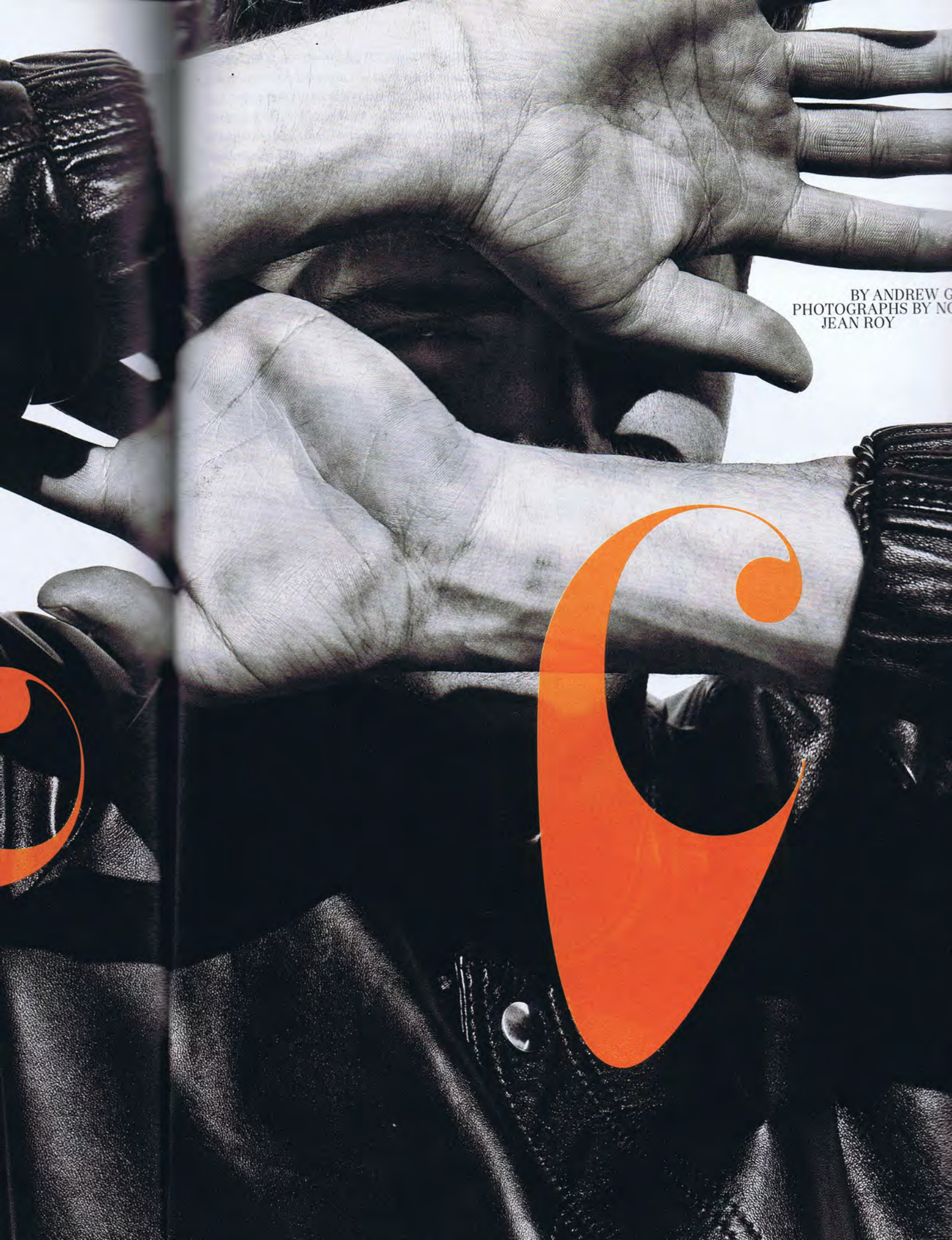


THE AGONY OF

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You were the prettiest teen face to grace the screen, but at 22 you have zero interest in chasing the throngs of adoring girls, and you have no taste for taking risks, and even if you did you probably couldn't stain your squeaky-clean image. And now you can't shake hands with anyone you meet . . .



BY ANDREW G
PHOTOGRAPHS BY N
JEAN ROY

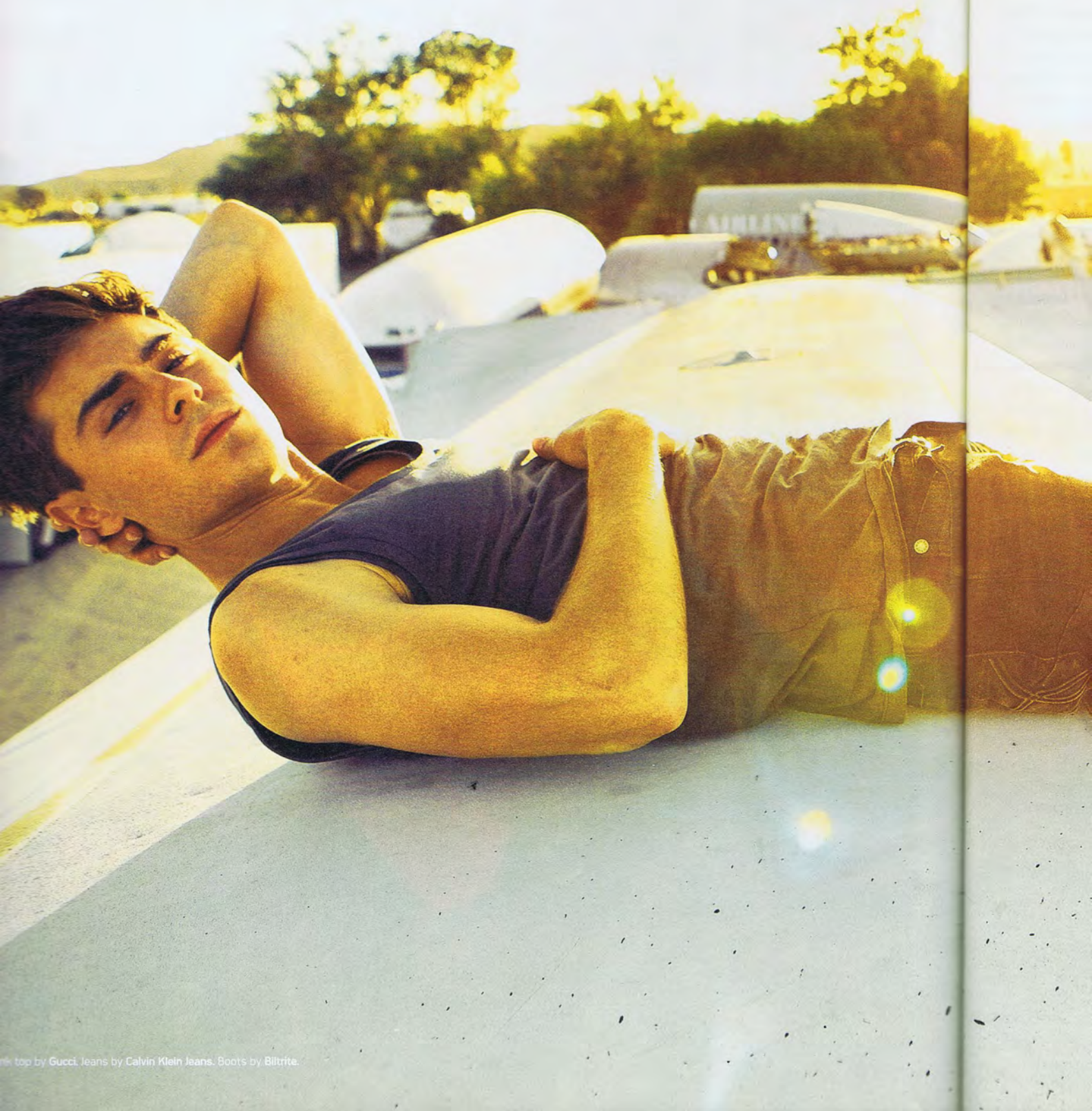
ZAC EFRON REFUSES TO SHAKE MY OUTSTRETCHED HAND. "OH, DUDE, I CAN'T," he says. "I've got a bad case of poison oak." I immediately assume this is a new no-shakes-allowed alibi for the celebrity germaphobe. And at first glance, as I stand here shoulder-to-shoulder with him at the grand host station of West Hollywood's Soho House, it does occur to me that perhaps Efron has taken a Howard Hughes-ian turn; although he's not shuffling around with tissue boxes on his feet, he is sporting a homeless-urban-ninja look, with a black Lacoste T-shirt under a black hoodie pulled over his head. He's got only one arm through the sweatshirt, and the other sleeve hangs slack like an elephant's

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paralyzed trunk. Frankly, he looks kind of nuts.

It's just before 6 P.M., and we've arrived to watch Game 3 of the NBA Finals, which is taking place in Boston, meaning we won't be sitting in Efron's regular courtside seats at the Staples Center. Efron's publicist has supposedly arranged a private dining room in which we can eat and watch the game, but the club's hostess is clicking around on her computer, unable to find the reservation. "Oh, maybe it's under my name," he offers meekly. "I'm Zac Efron."

She beams at this lack of presumption. "You're cute," she says.

If the mild presentation downstairs doesn't exactly trumpet this

particular 22-year-old actor's position in the Hollywood food chain, the Penthouse Dining Room speaks for him. The room is palatial—we sit near the flat-screen TV at one end of a monstrously long table, with 20 place settings and 20 red club chairs, surrounded by meticulously curated modern bric-a-brac. Through the wall of windows, there are sweeping, unobstructed views down into Beverly Hills and Century City, where at that very moment inside CAA's headquarters someone is surely invoking Efron's name, plotting to turn him into the next Tom Cruise and prevent him from becoming the next Chris Klein. Shaking his head uneasily, Efron, for the first time today, apologizes for something that doesn't merit an



apology. "Dude, I gotta be honest," he says. "I gotta be up-front. This is not how I roll. I really don't get private rooms at the Soho House. I've never heard of anyone doing this before. This is . . . unusual." He also frets about his black Vans, which, by the way, look perfectly fine. "I shouldn't be wearing them to Soho House," he says. "They have holes in them."

As some singer named Monica belts out the national anthem on TV, Efron apologizes that our initial plan—to go sailing together—got scuttled at the last minute. "Yeah, sorry about the sailing thing, dude," he says, gingerly removing his arms from the sweatshirt. The tops of his wrists finally become visible and there are two large, angry-looking patches of red, scaly, bumpy skin: The poison oak was no lie after all—the one-armed-hoodie look was an attempt at relief, not some retard-o-generation-specific trend. Then I notice the plum-size patch of skin on his cheek that's been clumsily painted over with calamine lotion. "I went backpacking over Memorial Day weekend and I just got the worst poison oak, bro," he says. "It was my first time getting it. Dude, it's, like, everywhere. *Everywhere*. I can't even begin to show you, 'cause you'll get so grossed out. I look like a zombie from *Dawn of the Dead*." Coaxing commences; negotiations occur. "Okay, I'll show you my back, but the front's pretty gross, man," he says, then lifts his shirt. Above the bunched-up waistband of his underwear (boxers, Hanes, blue plaid), half of his back has been taken over by a crust resembling swollen cornflakes. "This spot just popped up this morning. Don't touch it!" Efron is under the erroneous impression that anyone who touches him will catch his cooties—and maybe even develop a taste for brains.

There's something oddly portentous about how he contracted poison oak. Efron is, of course, the handsome young actor who is still best known for starring in the trio of *High School Musical* movies, films that were made for pocket change and lint—and reportedly generated more than a billion dollars for Disney. The final installment was shot in early 2008, and Efron's acted in only three movies since then, which is certainly not for a lack of offers. Is the pace so slow because he's choosy, or is it because he's paralyzed by fear that one wrong move will squander his huge store of celebrity capital? "Indecisive, for sure" is how he characterizes this state. A smart, highly disciplined kid who grew up three hours north of Los Angeles with parents who are, by all accounts, the anti-Lohans—concerned, reasonable people who tried to prepare their elder son for almost certain failure in show business and at one juncture, at least, tried to dissuade him from acting altogether in favor of college—he's acutely aware that his fame has far outpaced his body of work and his abilities. (Care to see him squirm? Ask him if he enjoyed recently being honored for his oeuvre at the Maui Film Festival.) Efron's also aware that although there are scores of young girls who will, for the moment, buy tickets for any project he does regardless of its quality, there are at least as many guys, like my thirtysomething movie-junkie friend, who had a hard time accepting Efron in arguably the best movie he's made, Richard Linklater's *Me and Orson Welles*, because they found themselves wanting to "punch his pretty fucking face in."

It was this very uncertain actor who led a party of nine through

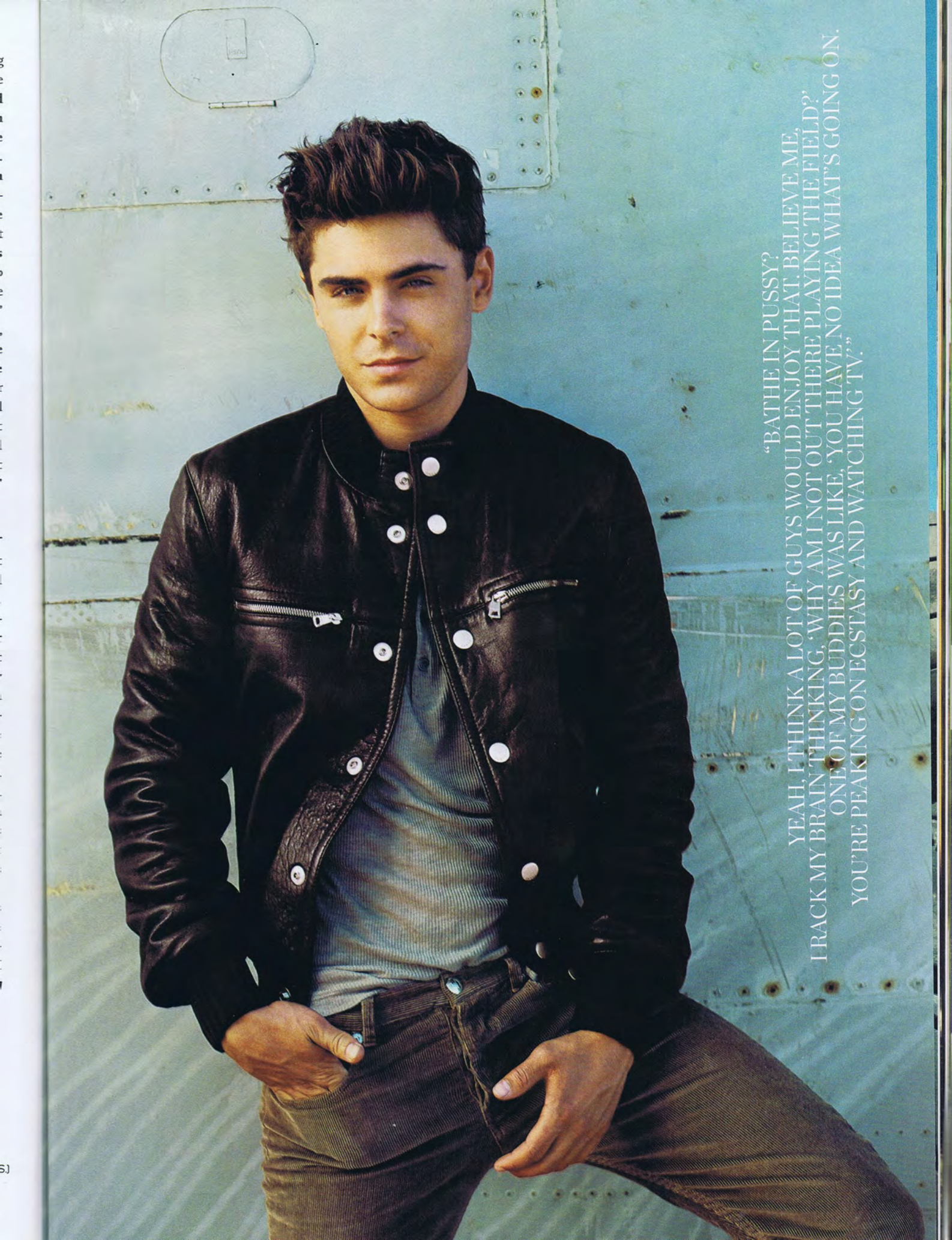
the woods and to a clearing that featured a majestic waterfall in a big California park that he refuses to identify for fear that the next time he hikes in, he'll find that TMZ has established a bureau there. His dad had shown him the spot years before, and Efron wanted to share it with his friends. He had carefully avoided the poison-oak leaves the whole hike, using sticks to push them away, limboing under hanging branches. When they reached the waterfall, he climbed up the cliff face, which hadn't looked so bad from below, and before he knew it he was standing 30 feet above his friends and the water. He freaked. "My legs were shaking," he says. "The pool started to look out of focus. It would get closer, then further away. So I sat down for a minute, but everyone was egging me on to jump. 'Jump! Jump! Jump!' I'd never seen anyone go off this jump. So I was like, 'I gotta do this. I brought everyone here. We made it through the poison-oak forest. I gotta at least do this jump.'" From atop the cliff, Efron determined that if he jumped too far out, he'd crash against the jagged rocks on the far edge of the pool. Maybe he also saw, down there on the rocks, the desiccated dreams of all the "real deal" actors who never panned out. All he needed to do was clear one little poison-oak bush directly below. No problem. He leaped. And the second before he hit the freezing water, he felt an ever-so-slight whoosh tickling his back and hands as the bush branches transferred enough of the dread urushiol oil to eventually spread over every part of his body—even his much-squealed-over teen-idol dick. "That was it," he says of the leap. "The moment I got it."

ZAC EFRON IS NOT COOL, AND THIS PRONOUNCEMENT IS NEITHER AN INSULT nor a revelation to him. His lack of cool has nothing to do with the fact that, as a preadolescent, he *lived* for community theater or that he tried to get away with wearing a fedora to school at 15. Cool is effortlessness. Efron is all effort. Whether you're the type who watches *High School Musical* and starts feeling so tingly that you think you've finally gotten your period, or the kind for whom watching it makes you fantasize about living in a European country where euthanasia is legal, you can't view a choreographed number like *HSM 1's* "Get'cha Head in the Game"—in which Efron and his Wildcats teammates sing while manipulating synchronized bouncing basketballs—and not immediately understand the level of commitment the project would demand of a 17-year-old. "He never quits," says Burr Steers, who directed Efron in the new drama *Charlie St. Cloud* as well as the 2009 switcheroo comedy *17 Again*, a film that featured what seemed like—but wasn't—a special-effects trick with Efron spinning a basketball on his pinkie. "Even the basketball wizards we hired to teach him tricks had never seen that done," Steers says. "But Zac, being incredibly competitive, just practiced every night until his pinkie was calloused and battered. He willed it."

The challenge directors have is to get him to try a little less. *Hairspray's* director, Adam Shankman, had to tell him that if he really wanted to be convincing as teen idol Link Larkin, he'd better stop beaming so god-damned much. "It's not how I am," Efron says. "Even in my audition I was smiling and happy. Not cool." On the set of **[CONTINUED ON PAGE 180]**



ZAC EFRON CUTS LOOSE: SNAP A PICTURE OF THE BAR CODE ABOVE TO WATCH EXCLUSIVE BEHIND-THE-SCENES VIDEO OF OUR COVER SHOOT. (SEE PAGE 48 FOR INSTRUCTIONS.)



“BATHE IN PUSSY?
YEAH, I THINK A LOT OF GUYS WOULD ENJOY THAT. BELIEVE ME,
I TRACK MY BRAIN THINKING, ‘WHY AM I NOT OUT THERE PLAYING THE FIELD?’
ONE OF MY BUDDIES WAS LIKE, ‘YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT’S GOING ON.
YOU’RE PEAKING ON ECSTASY AND WATCHING TV.’”

17 Again, Steers felt like he had to break him of some of the nicer habits he'd picked up at the House of Mouse. "It's something you go through with a lot of these young Disney actors," Steers says. "Teaching them that when they're acting, they don't need to worry so much about being polite, about treading gently around other people."

Hollywood, like everything else, is just an extension of high school, with the burnouts and the jocks coexisting uneasily. Burnout Sean Penn drinks and smokes too much and will always be cooler than jock Tom Cruise, whom one imagines doing lots of crunches and high-fives. Same with Shia LaBeouf and Zac Efron. LaBeouf seems to give not one shit. He disses Spielberg and flips pickups and just gets bigger; Efron makes appearances at Bar Mitzvahs as favors to industry friends. "I'm so jealous of that," Efron says of LaBeouf, whom he doesn't know personally. "Yeah, that's awesome to not give a shit. And Shia still pulls it off. That's so cool. It's just awesome. It just comes easy to some people."

Hollywood's upperclassmen have shown how they feel about this freshman. Penn, upon meeting Efron, reportedly said exactly two words to him: *Go skydiving*. But Cruise recently flagged Efron down in the lobby of CAA. "You ride motorcycles?" Cruise asked him. Alas, he didn't. "You wanna learn how?" Cruise invited him out to his house, taught him how a motorcycle engine works, showed him the hangar with his dozens of pristine bikes—including the Triumphs he rode in the *Mission: Impossible* movies. Efron was allowed to ride a pedigreed-less dirt bike. "He made so many great movies," Efron says of Cruise. "I get the feeling that he works really, really hard. It didn't come from swagger with him. It came from dedication, hard work. You see it in the way he physicalizes everything. You watch *The Last Samurai* and that's him! He's really doing that." I ask Efron why he supposes Cruise bothered reaching out to him. "I don't know," he says. "I don't even want to know. It's just so cool that he gave a shit, the fact that he cared at all. No one else did that."

Our waiter—a wavy-haired model type with a heavy South African accent—arrives to take our order. "You want to get a half-bottle of wine and

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"I'M SO JEALOUS OF THAT," EFRON SAYS OF SHIA LABEOUF, NOT GIVE A SHIT. AND SHIA STILL PULLS IT OFF. THAT'S SO

split it?" Efron suggests. I convince him that tonight life shall be grabbed by the throat and the two of us will attack a whole bottle of whatever red the waiter likes and, if swept up in a Dionysian frenzy, perhaps we'll even finish it. The South African returns and uncorks a nice Napa Cab.

"Will you be having wine?" he asks Efron.

"Sorry?" Efron says.

"Are you *old enough*?" Invictus the Waiter asks.

"Yes, please," he says, motioning to his glass. "And I am old enough. But no worries, man—I get it all the time."

Invictus pours. "If you need anything, I'm Greg," he says. He and I shake hands, and then he extends his palm toward Efron.

"My man, I'm not going to shake your hand. I've got poison oak."

Gregvictus smiles. "No worries," he says, walking out.

As the door clicks shut, Efron looks across the table, clearly concerned,

and so returns the Apologizer Bunny. "He heard me say that, right? He didn't think I didn't want to shake his hand, right?"

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, EFRON AND HIS FATHER, DAVID, SET OUT TO HAVE an overnight on a friend's boat. David is an engineer who raced catamarans as a teenager. As usual on any trip, Zac grabbed a script from his messy car to read. On this particular day, the only script in his car wasn't exactly a hot Hollywood property. It was an adaptation of a 2004 novel called *The Death and Life of Charlie St. Cloud*, about a man who can communicate with ghosts, a talent that serves him well in his job as a cemetery caretaker. On the water, Zac opened the script to the first pages, which depicted a race of 29ers, the high-performance class of skiff most often raced by young sailors. "We were out and the sun was shining and the wind was blowing, and as soon as I started to read the first couple pages the wind started to fill the sails," he says. "And I just remember the boat started leaning and all the docks started swaying, and I was reading the script and being like, 'Man, this is really cool.' If you ever get a sign, it must look like this."

Of course, it would take more than that to get Efron to sign on to a movie. The stars also seemed to be aligned when Efron and *High School Musical* director Kenny Ortega were set to reunite for a remake of *Footloose*. Paramount was gung ho, as were Ortega; Efron's longtime manager, Jason Barrett; and David Efron, whom Zac consults on every potential project. The sole holdout was Zac himself, who got a decidedly hinky feeling after reading the script. "All the things I loved about *Footloose* I couldn't find in the project," he says. "They just weren't there. I couldn't see myself doing it." During a series of phone calls, Ortega worked hard on him, asked him if he didn't think that what he was feeling was fear of failure and told him that on occasions such as this caution must be abandoned. "I was doing my very, very best to excite him and inspire him into wanting to do this," Ortega says. "I believed in my heart that we could do it together as a team, and I fought to keep him in the game." Efron finally called Ortega to tell him he was passing. "I love Kenny with all my heart," he says. "It was literally the hardest phone call I've ever made."

Some of Efron's caution might have originated with Barrett, who has hammered home to the young star what agents call "the power of no"—i.e., pass on enough *Marmadukes* and you'll eventually be perceived as desirable enough for *The Departed*. Barrett and Efron look at every big move he makes in political terms, endeavoring to convert the undecideds while also playing to Efron's young female fan base. Even sticking to this formula has its risks. A movie like *Me and Orson Welles* might have allowed him to work on interesting material with an esteemed indie director like Linklater, but since it bore no similarity to *HSM*, it wasn't deemed a good commercial bet; Efron's presence didn't help in finding it a major American distributor. "Even when Zac came aboard, they weren't interested," Linklater says. "They said, 'Well, he's playing out of his type.' I was always kind of like, 'Uh, he's playing a teenager who's in theater. Is that really far out of what his 'audience' might-like?'"

Charlie St. Cloud will be Efron's biggest test to date. The looming question is whether audiences will accept an actor who has only ever played well-adjusted young men as the town weirdo in dire need of sun and Lexapro. There's a scene in which Charlie walks into a store and is given the once-over by his romantic interest and her friends, who whisper that he's way too odd and dark for consideration. Your eye searches the screen behind Efron's gorgeous face, trying to locate the Eddie Munster lurking in the shadows. Surely they couldn't be talking about Zac.

"OH . . . MY . . . GOD," EFRON SAYS WITH A GASP. "IT'S LIKE THE BEST . . . orgasm . . . ever! And I just keep coming!" Efron and I are in the Soho House bathroom after a pee, and he's lingering at the sink, letting the water pour over his diseased wrists. When he got up to head to the john, I noticed that his pants were fully unbuttoned and unzipped. "I'm just airing it out," he'd said. "It just itches too much." Discipline and doctor's orders had kept the impulse to scratch at bay.

Here in the bathroom, the topic of other bathrooms comes up, specifically the Japanese one at the famous Los Angeles sushi place Matsuhisa, which has a bidet-like contraption that will essentially shampoo your anus. "Yeah, Vanessa has one of those," he says, speaking for the first time of his girlfriend of five years, *High School Musical* costar Vanessa Hudgens, who had dropped him off tonight. By now the Lakers are well on their way to winning the game and the bottle of Cab is gone, not more than a quarter of it consumed by Efron himself, which may explain the coarse phrasing of my suggestion that now might be the time for him to immerse himself in the company of more than one lady friend. "Bathe in pussy?" he repeats. "Yeah, everyone tells me that. I think a lot of guys would enjoy that. But I'm not really like that." I point out that he does not know if he would enjoy this or not, since he has never been famous and single. "Believe me," he says. "I rack my brain thinking, 'Why am I not out there playing the field?' One of my buddies was like, 'You have no idea what's going on right now. You're peaking on Ecstasy and you're watching TV.' But it's not in my heart." In person, by the way, nothing about Efron merits even flipping on the gaydar, and those rumors—that his relation-

ing room lasts only until 9 P.M., at which point the novelist Bret Easton Ellis will host a dinner after his reading, which the publicist announces is going on in the Penthouse Bar and Lounge next door.

Without knowing precisely how we've been lured there, we find ourselves in the back of Ellis' event, where a handful of blonde actresses are taking turns reading aloud Ellis' 1994 short story "Letters From L.A." Brilliant as the writing may be, it's not exactly riveting theater, especially given that one of the actresses, Malin Åkerman, seems to be having difficulty reading. "I'm a little bit dyslexic," she explains to the hushed crowd. Efron motions to the door and we exit. Blazer boy somehow manages to usher Efron up into the crowded roof bar and deposit him like a prized bone in front of a group of strangers smoking in the dark outside. "Do you all know Zac?" the publicist asks.

A pretty British blonde on the end reaches up for Efron's hand. "I'd shake your hand, but I have poison oak," he says.

She laughs uproariously, and, unnerved, he shows her his wrists as proof of his honesty. "Oh, God," she says. "Did you touch it on purpose?"

After politely excusing himself, Efron asks, "Who were those people?" Efron says that much of life in public is a blur of such random publicists, and he's often forced to fake comprehension. "Yeah, it's every bit as awkward as that just was," he says. "You're always missing some important piece of information. From a one to ten, that was just about a five."

Efron leads the way down the stairs to the first-floor lobby. "You play pool?" he asks, motioning over to the empty table. The moment we rack up, a young guy dashes up breathlessly. "Zac!" he says and introduces himself as someone who works for the director Bryan Singer, who was apparently upstairs in the bar. "You passed Bryan Singer on the way out."

"Oh, I did?" Efron says. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, no! That's fine," the guy says. "He just thought you might want to join us—whenever. Literally, he just wanted to catch you on the way out."

"Oh, that's very cool," Efron says, grabbing a cue stick. "You know what? I'll come up and say hi before I leave."

I go on to nearly smoke Efron, leaving five of his balls on the table. He grins uncomfortably when I tell him that he was lucky he was too young

WHOM HE DOESN'T KNOW PERSONALLY. "YEAH, THAT'S AWESOME TO COOL. IT'S JUST AWESOME. IT JUST COMES EASY TO SOME PEOPLE."

ship with Hudgens is a business coupling, with Mickey Mouse presiding over the union with a shotgun—seem particularly absurd. "That's just fucking insane," he says. "I've never even heard of that happening. I don't even know who I would have been around who would have thought that was even a good idea. It would have been so much easier to call it off a long time ago." Efron sees it as just wishful thinking by an avaricious gossip industry. "They want you to believe it, and they hope they'll influence you to break up by making you seem insane for being in it. And then you'll play the field, and then they can write about you a shitload, make shit up, and speculate about everything. Right now they know exactly what's going on and it's not very interesting and there's no money to be made on it. It's exactly how it should be. It's real."

Just then the door pops open and in waltzes a flamboyant publicist in a blazer. It seems that the industry juice that landed us in the private din-

to be considered for Singer's *Superman Returns*, considering that since its 2006 release (and subsequent box-office spanking) its young star, Brandon Routh, has seemingly relocated to Krypton. He'd rather just compliment me on my pool skills. Then I scratch on the eight ball. "You schooled me tonight," he says, even though he's just won. Because of his poison oak, he's not feeling so hot, he says, and he thinks it's time he goes. He gives me his cell-phone number, in case I have more questions, and outlines his schedule for the next several days so I don't call and find him away from the phone. "Believe me, I know we didn't get much time, and I'm so sorry about that," he says, despite the fact that we've been talking all night and my body has been crying out for bed for some time. Then, before departing, he pulls each pool ball out of the table's pockets and arranges them in the rack for the next player. He does not, however, go back upstairs to bid adieu to Bryan Singer. Even the nicest guy in town has his limits. ■