

WILD, WIRED AND WAY TOO RICH! THE 1999 NEW ESTABLISHMENT

# VANITY FAIR

October 1999 / \$3.95

CAMERON CROWE *on*  
BILLY WILDER

SEBASTIAN JUNGER *on*  
KOSOVO'S GRAVES

WILLIAM SHAWCROSS *on*  
MURDOCH & THE MRS.

JOHN CORNWELL *on*  
HITLER'S POPE

JAMES WOLCOTT *on*  
JACK KEROUAC

INGRID SISCHY *on*  
FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

## BEN AFFLECK

GWYNETH, GIRL TALK  
AND THE WHOLE MATT THING

BY EVGENIA PERETZ

**PLUS:**

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS *on* DOROTHY PARKER  
MICHAEL SHNAYERSON *on* SETH MACFARLANE'S NEMESIS  
and HENRY PORTER *on* IAN SCHRAGER'S NEW HOTEL

A college dropout, Ben Affleck found sudden fame in 1997 after he and Matt Damon teamed up as writers and stars of *Good Will Hunting*. But at 27, even as he is offered up to \$12 million a movie and acquires the spoils of success—the new house in the Hollywood Hills, the Tribeca loft, the five motorcycles—Affleck remains, indisputably, a *guy*.

EVGENIA PERETZ gets him talking about the “Matt ’n’ Ben show,” his romance with Gwyneth Paltrow, and his upcoming thriller *Reindeer Games*, for which he literally knocked himself out



# LET'S TRY IT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNIE LEIBOVITZ • STYLED BY KIM MEEHAN

STYLING BY RIVKANA WHITE. FOR DETAILS, SEE CLOUTIER'S PAGE.

#### THE WRITE STUFF

Ben Affleck on August 7, 1999, in his Tribeca loft, which has a wall devoted to such semi-ancient favorite video games as Ms. Pac-Man and Millipede.

# BEN'S WAY

# T

o Ben Affleck, nothing is more meditative than a motorcycle. Today he has selected his red Suzuki GSX1300R Hayabusa, nicknamed "the Blackbird Killer," to take his passenger from Hollywood to the Brentwood branch of Koo Koo Roo, the fast-food chicken chain popular among those on "the Zone Diet." The route he takes? Scenic and maddeningly winding Sunset Boulevard—ideal terrain, apparently, for Affleck to do what he finds most uplifting: dodge between SUVs and BMWs, barrel up the lanes at 100 miles an hour, and play a hair-raising little game in which he weaves in and out among a line of cones set up in a construction zone. Affleck rides a motorcycle everywhere. He owns five of them, including a Yamaha R6 and a BMW R 1100 S.

"I don't think of it as 'I'm *Bike Guy*,'" Affleck says over a barbecued-chicken lunch, for which he shelled out the entire \$8.50. "I can't stand those guys who talk to you and all they say is 'Gonna put my leathers on and hit the *canyons*.' I'm not *Adrenaline-Junkie Guy*."

