



Selma Blair
MY "EXCRUCIATING"
BATTLE WITH MS

Colin Powell
1937-2021
His Incredible
American Story

Exclusive
Prince William
My Hopes for
the Future

People

Exclusive

Gwyneth's Most Revealing Interview Ever!

- What past unhealthy relationships taught her about love
- How she's trying to accept her body as she ages: *'It all goes south from here!'*
- The most surprising things she's learned about sex

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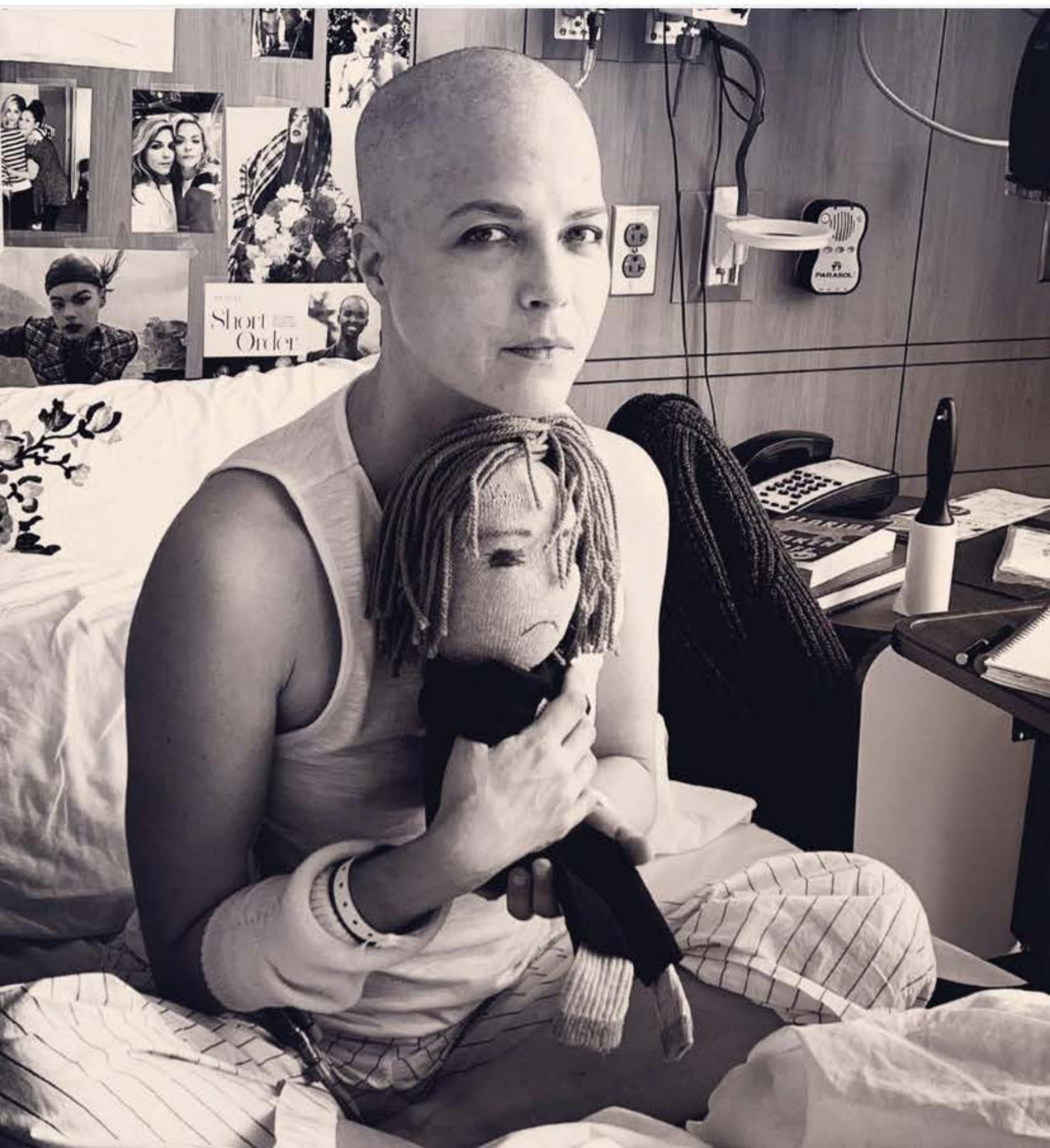
(MAGDALENA WOSINSKA/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDUX)

