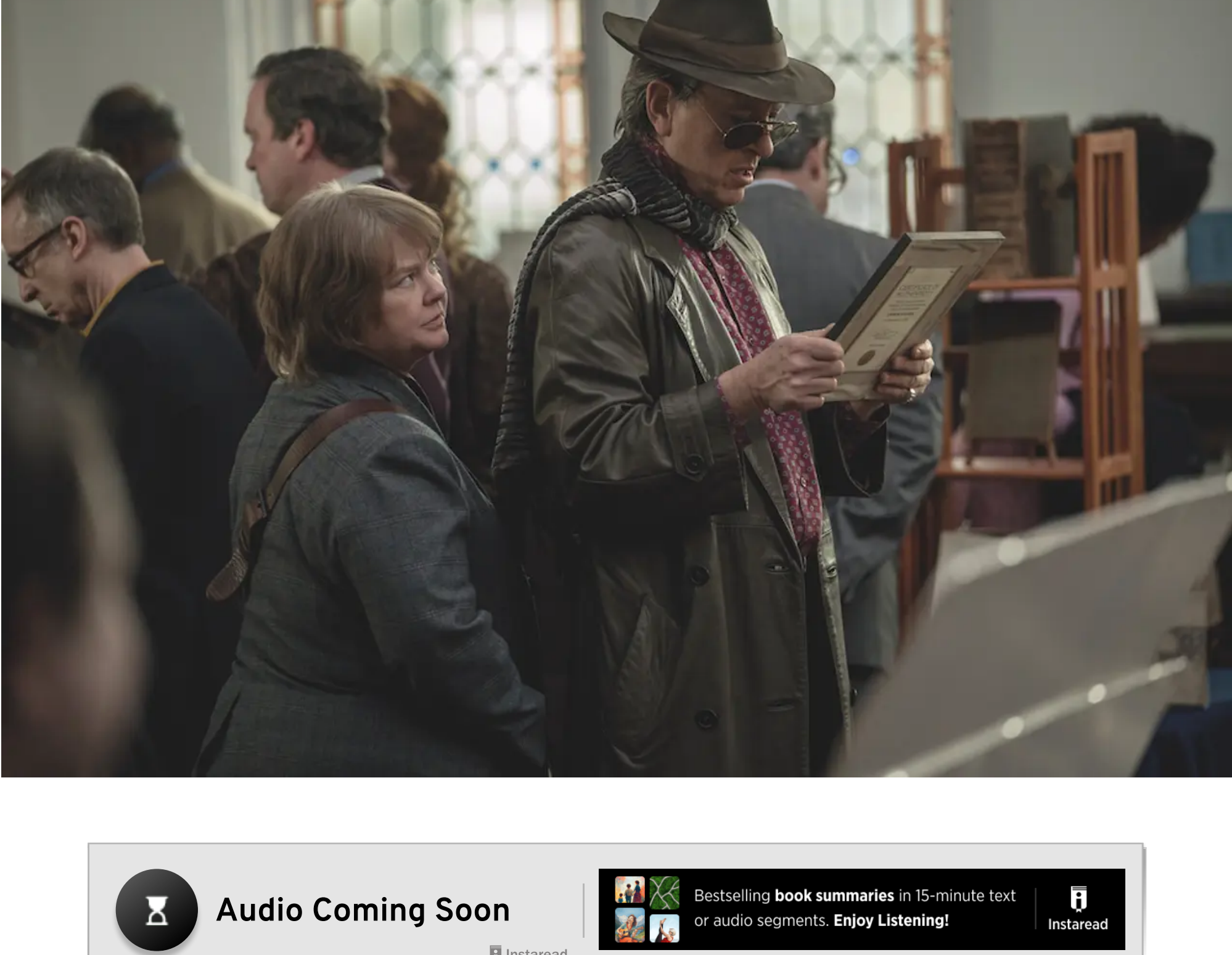


Interview: Richard E Grant

BY READERS DIGEST

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Known for his flamboyant performances in *Withnail and I*, *Downton Abbey* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*, actor Richard E Grant talks to Eva Mackevic about friendship, marijuana, and why he finds it so hard to forgive

In a quiet suite of Claridge's hotel my blood runs cold as I begin my conversation with Richard E Grant. I gather from the get-go that the actor can be very picky about the things he shares, careful not to reveal too much about himself or tread on any risky territory—a trait which makes him both fantastically charming and frustratingly impenetrable.