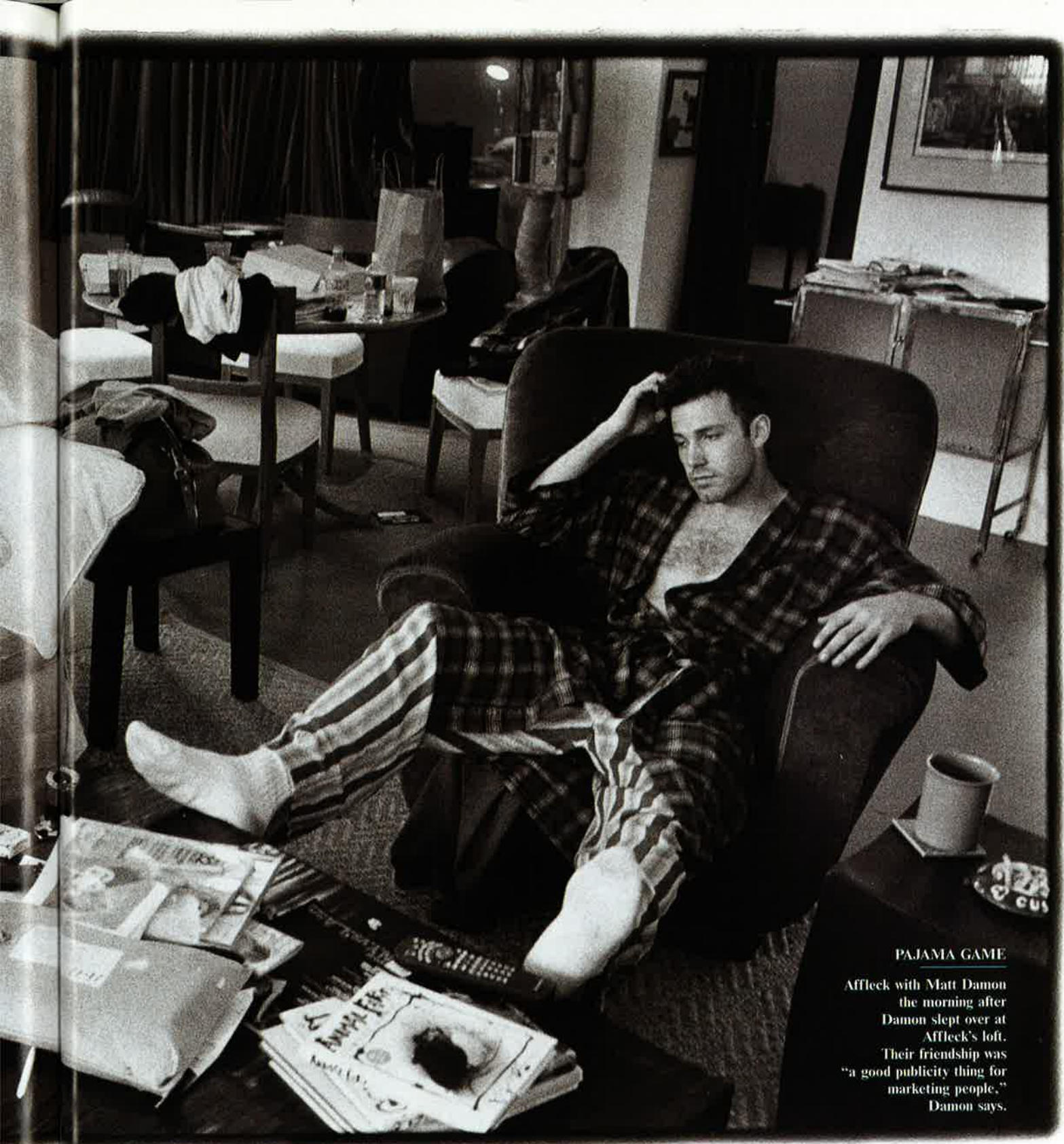
He may not be *Bike Guy* or *Adrenaline-Junkie Guy*, but spend a few minutes with Affleck, who's usually seen around town in baggy army pants, a T-shirt, and a leather jacket, and one thing becomes clear: he sure as hell is a *guy*. His best friends—and he does have *other* friends besides Matt Damon—are still his buddies from Cambridge, Massachusetts. They're currently camped out at his new, Mediterranean-style house (undergoing renovation) in the Hollywood Hills. He longs for the time when models looked like Christie Brinkley. He thinks Tom Cruise is a god. He stands behind Hootie. He has been known to forgo sex for video games. (A wall in his Tribeca loft—yes, Affleck is bi-coastal—is lined with old-school arcade favorites, including Ms. Pac-Man and Milipede.) And, these days at least, his fa-



vorite words seem to be "chump," "weak," and, especially, "jackass." "Jackass," to Affleck, is the worst of insults. A jackass is what he fears he sounds like in profiles like this one.

Indeed, Affleck might well come across as a jackass were it not for his acute self-awareness (which borders on the neurotic), his willingness to look like a fool, and the

fact that he is naturally curious, disarmingly smart, a bit flirtatious, and lampshade-on-his-head funny. It is these very qualities, in fact, that make Affleck irresistible to men and women, and decidedly un-jackassy. These qualities have also made Affleck one of the busiest actors of his generation, a movie star without delusions of grandeur, who has bridged the gap between inde-



#### PAJAMA GAME

Affleck with Matt Damon the morning after Damon slept over at Affleck's loft. Their friendship was "a good publicity thing for marketing people," Damon says.

pendent and mainstream films without getting too much grief for it. To wit, the 27-year-old Affleck has, in a little more than two years, kissed a boy in Kevin Smith's *Chasing Amy*, saved mankind from an oncoming asteroid in *Armageddon*, stolen scenes in *Shakespeare in Love*, and, along the way, picked up a best-original-screenplay Oscar for *Good Will*

*Hunting*, which he famously co-wrote with Damon.

"He's larger than life and yet people can relate to him," says the producer of Affleck's upcoming thriller *Reindeer Games*, Bob Weinstein, who thinks Affleck is this generation's version of Harrison Ford and Mel Gibson. Or, as Sandra Bullock, his co-star in the recent romantic comedy *Forces*

*of Nature*, puts it, "He has that lummoxy quality. He's not afraid to make a fool of himself, but then he'll turn around and kick your ass."

Even the hard-boiled director John Frankenheimer, who cast Affleck in *Reindeer Games*—a kind of modern take on the Rat Pack heist movie *Ocean's 11*—melts a bit when talking about Affleck. "He has a very

winning, likable quality about him," says Frankenheimer, who immediately thought of Affleck when he first read the script. "I've been doing this for a long time, and I've worked with some of the best and some of the worst. And he's really one of the nicest—really one of the nicest."

**T**o hear Affleck tell it, his success has been sheer luck. "I have a personality that's kind of willing to let myself skate by," he says, "to get B's and not really try." But *Reindeer Games*, it must be said, provided him with the opportunity to put in a little effort. "I wanted him to like me—I wanted him to think I was good," Affleck says of Frankenheimer, who has directed 34 films, including *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Seven Days in May*, and *Ronin*. "I worked twice as hard just out of fear of having him say, 'You're a sham. You're a fraud.'"

In his role as Rudy Duncan, a down-on-his-luck ex-con who gets pulled into a casino robbery on Christmas Eve, Affleck, for the first time, is on-screen in virtually every scene. For the first time, he gets to engage in some "hard-core-style sex," with co-star Charlize Theron. And—also for the first time—he finds himself on the receiving end of actual physical pain. He gets chased by a vindictive gang of truckers. He falls into freezing water. And, throughout, he has his face pummeled by the trucker-in-charge, played by Gary Sinise.

And so it should come as little surprise that, in the midst of shooting, Affleck experienced his first Grade 3 concussion when, while filming a prison brawl, an inmate played by the Washington Redskins' 315-pound defensive tackle, Dana Stubblefield, accidentally slipped and landed on Affleck's head, knocking the actor unconscious. "I don't remember what happened. I saw the tape later, and it's hard to tell. But the noise is kind of unmistakable. I just go, 'Whomp! Bang!'" says Affleck, suddenly looking and sounding like an 11-year-old skateboarder relating his latest awesome wipeout. "And my head goes, 'Boom!' Bounces off the concrete. It's like 'Whack!' Knocked me so stone-cold out that I don't remember a thing. That was the day I realized I had no chance of playing in the N.F.L." He sounds sincerely disappointed.

Is there anyone in America who doesn't remember exactly when, why, and how Ben Affleck became *Ben Affleck*? Naturally, he did it in typical guy fashion—alongside Matt Damon, his best friend from down the street since Affleck was eight years old. First they starred in the sensitive

1997 buddy picture *Good Will Hunting*, in which Damon played a working-class math savant and Affleck had a smaller but funnier role as his wisecracking sidekick. Then, at the Oscars, they scored major points by bringing their *moms* as their dates. Before you knew it, Ben 'n' Matt hysteria was full-blown (notwithstanding a vocal minority who considered their whole aw-shucks thing a big, annoying act).

"It was such a good publicity thing for marketing people," says Damon later at Affleck's house. "We ended up just talking about our friendship, which is really kind of a weird thing to do. . . . Hey, Ben," he asks, "what do you think about whoring out our friendship for personal gain?"

"At a certain point, some things in your life shouldn't be used to sell movies," Affleck replies. "Hey, I have two sphincters! See my movie!"

**I**n the public mind, Affleck and Damon have become Hollywood's very own Bert and Ernie. Damon can't go on location without people wondering what in the world has happened to Affleck.

For Affleck's part, the men renovating his house call him Matt, and he is routinely congratulated for his work in *Saving Private Ryan*. On Affleck's coffee table in his Tribeca loft sits a recent issue of *YM* magazine—someone's idea of a joke, Affleck swears. Ben and Matt are on the cover, promising "Every Juicy Detail!"

Just as their friendship has become a warm and fuzzy American legend, the story behind *Good Will Hunting* will forever be a part of Hollywood lore: that it all began in 1992 with 40 pages that Damon churned out for a writing class at Harvard; that, after showing it to Affleck, then a struggling actor in L.A., the two worked it into a script; that it was briefly a "NASA thriller"; that they eventually amassed 1,500 pages; that they sold the script to Castle Rock Productions; that the project was put into turnaround, largely because Castle Rock demanded that the film be shot at a location cheaper than Boston; that the two were given 30 days to find a producer; that, with just 3 days left, Harvey Weinstein rode in like a white knight and purchased it for \$1 million.

