Gwyneth

Gwyneth

THE BIOGRAPHY

AMY ODELL

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For Mom

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INTRODUCTION

Gwyneth Paltrow may not have known, as she headed into Goop's weekly staff meeting at ten a.m. on Tuesday, January 17, 2017, that the company was about to find itself embroiled in one of its biggest controversies.

Goop, which Gwyneth had started as a newsletter nearly ten years earlier, sometimes tried to plant products that would draw headlines for being wacky or controversial, which tended to boost traffic and therefore sales. An "energy clearing kit" that went up for sale around this time—contents: a wooden box, a bundle of sage, a feather fan, a smudge bowl, and a "potion"—was a plant. But it failed to draw mass attention, and Goop only sold one hundred of them. However, the egg-shaped stone Goop had plugged in the newsletter five days before the staff meeting, and now sold in jade ($66) or rose quartz ($55), was an entirely different story. Gwyneth believed in the eggs, which Goop expert Shiva Rose had recommended inserting vaginally and leaving there for as long as a full night. Rose claimed in Goop that these yoni eggs could do everything from "increase orgasm" to "balance the cycle" to "invigorate our life force."

The media quickly noticed.

"It's no yolk! Gwyneth Paltrow's website Goop is selling eccentric stone sex eggs which 'improve orgasms and muscle tone,'" announced a *Daily Mail* headline. "Gwyneth Paltrow wants you to put a rock in your vagina. Seriously," offered Mashable. Writing on her blog, vocal Goop critic and ob-gyn Jen Gunter took a serious tone, accusing Gwyneth of "profiting from snake oil" and warning that the eggs could lead to bacterial vaginosis or potentially deadly toxic shock syndrome. Major news outlets around the world invited more doctors to speak against the eggs, which became a referendum on the entire premise of Goop.

Gwyneth—referred to as "GP" around the office—often drove to work in her white Range Rover and parked in her space, denoted by the sign RESERVED FOR G-SPOT. She regularly arrived damp-haired and bare-faced following her morning Tracy Anderson workout, wearing Goop's G. Label clothing brand.

Goop now employed around seventy people, and she stood in its newly annexed office space in Santa Monica, stylishly outfitted with Restoration Hardware furniture provided gratis in exchange for publicity. She delivered her weekly address as though nothing was amiss. "We are the number one voice in the wellness movement," Gwyneth told her team. "Goop defined the concept of modern wellness and created the language to describe it. Let's own it."

Goop had only ordered around six hundred eggs; as she spoke, two thousand customers were on the waitlist to buy one. Her message was that the company was winning—that the response was another sign that Goop was threatening the medical establishment, connecting women with forms of healing and self-care that traditional doctors either couldn't understand or, worse, wanted to keep hidden.

She went on to outline the brand's philosophy of merging consumerism with a state of higher being. Goop was the authority on what we put *in* our bodies (supplements), how we *treat* our bodies (sleep, detoxes, and exercise), and what we put *on* our bodies (serums and creams). All were product categories in the Goop store. The viral-

ity of the egg story showed, she added, that they could offer solutions to women's problems and educate them at the same time. This was proof of the might that came from telling consumers about things they hadn't heard of before.

"We have incredible power," she said.

Goop had long served as a platform for Gwyneth's favored gurus. Habib Sadeghi, for instance, had contributed an article suggesting (falsely) that there could be a link between bras and breast cancer. Linda Lancaster had proposed that readers undergo an eight-day raw goat milk cleanse to rid themselves of hidden parasites (this is not medically advised).

But those controversies had mostly just driven awareness of Goop. So as the egg story went viral, Goop's primary worry was keeping enough in stock. The following year, California district attorneys sued Goop over the health claims it had made about both the eggs and another product, the "Inner Judge Flower Essence Blend" of essential oils. At which point, Gwyneth said in one meeting, "Let's just not sell it [the egg]." But the company paid a fine, admitted no wrongdoing, and continued selling eggs into early 2025 without making the same claims.

Goop was a business, after all. "She is fucking borderline brilliant," a former executive said. "GP knows exactly what she's doing."

BORN TO A successful television producer and a Tony Award–winning actress, Gwyneth Paltrow had spent her entire life surrounded by the players and poseurs of the entertainment industry. Growing up in New York and Los Angeles, she had attended elite private schools and had been adored by her parents' famous friends since her days as an infant spitting up on her godfather, Steven Spielberg. As a teenager, she was welcomed into a film world eager to profit from her beauty, charm, and pedigree. An enviable acting career soon followed, along with an Oscar, and serious relation-

ships with some of the world's most famous men. Gwyneth then channeled her notoriety into her own brand. Though her perceived relatability would be crucial to her success, she hadn't really lived a day as a "normal" person.

It wasn't that Gwyneth didn't try to understand average people. She simply had no point of entry into their lives. To her, they were always more like a theoretical construct. The idea of being "normal" became both a fear and a fascination. Her desire to translate her extraordinary life into terms her fans could appreciate gave rise to a second career recommending products and experiences as the face and CEO of Goop. Though staff wondered about her susceptibility to alternative health ideas that lacked scientific backing, she just hadn't faced many of the real-world problems that taught people to be skeptical of costly, easy solutions. Her statements about poverty, obesity, divorce, and nutrition revealed just how little she had in common with the masses, and at times seemed to make her one of the most resented celebrities in the world.

GWYNETH HAS BEEN admired and envied by a massive global audience for three decades. She felt destined for fame from early childhood. Her WASPy, sometimes anxious mother, Blythe Danner, and brash, sometimes narcissistic Jewish father, Bruce Paltrow, guided their firstborn to play bit parts in Chekhov plays and Greek tragedies as a child. They then steered her toward well-written, tasteful roles as her career took off in her late teens. Her first noteworthy part came in 1993's *Flesh and Bone*, when she was twenty-one. Practically overnight, she became known as a tastemaker and darling of Calvin Klein. She soon became a tabloid obsession thanks to her boyfriend, Brad Pitt, whom she started dating when the two played husband and wife in David Fincher's 1995 film *Se7en*. Her search for quality parts brought her to Miramax, where she quickly became a favorite of Harvey Weinstein, who gave her roles in highbrow literary fare, but also once sexually harassed her and treated

her in a way that Gwyneth described as "abusive." (Weinstein disputed this characterization.) At twenty-six, she won the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for *Shakespeare in Love*, famously crying at the podium in her pink Ralph Lauren ball gown and six-figure diamond necklace as her parents and Weinstein looked on. To many of the more than 45 million people watching, she appeared as a real-life princess without an ounce of relatability. And that dual fascination—hating her and wanting to be her—has persisted ever since.

In 2000, with her acting career at an all-time high, she told a reporter, "It's not like I go out there and say 'Will you please put me on the cover of the tabloids?' or 'Will you please mention me in every article about lipstick?' People just do that and it's beyond my control . . . I'm sick of this Gwyneth Paltrow person I see everywhere. I hate her and I wish she would go away. But there's nothing I can do about it." And the public sometimes seemed to agree. The more she talked, the more she revealed the distance between them and herself. And she talked even more once she pulled back from acting after having children and began Goop, sending the first newsletter from the well-appointed London home she shared with her rock-star husband, Chris Martin.

As fans and the media gawked at her missives, filled with expensive recommendations for sushi restaurants, handbags, and hotels, she doubled down, even as the economy crumbled and people lost their homes in the Great Recession. Gwyneth kept sending emails and kept talking to the press—"I can't pretend to be somebody who makes $25,000 a year"; "I would rather smoke crack than eat cheese from a can"; "I think it's incredibly embarrassing when people are drunk"—and she kept offending. She upset the medical community by promoting unsubstantiated health claims; mothers by saying, "To have a regular job and be a mom . . . of course there are challenges, but it's not like being on set"; and fat people, as when she starred in *Shallow Hal* and then said in a television interview that "every pretty girl" should be forced to try on a fat suit. There was often a seed of truth in her remarks. The medical establishment has failed women in many ways, parenting with

any job is challenging, and pretty women probably would benefit from understanding living in a different body. But as a famous person bathed in adoration since infancy, she seemed to fail to see the massive gulf between herself and her audience.

IN 2022, I published a biography of Anna Wintour, exploring her impact as the editor in chief of *Vogue* and a cultural icon in part thanks to the film *The Devil Wears Prada*. When trying to think of another woman whose life and career had the same combination of public fascination and private complexity, I kept coming back to Gwyneth Paltrow. As a movie star in the nineties, she became a fashion icon whose every look was parsed. Building on this influence, she became the face of brands like Dior, Estée Lauder, and American Express. Before it felt like every celebrity had their own lifestyle or beauty company, she launched Goop. The brand not only has sold an untold number of $600 sweaters, face creams, and vaginal eggs, making Gwyneth synonymous with a certain upscale minimalist aesthetic, but also has helped bring the wellness movement and alternative medicine into the mainstream—to the horror of doctors and academics. Throughout her public life, Gwyneth has given a master class in commanding the attention economy that now rules culture. Hating on her with just the right bravado and contempt has boosted the profiles of her critics, one of whom wrote a book titled *Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong About Everything?: When Celebrity Culture and Science Clash*. Love her or hate her, for over thirty years, we haven't been able to look away. And she has used that power to commodify her taste and lifestyle and sell it back to us, even though her life is the very definition of something money can't buy.

Gwyneth strategically curated her public image by giving countless interviews to friendly glossy magazines and talk shows, doling out "candid" statements and revelations when it served her project of the moment or elevated her brand. When I began my research for this book, I spent a year just reading thousands of such articles and inter-

view transcripts, creating a detailed timeline of her life. I wondered if, after all that coverage, I would be able to uncover anything new. "My father always used to talk about the difference between the public perception of me and what I was really like, and how there was such a huge gap," Gwyneth has said. "He was like, 'You've got the whole country fooled.'" When I started interviewing people who knew or had worked with Gwyneth, I realized what he'd meant. She and her handlers have controlled her image brilliantly for decades, particularly when it comes to her middling run as the CEO of Goop. The company she founded in 2008 hasn't experienced sustained profitability, has allegedly suffered from a chaotic and sometimes toxic office culture, and has lacked a clear business strategy as it ping-pongs from one of Gwyneth's ideas to the next. As the main narrator of her own public story, Gwyneth has masterfully shaped our perception of her. She knows all her best angles. I interviewed more than 220 people from her childhood, her inner social circle, and the entertainment world—including directors, costars, crew members—and current and former employees from Goop. In writing this book, I set out to create a complete portrait of this somewhat elusive subject from all angles, not just her best ones. And to understand what that intangible quality is that exalts someone to an enduring level of status and fascination few ever achieve.

When I initially spoke to Goop's then-publicist, asking whether Gwyneth was willing to be interviewed or to participate in the research for this book by providing sources (like Anna Wintour had for *Anna*), she told me they would be happy to help. But then I'd reach out to potential interviewees, saying I'd been in touch with Gwyneth's office, and they would check with her about speaking with me and come back with a no or simply disappear altogether. I reached her uncle Robert Paltrow by phone in late 2024, and he told me he would be happy to help if she said it was okay. The next day, I received a text message with his regrets.

Around a year after our first call, the publicist told me Gwyneth would help with this book if I agreed to let them "fact-check" it.

Yet Goop had published many stories that were not subjected to any traditional fact-checking. I assured her this book would be checked thoroughly by a professional fact-checker. I told her Gwyneth was still welcome to sit for an interview, and we could fact-check anything used from that as much as she wanted. But I didn't get a straight answer about Gwyneth's participation—a tactic I had heard about from other journalists who'd requested interviews: first an encouraging, welcoming response and then silence. This tracked with what I'd been told by an old friend of Gwyneth's, who noted—as many people have—that she has long been ahead of the curve on everything from cuisine to fitness fads, and that she *invented* ghosting.

That publicist left the company when I was finishing up the book and her replacement finally declined my interview request on Gwyneth's behalf and made Goop's chief people officer, Djenaba Parker, and Gwyneth's friend Richard Lovett, the co-chairman of CAA, available for interviews. Yet, this publicist denied or ignored my requests to speak with additional sources who wanted Gwyneth's permission before doing an interview.

Many were terrified to talk about Gwyneth. Her Goop staff seemed cagier than many of Wintour's former employees. Many had signed NDAs. Some people I interviewed had seen her take action against people she felt had crossed her. ("I can be mean. I can cave in to gossip. I can ice people out and I can definitely harbor revenge," Gwyneth has said.) Yet I was still able to interview many people who had never spoken about her before. (Anecdotes were corroborated where possible; dialogue was re-created from memory and may not be exact.) Gwyneth has had a habit throughout her life of bringing people close to her, then cooling on them. Some simply move on, while others become dismayed and desperate to get back into her inner circle. One person who worked closely with her around the time she started Goop said, "She's very good at, 'If I'm going to let you into my world, you're going to pay for it.' Yet she wants to come off to most people as just being that simple girl next door who just gets you. But in reality, that's not her."

This is the first extensively researched, thoroughly reported biography to piece together the often-told and little-known aspects of her life, to follow the golden child of Blythe and Bruce from being an It girl through becoming one of the biggest and most polarizing cultural influencers of the twenty-first century. Thus, the book has also become a study in the power of media, from *Vogue* to *The Tonight Show* to Twitter/X, that anoints women like Gwyneth, and an audience thrilled by her takedown even more than her rise. My hope here is to tell her story in a way that begins with her strengths, her talents, her vulnerabilities, and her desires and shows how that inner life passed through the bizarre, often corrosive influences of fame, beauty, and privilege, to illustrate Gwyneth Paltrow as never before.

CHAPTER 1

Perfect Pedigree

[Bruce] was one hundred percent involved in being a success in the industry.

—Paul Michael Glaser

No one called it "wellness" back then.

Most mornings in the fall of 1977, the little blond girl would take her place on the floor of Miss Murdock's kindergarten class at St. Augustine by-the-Sea Episcopal school in Santa Monica, close her eyes, and begin her meditation. For fifteen minutes, she lay on the rug in the corner of the silent room with the others, focusing on her breathing, as the class rabbit, Sophie, hopped around the students. When time was up, Miss Murdock would retrieve Sophie and invite the kids to draw whatever images had passed through their minds.

The two-story school in a wing off a church sat a few blocks from the beach. Each grade consisted of just one class, and the kids grew up together through sixth. Among Gwyneth's classmates in those years were Abbie Schiller, whose father, Bob Schiller, wrote for *I Love Lucy*; Chris Levinson, whose father, Richard Levinson, co-created *Columbo* and *Murder, She Wrote*; Maya Rudolph, known then as the daughter of singer Minnie Riperton; and a light-haired girl about Gwyneth's size, Mary Wigmore, who would become a lifelong friend.

Gwyneth's teachers remembered her as a sweet, creative kid but not a standout. Like many of her classmates, she would sometimes tuck little notes into teaching assistant Jill Mackay's purse that read, "I love you, Jill."

Mackay one day noticed Gwyneth playing with something that wasn't hers. When she went over to investigate, she found that Gwyneth had been pinching pencils, erasers, and other small items from her classmates' backpacks. Mackay conferred with Murdock, and they decided to invite her parents in for a conference. Blythe, who wore her blond hair in a chin-length Farrah Fawcett–style bob and who had the same blue eyes and downward-sloping eyebrows as her daughter, arrived with Gwyneth's younger brother, Jake, around two years old, in her arms and Bruce by her side. Mackay and Murdock wondered, given their careers and a toddler, whether the couple's daughter was getting enough attention at home.

After the meeting, Bruce had to go to the school office, and Mackay escorted him. Known for being both animated and blunt, he turned toward her and laid a heavy hand on her shoulder before they parted ways. "Do you think my Gwynnie's always going to be like this?"

"Oh yes," she joked, "she's going to grow up to be a bank robber."

After the meeting, Gwyneth's stealing stopped. But as she got older, Bruce's worries became more pronounced—about her performance in school, her teenage smoking habit, her partying. She was always a daddy's girl, but also may have noticed early on that the world was eager to give her what she wanted, and she didn't need anyone's permission to get it.

BLYTHE WAS AROUND the same age as her pencil-stealing daughter when she announced to her father, an easygoing banker named Harry Danner, that she wanted to be an actress. "So," he said, "who's trying to stop you?"

The son of a milkman, Harry himself had been offered a chance

on the stage, as a singer at New York's Radio City Music Hall, but he turned it down, around the time of the Great Depression, for a career in banking. Before meeting her father, Blythe's mother, Katharine, sang at supper clubs. Young Blythe was aiming for the stage career her parents had passed up, choosing instead to raise their children in a large four-story house in the suburb of Rosemont, on Philadelphia's Main Line. When they moved from Philadelphia to Bucks County for Harry's job, Blythe was enrolled at George School, a private Quaker institution where teachers emphasized peace, equality, social justice, and a simple life. After performing through high school, she joined the drama program at Bard College, a small liberal arts school around a hundred miles north of New York City, where she dated fellow student Chevy Chase, with whom she sang in a band (he played piano). She received offers during college to act professionally but completed her degree to please her parents. Despite her early success, Blythe could feel timid and full of self-doubt. In college, she fixated on how she was the only student in her program who couldn't cry on cue, which felt to her like a tragic flaw.

After graduating Bard in 1965, Blythe took random acting jobs, including small parts on the soap opera *Guiding Light* and the crime drama *N.Y.P.D.*, and as Miss Gum-Out at the New York auto show. She took what she called her "first real job" with the repertory Theater Company of Boston in 1966.* The company was looking to cast a slender, young German-speaking woman for a war drama called *The Infantry*. "I speak German fluently, and at the time I was disgustingly skinny. I doubt that any other girl who auditioned met both requirements," she said. *The Boston Globe* raved over the play and Blythe, who conveyed "a perfect sense of alienation." She was earning $60 a week (about $600 in 2025), which "meant no more checks from home," she said. "Having a father who was a Philadelphia banker makes you very proud of your

* Known as a highly creative group, the company's members included then-unknowns Dustin Hoffman, Jon Voight, and Robert De Niro.

financial independence." Her next few roles were "not just ingenues," she recalled, "but whores and innocents, crazy kids and characters." She signed with a New York agent in 1966 and received excellent reviews for her work in the Lincoln Center productions *Summertree*, *The Miser*, and *Cyrano de Bergerac*. She was offered her first Broadway role in 1969 but turned it down for a play called *Someone's Comin' Hungry*. Among the show's producers was Bruce Paltrow, the gregarious twenty-five-year-old son of a successful scrap-iron dealer.

BRUCE WAS THE kind of guy people either loved or couldn't stand. The second of four children, he was born to Jewish parents in Brooklyn and raised in Great Neck, Long Island. His father, Arnold, was a tough figure who went by "Buster."

In 1961, Bruce went to Tulane University in New Orleans to study painting, a subject his business-oriented family might have discouraged. He wore fancy loafers to class, and found himself a blond girlfriend who wasn't Jewish. He shared a house with a group who included Paul Michael Glaser, who would go on to play Detective Starsky on the seventies series *Starsky & Hutch*. The two were good friends, but Glaser remembered that the young Bruce "made himself a fair share of enemies. He had a very acerbic tongue, a very quick sense of humor, which I enjoyed. But he rubbed people the wrong way a lot of the time." Bruce knew this, too, but he refused to change. When one of their housemate's beloved pet rabbits died suddenly, Bruce said at its burial, "Can I have his left rear leg as a good luck charm?" The joke was not well-received.

Glaser saw a shift in Bruce around the time he became president of his fraternity, Sigma Alpha Mu. "It was very much a gesture for acceptance," Glaser said. "All of a sudden, Bruce walked away from the painting." If painting had been a way to reject the idea of taking after his father, who ran a lucrative business, and his brother, who by this time was a successful real estate developer, he was now falling in line. "There was a dichotomy. It was the artistic side of him that wanted to

express itself, but maybe, because of familial pressure, he wanted to be successful as well, and the success won out."

A few months after graduation, Bruce was working back in New York as an executive assistant at Screen Gems, a television production company, plotting his ascent each day as he dined at the lunch counter at Hamburger Heaven near Madison Avenue. When his friend and fellow assistant Preston Fischer found a promising script for *Someone's Comin' Hungry*, he brought it to Bruce. The play told the story of a married couple, the husband Black, the wife white and pregnant, who shared an apartment with the husband's father. Edgy material for the time. Bruce liked it, and the two agreed to leave their jobs to take a shot at producing it. Fischer had experience in production and figured Bruce could help him raise the relatively small sum of $75,000 ($650,000 in 2025) needed to stage the play, since he'd come from money and likely had connections to people who could cut the $2,500 check they were soliciting from each investor. They each raised a share and had their sights on Broadway after Marlo Thomas and Bill Cosby showed early interest. But then, Thomas signed on for a final season of *That Girl*, Cosby backed out, and they downgraded to Off-Broadway.

Actor Burt Brinckerhoff came on board to direct, and the three men began auditions. Blythe Danner arrived as not quite a star but certainly a critical darling. Brinckerhoff, Fischer, and Bruce agreed she was the one. Bruce was immediately attracted to Blythe, whom he called the "blond shiksa." She was refined, talented, beautiful, and plainly on her way to stardom. He wooed her with a confident patter and a stream of old-fashioned jokes, among them the Spencer Tracy chestnut, "You only need two things to be an actor: Remember your words and don't bump into the furniture," and "Nudity is great—if you can't remember your lines." Blythe was charmed.

One evening after rehearsals, before they started dating, Bruce and Blythe were walking together when they decided to visit the resident fortune teller at the Fifth Avenue Hotel. As Blythe recalled later, she saw their future: She and Bruce would marry. As Glaser remembered

it, Blythe was involved at the time with John Crowther, a Princeton graduate who had attended her same Bucks County high school and whose father, Bosley Crowther, was the *New York Times* film critic. But she quickly got together with Bruce. "[Bruce] did have a fabulous sense of humor. He was very, very personable. Everyone liked being around him. He came from money. I just think it was just one of those young, wonderful matches," said Fischer.

Blythe and Bruce were opposites in many ways but similar in one, Glaser noticed. Blythe was polite and kind but kept people at a distance. "That ability to do that could have been very attractive to Bruce, because he was really adamant about not feeling his emotions."

Someone's Comin' Hungry premiered on March 31, 1969, at the Pocket Theater on Third Avenue and Thirteenth Street. It ran for all of two weeks. *The New York Times* review stated, "The dialogue is all outline and no heart."

THE SUMMER OF 1969, Blythe landed the lead role in a comedy called *Butterflies Are Free*, playing a bohemian woman whose blind neighbor falls in love with her. She described the role as "grueling physically." The strain of this stage voice damaged her vocal cords, and she began losing weight. Bruce had already been referring to her as "the blond stick," but now her ribs started to show.

Two days before opening night and around seven months after they met, Bruce proposed. He thought it might ease her anxiety about her performance. *Butterflies Are Free* opened on Broadway on October 21, 1969, and Blythe's dressing room filled with friends, relatives, flowers, and congratulatory telegrams.

By the end of the night, Blythe Danner was a star.

THE NEXT DAY, a *New York Times* reporter interviewed Blythe at Sardi's restaurant. He wrote her up as "Broadway's newest, freshest,

most-acclaimed young star." Similar profiles followed in newspapers across the country.

The thrill of this success splintered quickly into anxiety. Blythe didn't think she could possibly live up to the acclaim. She felt unworthy of it, and the play began to seem trivial—it's not like *Butterflies* was Shakespeare or Chekhov. She became, in her words, "terribly depressed."

She managed those feelings by turning away from the fame and the ensuing expectations. She imagined settling down with Bruce on a Connecticut farm instead of in a Hollywood mansion. "I don't think I ever will be a celebrity," she told an interviewer. "This will blow over. If everybody someday could recognize me, it would be a bloody bore. I remember a lot of people are heard about in one big show and then nothing happens again."

She replaced the star on her dressing room door with a peace sign.

Blythe got her wish. She was not a one-hit wonder, but she never became a mega-celebrity, perhaps partly because she never got comfortable with fame. She treasured privacy and loathed the exhibitionism of going on talk shows or press tours to promote a project. The fame that her daughter would wear so naturally, almost weightlessly, threatened Blythe's sense of herself. She hated watching herself onscreen, forcing herself to do it only to critique the work. She learned not to read reviews until a show ended. "If they're good, there's the danger they'll give you a big head; if they're terrible, you're going to slide into a deep depression."

THE AFTERNOON OF Sunday, December 15, 1969—a date selected so that she wouldn't have to miss any *Butterflies* performances—Blythe slipped into an ivory Empire-waist dress and walked with her father down the aisle of Old St. David's Church in Wayne, Pennsylvania, outside Philadelphia. Bruce wasn't religious, but his Jewish friends were

surprised at just how Episcopalian it all was. The reception was held at a nearby golf club.

Blythe had been living in a sublet on Twelfth Street in Manhattan. After the wedding, she moved into Bruce's West Seventy-First Street apartment, which occupied a full floor of a brownstone. Friends had helped him strip the plaster off one wall, exposing brick, and he decorated the place himself with fashionable furniture. Bruce had been brought up knowing about good food and good clothes, and he had expensive taste. Like his peers, he wore a suit and tie to work every day. Unlike his peers, his ties came from Ralph Lauren, his suits from the upscale men's boutique Roland Meledandri, a favorite among high-status Hollywood types.

After the failure of *Someone's Comin' Hungry*, Bruce's ambition started to lead him, which strained his friendships. Glaser was in New York, too, struggling to make it as an actor. "I was going through all kinds of emotional turmoil," he said. "I always felt like [Bruce] kind of kept me at arm's length because he didn't want to deal with that side of a relationship . . . He was one hundred percent involved in being a success in the industry."

While Bruce was struggling to get his scripts produced, Blythe's career took off. She won the Tony in 1970 for *Butterflies*. When she walked onstage the next night, she received a standing ovation that made her so fearful of letting down the audience that she didn't think she would be able to go through with the show.

With her husband's career lagging behind and the spotlight now following her, Blythe chose to turn toward her family. "You can put things off while you build a career, and then it can all collapse," she said. It was also protective: She feared getting caught up in her own hype and didn't want to live and die by her work.

Bruce's career needed a boost, though, and around 1971, they decided to move to L.A., where he could better network and catch a break.

By 1972, Blythe was pregnant. A month before she was due to give birth, Bruce met a young director whose breakout film, about a murderous shark terrorizing a New England beach town, would be released in 1975. Bruce Paltrow and Steven Spielberg would be close friends for the next thirty years.

While Bruce thrived on the attention and praise of successful producers and directors in Los Angeles, Blythe seemed disinterested. "I don't want to denigrate his ability or his talent, but I always got the feeling that he was kind of riding on her coattails a little bit," said Glaser.

As her due date neared, Blythe thought about what to name the baby. If it were a girl, she wanted to give her a Welsh name. She considered Bronwen but decided in the end on the name of a childhood friend that had always stayed with her. Bruce was pushing for something less "airy-fairy," but he gave in. Blythe found doctors and hospitals on both coasts.

Gwyneth Kate Paltrow was born in Los Angeles on September 27, 1972. Spielberg became her godfather. In her first days as a mother, Blythe thought about not going back to acting but decided in the end "that I'm a better mother when I have an outlet for this particular kind of craziness—the desire to crawl into somebody else's skin."

CHAPTER 2

Nepo-Baby on Set

> I've known my whole life that this was going to happen to me in some way. You don't think it really will, but then when it happens you're like, "I knew it would happen." I believe if you ask any famous person they will have known that they were going to be famous. It's like a predestined thing.
>
> —Gwyneth Paltrow, *Vanity Fair*, September 2000

Gwyneth showed up on her first movie set at twelve days old. Her mother was filming *Adam's Rib*, and on breaks Blythe would carry her daughter around, and Gwyneth, ever the extrovert, would reach her little hands out to anyone who came near. But Blythe's workdays with her baby were the exception. Bruce had plenty of free time back then, so "I was the nanny," he said. "I would be with Gwyneth all day and night. And when it came time to feed, I would get Gwynnie out of her crib and bring her to Blythe, shooting movies or rehearsal. And she would breast feed and when she'd get done, I would burp her, I would walk her, and we would spend our days together." As an infant, Gwyneth stayed up all night, and Bruce would hold her in his arms and stroll around with her. Gwyneth developed a closeness with her father that she wouldn't feel toward her mother until much later in life.

Blythe, though happy as a wife and mother, still wrestled with anxiety and a sense of unworthiness. "Had I been more confident, I would simply have dealt with situations head-on. I think you really have to work at this very hard unless that quality is inborn. For example, I admire that trait in Katharine Hepburn, just knowing and not caring what anybody thinks about what you believe or feel," she said. "That is what I wish for Gwyneth." True to her mother's wish, Gwyneth would grow into someone who wasn't crippled by criticism that became intense and unrelenting, but that apparent apathy would surface in personal relationships as well.

So began Gwyneth's uniquely Hollywood upbringing: carried around Los Angeles in the arms of her confident father, rolling onto movie sets to meet her mother and be cooed at by the cast and crew. Blythe and Bruce sought to achieve something rather elusive in Hollywood, where long hours and seething ambition regularly tore families apart: They wanted to create a protected and normal world for Gwyneth and, eventually, her younger brother, Jake. Only that was impossible when family togetherness required hopscotching around the country to movie sets.

By 1973, when Gwyneth was one, the family had moved to a New England–style white clapboard house in Brentwood that Bruce had found, which they filled with antiques. Bruce, however, remained restless. His friends said his work was motivated primarily by money, and Glaser wondered if Bruce was ever truly happy with his career. "I feel like, no, he wasn't. He had a beautiful wife, and he had the kids, and he had all the earmarks of success, but his favorite thing to do was to hang out with his buddies from college and drink."

Gwyneth would feel pulled between money and art in her career. Bruce provided a template for the former, while Blythe remained committed to the latter.

Blythe's passion drew her to one summer stock theater, where Gwyneth absorbed her mother's craft firsthand.

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THE WILLIAMSTOWN THEATRE Festival started in 1954 as a way to make use of Williams College's main theater during the summer. When the students moved out, the warm weather and longer days brought in a raft of Hollywood stars like Christopher Reeve, Sigourney Weaver, Austin Pendleton, and Olympia Dukakis, all eager to escape the commercial pressures of New York and L.A. In this pocket of the Berkshires in the northwest corner of Massachusetts, they lived modestly and relatively anonymously. Between rehearsals, they could relax on the lawn under a tree's shade, knowing that locals wouldn't think twice about finding Superman himself in their midst, reading over a script. The actors created plays together under the mercurial direction of the Greek maestro Nikos Psacharopoulos, who said, in his accented English, "If I have to be a tyrant, I will be a tyrant." He was determined to keep show tickets affordable because he didn't want Williamstown to be "an elitist theater like Broadway."

But he did want celebrities, and he managed to convince them to come spend the summers with him. "He was a serious star fucker," said Deborah Lapidus, who worked on the productions in the eighties and went on to teach at Juilliard. The festival had always been considered a place you went to find stars, not make them.

Nearing his twentieth year as artistic director of the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 1974, Psacharopoulos had chosen to stage Chekhov's *The Seagull* and was in search of the perfect Nina, a notoriously difficult role. The final decision came down to Blythe and rising star Meryl Streep. His staff understood why he ultimately picked Blythe, whom they viewed as the best American actor onstage at that time.

While Blythe landed the role of Nina, she was terribly nervous about it. She and Bruce drove up to Williamstown for Blythe's first season at the festival, Gwyneth in her lap, beginning what became an annual tradition for the Paltrow-Danner family for roughly the next twenty years.

Blythe was early in her second pregnancy. Once settled in for the summer, she would carry Gwyneth or wheel her in a stroller around campus. Once again, everyone was drawn to this doll-like toddler with blond curls and chipmunk cheeks who had a funny first name, just like her mom. Even then the festival staff wondered if she was the next Blythe. Though not even two years old, Gwyneth was already a local celebrity. She was also a *sponge*. After sitting with her mother through hours of rehearsals, Gwyneth had somehow ingested Nina's lines. One hot, muggy day, the crew propped Blythe's little girl up on the stage naked, her blond curls flowing, and she lisped the lines: "Men and beasts. Lions, eagles, and partridges, antlered deer . . ." Gwyneth knew from around this age that she wanted to act. "My playground was the theater. I'd sit and watch my mother pretend for a living. As a young girl, that's pretty seductive," she said. "I always just knew that this was my thing."

Gwyneth would never have a formal acting education. But as far as many casting directors were concerned, her summers of theater immersion in Williamstown, among the best actors in the English-speaking world, were as good as a Juilliard degree. Starting at toddlerhood, Williamstown exposed Gwyneth to some of the best plays ever written, while acclimating her to the realm of Hollywood and celebrity. The people at Williamstown signaled to her that she was born for this—that she belonged in this world, among these stars, just like her mother.

Yet, as she watched her toddler, Blythe just thought, "Uh-oh, this is a bad sign."

GWYNETH'S EARLY EDUCATION in Santa Monica was, like her summers, unconventional. St. Augustine's was a small private kindergarten-through-sixth-grade Episcopal school that the church had opened in the mid-1900s, with fewer than two hundred students around the time private-school enrollment was exploding owing to some parents seeking to avoid a relatively new policy of busing children between districts in an attempt to desegregate them.

A *Vanity Fair* story published in 2000, not long after Gwyneth won her Oscar for *Shakespeare in Love*, reported that Gwyneth "learned to twist her body into a new shape with each bang of her 'movement' teacher's tambourine, but never did learn how to spell," though faculty from the time disagreed with her characterization of the school as academically unserious. The curriculum emphasized the arts and creativity. Students called teachers by their first names. Book reports might be performed as skits.

Gwyneth's drama teacher, Carol Rusoff, didn't force the students to memorize lines; she encouraged improvisation. Gwyneth was an eager student, often raising her hand when Rusoff asked who wanted to step up onto the small funky stage in the large all-purpose room underneath St. Augustine's church. Some students, Rusoff recalled, had "built-in shyness" or "things that restrained them from revealing themselves.

"Gwyneth didn't have anything that restrained her from revealing herself."

TOWARD THE END of 1977, midway through Gwyneth's first year at St. Augustine's, Blythe and Bruce moved the family to a place at the corner of Georgina Avenue and Twenty-First Street in Santa Monica. The 5,300-square-foot home was surrounded by a dense green privacy hedge, inside of which Gwyneth remembered "a pool and a garden and a guesthouse and a big old tree in the backyard with a tree house." Gwyneth and her best friend from school, Mary Wigmore, could walk out the front door and down Georgina Avenue to the Brentwood Country Mart shopping center consisting of red barnlike shops with white trim and a courtyard at the center, where local residents Mel Brooks or Anne Bancroft or William Hurt might be seen sitting at a table with a soda and a script. Gwyneth made the walk every weekend; the Country Mart was just the neighborhood candy store to her. Santa Monica wasn't as ritzy then as it would become (her childhood home sold for $11.85 million in 2021); in 1977 it still possessed the quiet, unpretentious atmo-

sphere Blythe wanted for her children. Arnold Schwarzenegger bought a home down the block on Twenty-First Street in 1980, when Gwyneth was eight, and she'd sometimes see him jogging through the neighborhood in a red Speedo.

For Gwyneth and Wigmore, this grid of blocks south of San Vicente Boulevard was a sanctuary and a stomping ground. "I didn't fit in perfectly with other people; I didn't want to go to dancing school and wear the white gloves and all that. I was wanting to climb trees and be outside," Gwyneth said. She and Wigmore would throw stuffed animals into the chimney of the house next door, or ring a doorbell, then scamper off. Sometimes, with a larger group, they'd toilet-paper houses in the neighborhood. Schwarzenegger's place, a Spanish-style house in white stucco with a long lap pool in the back, was the ultimate prize.

Blythe did what she could to teach the kids about the larger world and the environment. She would bring them with her to the Santa Monica recycling center, where they'd sort cans. They had solar panels installed on the house. For a while, Gwyneth seemed to follow her lead. "In Los Angeles, Gwyneth used to hold up a sign at passing trucks from our car saying, 'You're polluting,'" Blythe remembered.

Around age seven, Gwyneth started asking to audition for roles. Though her parents decided when she was a baby not to interfere too much in her development (so long as she was, Blythe has said, "polite and well-behaved"), they drew the line at acting. "[T]hey said, 'No, you're a child and you have to have an education and we'll support you completely if that's your decision when you're 18, but for now you have to be a child,'" Gwyneth recalled.

In the fall of 1978, Blythe took Gwyneth to Beaufort, South Carolina, where she was filming *The Great Santini*. Gwyneth made a friend there, Hugh Patrick, with whom she'd pick pecans, play in a tree house, and run through the marshes. "Gwyneth was in a school with a majority of black children. She not only survived in this new situation, she swam along and had a fantastic experience," Blythe said. "I'm happy I haven't denied her that. Most of the kids she goes to school with in

Hollywood are self-complacent and indulged. I guess that goes against my Yankee blood. I think exposing them to new things can do nothing but help them grow."

On set, Blythe talked about Gwyneth all the time. When her kids were around, Blythe doted on them. When she was away from them, she seemed to feel guilty. One day Blythe had friends visit while she was filming. She introduced them to Lisa Jane Persky, who was playing one of her character's children. Persky's character was a tomboyish, sarcastic teenager. Blythe said to her friends, "She can't possibly be my daughter, can she?" Blythe seemed to view her real daughter as beautiful and perfect, an extension of herself and her good breeding—and Persky as something else.

Persky, in her early twenties and just starting her acting career, identified with her character's shortcomings and felt so shattered by this remark that she later cried. Though she got over it, it stayed with her. She saw how special Gwyneth was to Blythe, how advantageous it would be to have a mother with such pride and belief in her daughter. For actors, confidence is everything, the ultimate armor against relentless and often opaque rejection. For Gwyneth, it was a birthright.

CHAPTER 3

Curtain Call

There was a sense—and I don't think there was anything malevolent about it—that where she wanted to be is where she would end up.

—Bonnie Monte

Gwyneth spent most of her childhood in one rarefied atmosphere after another, surrounded by the beautiful, the fashionable, the creators, and the dealmakers, but Williamstown was a particular pilgrimage. The family would spend around six weeks at the festival each summer. Some summers while Blythe performed, Bruce would travel back and forth to L.A. to work on the television series he produced—*The White Shadow*, which ran for three seasons on CBS beginning in 1978, and later *St. Elsewhere*. Bruce caught plays when he was in town. When watching one he thought was bad, after a character pulled a gun, Bruce called out, "Shoot him! Shoot someone! Shoot me!"

Blythe would bring Gwyneth and Jake to rehearsals, sometimes with a babysitter, sometimes on their own, to sit in the wings and watch. Other days they ran loose on the grounds of the Williams College campus, abandoned for the season. Along with other top actors who came back summer after summer, like Maria Tucci and Frank Langella, Blythe was like royalty, and her status soon extended to Gwyneth.

In 1980, Blythe was starring in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, in a role Meryl Streep had played a few years earlier in New York. (During rehearsals, Blythe would say, "I can't do this. Meryl did it, Meryl's so good. I can't come up to that." By now the Williamstown crew was familiar with her anxiety and knew that, however fretful Blythe was in rehearsals, she would always be ready by curtain.) That summer, Gwyneth was asked to be in the play, along with Maria Tucci's daughter, Lizzie Gottlieb, in small parts that involved spinning around during a party scene. Psacharopoulos thought of the theater company as a family, and he liked to give parts to the children of his favorites, often without an audition.

The festival had an apprentice program whereby actors without family connections could work their way up to performing. Those who were accepted would pay for the privilege, including their board. In exchange, they got to take acting classes and practice scenes in the morning, then spend the afternoons building sets, hanging lights, sewing costumes, and posting flyers. When one of Gwyneth's peers, a young woman who did have family connections, decided to enter the apprentice program as a teenager, Gwyneth was mystified as to why she would choose to do that.

At the end of the season, the apprentices would put on a play, and the regular actors and stars would sit in the audience. Only a handful of, say, eighty apprentices were asked back the following summer to progress up the ranks to the Act 1 company, which would be followed, if they were lucky, by the nonunion company, and finally, the union company. In 2021, the *Los Angeles Times* published an investigation of the sixty-year-old apprentice program, saying it "expose[d] artists-in-training to repeated safety hazards and a toxic work culture under the guise of prestige." ("The safety and the emotional well-being of the entire WTF community is our top priority. And we take any claims to the contrary very seriously," Board Chair Jeffrey Johnson said in a 2021 statement.)

The nepotism undergirding the festival allowed Gwyneth to bypass all that. Instead, when she wasn't watching rehearsals or rehearsing, she

would spend time with her friend Mary Wigmore, whom she would sometimes bring along for the summer, and who would come to occupy a uniquely secure position in Gwyneth's social circle. They'd take tennis lessons or have playdates or go swimming.

She also befriended Robert Nugent Jr., roughly three years older, the son of a Williams College custodian who worked at the festival. One summer, Psacharopoulos randomly asked Nugent if he wanted to be in a play. Nugent didn't think much of it. The famous actors at the festival were just people to him, not stars. Psacharopoulos cast Nugent in plays each summer for the next several years, eventually in small speaking parts alongside Gwyneth.

The two spent time together offstage as well. "As young kids, if you call it dating, we dated. So she must've been attracted to me and obviously vice versa, even though I was only nine, ten years old," Nugent said. While some actors stayed in dorms during the festival, the top actors like Blythe stayed in houses with their families. Nugent, who lived in town year-round, would go to see Gwyneth—a few times, the family stayed in one of the nicest houses in town, owned by doctors who were away for the summer—and she would direct him and Jake in plays she'd made up. But most of their time was spent wandering the festival grounds and exploring the woods. Though the theater had drawn them together, they never talked much about acting.

Nugent's circumstances were very different from Gwyneth's. "I was certainly poor," he said. "I had a rough upbringing, so maybe I was a lost soul for her." They talked a lot about his difficult home life. "It doesn't matter if you're affluent or not, you have moments where you feel the same . . . it transcends just your socioeconomic background. And they might not be exactly the same, but the raw emotion kind of is."

One summer day when she was around ten or eleven, Gwyneth turned to Nugent and said, "Will you marry me?" She made them fake rings and, with Jake as a witness, they held a ceremony.

Gwyneth's first "marriage" ended that August. She returned to

New York, where the family had moved by that time, and after a few blissful summers together, she and Nugent fell out of touch.

BLYTHE OFTEN TOOK Gwyneth to see the various festival productions. Most kids didn't understand how to process plays and might have found them loud or boring. But Gwyneth got to see them through her mother's eyes, with Blythe gesturing at the stage and whispering, "Watch that guy" or "Look what's happening on the left."

In a 1994 interview, Gwyneth said, "A lot of times when I read something, I know how she [Blythe] would sound doing it. It's the first thing that comes off the page . . . I can just hear her inflection. Her voice. How she would say it."

The year after *The Cherry Orchard*, Blythe was set to star in *The Greeks*, a compilation of ancient Greek dramas. On the first day of rehearsal, Blythe arrived with Bruce and the kids to the large black-box theater on campus—a big empty room with no stage and little more in it than actors and folding chairs. "Baby Blythe," as Psacharopoulos called her, was late. But he stopped the rehearsal to welcome her. Gwyneth ran right up and gave him a big, warm hug.

Gwyneth then dropped down into the folding chair next to the green director's chair that bore Psacharopoulos's initials. This seat happened to belong to his assistant, Bonnie Monte, who had been standing when they arrived. Monte was earning fifty dollars per week for what she estimated to be 110 hours of work. (He later raised it to seventy-five when she told him she couldn't live on so little.)

"Do you want to sit there?" he asked Gwyneth.

"Yes," she announced.

Psacharopoulos asked Monte to go sit in the back of the room.

Looking back on it, Monte said, "She sat there for the very first rehearsal and kind of took her rightful place as the young princess in the room. And I remember thinking, *Well, that's my chair. Why are you sitting there?* There was a sense—and I don't think there was anything

malevolent about it—that where she wanted to be is where she would end up."

PSACHAROPOULOS NEEDED KIDS for *The Greeks*, which had a cast of sixty. The production included seven plays by Euripides, along with one each by Sophocles and Aeschylus, plus the story of Achilles from *The Iliad*. In its London run, the play went for nine hours over three nights. For Williamstown, Psacharopoulos cut it down to six hours over two. The actors had three weeks to rehearse. At eight years old, Gwyneth was cast as young Orestes and Polydorus. *The Greeks* was a grueling production for a summer theater festival, and Psacharopoulos needed his actors to be as committed as the army of apprentices supporting the show. He had no problem firing the children of famous actors if they got lazy or distracted.

When powerful actors like Maria Tucci unleashed onstage, the crew worried that some of the kids would get scared, but Gwyneth didn't flinch. While her parts were small, the material wasn't exactly light. As Polydorus, she played a boy who was murdered in front of his mother, Hecuba. Psacharopoulos wanted Gwyneth to convey stoicism, to face death calmly while other characters lost their minds around her. She could handle it, but she was still a young kid, and Psacharopoulos and his staff had to remind her, "Don't scratch your nose when you're dead."

During breaks in the performances, the kids would gather in a room to color and play. But Gwyneth was often just offstage, watching the show.

THE FESTIVAL WAS a protective environment, and Blythe let her daughter roam freely. Gwyneth popped into rehearsals for the Cabaret, a musical revue including skits that took place at different restaurants in town. Cabarets were the most exhilarating part of the festival for

the kids, who got to stay up late and—if they were lucky—perform themselves.

Starting at eleven thirty p.m., Cabarets were casual, though performers were cast and rehearsals were held. The venues were always packed. One night when Gwyneth was a tween, she was chosen to perform on the Cabaret stage at the '6 House Pub in town alongside her mother. Together, they grabbed the mics and took their spot in front of a curtain in the cleared-out area of the restaurant that served as a stage, while spectators watched from tables in front. Gwyneth and Blythe sang "Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)" to live musical accompaniment, alternating verses. The crowd was impressed; Gwyneth had enough stage presence to hold attention alongside her Tony-winning mother.

"I'm sitting there watching it," recalled Robert Nugent Jr. "I was thirteen, and I'm like, *Yeah, the irony of those two singing together, that song*. I mean, everybody got it."

Blythe would later remember Gwyneth performing that same number in New York at a Williamstown Theatre Festival Gala, an annual re-creation of the summer Cabarets, alongside child actor Christian Slater, to "thunderous applause."

"I saw her eyes look to the left and right, and I said to Bruce, 'She's got it. She knows.'"

CHAPTER 4

Spence and Sensibility

Not one person had a doubt that she was going to be famous.

—Former Spence classmate

When Gwyneth was around ten years old, Blythe was filming a television movie in London. The whole family joined her. Bruce decided to take Gwyneth to Paris for a father-daughter weekend. They stayed in a beautiful hotel, where he let her order french fries and a Coke for breakfast. They visited sites like the Centre Pompidou and the Louvre. On the way back, Bruce said to Gwyneth, "Do you know why I took you, and it was a special trip for you and I?" Gwyneth said no. He said, "I wanted you to see Paris for the first time with a man who will always love you, no matter what." This story would make Gwyneth emotional when she told it many years later—a testament to the love between father and daughter. But it also perhaps showed young Gwyneth that a grand gesture could be a substitute for real connection. By the time she became a public figure, Bruce's college friend Paul Glaser recognized the same emotional distance in her that he had seen in her father.

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BRUCE'S BIGGEST HIT, *St. Elsewhere*, a television drama about doctors teaching interns at a run-down Boston hospital, premiered October 1982. As the show took off, Blythe decided that her kids needed the kind of education that she felt they could get only on the East Coast, and the family moved to New York City. Bruce commuted to Los Angeles when necessary during the week to work on the show.

In the fall of 1984, after passing a required entrance exam, Gwyneth arrived at Spence, a small private all-girls school on Manhattan's Upper East Side, at East Ninety-First Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Wealthy, high-strung parents stressed over getting their kids into Spence for kindergarten, believing it a pathway to Ivy League college admission. But Spence was more than an Ivy League funnel. An old saying of these private schools went, "Chapin girls date doctors and lawyers, Spence girls marry doctors and lawyers, and Brearley girls become doctors and lawyers." Spence was, one Brearley student said, "like the thoroughbred horse of girls' schools."

The school tucked itself into a narrow ten-story building and an adjacent squat one with playgrounds on the roofs. Between classes, all the girls converged in orderly chaos on the central staircase to get to their next period, some in leotards for dance class, others in the mandatory uniform, a white top with sleeves and a gray skirt or gray pants.

Gwyneth arrived at Spence at the beginning of seventh grade, a skinny eleven-year-old with braces. She had a short "bad haircut," which she later talked up in interviews. Boys from other schools started calling her "E.T.," because they said her eyes were far apart. Yet Gwyneth was always considered very pretty. Her classmates couldn't understand her name, and someone started calling her "Gwen." Over the years, she would appear in yearbooks as Gwyn, Gwen, Gwyneth, and Gwynnie.

Many of the roughly fifty girls in her class had been there since kindergarten, and cliques were well established. On her first day, Gwyneth wore penny loafers, a blue-and-white-striped Breton shirt, and a white skirt, but the preppy look flopped (the uniform wasn't

required the first day of school). After school, she went home and changed into pink parachute Guess pants and a coordinating pink top and went back to the playground. "The girls who were not really into me in the preppy look were now so into me when I was in the pink Guess outfit. This one girl was like, 'You're totally going to be in our group' because they were the cool girls," she said. Gwyneth asked if any other girls had made the cut to join the cool group. "Well, maybe this one from this morning who had that striped shirt on."

Gwyneth's arrival unsettled the social dynamic in her grade, though the precise origin of the chaos spawned by her arrival was difficult to pinpoint. She had strangely potent charisma, and other Spence girls—even seniors—wanted to invest in knowing this new middle schooler. "She established herself as an interesting person—someone people wanted to hang out with," recalled the head of the middle school at the time, Kate Turley. "It was easy for her to make her way." But other students seemed to feel threatened. One classmate recalled, "Not one person had a doubt that she was going to be famous." After all, she might spend a weekend with someone like Steven Spielberg. But she was also polarizing.

Alison Cayne, whose father ran Bear Stearns and who lived on Park Avenue, was one of the Spence cool girls. "There are A girls and B girls, and A girls are popular," Cayne declared. At first she and Gwyneth were best friends. But they were both alphas and eventually became archrivals, creating a toxicity that affected the rest of the class. Gwyneth could be cruel—like when she wrote down a list of names of classmates she hated—but a lot of students could be savage. The difference with Gwyneth was that she was more clever and remarkably adept at reading people—she knew what would hurt other girls, and deployed much more devastating comebacks.

By eighth grade, the dynamic settled, and Gwyneth eased into the background somewhat. She and her friends would go to a nearby deli for lunch, then come back and happily sit on the floor, skirts splayed out around them. She found her crew with whom she would remain

friends long after graduation, among them Julia Cuddihy, Betsey Kittenplan, Hilary Weekes, and Caroline Doyle.

In L.A., Gwyneth had a familiar pedigree and a sense of the culture; at Spence, where there weren't many Hollywood families, she was more conspicuous. Her parents had a five-story brownstone on East Ninety-Second Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues, steps from Central Park. They kept the Santa Monica home so Bruce could go back and forth to work on *St. Elsewhere*. But the girls at Spence didn't just have brownstone money—their parents worked on Wall Street or in corporate law and appeared in the business pages of *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. They lived in apartments overlooking Central Park or Park Avenue with a Picasso or a Miró on the dining room wall. They were ferried by limousines to weekend homes in the Hamptons. They came from old-money families with last names like Astor and Vanderbilt. When they went to summer camp, they brought Evian water to spritz on their faces. Students who didn't come from that exclusive world of the five-block radius around the school said they felt like they were different—even Gwyneth. Within the walls of Spence, though, discretion was a practiced art. Gwyneth's peers knew her parents were famous but didn't make a thing of it. Mick Jagger's daughter Jade passed through during Gwyneth's early years, along with Princesses Alexandra and Olga of Greece—their last name just "of Greece."

When Gwyneth crossed lines or hurt feelings, her feigned obliviousness could be more alienating than the transgression itself. One day in the locker room, Gwyneth was changing into her green bathing suit—a uniform her teammates dreaded wearing—for swim practice. Gwyneth had always been naturally skinny, and possessed disdain for fat people that was apparent to her fellow students. She turned to the girl next to her, a classmate who was not as thin or nearly as confident, and said, "Isn't it interesting how different people's bodies are?" That girl's reaction was one of shame and embarrassment as she stood next to willowy Gwyneth. Years later, when she saw Gwyneth making similarly oblivious comments publicly, she thought back to that moment.

Whatever Gwyneth's motivation for the remark, she didn't seem to care that her words might have come across as hurtful, and to this student, that almost made it worse.

THAT INITIAL YEAR at Spence, Gwyneth smoked her first cigarette. Students would sneak past the two older ladies who guarded the front door, around the corner to a place known to private-school kids in the neighborhood as the Stoop, where they'd smoke and meet up with boys. The Stoop belonged to the building on Ninetieth Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues that happened to be the home of Robert Chambers (who became known as the "Preppy Killer" after he was charged with strangling eighteen-year-old Jennifer Levin to death in Central Park in 1986; he pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter).

"I was immediately drawn to [smoking]—probably because my dad smoked around my mom when she was pregnant with me and when I was little, and it just gets in there, I guess," Gwyneth said. When she wasn't smoking on the Stoop, she'd smoke at the pizza parlor on Madison and Ninety-First Street. After Bruce found out that was her spot, he would sometimes stop by to see if she was smoking. Desperate to get her to quit, he asked his friend Leo Penn, who directed episodes of *St. Elsewhere*, for help. Could he possibly get his son Sean's new wife, Madonna, to write a note to Gwyneth to discourage her from smoking?

"Dear Gwyneth, Just to jot down my average day . . . I wake up, I don't smoke . . ." the note said. "And I go home a happy healthy me. Love, Me, Madonna. P.S.: Good girls live longer." Gwyneth brought the letter to school, where a teacher gave her the floor to share it during class, then framed it to display on the mantel in her bedroom. But she continued to smoke. "I smoked a pack a day probably until I was 25 years old," she said. "Like wake up and light a cigarette, I really was into it—I loved it."

Gwyneth maintained an attitude of invincibility and not giving a damn, both at school and at home. Students weren't supposed to chew