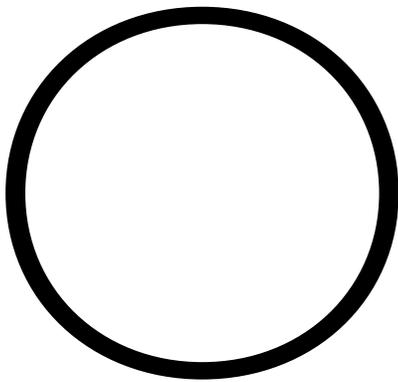


a beautiful mind

Harvard physicist
LISA RANDALL *has*
unlocked secrets of a hidden
universe. Robert Sullivan
taps into an extraordinary
intellect. Photographed
by Raymond Meier.



In a glorious spring morning in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard theoretical physicist Lisa Randall is walking fast, like an energized particle. “It’s just that I have a meeting and I want to prepare,” she apologizes as she leaves her Cambridge town house. “And I want to get a latte.” It took a lot of lattes over the course of three years for Randall to write *Warped Passages: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Universe’s Hidden Dimensions*, but the book, which *The New York Times* has called “mind-bending reading,” has made her the theoretical physicist most likely to appear on *Charlie Rose*, as well as one of the most-cited scientists in her field. She was the first woman tenured in physics at Princeton, and the first woman theorist tenured in science at both Harvard and MIT; in naming her as one of the 100 most influential people of 2007, *Time* wrote, “A physicist jolts the boys’ club by reshaping the universe.” It would take a lot of time to understand the scientific mind behind the person now headed toward her coffee, but Randall’s longtime friend Christina Büchmann, a writer and editor in Berkeley, credits her innate gift. “I read a line from *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi*, by Kipling, the other day,” Büchmann said, “and I thought, That’s a perfect description of Lisa. It says, ‘It is the hardest thing in the world to frighten a mongoose, because he is eaten up from nose to tail with curiosity.’”

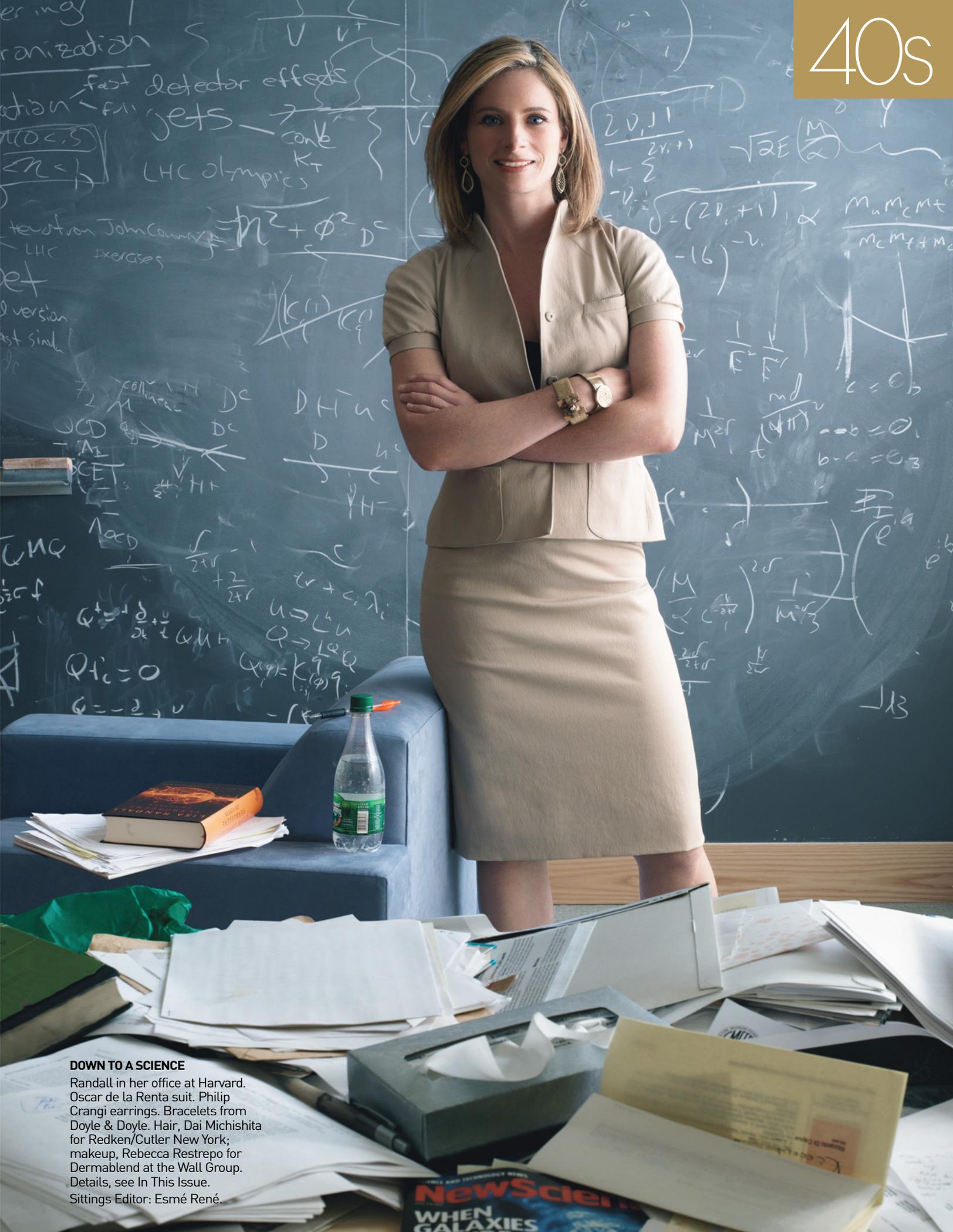
With her high cheekbones and quiet elegance, Randall, 45, is less apt to be mistaken for a mongoose than for an actress studying for the part of Harvard professor, but as she makes her way to the edge of campus she exhibits a quick acceleration—and a penchant for minute observation. On Boston traffic, whose mechanisms remain unexplained, she laments, “It’s ridiculous. There’s absolutely no signage.” Which leads to another observation, on urban design. “You know, I just read Robert Caro’s biography of Robert Moses,” she says, veering