We're here to talk about his new film, *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* which tells the true story of the American celebrity biographer, Lee Israel, played by Melissa McCarthy. When Israel's writing career took a turn for the worse, leaving her penniless, she turned to a life of crime, forging letters of famous deceased writers and selling them for big money to book shops and private collectors. Richard portrays her hedonistic, larger-than-life friend, Jack Hock—a cash-strapped British expat who joined Israel in the pursuit of this risky illegal scheme.

"I wish I could say I was more forgiving but emotionally I'm incapable of that"

"There was very little to go on [in terms of research], other than that Jack died at the age of 47 in 1994; had a little cigarette holder that he thought would stop him from getting lung cancer, as he was a chain smoker; and that he had been in jail for two years for holding a knife to a taxi driver's throat, arguing about a fare." Richard tells me about the role in his mellifluous, plummy voice.



Withnail is one of Richard's most iconic roles to date

Hock was also an out-of-control but extremely charismatic alcoholic which is very reminiscent of arguably Richard's most famous character, Withnail, I observe.

"I suppose if you play somebody who's as alcoholic, verbal and vitriolic as Withnail, inevitably there's going to be an overlap into this kind of personality, but Jack Hock wanted to be liked, he was like a Labrador who would lick people into submission. A character like Withnail would not have given someone as spiky and misanthropic as Lee Israel the time of day."

Jack Hock did though, and the result was a deep, sincere friendship that both found solace in, despite the constant verbal sparring and extortionate pride. When I ask Richard what he's like as a friend himself, he somewhat unsurprisingly admits that he's quite rigid and very loyal when it comes to his personal relationships. Having moved to London in 1982, he still remains in touch with school friends from his native Swaziland.

"Fortunately, I have a job where you can—if you're lucky enough—carry on playing parts until they just don't want to see your face anymore"

"I place enormous value on friendships. I think that—unlike being married, or blood related— they're this invisible thing that you have to nurture. I was incredibly lonely when I first moved to London, so the friendships that I formed in the first year really sustained me. I'm a loyal dog by nature so once I'm friends with somebody, that's it. And, equally, if they betray me..." he pauses for a moment. "...I wish I could say I was more forgiving. I understand rationally I should be, but emotionally I'm incapable of that." Richard tells me about a time he was inadvertently betrayed by a friend of 30 years, who accidentally copied him into an unsavory email. "It's still stuff that I've never forgotten and that ended that friendship," the actor admits. the conversation turns to our shared experience as immigrants in London and what it was like to move our whole lives to a different part of the world. "Swaziland is physically beautiful. We had a pool, a beautiful garden, an amazing view down a valley that you could see from 40 miles, monkeys at the bottom of the garden—all the things that you just take for granted when you grow up there. It's rural and dramatic compared to the urban landscape of London which is flat as a pancake. It's only when you go away you realise that it was exotic in retrospect, whereas at the time, that was your norm.



