INTERIOR DESIGNER SHEILA BRIDGES SEEMED TO HAVE HAD IT ALL: A-LIST CLIENTS, FEATURES IN GLOSSY MAGAZINES, A HIT TELEVISION SHOW, LUCRATIVE ENDORSEMENTS, AN EXQUISITE HARLEM APARTMENT AND A BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY HOME. IN AN EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM THE BALD MERMAID, THE TASTemaker’S FORTHCOMING MEMOIR, BRIDGES SPEAKS ABOUT HOW LOSING HER SIGNATURE CURLY HAIR TO ALOPECIA AREATA, AN AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE, ULTIMATELY LED HER ON AN UNFORGETTABLE JOURNEY OF PEACE AND PERSONAL POWER.

“I spent many hours blow-drying and curling my hair, hoping it would resemble movie star Farrah Fawcett’s,” says Bridges about her high school look (opposite page). Here, the author, wearing a Tracy Reese dress, stands in her Harlem living room. This was her first photograph without her hair.
wipe it clean would land me in bed, seemingly simple act of swiping a sharp head on. I couldn't stress about my hair loss, I decided I would literally face it had reached the point where the locks I that supposedly would bring about the lotions and over-the-counter potions red-velvet cupcake to eat and a blue What I do remember is I bought myself a Wednesday that became Thursday? definitely still July, because I had just Bald Mermaid Here, in an exclusive excerpt from Bridge's piercingly honest memoir, The Bald Mermaid (Pointed Leaf Press, $25), the Philadelphia native, 48, must face giving up the enviable mame that had to come, and then, confront her.

When I first started crying it was definitely still July, because I had just had just what I do remember is I bought myself a red-velvet cupcake to eat and a blue Gillette razor to shave my head. I cracked open all my hairdressers, the acnepucrures and herbs, the prescpictions and over-the-counter panions that supposedly would bring about the rebirth of my hair. I didn't want to wear a toupee, a wig or a weave. Marred by all-consumming hair thoughts, I was tired of explaining and sick of pretending. It had reached the point where the locks I was losing were calling all the shots. So, instead of trying to hide or deny my hair loss, I decided I would literally face it head on. I couldn't stress about my hair falling out if I didn't have any right? What I hadn't anticipated was the seemingly simple act of swapping a sharp metal blade across my scalp to wipe it clean would land me in bed, depressed, confused and swallowed up in a powerful range of emotions. Appear- ently, it was an aberrant choice and I had left myself woefully unprepared for the negative reactions it elicited in others, and for the profound impact it would have on my life. When I know for sure it was still July when I bought that razor, it quickly blunted into August. I suspect it was still hot and sunny outside but I couldn't be sure since I had drawn my Roman shades tight, turned off my phone and set the thermostat at 60 degrees to drown out the world and freeze away the pain. The only thing I could be sure of was I didn't have anywhere to go because grief was my full-time job now. Grief had replaced my lucrative career, the one in front of the TV cameras that kept me in the pages of all the glossy magazines. Deep down I hated that job, but I wasn't sure how much I liked this new one, either. It certainly offered better hours and less of a commute. But it paid a whole lot less for a lot more work. Grief required that I lie in bed all day, every day, until further notice. Like everything else in my life, I took my new job very seriously, which meant I would lie in bed until the Universe instructed me to do otherwise. I had no one to see, nothing to do. Just grieve. At first I mourned the physical loss of my hair, the so-called crowning glory that made me a woman in the eyes of conventional society. Then I started to reflect on what this less truly represented. It was my hair that made me feminine and dignified, beautiful and whole. Picturing the Goliath-like enormity of what lay ahead, I became inconsolable. What was I going to do now? How could the Technicolor clarity with which I had always perceived and planned my life have so quickly turned into such a disorienting black-and-white blur? I stayed barricaded in my bedroom, with my black wool, ribbed-knit ski hat pulled low to protect my new baldness from the not-too-caring raging in my heart. Though I was determined to move beyond grief, somehow I became more panic-stricken with every step I took. If only I could pinpoint when I had lost my equili- rium, maybe I could go back, retrace my steps and regain some balance. Once in a while I was allowed to take a break from grief to do something important like pray or take a pee. But mostly I stayed huddled under my plain wool blanket and goose-down duvet, hoping to make things right with the Universe. My impeccably laundered white sheets with the blue embroidery were normally crisp and clean, stretched across the bed with military precision. Now they were clammy and cold, soaked with tears and soiled with my own snot and shame. I had stopped reaching for the box of Kleenex on my nightstand and started wiping my wet eyes and blowing my runny nose on the 3,000-thread- count Egyptian cotton instead.

I simply was not ready to face the world without hair. I was humiliated by my own appearance, paralyzed by self-consciousness, too embarrassed to walk outside without a scarf or hat. How was I—once America's Best Interior Designer, now totally bald—going to get along in a world that placed such tremendous value on a woman's appear- ance in general and her hair in particular?

I continued to drift in and out of sleep, keeping one eye open just in case Miss Universe decided to come back for another round. Dolby stood by with his tail pointed, studly, vigilant, ever protective, his scruff rising above the rest of his smooth white coat like a miniature Mohawk. He lowered his head and gawled, curling his upper lip to reveal the tips of his yellowing teeth. I surmised that despite her disdain, the Universe was thoughtful enough to grant me a brief pardon, allowing me to temporarily disengage from life until I learned to trust my sadness. So from my eighth-floor bunker, holed up with grief, imprisoned with my own tormented thoughts, guarded by my loyal companion Dolby, I lay in my bed and cried. And when I was finished, I rolled over onto my right side so I could weep. I wept and then wept some more. And while I wept, Miss Universe sat comfortably on the love seat across from my bedroom, her legs propped up on my powder blue ottoman, quietly watching with the hint of a smirk, as I suffered my emotional miscarriage.