Weinstein also agreed to shoot the film in Boston, which allowed Affleck and Damon to feel comfortable doing the Boston accent, which, for obvious reasons, is near and dear to their hearts. "It was the whole reason I did the movie—just to do the accent," Affleck says, not entirely facetiously. Given any opportunity, he will launch into

full-voltage riffs about Boston landmarks—from Jordan's Furniture commercials ("I think these sofas *haffta* go!") to the pride surrounding the brutal winters ("Stock up on *wahta*, it's the *Noreasta*!"). He endlessly amuses himself with the names of Massachusetts towns ("You don't know me, fucker, but I'm from *Hull*. Bitch, I'm from *Lynn*. You don't know *Medfield*. Come down to Medfield, then we'll see what the fuck's up!").

"The Boston accent is more of an attitude than an accent," Affleck explains. "Underneath everything you say has to be the attitude of: You're an asshole, I know better than you, fuck you." It's an attitude that Affleck knows well. Dinner at the Afflecks' home, in Central Square, Cambridge, was characterized by heated debate on any topic, including whether to have the television on while eating. At times Affleck's reality wasn't so far from the scrappy existence depicted in *Good Will Hunting*. In addition to Ben and his younger brother, the up-and-coming actor Casey Affleck (who played Ben's weaselly younger brother in *Good Will Hunting*), there was Affleck's mother, Chris, a public-school teacher, and his father, Tim, an alcoholic and a frequent gambler who worked as a janitor, an electrician, and a bartender. "At the end of the football season," Affleck says of his father's tendency to bet on the games, "there would either be tough times or we'd get a VCR." The parents divorced when he was 12, and Tim is now a counselor in an alcohol-rehab center.

Affleck's neighborhood was largely African-American. So while other white kids from Boston were spending the 80s listening to the Cure and writing Goth poetry, Affleck (then called "Biz" to Damon's "Matty D") was listening to Prince and break-dancing in a nylon Puma sweat suit. "I was a real chump," he says.

Perhaps. But he was still on his way to starting his acting career. When he was seven, a casting-director friend of his mother's got him a tiny role in the independent movie *The Dark End of the Street*. By age eight, after winning a part in the PBS science series *The Voyage of the Mimi* and a brief stint as a Burger King pitchboy, the young wisass was hooked. Even as Affleck and Damon were starring in plays at Cambridge's Rindge and Latin high school, they were plotting their paths to glory. They had a joint bank account, designated strictly for New York excursions (the upcoming auditions and all), and even conducted "business lunches" during which, Damon recalls, "we'd basically sit over our cheeseburgers and not talk about

CONTINUED ON PAGE 324

JACKET AND PANTS BY HARLEY-DAVIDSON; T-SHIRT BY FRUIT OF THE LOOM; BOOTS BY CHIPPEWA; FOX DETAILS. SEE CREDITS PAGE

“The reason  
I’m single is because  
I wouldn’t want  
to be with anybody right  
now who would  
be willing  
to be with me.”



#### READY TO RUMBLE

Affleck owns five motorcycles, and even his dentist sometimes wears full biker regalia. “I like to think that if I were gay I’d be out. Rupert Everett-style,” Affleck says.

# Murdoch

to find a way to attract to the company people like Jerry Yang at 26, when he started his own company. He's still only 30. We need to recruit more young lions and let them run with it and play with a few million dollars. That's what we're trying to set up with [his son] James. We're going to set up a small fund and say, "Go spend it." We'll put some seed money into three or four ventures a year. And if it goes well, we'll put in more money. But we must attract these people. And let them get rich. Look at Jerry Yang. His company's worth billions now and he's certainly got a billion or so and he's 30. It's astonishing! He laughs about it and says someone might invent a better mousetrap tomorrow and he'd be out of business. As someone else said to me, there were hundreds of auto companies that were floated in the early 20th century, and barely any of them are there today. Today's Ford and GM are the results of later mergers. So the lesson is you don't have to hurry. There's still a lot of change to come.

**SHAWCROSS:** *Wouldn't you like to do something completely different now? Think of your predecessors as robber barons—people such as Rockefeller and Carnegie, fierce businessmen who also set up vast philanthropic institutions which have had a lasting impact for good. Don't you want to do that?*

**MURDOCH:** Yes, but I'm not clear enough about it to say I want to set up an institu-

tion as such. The Murdoch-family assets will have a very large portion put aside for charitable giving. That's starting now. That will be under the control of my children. I feel very strongly that the cause private philanthropy can do a lot about is education. Seeing that every talented kid gets equal opportunity is the thing that interests me most.

**SHAWCROSS:** *So, is there a Murdoch-family foundation already?*

**MURDOCH:** Yes, but we don't publicize it.

**SHAWCROSS:** *What causes have you supported so far?*

**MURDOCH:** Inner-city causes, basically in New York and Los Angeles. Some things for disadvantaged kids that Anna was interested in in Australia as well as here.

Anna did a lot of great work for abused kids in the poorest parts of Los Angeles.

**SHAWCROSS:** *What sort of size do you hope to grow this to?*

**MURDOCH:** That depends, I guess, on how well News Corp. does.

**SHAWCROSS:** *Do you consider yourself a libertarian?*

**MURDOCH:** Pretty much. There have to be some rules, but I do believe in tolerance and people doing their own thing. What does libertarian mean? As much individual responsibility as possible, as little government as possible, and as few rules as possible. But I'm not saying it should be taken to the absolute limit, as many libertarians tend to.

**SHAWCROSS:** *What do you want to be remembered for?*

**MURDOCH:** I'm not really worried about the

history books. Let the chips fall where they will. If they go back and read everything that's been written about me and use tall stories as source material, I'll be seen as a pretty terrible person. But I think that you just want to die with a good conscience and the feeling that you've been a force for good as you see it. I don't say I haven't made mistakes and won't make mistakes in the future. I'd like to feel I made a difference. I think that in Britain we've been one of the forces for change and modernization, and most of the changes have been very good. I think being a part of what is called the Thatcher revolution was something I'm proud of. If you look at the details of everything she did, you can probably find plenty of faults, but on balance I think it was absolutely vital and we were one of the very few consistent supporters of that.

And then for our own sector, the press, I think what we did there to force change has really ensured the life of a competitive print-media scene. Maybe we've only elongated it for 20 or 30 years, but that in itself is very good.

**SHAWCROSS:** *And in America?*

**MURDOCH:** We've had less impact here, but we've helped keep alive a competitive press in New York. We've made television a lot more competitive. Other, bigger forces have taken over that role now, in terms of cable and the multiplicity of channels. Bigger forces based on technology. What we've done, even here, has been to provide an alternative. □

# Affleck

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 266 anything." When Damon went to college at Harvard, little changed. Affleck hung out with Damon's new Ivy League friends and did his part to help drain the beer supply at the Delphic, the frat-boyish "finals club" Damon belonged to.

For Affleck, college held considerably less appeal than it did for Damon. After two months at the University of Vermont, he dropped out—much to the dismay of his mother, who, Affleck says, "always wanted me to be a history teacher." And so it was on to Los Angeles, where he and another friend lived in a one-bedroom "shit hole" on Franklin and Cherokee—"the Times Square of L.A.," as Affleck puts it. Between auditions, he spent his time rustling up the \$300 rent and generally living a *Slacker*-style existence in which he spent too much time fielding calls from someone named "Fat Ed." "He'd always call and be like 'Yo, this is Fat Ed. Motherfuckers owe me \$70 for groceries!'"

Luckily, it wasn't long before Affleck was getting movie work—the 1992 prep-school drama *School Ties*, Richard Linklater's 1993 *Dazed and Confused*, and Kevin Smith's embarrassing 1995 homage to New Jersey, *Mallrats*. Invariably, Affleck would be cast as the lunkhead, perhaps because he had yet to grow into his leading-man looks. Most of his roles required him to beat the crap out of some pencil-necked pre-adolescent. "I'd always go in for the lead," says Affleck, "and they'd be like 'You're interesting as Steve. We'd like you to read Bruiser.'"

Smith saw that Affleck had more to offer, and cast him as the main character in *Chasing Amy*, the 1997 Sundance hit that landed Affleck on the indie-film map. Playing an insecure, flabby, goatee-wearing cartoonist, Affleck got to do some hard-core, scenery-chewing emoting, including a monologue in which he pours his heart out to a yammering lesbian, played by Joey Lauren Adams. The scene was profoundly informed by Affleck's personal life at the time: he was in the process of breaking up with his high-school girlfriend. "I could strongly identify

with the feeling of unrequited love," says Affleck. "Basically, I was in love with someone for years and years. And ultimately I felt like she just didn't love me in the same way—which was extremely painful."

Affleck would never admit that he likes to talk about mushy stuff—"It would be very difficult for me to say, 'That hurts.'" But get him started on any topic—including love and relationships—and he's virtually impossible to shut up. Nothing sends him on a sentimental roll quite like Gwyneth Paltrow, his girlfriend of a year, with whom he split last January.

"Gwyneth has a lot of things that haven't come across in her public image," says Affleck, who is forever defending her against the perception that she's an ice queen. "She's extremely funny, she's extraordinarily smart—not because she's a 1,600-on-the-S.A.T. girl, but smart in the way that she kind of gets it," says Affleck. "She's actually the funny, down-to-earth fat girl in the beautiful girl's body." He is equally valiant about their well-publicized breakup. "People's stories always seem more interesting and more full of intrigue from the office-gossip per-



spective," says Affleck, perhaps referring to tabloid accounts that had Paltrow alternately sneaking around with Joe Fiennes, Viggo Mortensen, and ex-boyfriend Brad Pitt. "But when you're on the inside of your own relationship, you know the answers to those kinds of questions are much more mundane than when it's all shrouded in mystery and infused with conjecture: 'I heard he caught her in a ménage à trois with a transvestite and two Pygmy lesbians!'"