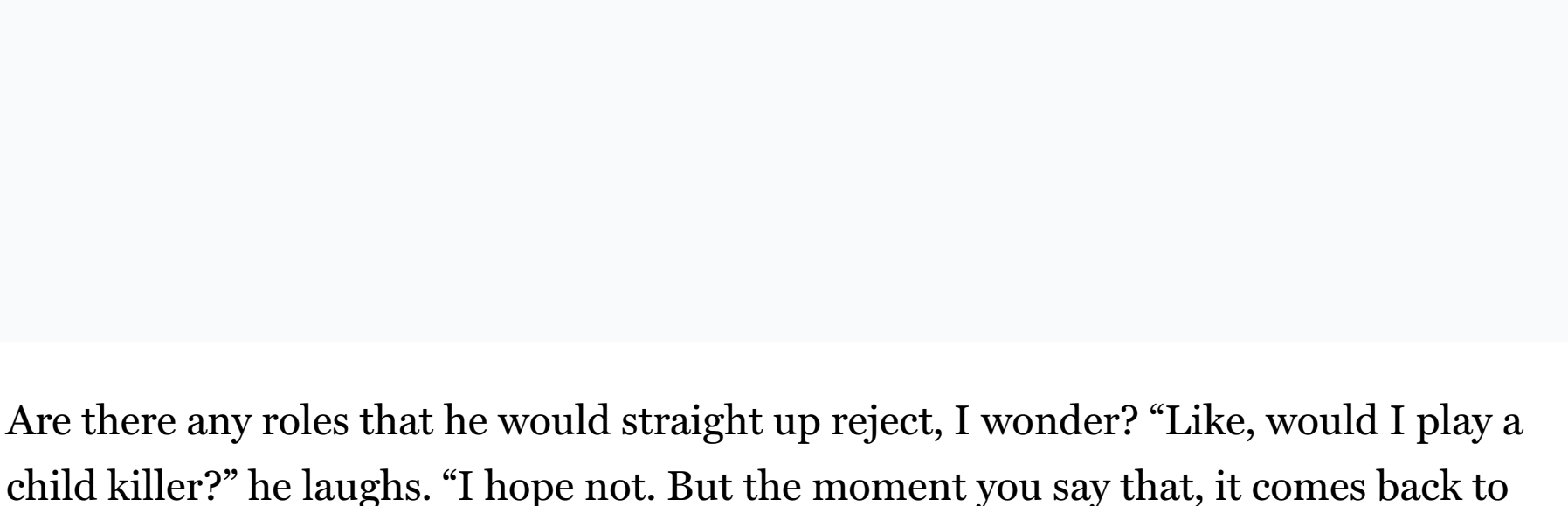
With Melissa McCarthy in *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*

"Rudyard Kipling said, 'What do they know of England, who only England know?' and it's that theme of, only when you go away and go back again, are you able to look with fresh eyes at where and how you grew up," he muses.

If there's one thing we agree on, it's that neither of us would ever permanently return to our homeland.

"I can't earn a living there," says Richard. "But it's very nice to go to. The whole life that I live in England and America, which is show business, is of absolutely no consequence or importance when I go home. And it's a completely different but refreshing reality. "Perhaps a nice place to retire one day?" I ask. "Oh, I never want to retire!" he laughs. "I love my job too much. Fortunately, it's a job where you can—if you're lucky enough—carry on playing parts according to your age until they just don't want to see your face anymore."

Richard hopes it won't happen any time soon though, as the list of directors he'd like to work with (From Spielberg to Tarantino, via Damien Chazelle) is "as long as his arm." Not that he's complaining, though: "I've worked with Altman, Scorsese, Coppola, Jane Campion, Philip Kauffman, now Marielle Heller... I've had a good run but you know, there's always somebody new who comes up with an idea or a way of working that is tantalising and interesting,"



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Are there any roles that he would straight up reject, I wonder? "Like, would I play a child killer?" he laughs. "I hope not. But the moment you say that, it comes back to haunt you. I'm sure if you asked Anthony Hopkins when he was doing Shakespeare at the National Theatre, 'Would you ever have played a serial killer who ate people?' he'd go, 'Maybe not,' but he portrayed [Hannibal Lecter] brilliantly so I think it's a kind of trap. Never say never, to quote James Bond."

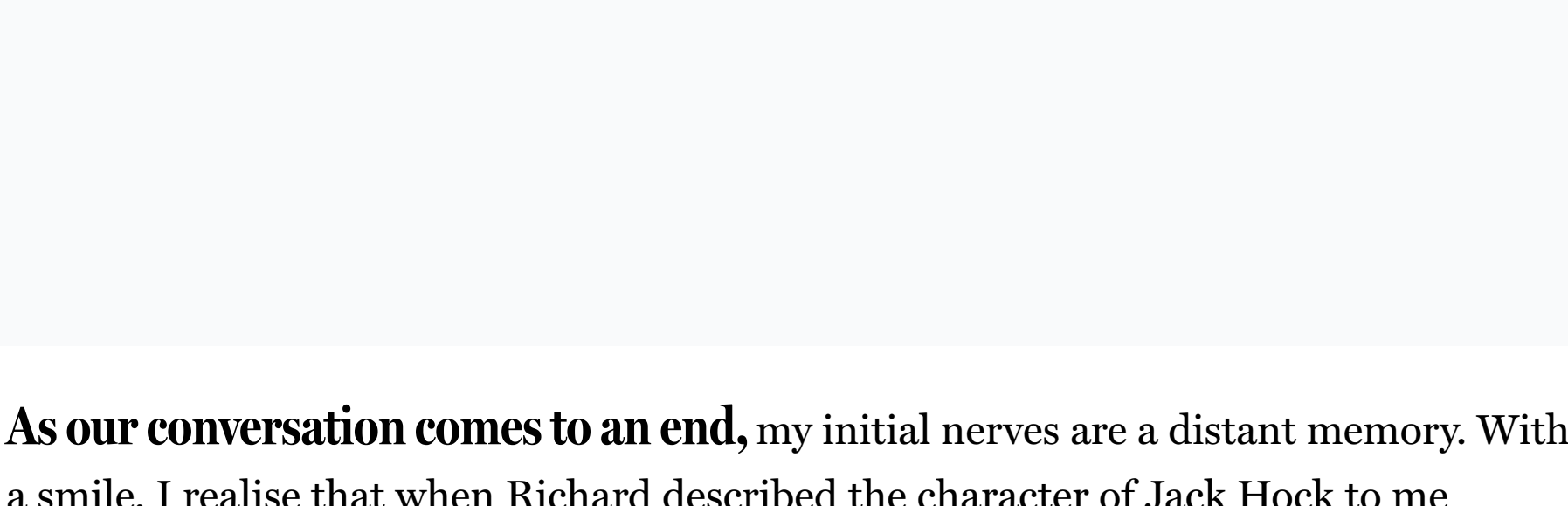


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By this point, Richard has let his guard down, and the initially-chilly interview has turned into a mellow chat as we find ourselves giggling about his allergy to alcohol.

"I've only been drunk once; I managed to keep alcohol down for nine minutes and then I was violently ill for 25 hours," he tells me. As someone who's intolerant to booze though, he's certainly played a lot of characters with substance abuse problems. I ask him what his secret is. "Well, what I've observed that's so acute in drunken behaviour is that the effort that they make to appear *not drunk* and to get across a room in a straight line thinking that they're managing it—that in itself is a clue to how to do it. You just try and hope that other people believe that you are," he says.

When I wonder aloud whether he has indulged in any other vices to make up for his abstinence, Richard gets a bit giddy: "Oh yeah, all of them! I tried every drug under the sun in my youth. You wean yourself off that experimental time of your life. Your social life changes when you get more responsibilities. I still smoke dope but that's as much as I do now. I love marijuana—it makes me laugh," he smiles.

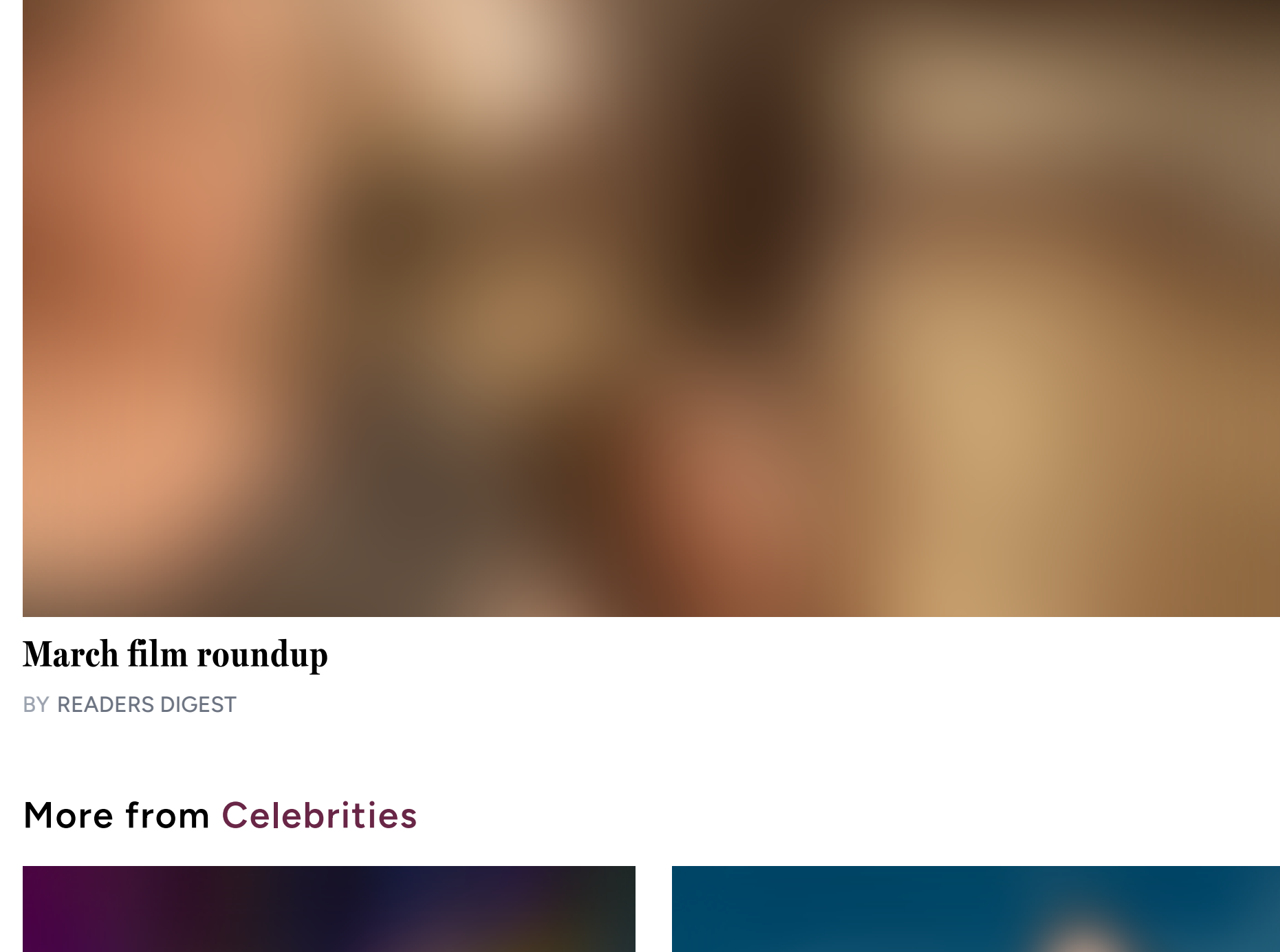


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As our conversation comes to an end, my initial nerves are a distant memory. With a smile, I realise that when Richard described the character of Jack Hock to me earlier, he could also have been easily describing himself: "It's like dealing with somebody who always has a long face. When you finally elicit a smile out of them, the reward seems much greater than it would've been with somebody who's permanently happy."

