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elijah arrives

Actor Elijah Wood shakes his
child-star status by joining *The Faculty*

BY JENNIFER GRAHAM PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE HOLZ

ELIJAH WOOD IS REALLY HOT. BUT then, who here isn't? It's late spring in Austin—a time when most Texans crank their air conditioners to full capacity. But on the spooky set of the horror movie *The Faculty*, the AC is temporarily off, since the noise drowns out the actors' voices.

Inside a warehouse masquerading as fictitious Herrington High School, Elijah and Jordana Brewster (a former *As The World Turns* star) are shooting what should be a no-sweat scene—snooping around the teachers' lounge looking for a scoop for the school newspaper. No sweat, that is, if it didn't have to be filmed over and over in the nearly 100-degree heat to give director Robert Rodriguez (*From Dusk Till Dawn*) plenty of angles to choose from.

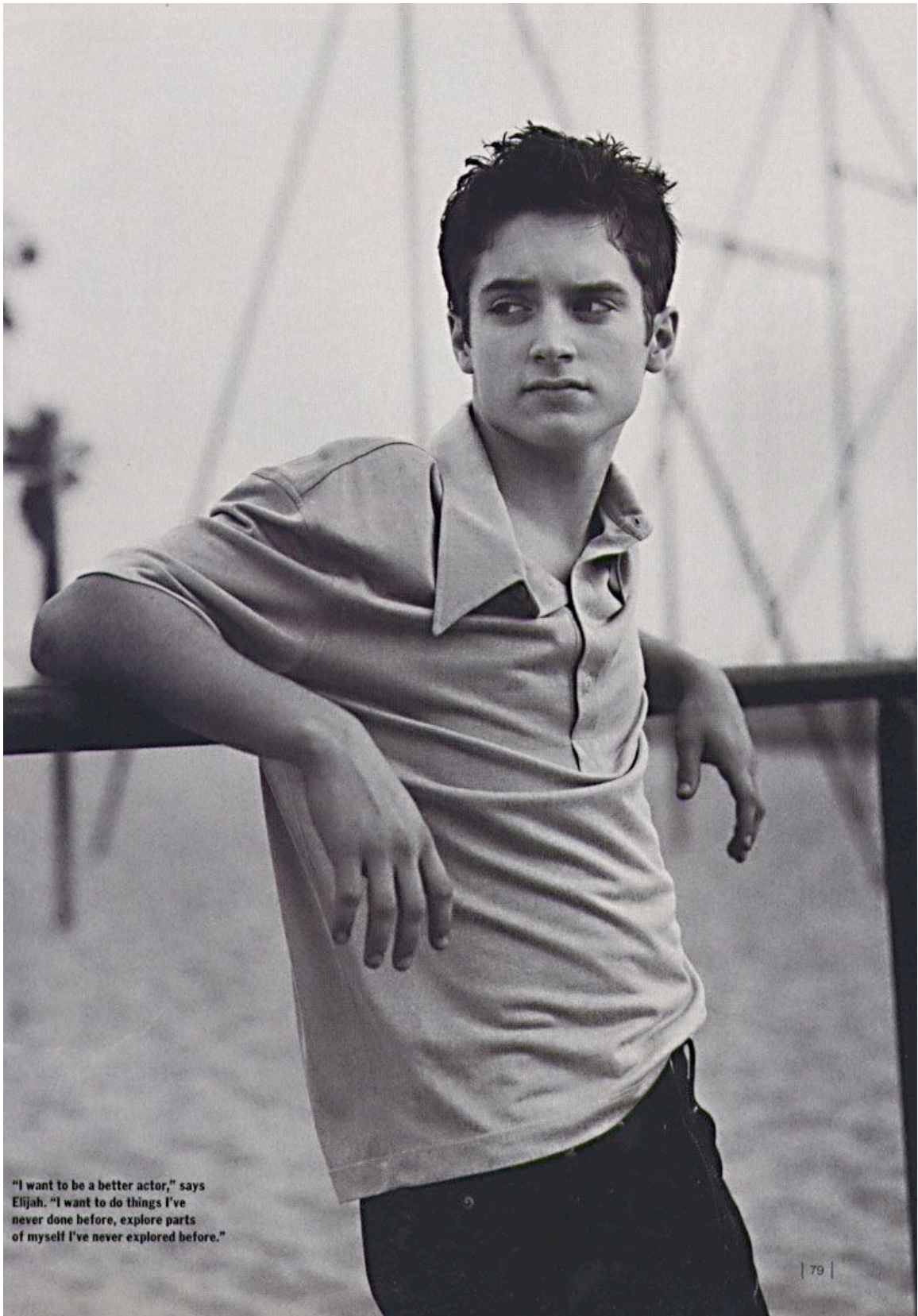
When the scene finally wraps 45 sweltering minutes later, overheated crew members sigh with relief. But an ebullient Elijah bounds off the set like the star of a super-caffeinated-soft-drink commercial. "It never gets boring," he says. "It