sharply left into Starbucks. “I used to think my parents ruined my childhood, but it was Moses.”

The childhood she refers to began in Fresh Meadows, Queens—a neighborhood bordered by the theoretical-sounding Utopia Parkway. “It was supposed to be the ideal place to raise kids,” she says. “But where I grew up was a development, and all the houses look pretty much the same. There was an architectural critic who pointed out that they had different doorways, which I never noticed.” In her high school years, she persuaded her mother to allow her to ride the subway each morning to Manhattan—to Stuyvesant High School, where she won a prestigious Westinghouse science prize and enjoyed working hard in all her subjects but fell in love with math and science. Next came Harvard, for undergraduate and graduate work; then Berkeley, M.I.T., and Princeton. Since 2001, she has been a professor at Harvard, where she is one of the few women in her field.

“It’s difficult for women in science,” says Randall, who is wearing a cool denim jacket, a black-and-blue pleated skirt, a blue T-shirt, and Donald J. Pliner sandals. “It’s a double-edged sword. I don’t want to seem frivolous—though obviously I’m not, because I’m a physicist.” She is understandably reluctant to opine. “I think there are a lot of women in physics—and there really *aren’t* that many women in physics—who sort of don’t really know how they should dress,” she says. “You want to just blend in. On the other hand, you’re never going to blend in. The great thing about getting older is you don’t have to care.”

This morning’s passersby might see a reserved professor when they pass Lisa Randall, but Raman Sundrum, a physics professor at Johns Hopkins, points to her intellectual audaciousness. “It was very exciting,” he says of their work together on extra dimensions—physical places outside our immediate experience that, as far as the theory goes, may warp time and mass and distort the influence of gravity, a little like multiple mirrors in a dressing room. “It was quite an adventure. Early on we felt like, Wow, we’re in totally new territory. (continued on page 275)



DOWN TO A SCIENCE

Randall in her office at Harvard. Oscar de la Renta suit. Philip Crangi earrings. Bracelets from Doyle & Doyle. Hair, Dai Michishita for Redken/Cutler New York; makeup, Rebecca Restrepo for Dermablend at the Wall Group. Details, see In This Issue. Sittings Editor: Esmé René.

“What Hillary and Huma share,” says Steenburgen, “is an absolute lack of jadedness. In that job, it’s easy to become numb because so much of what you hear is a complaint. But they have both managed to maintain a sense of outrage and sorrow. If anything, I think Hillary is feeling things more intensely than when she was younger. I don’t know if it’s a chicken-or-the-egg thing—Hillary affecting Huma or the other way around—but together they work.”

After hearing from so many people that Huma Abedin is the master of the velvet no, I finally got to experience it firsthand. Following Hillary’s breakfast in the Hilton ballroom, her traveling press person introduced me to the senator so I could get a quote about her employee. Just as I was about to ask, Abedin swooped in. “No, no, no,” she said, waving her hands. “She has to go.”

Clinton smiled and shrugged. “I go where I’m told,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Huma later apologized. “She’s just so busy today. I don’t want to bother her with my stuff.”

No matter. That evening, I received an E-mail from the senator herself. “Huma Abedin has the energy of a woman in her 20s, the confidence of a woman in her 30s, and the experience of a woman in her 40s, and the grace of a woman in her 50s. She is timeless, her combination of poise, kindness, and intelligence are matchless, and I am lucky to have had her on my team for a decade now.” □

A BEAUTIFUL MIND

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And she has the fine balance of being daring while not being crazy—it’s a very rare balance in physics, as anywhere else.”