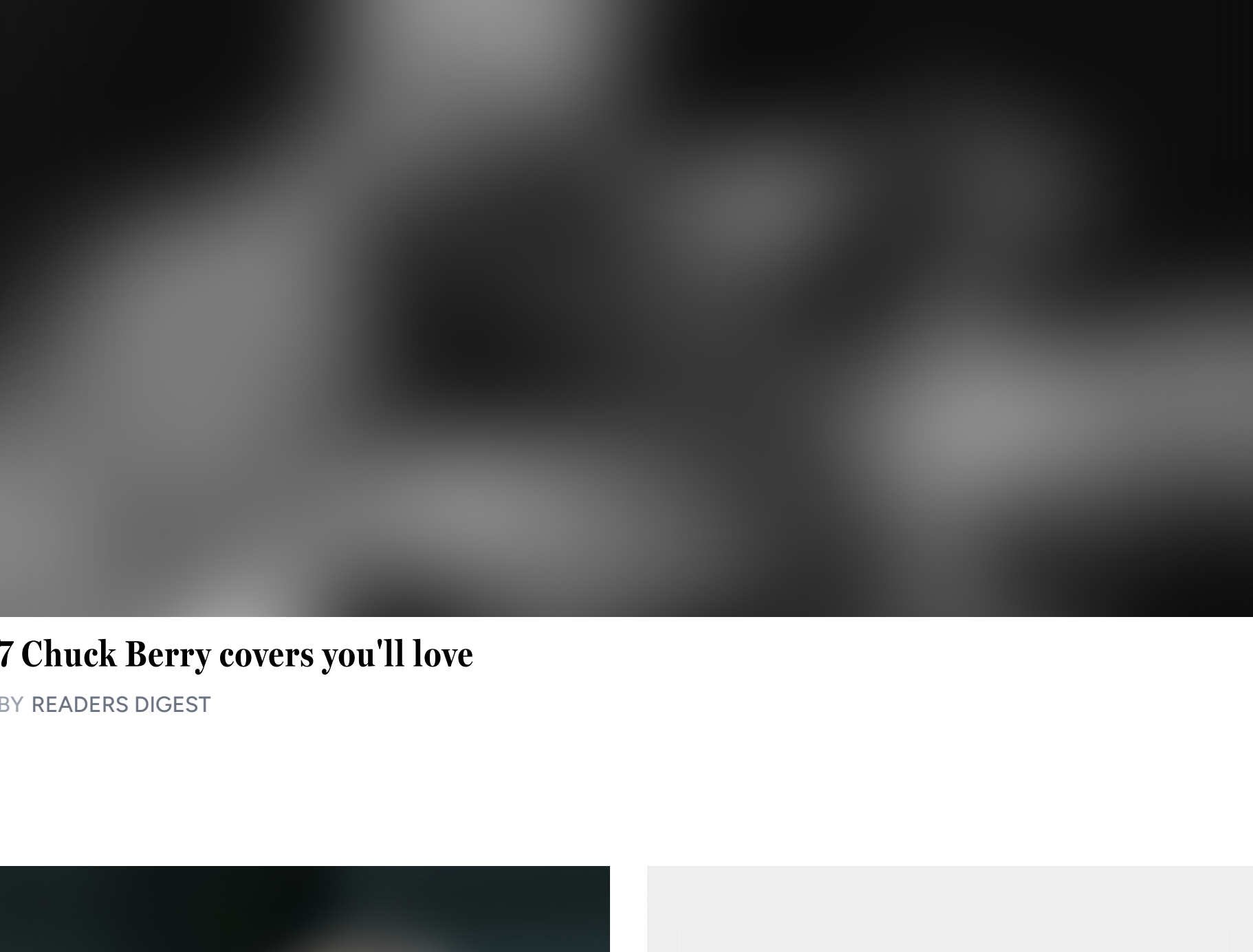
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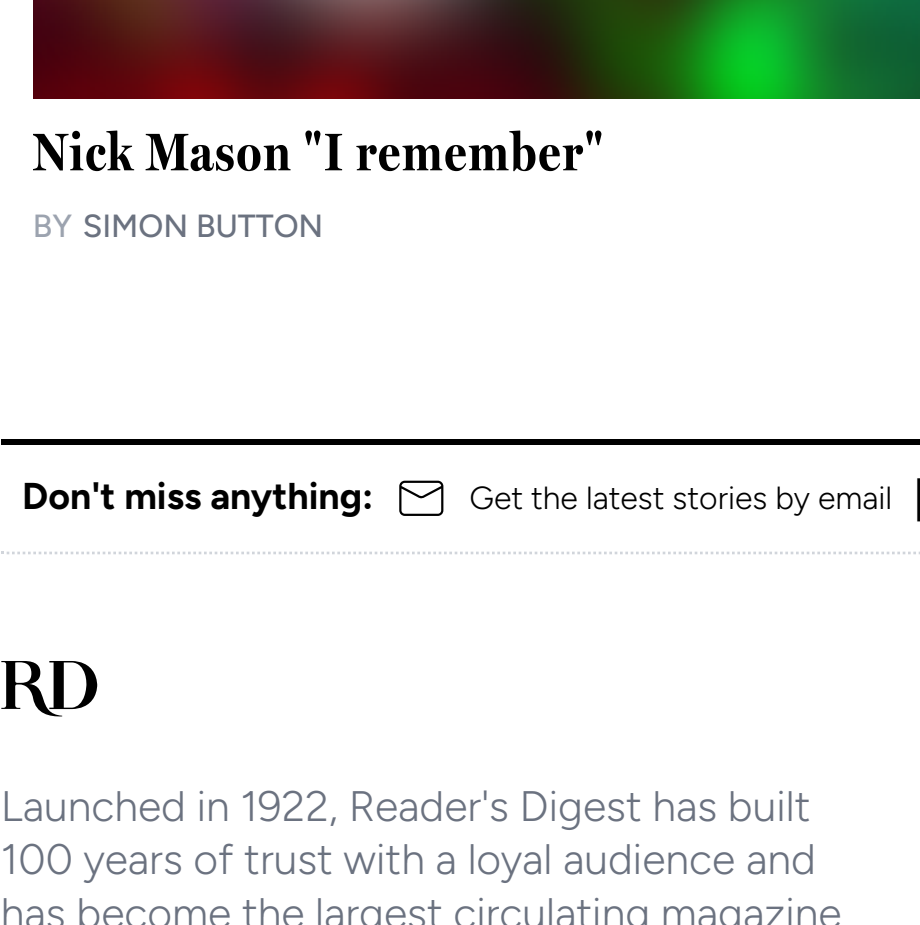
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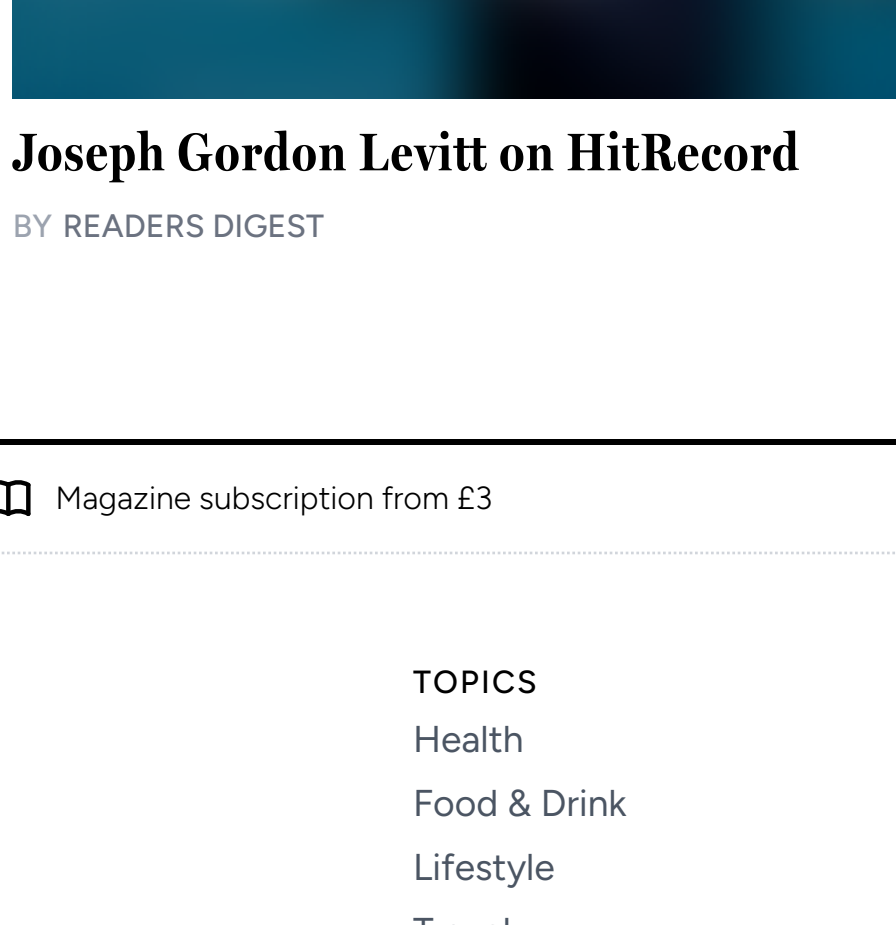