gives you a chance to do it slightly different every time."

Spoken like a true acting professional—which is exactly what 17-year-old Elijah is. Over the past nine years, the Iowa-born performer has been quietly building a career with roles in 13 movies, among them 1992's *Radio Flyer* and 1996's *Flipper*. But now he's primed for a little noise, and *The Faculty* could be just the vehicle to supply it. Penned by *Scream* scripter Kevin Williamson, the movie already has chill-seeking fans buzzing in anticipation of its Christmas Day release. Meanwhile, Elijah is waiting to see if his starring role will help him leave his "child actor" tag behind for good.

It's no secret that many show-biz kids have a hard time growing up in Hollywood. Some outgrow their cuteness; others just don't have the ability to handle adult roles. Says Elijah, "It's all people talk about: 'Are you gonna make it?' 'Are you confident?' 'You know, it's a big jump.'" He continues with a rueful ▶

GROWING UP BY ERIC WAIN; STYLING BY ALEJANDRO PERAZA FOR CELESTINE; LA SHIRT; JEANS: MARK AZOVA; METONIMIA; JEANS; DRESS: AT AMERICAN PALE DE U.S.A.



"I want to be a better actor," says Elijah. "I want to do things I've never done before, explore parts of myself I've never explored before."

smile, "I swear, you should label it *The Elijah Wood Story*."

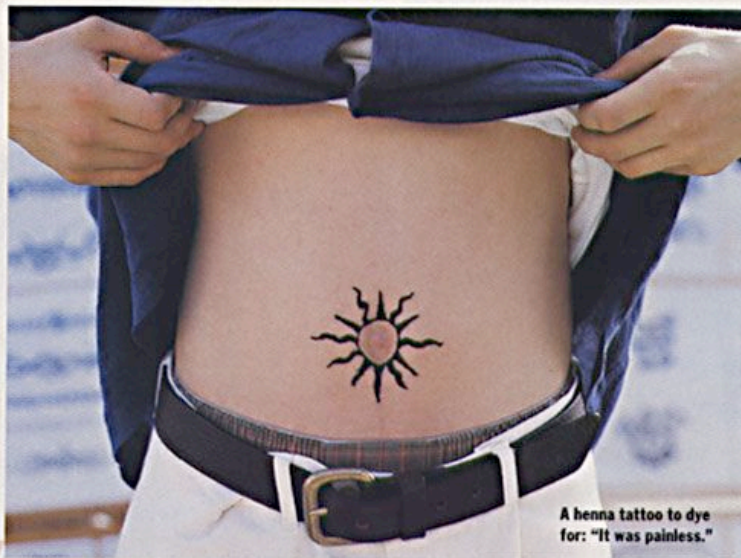
In his case, odds are the story would have a happy ending. In fact, Elijah has already made two small but successful forays into adult territory, as Christina Ricci's disturbed boyfriend in last year's critically acclaimed *The Ice Storm* and as an amateur astronomer in summer's *Deep Impact*. "Elijah will be one of the rare ones who will have no stops in his career," predicts Rodriguez. "He's so professional and hardworking, he's just gonna keep going."

Maybe that's because, unlike some actors his age, Elijah has kept his eyes focused on his job rather than on the bright lights around it. While most of Hollywood's up-and-comers would give anything for a stab at this sinister thriller (described by Williamson as *The Breakfast Club* meets *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*), Elijah was initially wary of accepting the role of Casey, the quirky student photographer. "I don't want to be a part of something just because it's popular," says Elijah, alluding to the recent wave of teen-horror flicks. But, as a fan of *From Dusk Till Dawn*, Elijah felt better when he found out that Rodriguez was helming the project. "I knew [he] wouldn't do the same thing everyone else does," he says.

THE GOOD SON

Elijah Jordan Wood has never been one to do what everyone else does, either. In an industry where young actors are often emancipated from their parents before they turn 16, his closest companions are his mom (and manager), Debbie, and his sister, Hannah, 15. In fact, the threesome has set-hopped together for more than half of Elijah's life. (His dad, Warren, and his brother, Zack, 23, do not travel with them.)

At City Grill, Elijah's favorite Austin bistro, the family talk and laugh over dinner at an outside table shaded by trees. Although his mother and sister have lighter hair, they share Elijah's delicate nose and cupid's-bow mouth. Those features (plus a pair of huge baby blues) are what first helped launch Elijah's career. When he was eight, the

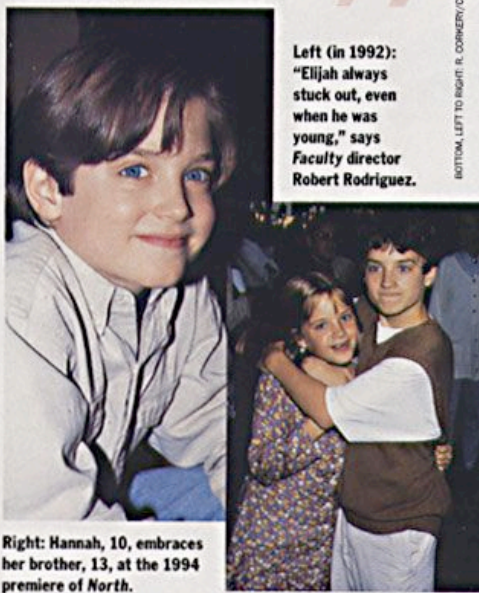


A henna tattoo to dye for: "It was painless."

I DON'T WANT TO BE A PART OF SOMETHING JUST BECAUSE IT'S POPULAR.

family moved from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to Los Angeles, where Elijah quickly landed modeling and TV-commercial work. Within six weeks, the eight-year-old got his first acting gig, playing a tiny business executive in a Paula Abdul video, which led to his feature-film debut as a video-game fanatic in *Back to the Future Part II*. Soon after, his mother stepped in to become his manager, and the traveling began.

"We've been all over the country," says Hannah, who's clearly comfortable with their nomadic lifestyle. The family's many temporary homes have included Connecticut (during the filming of *The Ice Storm*), Georgia (for 1994's *The War*) and the Bahamas (for *Flipper*). Hannah admits that hanging out with her brother "twenty-four-seven" has been hard in the past. "There was that couple of years when we hated each other," she says. "I



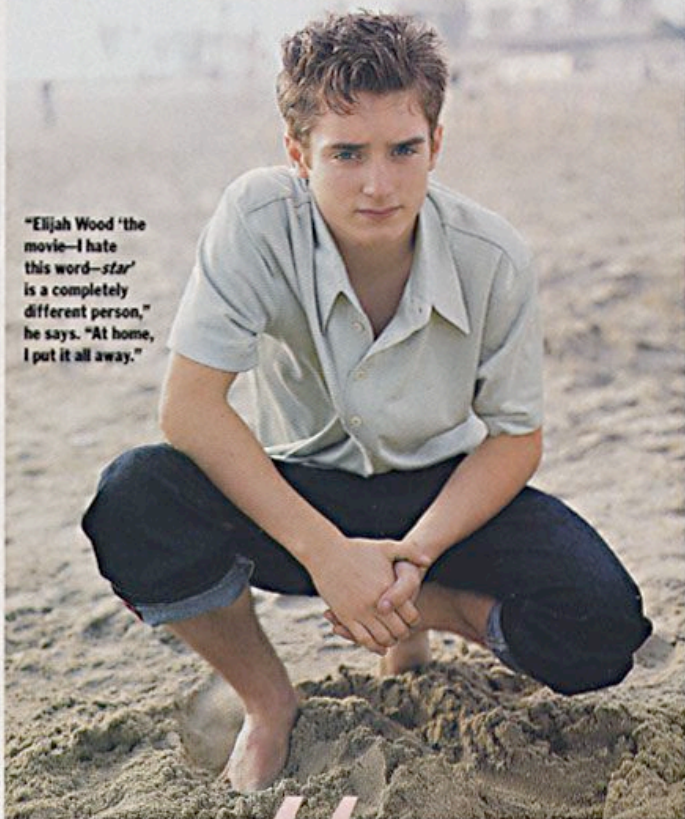
Left (in 1992): "Elijah always stuck out, even when he was young," says Faculty director Robert Rodriguez.

Right: Hannah, 10, embraces her brother, 13, at the 1994 premiere of *North*.

think it was because he was getting all the attention. Now we get along really, really well.... We go see movies and go CD shopping." There was even a time

BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: R. CORNEJO/CORBIS; JIM SAMUEL/GALELLA

"Elijah Wood 'the movie—I hate this word—star' is a completely different person," he says. "At home, I put it all away."



when Hannah wanted to follow in Elijah's acting footsteps, but now she's considering a career in psychology. "I get too bashful, too giggly," she says. "[Acting's] not my thing."

High school's not really Elijah's thing (both he and Hannah are home-schooled), so a life spent on movie sets works for him. "The [school] crowd bothers me, and the formation of cliques," he says. "I'd probably find someone that didn't like any of that and hang out with them." He reconsiders: "Then again, that would be *our* clique, so there's no way out of it." If he did attend high school, he'd probably be known as the cool indie kid, turning his friends on to his favorite music groups, such as The Smashing Pumpkins, Massive Attack and Propellerheads.

But here on the set of *The Faculty*, he'd probably be voted "Most Likely to Be Recognized in Public." At din-

IT'S SO WEIRD WHEN PEOPLE STARE AT ME. YOU NEVER GET USED TO IT.

ner with some fellow cast members a few weeks into filming, the restaurant host greeted him by name—"Mr. Wood." That was all his new friends—Jordana, Josh Hartnett (*Halloween: H20*) and Shawn Hatosy (*In & Out*)—needed to hear. "They were continually calling me 'Mr. Wood,' just to be on my case about it," he says with a good-natured grin. "It's so weird when people stare at me," he adds. "You never get used to it."

Well, he'd better start getting used to it. The *Faculty* cast have set themselves up to receive plenty of recognition by modeling in a national ad campaign for Tommy Jeans. "I've experienced

media, but nothing to this degree," he says. "It's all kind of frightening."

COMING OF AGE

Most likely, the media craziness will subside as Elijah prepares for higher education. "I'm going to fifty-fifty it," he says, meaning that he'll attend college but take time off to act when good scripts come along. With one more year of high school work to go, he's already set his sights on Columbia University in New York City, where he'd like to major in English. No doubt he'll make his professors proud, particularly when they hear his advice for aspiring actors: Find the nearest book and crack it open. "That is serious," he says. "I know that my acting has been enriched by reading. It allows you to understand [human] nature and what people are all about."

What's on his night table these days? *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, required reading from his tutor. "It's cool reading this," says Elijah with a grin, "because I know everything that happened." (Did we mention that he played Huck in the 1993 movie?)

College will also bring Elijah closer to his ultimate dream: to write and direct his own movie script. "I want to show people my passion [through]

thought-provoking films," says the actor, whose inspiration was spurred by his role in *The Ice Storm*, a disturbing story, set in the '70s, of two suburban families faced with tough moral decisions. "I actually had to sit and think about my character and really develop him," says Elijah. "That started my move to [being] an adult actor." Sounds like that move is finally complete. ☉

@ To hear revealing audio outtakes from our interview with Elijah, go to the "Virtually Unedited" segment of the Stars & Stuff area on our site on AOL (keyword: Teen People). You'll also find out where to surf for the Web's best Elijah Wood sites.