While being a woman in her field may not matter in one sense, it was, in another sense, the reason she was appointed to the Harvard Task Force on Women and Science, established shortly after former Harvard president Lawrence Summers suggested that women might be innately less qualified than men for science. Asked about the success of the task force—female professors were hired, and more opportunities for female graduate students were created—Randall admits that a panel can be only so effective. “It’s a very hard thing to implement from the top because the problems occur in your daily life with your colleagues,” Randall says. “It’s hard to save you from all that.”

Büchmann sees her old friend’s success in a male-dominated world as testament to Randall’s strength. “She stuck it out to get to a place where she’s going to get more

reminders of sexism than most women,” she says. “I think it’s like being on a mountaintop where the wind is very sharp.”

Randall herself merely makes two observations:

First, she likes a lot of the E-mails you get when you write a book on theoretical physics—like the one from a mother who E-mailed Randall after she and her daughter read about her in *Time*. “She had asked her daughter what she wanted to be when she grew up,” Randall says, “and her daughter first gave the answer that she always gave, which was ‘a cheerleader.’ Then she said, ‘And I want to solve hard math problems.’”

And second, time is relative—in this sense, anyway: When Randall was in Belgium on a break from a conference at which she received an honorary degree and took advantage of the fashion density of Antwerp, she did *not* feel the hour she spent buying a tulle-lined golden brocade dress for the gala at which she was to be honored was a long time. “I was with a theoretical friend, and he thought it was taking a lot of time,” she says, “but I thought I was going rather quickly.”

Back on the street, she is now passing Harvard Yard—in particular, the Bradstreet Gate, dedicated in 1997, 25 years after women were allowed to move in. The gate is named for Anne Bradstreet, the great seventeenth-century American poet, who is represented with an engraved line: “I came into this Country where I found a new World and new manners at which my heart rose.” Randall’s own heart, including its rate, rises during her adventures in rock climbing. She had practiced, she mentions, just the night before, after a day spent reading about and discussing black holes. “It’s challenging,” she adds. “It’s absorbing.” She climbs in New Hampshire (sometimes with her rock-climber boyfriend). “Unlike hiking, where you are in the trees half the time, you’re always in a place with a beautiful view.”

As she deftly balances the latte and the Harvard Department of Physics front door, she finally enters the Jefferson Physical Laboratory, where her office might be described as follows. First, the chalkboard, which is thick with equational thinking, its scratchings seeming to illustrate a brain poking around for the secrets of matter, the secrets of the Everything. Second, the view of the Yard, which Randall turns to as she places her latte on her desk. Third, her desk, covered by hundreds of physics papers. “We’re getting ready,” she says. She is preparing for the first runs of the Large Hadron Collider, a particle accelerator in Switzerland. In upcoming experiments, in

the next year or two, results could actually prove Randall’s theories of extra dimensions. “What will be really sad is if they are there and we miss them,” she says.

Thus, with good reason, she excuses herself and sits down and starts thinking. □

FAST FORWARD

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says, and Robin shoots back, “I do.” She tells me about the two-piece black Alaïa she loves that exposes a two-inch strip of skin on the sides, the fabric held together by “rubber bands.” When she wore it to the ballet in Miami, all the bent-over old men were craning to see if it was really her skin they were looking at, an amusing fringe benefit, but there is also the fact that “I can ball it up and stick it in my bag—I wear it all the time.”

Shane arrives and, as it happens, has already pulled things for her in a room. First up is a white embroidered Rick Owens dress. “Why am I trying this on?” she asks, and Shane quickly explains that there is only one in the country. It is rejected anyway, as is a too-tricky-by-half Martin Margiela ensemble that features a body-clinging mid-calf white tank under a white beaded poncho/tunic that looks so much like the backrests used by Manhattan cabdrivers, I can’t help laughing out loud. We go to the slightly more sensible land of Alexander McQueen. Brooks is stunning in a sleeveless lilac brocade with a deep neckline, and the aubergine satin Jimmy Choo stilettos Shane has magically produced to go with it. “And you have the VBH clutch, right?” he asks, rounding out the look. “And you can put that white Alaïa cardigan over it.”

With alterations at her tiny waist, the dress is a go, as is a black jersey Narciso slip dress that fits her like a second skin. “I like him because it doesn’t get any simpler than this, but it looks really nice, doesn’t it?” We all pipe up that it looks better than nice—it looks amazing. After marveling over her lack of body fat, Shane can’t resist bringing out a strapless leather minidress. She looks hot, I must say, but there is the faint air of go-go dancer, and, she says, “I would be too self-conscious.”

She buys a lot of stuff, but she is not merely extravagant—she has a strong sense of style, and through it all she knows exactly what works on her and what doesn’t. She nixes a pleated baby doll Nina Ricci with bows and a plunging back, for example, and shrieks at a pair of Alaïa shoes with superhigh sneaker-sole platforms. When she leaves the store, she tells me the McQueen is her absolute favorite—“so elegant”—and she remembers a *(continued on page 276)*