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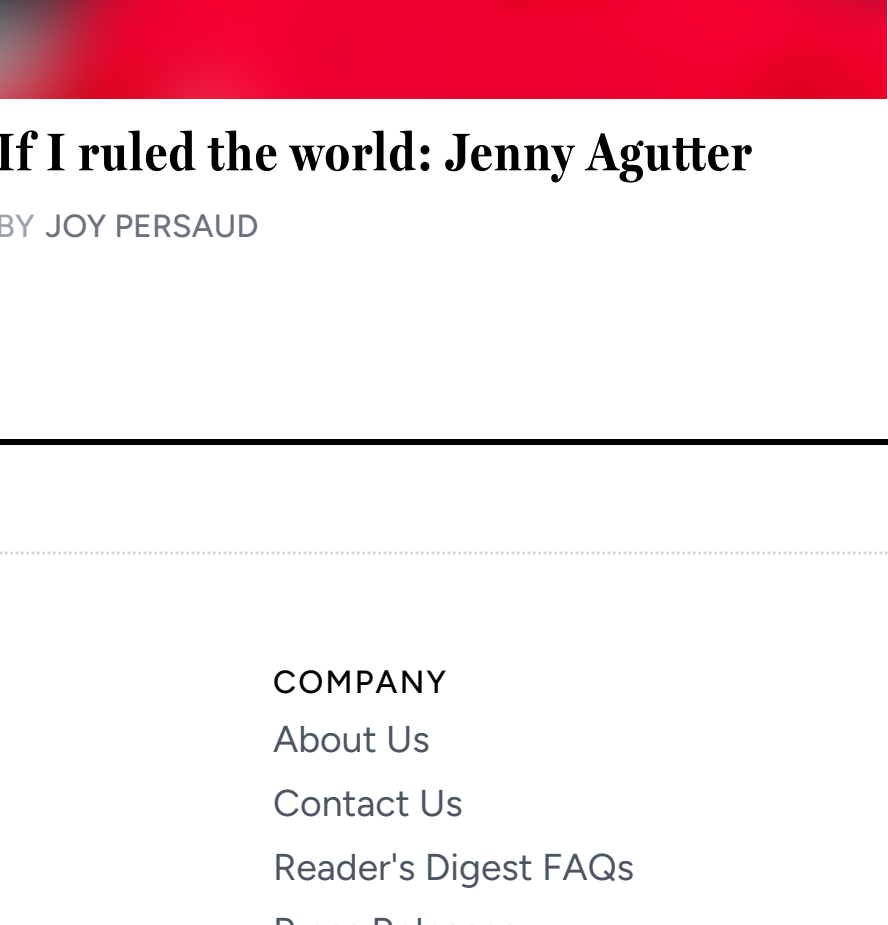
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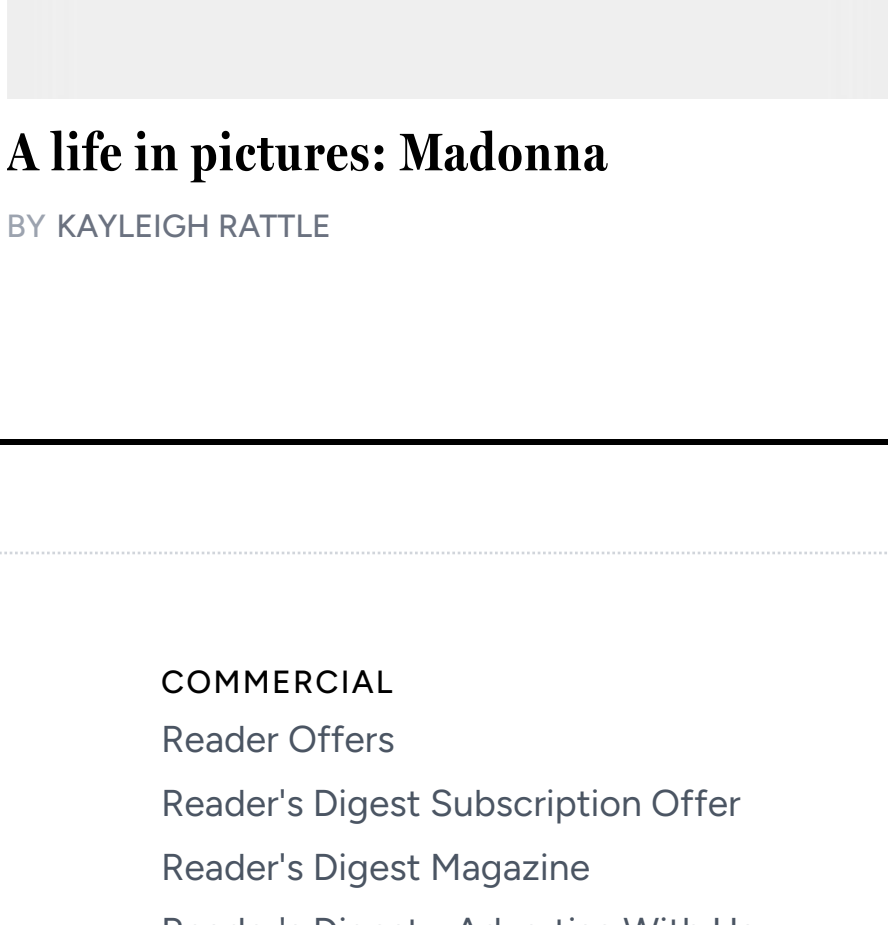
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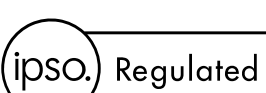
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BY KAYLEIGH RATTLE

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