

‘Designers
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“We already
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girl. We don’t need
you any more”’

Model Chanel Iman
on racism in the
fashion industry

INTERVIEW Tim Teeman



*Fashion by Jane Taylor-Hayhurst.
Photographs by Danielle Levitt*



Opposite: dress, £4,750,
Louis Vuitton (020-7399
4050); ring, £500, Lara
Bohinc (larabohinc.com)

This page: dress, £1,625,
Victoria Beckham at
Harrods (harrods.com);
sunglasses, £300, Rochas
(matchesfashion.com);
bracelets, £330 each,
Chanel (020-7493 5040)

Hair: Adrian Clark using
GHD at the Wall Group.
Make-up: Cyndie
Komarovski at
the Wall Group.
Model: Chanel Iman
at IMG

Chanel Iman has a date. "A second date," the 22-year-old model says, sitting in a booth in the Jane hotel, New York, on a Sunday afternoon. The first went well. "We had an incredible conversation and got to know each other.

This time I'm hoping to get a little more... personal." Her second-date outfit is a floaty shirt, short skirt and thigh-high boots. A woman passes by and does a double take, exclaiming, "Oh my goodness." The 5ft 10in model looks down at her legs and laughs: "Does this look 'after church'?"

She is, according to her website, "the youngest and most successful African-American High Fashion Model of her time". She is also an activist: she has campaigned for Obama and is vocal about the lack of black faces on the catwalk and advertisements.

"I appreciate designers making a strong statement that black women are beautiful," she says. "Black women like fashion. And when there's more diversity on the runway it makes our world more inclusive." At 15, she moved to New York to model. A year later, she was the youngest model to appear on the cover of American *Vogue* (at 16) and only the third black model to have done so.

So does fashion have a problem with race? "Yeah, I think so. It is much better than in the days when there was only one black face. There are more now, but we can't ignore that there should be more."

Has she experienced racism? The first time I ask she diplomatically claims that she avoids it. But when I repeat the question, she replies differently. "Yeah, most definitely," she says forcefully. "A few times I got excused by designers who told me, 'We already found one black girl. We don't need you any more.' I felt very discouraged. When someone tells you, 'We don't want you because we already have one of your kind,' it's really sad."

Four years ago, along with Alek Wek and Naomi Campbell, Iman modelled in an issue of *Vogue Italia* which featured only black models, photographed by Steven Meisel. For Iman, "That 'black issue' was a moment for everyone, whether coloured or not. It was something fashion doesn't do regularly. It was so beautiful and I was pleased to be part of it."

Critics, on the other hand, pointed to the fact that the 30 per cent increase in advertising for the issue relied mainly on campaigns with white models. Meisel said at the time, "I've asked my advertising clients so many times,

'Can we use a black girl?' They say no. Advertisers say black models don't sell."

There are more black models used in fashion advertising now, says Bethann

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Hardison, a former model who has been lobbying the industry on this issue since 2007. And Iman's success signifies progress, she believes. "Things are improving. We have gone from no ethnic minority models in shows to 'one'. We need to get past 'one' to more. There's a greater consciousness of Asia and China, so we see more of those faces now. There needs to be a permanency [about] using black models. You still see all-white shows in Europe and New York... And don't give us an all-black catwalk show. It doesn't help us; it just puts us into a category."

The youngest of four children, Iman was raised in Culver City, Los Angeles. Her mother, who is half-Korean, half-African-American, named Chanel after Coco Chanel; Iman (a cousin's name) has since become her professional surname.

Her parents separated when she was young and she grew up with her mother. In 2004 she joined Ford Models, coming third in their Supermodel of the World competition a year later. Now she is signed to the IMG agency. Anna Wintour, US *Vogue* editor, was an early champion. "The first time I met her I was very young. I knew who she was but I wasn't aware of the power she had."

She says earnestly, "I appreciate women who have made a difference in the world: Oprah, Beyoncé, Alicia Keys. I want to become the best leader for my generation I can. I want to use my voice to make a difference."

"I'm Christian. I try to go to church. I have a great relationship with God. I talk to Him all day every day. My mum taught me faith is the most important thing to have."

Iman doesn't accept the accusation that modelling and the fashion industry

encourage eating disorders. "I don't feel guilty. This is my body, how God created me. I've always been thin." She says she's "never seen the industry's dark side. There have been no eating disorders or drugs. The only dark thing was I was very lonely, and still get very lonely, on the road." As tonight's date implies, she is single. "My focus is on my career, but if something wonderful comes into my life I'm not going to stop it from happening."

After modelling she may open her own business, even enter politics. She wants to help underprivileged children and women, and work more in Africa: "I felt as if I belonged when I went there." She works for the HerShe Group Foundation, mentoring girls in foster care and, with Uma Thurman, was part of a campaign to draw attention to war and famine in the Horn of Africa.

How tough is she? "For me, the biggest challenge was moving to New York, aged 15." Becoming a Victoria's Secret Angel has made her famous: the Angels have their own primetime TV spectacular, modelling the brand's lingerie. Does she get self-conscious posing in underwear? "No, you feel confident. Everyone is professional. You're not the only girl doing it. It's sexy and fun."

Not sexually objectifying? "Obviously, when you are walking down the street in New York and a guy hollers at you, it can be a bit much, but generally guys are respectful, want to get to know me and take me out for dinner..."

So, what's the plan for tonight's date? "Perhaps see a movie and dinner. Maybe we'll hold hands. A cuddle." Suddenly, the "good girl" reasserts itself. "In public places," she says firmly. ■

Clockwise from top left: body, £845, and skirt, £2,930, both Louis Vuitton (020-7399 4050); dress, £4,323, Elie Saab at Harrods (harrods.com); shirt, £450, Victoria Beckham at Harrods, and skirt, £635, Miu Miu (020-7409 0900); coat jacket, £2,640, Dior (020-7172 0172)

Iman on the Jason Wu catwalk in New York last weekend