THIS WEEK

Selma Blair: 'I Want to Tell the Truth About MS'

THE ACTRESS SHARES THE BRUTAL REALITY OF LIVING WITH THE CHRONIC DISEASE AND EXPLAINS WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT TO SHOW THE WORLD

By KARA WARNER



Her Harrowing Journey

Blair lost her hair during her 2019 stem cell transplant in Chicago and says “it’s important” that people see the full scope of her experience with MS.

In the summer of 2019 Selma Blair’s doctor told her to prepare herself for the worst ahead of possibly life-altering but risky stem cell treatment. The actress had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in

2018, and the chronic degenerative neurological disease had wreaked havoc on her body, at times leaving her struggling to walk and even talk. The intense two-month procedure was her best option for jump-starting her immune system, but it didn't come with any guarantees. "I was told to make plans for dying," she says in a scene from the unfiltered and unflinching new documentary *Introducing, Selma Blair*.

In the film the actress, best known for her supporting roles in movies like *Cruel Intentions* and *Legally Blonde*, offers an intimate and often difficult-to-watch look at what she's endured since going public with her diagnosis Oct. 20, 2018. "It was a really hard time in my life," the star, 49, says of the period of illness, treatment and recovery captured in the documentary. The gripping scenes in a Chicago hospital where she received treatment show a woman robbed of her energy, her appetite, her optimism and her hair. "People don't say how excruciating, emotionally, it can be to kind of prove you're not well," she says of the lack of awareness about the disease and her motivation for doing the documentary. "But I want to tell the truth about MS. It is important to me that

people see what living with a chronic illness is like.” Shot over 25 days between 2019 and 2020 by filmmaker and now close friend Rachel Fleit, the film (currently in theaters and streaming on discovery+) takes viewers on Blair’s journey while showcasing her sense of humor and resilience in the face of her new and varied life challenges. “I’m trying to look dead for a dramatic ending,” she deadpans while lying on the floor in one scene.

One year after the stem cell treatment, Blair’s MS is officially in remission (meaning there is currently no evidence of disease progression), and although she says she’s noticed “huge improvements” in her speech and movement, she often uses a cane to walk. She’s also quick to note she is not cured, as there is no cure for MS. Some days, she explains, the “severe fatigue is still such a gargantuan boulder in my way,” but she’s constantly working on ways to curb it and spend as much time as possible with her son Arthur, 10, whose dad is fashion designer Jason Bleick, whom she dated from 2010 to 2012. “Nothing was off-limits,” Fleit says of her access to Blair. “There was nothing we couldn’t show or couldn’t talk about. She didn’t even do hair and makeup the whole

time.” To that Blair quips, “Rub it in!” But seriously, she continues, “I was too busy not feeling well. Let’s hope that never happens again.” Despite the brutal reality presented onscreen, Fleit notes that *Introducing* isn’t a sob story. “I found this incredible, remarkable subject who was going through something quite intense and extremely painful and difficult that needed to be shown to the world,” she says. “There’s emotion and pain, but it isn’t a sad story. It’s actually quite an inspiring one.”

‘This isn’t a sad story. It’s quite an inspiring one’

—DIRECTOR

RACHEL FLEIT

An unexpected side effect of Blair’s hemato-poietic stem cell transplantation (see sidebar) that she’s now dealing with is what she calls “instant” perimenopause. “That was a real body hit,” she admits, joking that menopause will be “our next documentary, about the seven years of perimenopause that I look forward to.” Still, she’s focused on the positive changes in her daily life. “I’m working on it. Little by little, I can

do all these things,” she says, adding that she and Arthur now play football together, albeit a slightly one-sided version. “I just get pelted with balls,” she says. “I mean, I can’t say I could go running, but I can jog down to the mailbox if I were to practice a few times.”

