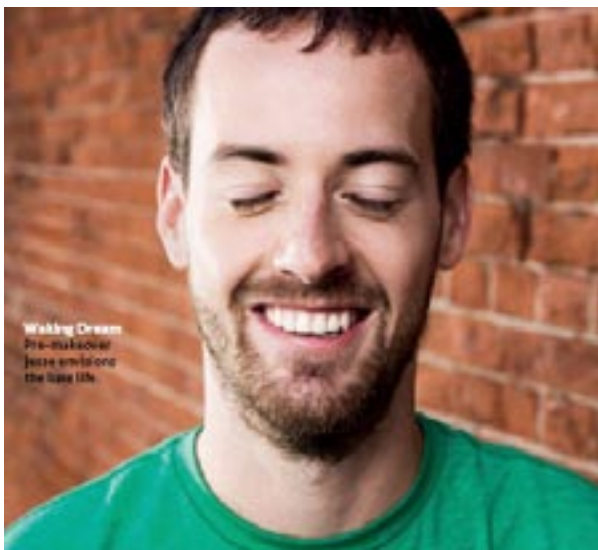
“What, exactly, are you doing?” they’d ask me.

“I’m going to New York City and renting an entire lifestyle. High-class clothes, watch, and car. Then I’m going to see what happens. I will have a sizable expense account.”

My friends couldn’t understand why I needed an upgrade. They were comfortable people, set in their lives, and I could never adequately explain my restlessness.

But would that be enough to temporarily buy my way into a new life? With my rented clothes, car, and watch, would people treat me differently? Could I convince them to see me as the superstar I’ve always known myself to be? More important, could I convince myself?

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Somehow I'd failed to communicate the seriousness of the question. After a moment, my friends would respond, "It sounds like you're getting paid to play dress-up, with free drinks. Can I come?"

They had a point: Twelve hours wasn't much time for a complete personality revamp, and without the suavity to match my new lifestyle accessories, I'd just be a sheep in wolf's clothing. I might look the debonair gentleman, but I wouldn't feel it.

So once in New York City, I made my first stop Polished Social Image Consultants. Samantha von Sperling, Polished's founder and director, had graciously agreed to help transform me into a man of wealth and taste.

Thanks to a misreading of the subway map, I arrived 20 minutes late, dressed

in jeans and a leather jacket despite the 70-plus-degree heat. In a misguided attempt to recover lost time, I'd sprinted the last mile to her studio. My hair was matted, and sweat shone on my forehead.

Damp spots blossomed on my Tshirt - kelly green, with the slogan, "Got Your Tickets to the Gun Show?" pointing to my .22-caliber biceps.

Despite my disheveled appearance, von Sperling welcomed me into her minimalist studio. The five-foot-three Betty Boop look-alike knows how to turn heads. It's all about confidence, she said, and "people smell confidence." Sure, but I'd heard that before. My innate skittishness, the free-floating anxiety fundamental to my character, had its own odor. It was the reek of flop sweat, of thwarted ambitions; von Sperling had picked up on it as soon as I shook her hand. As I did so, she said, I was looking everywhere but at her. I was probably checking for fire exits.

I'd have to fake my way into a confident persona. Since we had so little time, von Sperling suggested we work from the outside-in, what she called "the jumpstart approach." Start by looking the part and the rest will follow. "Put the body in the stance, get the man in the suit," she said. "Suddenly he becomes a little more confident." Clothes make the man. I could handle that. I'd worn clothes before.

It's all about confidence, von Sperling said. But I'd heard that before. The free-floating anxiety fundamental to my character had its own odor.

Or so I thought. I was "swimming" in my medium T-shirt, according to von Sperling. The diagnosis of "too sartorially incompetent to even choose his T-shirt" was an ego-blow, but I took it in the name of personal growth. I'd committed the cardinal sin of fashion: failing to flaunt my assets and minimize my faults. But I could find forgiveness. As von Sperling pointed out, I had more to work with than I'd realized. "You have beautiful eyes. You're slim. You're tall," she said. "You didn't fare too badly in the gene pool at all." I promised to quote her on that.

So I had potential, but I'd need professional help before I'd be ready for my close-up. I'd set up an appointment with

Neva Lindner, a professional stylist and founder of Wardrobe NYC, a high-end wardrobe rental salon. She counts as clients Sharon Stone's stylist and Rachel Hunter. The costume designer for The Sopranos has raided her closet. Lindner works out of two studios, one in SoHo and the other in L.A., featuring closet after closet of designer clothes: Yves St. Laurent, Pierre Hardy, Marc Jacobs, Versace, Armani. To my ears, it might as well be the Latin mass. I knew they were

important but wasn't sure why.

I dove in anyway, trying on everything. The refrain, "Do you have anything smaller?" started getting repetitive even to my ears. I was beginning to think I'd need to add a paunch to my list of rentals.

Eventually, Lindner guided me to a Dolce and Gabbana blazer. "This is a little flashy," she said. Black silk

with a subtle paisley pattern, I dubbed it "the Monochrome Acid Trip." It was flashy, and I saw no reason not to take it. My rented plumage ought to be flashy; if you get the chance to live like a rock star, you don't want to be a bland one. I figured I'd go for "decadent Eurotrash" and began practicing my haughty sneer.

Just to be safe, I chose a backup outfit, a vintage Yves St. Laurent jacket and pants set in light blue. I matched it with a white shirt favored by Hayden Christensen. Yes, the Hayden Christensen. It seems Anakin Skywalker likes the look of French cuffs.

My look was almost complete. To accessorize, I rented an Omega Seamaster James Bond watch from Watch My Wrist. An elegantly understated piece of Swiss engineering, the Seamaster is designed for a sophisticated gentleman. And it's designed for a gentleman's body, meaning that I had remove three links for it to fit my dainty, child-like wrists. I was wearing two months salary on my arm; this fact made me, you might say, somewhat skittish.

Polished Social Image Consultants' von Sperling had barely contained

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her revulsion at my \$13 haircut and used her pull to get me an appointment with James Hernandez. The superstar coiffeur doesn't advertise. In his semi-hidden studio he surveyed the 'do-saster with calm stoicism of a paramedic. The style didn't fit my head.

"Look how it hangs down here in the back!" Hernandez said, shaking his head. "And let's trim up that beard. We'll make it work, make it look good," he grinned, stroking his own stubble. With 45 minutes of careful attention, he turned my shaggy mop into a textbook example of roguish dishevelment.

Once we'd established my look, it was time for a rechristening. "Jesse Hicks," Samantha told me, was an "endearing" name. Endearing is what you bring home to meet your parents. Tonight I was going to be something else. Something dangerous. Something, as von Sperling put it, "mucho macho."

So I became a "Brad." Short and to the point, with no messing around. Adding a super-masculine last name, I became "Brad Briggs, International Diamond Thief and Raconteur." Brad Briggs was the kind of man who makes supermodels giggle shyly behind their hands.

Knowing that role would take a wee bit more coaching, I looked for more advice. From Robert Green, author of *The 48 Laws of Power* (Penguin), I learned the need to control my emotions and to keep the endgame in mind. After all, that worked for Sun Tzu and Machiavelli. From Allan Pease, co-author of *The Definitive Book of Body Language* (Bantam), I realized that I needed to mimic the posture of conversation partners and not to jabber like Woody Allen. Check and check. Brad Briggs was ready.

Outside the hotel awaited my

chariot: an Aston Martin V12 Vanquish, illegally parked, its tungsten finish gleaming like quicksilver in the sun. As I climbed in, I checked my watch, the Omega Seamaster I hadn't figured out how to set. Even if it was twenty minutes fast, I was still late for my dinner date for three at Amalia, a midtown restaurant evoking Old European decadence. I pressed the large red button in the center of the console, helpfully labeled "Ignition."

Giving a congenital lead foot like Jesse Hicks an Aston Martin would be like giving a small child a firearm, but Brad Briggs slipped behind the wheel with confidence.

Twelve cylinders came to life with a distinguished, aristocratic growl.

Giving a congenital lead foot like Jesse Hicks an Aston Martin would be like giving a small child a firearm, but Brad

Briggs slipped behind the wheel with poise and confidence - directly into the turtles-in-molasses crawl of New York City rush hour. The Vanquish idled like Hannibal Lecter pacing in his cage.

The drive was Brad Briggs' first public appearance, a chance to see how people would react to my new persona. I already felt more confident. I was ready to test my new image on my two friends, Kelly and Catherine. But as my 6 o'clock dinner reservation came and went, I took special pleasure in the gawking passersby. A bike messenger yelled out "Sick car!" looking back as he nearly collided with a taxi. A man in a suit and tie paused his cell phone conversation to ask, "Is that the DB9?"

"No, it's the Vanquish. V12."

"Really, what year?" he asked as he bent down to inspect it.

"2006," I answered. I could tell he wanted to touch it. Maybe rest his cheek against the curvaceous fender. I had his respect, momentarily; this slick, Big City power-broker was asking about my car. Of course, it was just the car he was impressed by, not the man inside. I knew that, and looked forward to leaving my sleek metal cocoon.

A father pointed at the Aston

Martin and leaned down to his young son, who grinned. I imagine he said something like, "Son, that's a car you won't see anywhere. And that's a car you won't see anywhere, turning into a dead end because the driver doesn't know where he's going." Turning down a blind alley was a Jesse Hicks move; Brad Briggs made all his wrong turns intentionally. The people on the street didn't seem to grasp the distinction.

I arrived an hour-and-a-half late. European time, I rationalized.

By promising free drinks and a classy dinner, I was able to secure the temporary company of Kelly and Catherine, a flaxen-haired goddess and a ravenlocked vixen, respectively. Both students in their early 20s, they'd taken my advice to heart: "dress code = sexiest version of yourself." Kelly was bright and glittery, Catherine dark and mysterious-perfect arm candy for the new, better me.

But as I approached, the two fixed me with a joint look of cool disdain. They'd been drinking, and the bartender had been hitting on them. "We've been here long enough that we know more about each other than either of us knows about you," Kelly

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said.

I tried to temper their annoyance, with only relative success. Still, Brad Briggs could talk his way out of anything, and if all else failed he'd simply pick up the tab. Cringing inside, I signed the check and led them to our table.

Amalia's low-key, high-class atmosphere- that of a "dilapidated Prague mansion," according to the press release-seemed a fitting place to make my debut. As we dined on sirloin steak and mushrooms, Catherine commented on our waitress, a Jessica Simpson lookalike, saying, "Everyone here looks like a celebrity. It's a little creepy." She was right. One waiter looked like a B-grade David Bowie.

The refrain, 'Do you have anything smaller?' started getting repetitive even to my ears. I was beginning to think I'd need to add a paunch to my list of rentals.

The ambitious, chatty businessman seated behind me had the notquite-placeable face of a character actor. We'd slipped through the looking glass.

Meanwhile, Kelly convinced Jessica Simpson to bring us a \$100 bottle of wine. We toasted, at her suggestion, to "adults at play."

New York is a vertical city, and the real adults were at play far above us. The actual test of my new persona-Brad Briggs' baptism by fire-would be in scaling those Olympian heights. Could I gain entrance to their world? And would that make me one of them?

I FIGURED IT WAS BEST to risk everything on the first try. I'd either succeed or fail spectacularly, falling to earth like a flaming Icarus. Either way, something would happen. After

dinner we headed to the top of the nearby Dream Hotel. There we found Ava Lounge, a cozy rooftop bar with floor-to-ceiling windows.

But the doorman refused us, citing a private party. Kelly did her thing, revealing an impressive length of thigh and politely asking if we might be allowed in to find our friend, "Marcie." Eventually he relented. Clearly my company had more of an effect on him than had my carefully chosen wardrobe.

Inside we found an austere, retro-modern décor teeming with hipsters. Behind them, the view of Times Square exploded so brightly it obliterated all detail.

Polished Social Image Consultants' von Sperling had told me that New York, like its West Coast doppelgänger, Los Angeles, was a city of conflicted dreamers. Though they worked hard and played hard, somewhere deep inside they nursed a feeling of primal dissatisfaction with themselves. I knew that feeling, and now I was among them. They swirled around me with studied indifference, gazing down on Times Square with what they hoped was a look of ennui. Obviously, I wasn't the only one faking it.

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At first, the "cooler-than-thou" atmosphere felt oppressive. But as we sat on gold couches, drinking by candlelight and admiring the monochrome erotica on the walls, I began to feel at home. Despite my personal-

ity makeover and rented glamour, no one had yet recognized my extraordinary uniqueness. No one had greeted me with a red carpet and popping flashbulbs. I'd spent all this time making myself fabulous ... and no one had noticed.

In a way, though, I had become one of them. Not by copying their look or aping the self-confidence that



seemed to come naturally to them. The revelation, when it came, was a little like the ending of The Wizard of Oz. I didn't need those ruby slippers-the car, the watch, the wardrobe- to go home. I'd been home all along, among people trying just as hard to impress me as I was them. We were all kindred spirits, self-conscious and playing dress-up for each other.

That's how we'd all come together in this penthouse bar with overpriced drinks and a spectacular view. That's what we were paying for, after all: the view of ourselves. For the price of admission- the price I'd paid for my rented persona, the time I'd put into becoming Brad Briggs-I got to watch other people, watch them watching me. We could play our roles until, like in a movie, we all disappeared, back out into the dark night from which

we'd come. simply pick up the tab. Cringing inside, I signed the check and led them to our table.

*Jesse Hicks is a writer based in Pennsylvania.
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