

EVEN BACK AT SPENCE,
GWYNETH PALTROW HAD
THE LOOKS, THE BRAINS,
THE PERSONALITY, AND GOT
ALL THE GUYS. NOW, AT 23,
SHE HAS GOT *THE GUY* AND,
WITH HER REMARKABLE
PERFORMANCE IN *EMMA*,
IS ABOUT TO BECOME A
MAJOR MOVIE STAR.

a star is bred

BY NANCY JO SALES

Gwyneth Paltrow alights in the Pembroke tea-room of the Lowell Hotel. She is wearing a black leather jacket and vinyl pants, a twinkle of a diamond bouncing from a short chain around her long neck. Even off-screen, she appears backlit. If she came with a soundtrack as well, it would be something with harps, a choir, and a Bootsy Collins bass line. Her brilliant hair twisted back in a tossed-off bun, she has the look of a funky angel come to earth to do some good deeds and

maybe get in some shopping at Agnès b. ★ Doug McGrath, the 38-year-old director of *Emma*, and I, two perfectly normal-looking people, dwindle in our chairs as Gwyneth arrives. We grow momentarily silent, our feet now barely scraping the ground. Gwyneth's so beautiful, it's embarrassing. ★ Seconds after arriving, Gwyneth mentions the unmentionable—the subject her publicist has made verboten. ★ “Brad *loved* the movie,” Gwyneth tells McGrath, leaning in for the kiss.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SANTE D'ORAZIO
FOR NEW YORK

of anyone's improving the classics, whether by tacking happy endings on to tragedies like *The Scarlet Letter* or even updating social comedies like, for example, *Emma*. "I think it's sad," she says, lighting up her first Camel, "that America's main cultural reference to this movie will be *Clueless*. I mean, *honestly*."

"I went to Spence, an all-girls private school," Gwyneth continues. "We did not read *Emma*. We read *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. I had a very difficult time getting through *Pride and Prejudice*. Parts of it are so rambling. I really was like, *oh, Lord*."

"Aren't you always secretly wishing that a carriage will break loose and run over that mother?" McGrath jumps in on *Pride and Prejudice*.

"I wanted a chandelier to fall on that mother," says Gwyneth.

Gwyneth and her director finally agree that *Emma* is a much better novel than *Pride and Prejudice*. "*Emma* is funny," says Gwyneth. "It made me laugh so many times. Brad was laughing when he watched it—and he wouldn't go and see it in the theater, you know what I mean? He went to see *The Rock*, okay?"

"In the picnic scene"—the one where Emma humiliates poor old prattle-mouth Miss Bates—"Brad was like, 'You *bitch!* That was so mean!' " When Gwyneth does Brad, she lowers her voice to a studly, slow-witted baritone. (It's affectionate, I think.)

"He was hitting me," Gwyneth says. "'You're evil!' he said. And I said, 'It's not my fault; it's a movie, hello? *Good morning?*' "

The Miss Bates scene is the pivotal moment in the novel: Emma, whom Austen describes as "handsome, clever and rich" but with "a disposition to think a little too well of herself," can't re-

sist slinging a nasty remark at her silly old-maid neighbor, a woman who wouldn't hurt a soul. Emma's cruel wit is her fatal flaw.

"That's one of *my* flaws," admits McGrath. "It so disturbed me." The crushing picnic scene was what compelled the Academy Award-nominated screenwriter—he co-wrote *Bullets Over Broadway* with Woody Allen—to undertake *Emma* as his first-time directing project. "You make some little smarty-pants remark just to make people laugh, and think, Oh, she's not going to get that, and then she does get it, and you look like the smallest, meanest person."

Gwyneth nods knowingly. She reflects, "Girls' schools are a lot like that—especially these private Upper East Side schools. The one I went to certainly was."

MISS BATES, CIRCA 1996, HAS A LOW-LEVEL JOB IN PUBLISHING. "I can't believe I'm telling you this," she says with a nervous laugh. She goes to great lengths to first explain that she always liked "Gwyn" when they were students at Spence, from which they graduated in 1990. "She was just very straightforward about things. She wasn't dreaded like some of these people there were. Spence people could be really mean. They could say awful things to each other. . . ."

And yet she still remembers, with a degree of emotion that puts a catch in her voice, standing naked with Gwyneth Paltrow in the locker room before swim practice one day as they climbed into some "hellish" Speedo bathing suits, the team uniform. "She said, 'Isn't it interesting how different people's bodies are?' Like comparing mine to hers. And I just wanted to *hit* her."

"He thinks you did a great job. He was so into it. *Ohmigod*."

McGrath turns, actually blushing. "I hypnotized her before this interview," he explains.

A lady in a white apron wheels around the tea cart. Gwyneth orders an unpronounceable Chinese brew. The secluded tearoom is otherwise empty. McGrath and I note that it seems the perfect place to conduct an interview, or an affair; then we both are blushing.

Gwyneth just smiles, and smiles.

Emma is Gwyneth Paltrow's twelfth film, and she's all of 25. In the others (*Seven*, *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*, *Jefferson in Paris*, *The Pallbearer*), Gwyneth played secondary roles that got her notice but nothing like the coronation she's about to receive. Her portrayal of Jane Austen's 1816 heroine is uncannily authentic, the kind of performance movie folks love to herald as "breakthrough."

"A lot of people are talking about a Best Actress nomination," crows Harvey Weinstein, the head of Miramax, which is releasing *Emma*. "God willing, she'll get it. But either way, this is going to propel her into the higher ranks of American actresses."

"Emma will follow Gwyneth the way Holly Golightly followed Audrey Hepburn," says Steven Haft, producer of *Emma* and *Dead Poets Society*, "in that it was the perfect blending of an actress and a role."

"She fits into Austen's world perfectly," agrees David Ansen, *Newsweek's* movie critic. "You wouldn't want to see Demi Moore as Emma."

Neither, it seems, would Gwyneth. She doesn't think much

MY FRIENDS ARE ALWAYS SAYING, 'DON'T YOU HAVE ANY CUTE GUYS FOR ME?' SAYS GWYNETH PALTROW. "FOR SOME REASON, ALL MY FRIENDS THINK I KNOW A HUNDRED PERFECT CUTE GUYS."

If the perceived affront persists, it may be because the one who delivered it is now everywhere and has, it seems, everything. And this Spence graduate is by no means alone in her inability to simply *let Gwyneth go*.

"Everyone's like, 'Ohmigod, I have this shitty job and Brad Pitt is kissing her feet . . .,'" says a Brearley graduate who knew Gwyneth, and who also has a low-level job in publishing.

"We all went to college and worked really hard, and now she's the newest hottest thing dating the Sexiest Man Alive," says a Nightingale-Bamford alumna, also working in the lower rungs of publishing.

"People are jealous of her. *I'm* jealous of her."

This young woman knew Gwyneth only slightly—from socializing with the popular crowd at schools like Spence and Nightingale, Dalton, Chapin, and brother institutions like Collegiate and St. David's—but she says she still finds herself obsessing about Gwyneth. Gwyneth the Goddess. Gwyneth the It Girl. "Even people who don't know Gwyneth measure themselves against her success," she says. "Gwyneth makes us feel extremely lame."

Gwyneth's precipitous and glorious ascendancy seems to function as a very public reminder of how their lives have yet to deliver the fabulousness they were promised as their birthright. It's a blow to have to suddenly realize, at the age of 23, that having an Ivy League education, a parent who kicks ass on Wall Street, or even beauty (helped along, perhaps, by a little cosmetic surgery and lots of trips with Mom to Georgette Klinger) doesn't necessarily mean you're destined to run the world yourself—or ever be on top of it the way Gwyneth Paltrow seemed to be one shiny afternoon in L.A. this year, when she showed up at the Oscars in a slinky Calvin Klein creation, on the arm of Brad Pitt.

Brad, Brad, Brad, Brad, Brad. Gwyneth's classmates walk by newsstands, and *People* magazine hollers BRAD IN LOVE! They turn on the Golden Globe Awards, and Brad Pitt is accepting his Best Supporting Actor award for *12 Monkeys*, giving thanks to "my angel, Gwyneth." (Cut to: Gwyneth in the audience, shaking with pride and looking so tastefully beautiful.)

It's all enough to make a struggling young Manhattan lady—eating her take-out sushi alone at night as she flips through another magazine citing a "Best Dressed" win for Gwyneth—feel mighty sensitive. Gwyneth's idlest comments about her own life are now mistaken as insults. "At our fifth reunion, she kept dropping Brad Pitt's name and nobody was biting," says a Spence classmate. "Well, Brad's in town." "Oh." I mean, like, she could have been saying 'Uncle Joe's in town.' I mean, we're not stupid, okay?"

IN THE LOWELL'S TEAROOM, THE TALK HAS TURNED TO matchmaking—another of Emma's foibles. Gwyneth undoes her loose bun and lets her hair cascade across her shoulders. McGrath and I are smiling like idiots. "My friends are always saying, 'Don't you have any cute guys for me?'" says Gwyneth.

"For some reason, all my friends think I know a hundred perfect, cute guys."

"They're hoping Brad has a hundred cute brothers," McGrath offers.

"Clones," Gwyneth says, twisting her hair back again carelessly.

GWYNETH'S MEMORY OF SPENCE DIFFERS FROM OUR MISS BATES'S, though it is no less Austenesque. "I had braces and I was skinny and little and I had a bad haircut." Gwyneth wrinkles her perfect nose. "And there was one girl who did terrible things to me, and she was like the head of the whole class. Sometimes we would be friends, and sometimes she'd just be like, 'I have the power over you.'"

"You woke up and you were in a women's prison," McGrath embroiders.

"The things she would do!" Gwyneth continues. That girl, she says, used to go on a campaign to have other girls call Gwyneth and tell her that popular boys at St. David's wanted to date her, when it was all just a big lie. "One day in seventh grade, I thought we were having a nice conversation about California, where I was born, and she said, 'Oh, do you like California better than New York?' and I said, 'No, I love New York now that I'm used to it—I'm having a wonderful time,' and she said, 'Good, because I was going to say if you like California better than New York, then you can just *go on back there*.' And I was like, 'Oh . . . my . . . God . . .'"

"She's in the military now," says McGrath, riffing.

"I heard she's a zealot—a [member of a cult]," says Gwyneth. She sighs ironically. "God will have to save her."

Gwyneth acknowledges, though, that she, too, has a bit of a mouth. "Sometimes, I can get into trouble for it," she says, picking plump green grapes off a custard tart before us on a stacked tray, with fingernails painted slate. "I should learn

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better manners," she says, chewing happily. "I can be very impatient, and I'm too opinionated."

"You have very good manners," McGrath replies. "You always had very strong opinions on the movie, but it wasn't about winning an argument. You'd say, 'No that's not what should happen, this should happen,' and you would explain why, and you would be right."

"Sometimes I was wrong," Gwyneth insists.

"Yes, but when you were wrong," McGrath says, continuing the love scene, "then I'd say, 'No, you're forgetting about this.' And you'd say, 'Oops, you're right,' and that would be the end of it."

"That's true," says Gwyneth. "But sometimes I don't know when to stop, and I can get whiny because I have to express every emotion that I have every second that I'm having it."

"Which I think is bad," she adds. Her eyes, which are the blue of a flame, narrow slightly. "But at the same time, you don't have to guess with me."

WHEN HER "BAD HAIR" DAYS IN HIGH SCHOOL BECAME TOO "painful," Gwyneth says, she retreated into avid movie watching—and books. With her friends, the intellectuals, she "would sit around smoking tons of cigarettes and drinking tons of coffee discussing our Russian-existentialism class and whose Raskolnikov's-dream interpretation was better."

"We were crazy," she says, laughing. "We were so pretentious. In these private Upper East Side schools, the emphasis becomes all about whose remark is more insightful or wittier or more analytical."

In past interviews, Gwyneth has freely given the impression that in high school and beyond, she was something of a hellion. In 1994, she told the *New York Times* she would sneak out at night and leave a note on her pillow saying, "Dear Mom and Dad, I didn't run away. I haven't been kidnapped. I'm out at the clubs. You can punish me in the morning."

Gwyneth seems to like playing with the impression that, deep down, she's just a bit of a bad girl, but take it or leave it, and aren't you missing out if you do leave it. In *Flesh and Bone*, Steve Kloves's gloomy little 1993 movie about drifter angst in west Texas, she slithered leggily on to the screen while Muddy Waters sang "Bad to the Bone." Some critics thought she should have won a Best Supporting Actress nomination for her performance as a grave-robbing con artist. She stole the movie from Meg Ryan, anyway, whose cheerleaderish cuteness she chewed up and spit back at her like a mouthful of damp pom-pom. "I'm not a nice girl," Gwyneth tells Ryan at one point in the film, with a smirk, "but I'll bet that you are . . . aren't you?"

Gwyneth now says reporters blew her badness way out of proportion. "I was just finishing puberty when I said that; yeah, I was wild because I snuck out of the house and went to a bar." She fires up another Camel, blowing smoke out of her nose impatiently. But she's not mad. She seems rather amused by all this. "And now, like, I read in the *Star* I'm, like, a boozier. I was not wild. I was a normal teenager. I snuck out and went to bars."

"And then after the murder, she really went on the straight and narrow," interjects McGrath, playfully.

GWYNETH DID ONCE HAVE A BAD HAIRCUT—"FOR ABOUT FIVE minutes," one of the young women who is not Gwyneth recalls, though she can't recall the awkward geek girl Gwyneth remembers herself as. By ninth grade, the consensus appears to be, Gwyneth had blossomed into her present state of stunningness, and took to wearing a leather jacket and hemming her school uniform well above her knees—the better to show off her coltish legs around the corner on Madison Avenue, where she would escape to smoke cigarettes and flirt with passersby. "I mean we all did that, okay? But she wore her skirt a little too short."

Even then, they all lived in the shadow of Gwyneth.

"She was *always* this badass. She wore cowboy boots."

"She was always six feet tall with blonde hair down to her waist."

"I heard all those stories about how she stole other people's boyfriends."

Gwyneth rolls her eyes. "I kissed somebody's boyfriend when I was 15," she says, maybe a little perturbed.

THE CONVERSATION TURNS, ONCE AGAIN, TO THE CLASSICS.

"That scene in *Annie Hall* with the black soap?" Gwyneth laughs. "'What are you, joining a minstrel show?'" She does a fair Woody Allen, almost as expert as McGrath's. ("She is the world's best mimic," says producer Haft. "One day on the set she was doing Emma—as Woody. Or Woody as Emma. It was riotously funny.")

"Will you call Woody and ask him to write me a romantic comedy?" Gwyneth asks McGrath. (She's kidding, I think.)

IT WASN'T BOYS, OR EVEN BOOKS, THAT MOST INTERESTED YOUNG Gwyneth—it was acting. "I always knew I wanted to be an actress," she says. "I always knew that it was just a matter of time." ("She was *not* one of the biggest actresses in our class," says a Spence graduate who was, and who now works in retail.)

Gwyneth did have a role as Titania, queen of the fairies, in a Spence production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (a part she seems born to play). Her love of performing was nurtured each summer, too, at the Brown Ledge acting camp in Vermont. "If you ever have a daughter," she confides, sounding like an Upper East Side matron, "send her to Brown Ledge. It's the best."

Gwyneth credits her parents—actress Blythe Danner (*The Great Santini*, *The Prince of Tides*) and TV writer-producer Bruce Paltrow (*St. Elsewhere*)—with giving her self-confidence. "I grew up in a house," she says, "with two very intelligent people who always led me to believe that whatever I thought was valuable. If I said something, it was 'Oh, why do you think that, that's very interesting.'"

Private school, camps, great parents. Like Emma, Gwyneth does seem to have passed through her young life with "very little to distress or vex her." She grew up on 92nd Street with German nannies, golden retrievers, and an adorable younger brother, Jake, who's only 20 and just made his directorial debut with a short film at the Sundance Film Festival. Jake's a St. David's boy.

Her mother, she says, "wanted [her] to become Margaret Mead," and her father was afraid that the life of a performer would be an unsuitable one for his daughter. Gwyneth con-

vinced them of her talent after appearing with Danner in a 1991 Williamstown Theater Festival production of *Picnic*. "I first saw her onstage in *Picnic* when she was 17," says Miramax executive producer Donna Gigliotti. "And I thought, This is major." Gwyneth acknowledges that her familial connections used to get her phone calls returned; but now, as she sweetly and justly enough puts it, she has earned "the respect of my peers, and the people with the power to make movies."

"Among her many sickening qualities," McGrath says, "she can do everything you ask her to without having to rehearse it or ever see any of the objects involved—like archery, horseback riding. She just says, 'Oh, sure, I can do that.' I said, 'You're going to have to sing and harmonize,' and she said, 'Oh, yeah.' If I'd said, 'You know I need somebody to do twelve back flips over burning barrels,' I'm sure she could do that too."

"Some people were born to sing," says Gwyneth matter-of-factly. "They just can or they can't."

"She can play Emma," boasts Miramax's Weinstein. "She can play a whore [as indeed she does in the upcoming *Hard Eight*]. She can do anything."

"Everything she does, she does to perfection," adds producer Haft.

"She never seemed to have trouble with *anything*," sighs a former schoolmate.

McGrath says, in fact, that during the time he was adapting the *Emma* screenplay, he couldn't picture another twentysomething actress in the leading role. Not Julia Roberts, Sandra Bullock, Drew Barrymore, Marisa Tomei, Laura Dern. "I didn't know who I wanted to play it," he says, "and I was worried I had no one in mind." Gwyneth, meanwhile, was up in Canada making *Moonlight and Valentino* when she got a visit from "some agents [from ICM] trying to steal me from CAA—which I almost succumbed to. They said, 'We have this genius Doug McGrath, and you have to do this movie.'" At a reading at Miramax, she says, "I was like, 'When do we start?'"

She wanted the part so badly, she made a pact with Harvey Weinstein to do *The Pallbearer* with David (*Friends*)

Schwimmer first, even though she thought the script weak (so, as it turns out, did audiences). Weinstein "bribed me," Gwyneth says. "He admits it."

But though she says she's protective of her "artistic integrity," she agreed to the deal because Emma was "the best part ever written for a young girl."

"You stick with me," says McGrath, in a fit of anxious perfectionism. "I'll show you all the things wrong with *Emma*."

"What?" says Gwyneth.

"The truck!" he exclaims. Apparently there's a one-second shot where a lorry sits parked on a nineteenth-century street.

"Oh, shut up," Gwyneth says.

"I can read the license plate on it now," McGrath moans.

"What are you, computer-enhancing it?"

"I have studied it."

"Don't listen to this man—he doesn't make any mistakes."

"I have so many to choose from," McGrath laughs.

"Like what?" says Gwyneth. "You were never in a bad mood on the set, you never raised your voice or lost your temper . . ."

"The day of the eye-lines?" he ventures, referring to the trouble they had positioning Emma and the evil Mr. Elton correctly in a carriage scene. "A topographical map on my forehead."

"Ach. If that's losing your temper, will you move in with me?"

"I certainly make tons of mistakes all the time," Gwyneth adds, sipping her tea.

"IT'S VERY STRANGE TO BE FAMOUS," GWYNETH IS SAYING, "BUT right now it's on a really nice level. I can work when I want to, and I don't have to work if I don't want to, and very sweet people shake my hand on the street or take my picture. I'll walk by NYU, and a girl will come up to me and say, 'I've seen all your films and I'm an acting student and can I just talk to you for a second?' And it's nice."

A couple of years ago, Gwyneth was offered the female lead in *Cool As Ice*, playing opposite Vanilla Ice. She wanted to do it, she admits. "I needed the money." Fortunately, she says now, her parents talked her out of it.

"I have really stayed away from doing leads in films until now on purpose," she says. "I turned down five studio films because I was learning. At that point, if I had done something just to be the star of a movie, the responsibility would get placed on me. I'm in no hurry, and I'm not that ambitious anyway. So I would say, 'I don't want to do this, I'm not ready for this.' I didn't want to be held accountable for the success of a film at 21."

At 23, it's a different matter. As much as she has made mistakes, Gwyneth says, she has found the experiences salutary, improving. Like Emma.

"I think the fact that Emma learns from her mistakes shows how she has such a capacity for life and the importance of other people," says Gwyneth. "The thing that I loved best about her is that even though she makes terrible mistakes, she learns from them. That's such a wonderful quality in somebody."

GWYNETH RAN INTO AN OLD SPENCE CLASSMATE LATE LAST YEAR at Grange Hall, the bar-restaurant in the West Village. This was well after the young superstar fell in love with her; after *Emma* was in the can; and after Gwyneth was on her way to make three more movies in quick succession (the upcoming *Kilronan* with Jessica Lange, *Hard Eight* with Samuel Jackson, and *Great Expectations* with Ethan Hawke, which she's about to shoot).

"I'm so out of it," the former Spencie says, "I had no idea what she was up to. And I said, 'Hey, how are you, what have you been doing?' And she said she was acting, and I said, 'Well, stick with it. It's hard at first, but you'll get there.' And she was like, 'Yeah.' She was a really good sport about it. She could have made me feel like such a fool." ■