She has also spent the past year during the pandemic working with vocal and physical therapists over Zoom to improve her movement and balance and has learned helpful techniques to manage her body’s minor flare-ups. “My version of MS really screws with my mind,” she says. “It’s triggered by my own emotions and fears, adrenaline, as well as lights and sounds. I am working on those things. If you see me start to shake, it means my nerves got big. Getting into a ball for a minute and resetting myself helps. Or I’ll jump into the cold pool and swim.”

Although it continues to be an uphill climb, she’s proud of the awareness she is helping to raise about the disease and is working on making changes within the community. She would love to be involved with making adaptive clothing with magnetic options since buttons can be challenging for people living with MS. “All last week I couldn’t undo

my buttons for some reason,” she says. “I’m asking everyone—my son, the babysitter—for help. I even had to ask a stranger on the airplane to help me undo my pants so I could use the restroom. I’m an outgoing, possibly too outgoing of a person, so that’s not that hard for me, but I imagine there’s a lot of other people who would wind up wetting their pants in the scenario.”



Making an Impact

Blair's activism on behalf of MS awareness has the potential to change lives. "She's talking about all of the challenges, the good and the bad," says Multiple Sclerosis Association of America CEO Gina Ross Murdoch, who has worked with Blair on community outreach. "That honest, raw look is incredibly helpful to tell the story of what the disease is about and the daily struggles. She's using her platform to connect and empower people and educate those who don't know about MS. She's given the MS community a great gift."

**'If I can continue to move
this needle for myself
and get strong again,
that's a game changer'
—SELMA BLAIR**

As she continues working to overcome everyday obstacles, Blair is enjoying life's simple pleasures, such as horseback riding and spending time with Arthur and their dog Pippa. She hopes her openness about her own struggles will help others going through MS not to feel alone. "I'm trying to develop a love story with life right now," she

says. “Things are coming along for sure. I really do feel like a new person.”

THE MAKING OF A LIFE-CHANGING DOCUMENTARY



A Safe Space

“It’s not a ‘celebrity doc’ to me,” says Blair (above, enjoying backyard pool therapy in *Introducing, Selma Blair*). “It’s not polished. It’s intimate and easy.”



Friends and Collaborators

Director Rachel Fleit (left) says she felt an instant connection to Blair. “She was disarming and charming,” says Fleit.



Wheeling Around

Filming the doc “was easy for me because I was being taken care of all the way around,” says Blair (right, with assistant Bonny Burke and friend Julie De Santo).

(COURTESY DISCOVERY+(3))



Defining Moments

A scene from *Introducing, Selma Blair* (below), just before she received her stem cells.

WHAT IS A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT?

The goal of Blair's **hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (HSCT)** was to reset her malfunctioning immune system. "In autoimmune diseases your immune cells get confused and attack your own body," her doctor Richard K. Burt of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, explains in *Introducing, Selma Blair*. A stem cell transplant replaces damaged and lost cells and tissues, but first several rounds of intense chemotherapy reset the immune system "to zero" so it can be rebuilt, clinical research nurse Kathleen Quigley of Feinberg School of

Medicine explains. “The stem cells then help boost your immune system back.” According to the film, the treatment has an 83 percent success rate after two years.

HER CIRCLE OF SUPPORT



Mom's No. 1 Fan

Blair's son Arthur said he was "proud" of his mother as he joined her (above) at a screening of her documentary in L.A. on Oct. 14.



Forever Friends

Blair has relied on encouragement from longtime pals Shannen Doherty (left) and Sarah Michelle Gellar (center), her *Cruel Intentions* costar.

STORME ATLANTIS WORTHINGTON; JORDAN STRAUSS/IN-VISION/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK ■