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As a little girl, Greta Gerwig wanted nothing more than to be a bride. Then the loose, loud look of grunge came along and taught her she could be something else—herself.

WHEN I WAS GROWING UP, magazines were my holy texts. This was before the Internet, and we didn't watch television, so magazines were the things that connected me to wanting and glamour and the sense that life was happening somewhere else, and definitely not to me. They existed in the checkout line of the grocery store—where I prayed it would take a few extra minutes to scan everything—in waiting rooms, and at the Sacramento Public Library.

My mother, my very good mother, would take me every week to the downtown branch, which had multiple stories and was filled with light and comfortable chairs. Despite being the capital of California, Sacramento was and is a midsize city with a small-town heart. As with so many kids, for me the library was a portal to other worlds. I loved the quiet communal space where children did homework and anyone at all could nap or read. After picking out a stack of fiction—Madeleine L'Engle, Judy Blume, Frances Hodgson Burnett—I would head for the magazines, arrayed in red binders with clear fronts. I'd sit in one of those big chairs and take my time, studying each as if someone were going to give me an exam.

Bridal magazines were my drug of choice. Being a bride was about the most significant thing I could imagine for myself. To me, life went: Flower Girl, Bridesmaid, Bride. Those were the three big events. This was reinforced by Jane Austen, from whom I also learned the dubious lesson tha

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