Like a true movie star, Affleck is determined to keep the details of their relationship hidden. Like a true guy, he can't quite help himself from doing the opposite. An amateur photographer (his current passions are his Widelux camera and his Adobe Photoshop), Affleck keeps several albums of his work in his loft. Amid pictures of Cambridge, his mother, and his brother are pictures of Gwyneth: Gwyneth with flowers in her hair, Gwyneth waking up in the morning, Gwyneth dressed as Romeo on the set of *Shakespeare in Love*, Gwyneth about to head into Makeup. "Isn't she pretty?" Affleck says wistfully, gazing at the last image. "She's much more beautiful just natural like this than when she's all done up." He's lost in a Gwyneth moment. "I'm getting sad." But he's no sucker, and makes it clear that there will be no weeping here.

Affleck wasn't always so evolved in this department. Think back to the height of the Ben 'n' Matt frenzy, in 1997, when Affleck was dating Paltrow and Damon was seeing her friend Winona Ryder. "It was so gay," Affleck says, in the eight-year-old-girl sense of the word. "If I had gone by the tabloid stories of it, I would have been like 'Look at these fuckin' chumps. I just want to smack these people.' And I kind of wanted to smack myself," he admits. "But it's one of those things you kind of can't help. What are you going to say? 'Look, dude, don't go out with her. It'll look really weak.'"

Cringe-worthiness wasn't the only issue. More than anything, Affleck was concerned about how the tabloid stories would affect those around him—such as his ex-girlfriend. He likens the tabloids to "the friend who says, 'I don't want to get involved, but I did see Cathy blowin' three guys.'" Equally bothersome are the tabloid items describing Affleck as a rabid Lothario—buying out all the condoms in a 7-Eleven in Wisconsin (a state he's never set foot in), and getting cozy with Mariah Carey, Pamela Anderson, and, most recently, navel-baring pop star Britney Spears. "Britney Spears is 16 years old, O.K.?" says Affleck, rolling his eyes. "Can you dig it?"

Nor has Affleck been excluded from one of Hollywood's favorite games: Guess

When he dreamed of playing

in the majors,

you didn't just give him

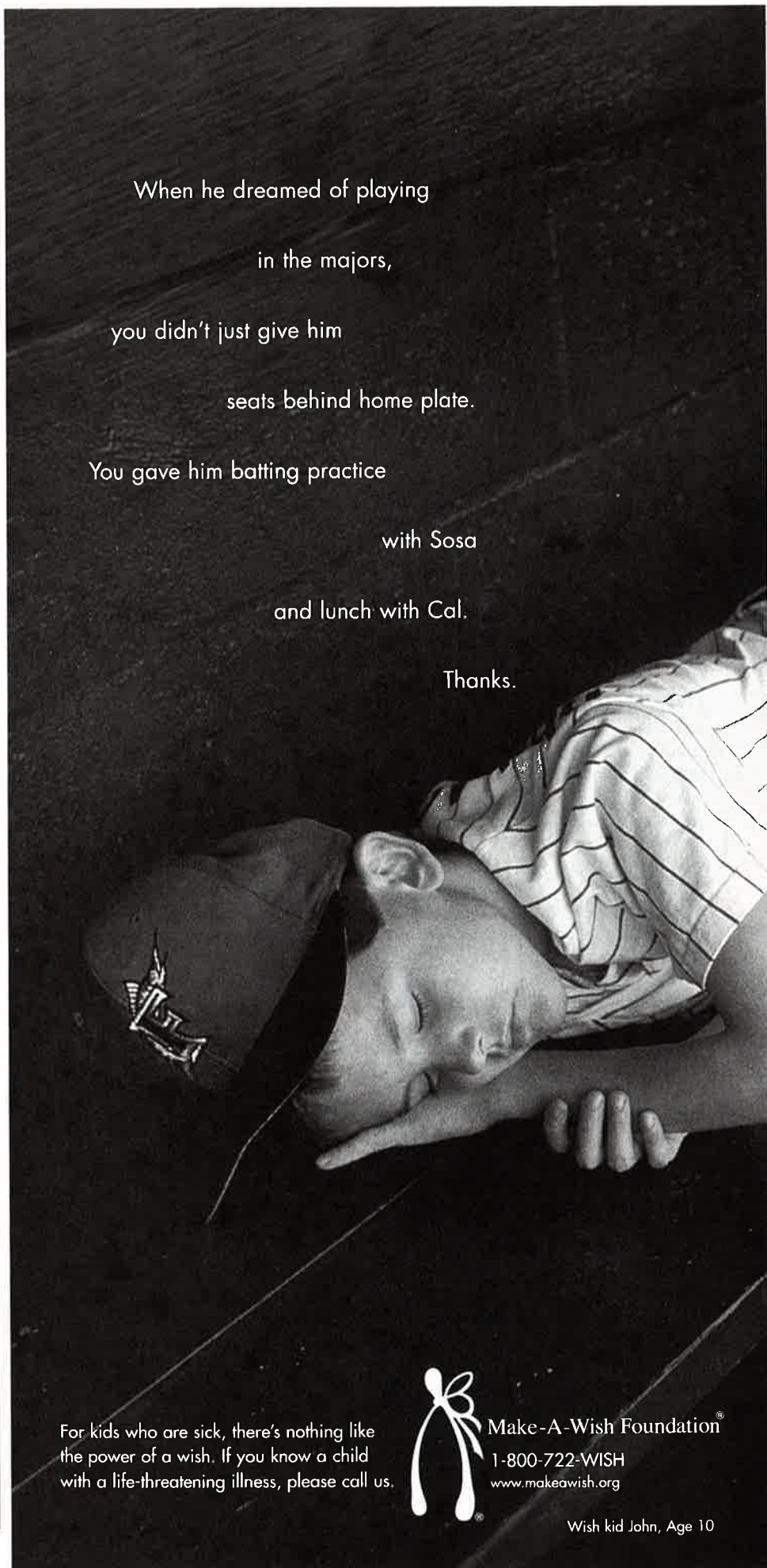
seats behind home plate.

You gave him batting practice

with Sosa

and lunch with Cal.

Thanks.



For kids who are sick, there's nothing like the power of a wish. If you know a child with a life-threatening illness, please call us.

Make-A-Wish Foundation®

1-800-722-WISH

[www.makeawish.org](http://www.makeawish.org)

Wish kid John, Age 10

# Affleck

Who's Gay. His sexuality has been the subject of blind tabloid reports, and Affleck is often told that it's a foregone conclusion in the gay community that he and Damon are in love—a nugget that Affleck seems to get a particular kick out of. According to Hollywood gossip, says Affleck, “not only is every [actor] gay, but somebody has a friend who slept with them. Maybe there are gay people who are in the closet in Hollywood—I'm sure there probably are—but I'm sure they didn't sleep with *Henry's friend*.” As for his own sexuality, Affleck says, “I like to think that if I were gay I would be out. Rupert Everett-style.”

**T**hough Affleck has learned to handle the rumors with panache, his sudden fame and formidable wealth (he is now offered up to \$12 million per picture) have been a bit harder to reconcile. “It's a tricky moral issue for me,” says Affleck. “[Sometimes] I feel that maybe I should just keep \$50,000 and give everything [else] away.” His healthy Cambridge-liberal guilt is hard to miss. Even Frankenheimer, who briefly met Affleck's mother, couldn't help but notice that Affleck's “childhood was well formed and that he grew up with the right values.” On the other hand, Affleck is too smart to pretend that he doesn't enjoy “priming the pump.” “I once read an interview with a young actor who was saying, ‘I'd like to live in a country house—the kind that Henry Miller lived in,’” says Affleck. “And I always thought, I want to live in the house that *Reggie Miller* lived in.”

True to his guy-with-a-conscience form, Affleck has found himself somewhere in the middle: Sure, there are the two homes, the five motorcycles, the marble bathroom, the four computers, and the two cars (a Chevy Malibu and '69 Cadillac Sedan DeVille, which he shares with his brother). But he also gives a lot of his money to charity and to “needy individuals, whom I seem to come across with increasing regularity,” has recently purchased a house for his mother, and, let it not be forgotten, often eats lunch at Koo Koo Roo. Yes, he implies, on occasion his behavior veers toward the prima donna-ish—he's been known to snub the press at movie premieres. But when he complains about anything, he feels “tacky,” and when he catches himself trying to escape conversations with aggressive fans—by, say, claiming he needs to “go to the bathroom”—he feels, well, “shitty.”

“Hey, Ben!” says a grizzled Koo Koo Roo patron who, in his full biker regalia, resembles a 70s-era Hell's Angel. Instead

of running to the rest room, Affleck stands, bear-hugs the man, and launches into a long discussion about teeth. The interloper, you see, is not a Hell's Angel at all; he's Affleck's dentist, Dr. Stan Goldman, and Dr. Stan Goldman, like almost everyone who has crossed Affleck's path, is a serious fan.

“Love that dude,” Affleck says after Dr. Goldman congratulates him for his work in *Shakespeare in Love*, bums a Camel Light, and takes off on his Harley. “I got sent to him by Disney when we were doing *Armageddon*. Fixed my tooth. My tooth was cracked and fucked up.”

If the \$100 million Jerry Bruckheimer asteroid juggernaut marked the moment when Affleck began worrying about his teeth (the whole set looks better than it used to), it was also the event that propelled Affleck from indie boy to action star—and spawned the inevitable talk about “selling out.” It is an accusation that Affleck finds roundly preposterous. “How many opportunities do you have to go onto the space shuttle? To go into the neutral-buoyancy laboratory?” he says. For one thing, Affleck was raised on *Star Wars*. For another, he realizes that “just because a movie's independent doesn't mean it's good.” Yes, he remains involved in several upcoming low-budget projects (Kevin Smith's beleaguered religious send-up *Dogma*, Ben Younger's Wall Street drama *The Boiler Room*, Billy Bob Thornton's southern comedy *Daddy and Them*, and Jay Lacopo's *The Third Wheel*, a romantic comedy about a date gone haywire, which he and Damon are producing). But nothing lights up Affleck's bullshit meter like a lousy art-house film with a pretentious title. “I'm always like ‘Yecch,’” Affleck says, cringing. “You know, *Manny and Chuck with the Strawberries*, or whatever it is. I want to see *Enemy of the State*.”

**W**hich is not to say that Affleck plans to spend his career spraying bullets into gangs of international terrorists or delivering Bruce Willis-type lines such as “Yippee Kai Yay!” with a straight face. In Affleck's opinion, there's nothing so inane as “the best there is” movies. “[Hollywood] can't make a movie unless the lead guy's the best so-and-so,” says Affleck, launching into a testosterone-pumped movie-trailer voice. “It's always like ‘The best valet parker there ever was! And now he's back, for one . . . big . . . party!’”

If anything has characterized Affleck's role choices, it's the instinct to keep looking for what's different. “His wheels are constantly turning,” Sandra Bullock says. “I don't think he can turn his head off.”

And so Affleck, burned out on *Armageddon*'s “deep-core drilling,” chose to do

*Shakespeare in Love*, despite fears that the cast was “going to be a bunch of R.S.C. knighted British people who were going to hate me and make fun of me.” Next was *Forces of Nature*, which touched a nerve. “I identified with that dilemma, that fear of commitment,” Affleck says of his character, a conservative groom-to-be who questions everything when he meets the free-spirited Bullock. On a few occasions, Affleck even rewrote dialogue in hopes of making the scenes more honest. “He'd brainstorm, and he'd get quiet for 20 minutes,” Bullock recalls, “and we'd know what that meant. He was writing 12 pages of dialogue.”

“I wished they had used more of my stuff,” Affleck admits. “In retrospect, I think that movie would have been better served to be edgier. . . . If [Bullock's character] had been talking about sex toys,” says Affleck, “that would have freaked this guy out, and he would have been made uncomfortable.”

**I**f Affleck is looking for a little discomfort, now is his moment. The new film *Dogma*—in which Affleck and Damon play angels with a penchant for automatic weapons—has come under attack by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which thinks the film ridicules the church. (Affleck views the controversy as, in essence, “three guys who had this little jury-rigged operation in Duluth who were trying to get their names in the papers.”)

More emotional turbulence may be ahead for Affleck as he begins shooting Don Roos's romance *Bounce*, opposite Gwyneth Paltrow. And with *Reindeer Games*, the world will see what Affleck looks like as a victim. “I saw him as a throwback protagonist,” Affleck says of his most recent character. “The hard-luck protagonist who doesn't look good all the time, who's constantly getting shit on, and who has the opportunity for a wry loser's irony. He kind of reminded me of my dad,” he says. “Not that my dad's a loser, but [he has] that tough-luck sense of humor.”

And thus it appears that Affleck may be nearing the end of guy territory and approaching manhood, a secure place to utilize some of the skills he's picked up from his various directors—directing, alas, is yet another target Affleck has set his sights on—and to explore the jackassery that he fears so intensely. Among the many issues that Affleck is now confronting are, he explains, a limited capacity for compromise and a lack of willingness to put his energy into a romantic relationship. “The reason I'm single,” Affleck says, “is because I wouldn't want to be with anybody right now who would be willing to be with me.”

And, just for a moment, Ben Affleck sounds a little like Woody Allen. But only a little. □