

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT BILLY



WRITTEN BY ANDREAMEYER
PHOTO BY JOSHUAKESSLER

photographed at the Sunset Marquis, West Hollywood, CA
Special thanks: Klaus Messner

He's a tattooed wild man with a sketchy past, a ladies man with a string of unhappy ex-wives. He's a hillbilly, a one-time drummer from small-town Arkansas who struggled for years before playing a simpleminded avenging angel in *Sling Blade* and winning the Oscar that made him an A-list actor, screenwriter, and director. He's got innumerable quirks and phobias, and his current wife, Angelina Jolie, wears his blood around her neck and gave him a set of grave plots for their anniversary. He's a stud: Jolie, 20 years his junior and arguably one of the most beautiful women in the world, has tattooed his name all over her body and reportedly walked into a wall the first time she saw him.

Billy Bob Thornton saunters into a villa at the Sunset Marquis, wearing cords and a baseball cap, says, "How's it going?" and I'm thankful there isn't a wall for me to walk into. He's disarmingly good-looking, with the kind of sex appeal that could knock even a strong woman down. And he's surprisingly sweet. He speaks softly in an Arkansas drawl as he glances at me from the corner of his eye. Unless he's riled up, and then he looks straight at me with penetrating brown eyes. He offers me half of the papaya (his favorite food) that's been ordered in advance, and eats his portion with a knife. I get the fork—he is a gentleman.

And I completely get it: why this 46-year-old man, whose looks range from ordinary to interesting to odd on the screen, is a movie star—and why any girl would risk bruising her forehead for him.

The opening shot of Thornton in his upcoming film *The Man Who Wasn't There* has a similar effect on the viewer. It makes us reconsider both the man and the actor. This is a Billy Bob we haven't seen before, transformed by Joel and Ethan Coen into a serious, chiseled hero reminiscent of black and white screen icons like Bogart

or Clift, a pokerfaced Everyman whose stolid intensity holds us every moment that he's on screen. Thornton plays Ed Crane, a quiet, contemplative barber in Northern California who floats through his life until his involvement in a blackmail scheme busts it right open.

"People who look at things on the surface say I remind them of Humphrey Bogart in this movie," Thornton tells me, sniffing from allergies. "But the people who really think about shit all say it's Montgomery Clift. Ed Crane seems pained. He seems to have a certain sadness and misery in him, a silent, internal angst that's very much like Montgomery Clift." He pauses, "You like papaya?"

Thornton isn't surprised that he was cast in a role so unlike anything he's done before. "The Coen brothers have a vision," he explains. "On the surface, George Clooney's part in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* was a more natural role for me. He's playing this hillbilly guy on the road in his overalls. Me, I could walk through that part, and maybe George could play this part. But they knew better. It's more interesting to see me do Ed Crane. They just knew."

To anyone who respects Thornton's work as an actor, it's obvious what made the Coen brothers think he could embody a passive, forgettable man whose first calculated act sends his measured life spinning suddenly and completely out of control. He's portrayed a couple of sweet, unsophisticated guys from the South in *A Simple Plan* and *Sling Blade*. But he is also the mean-spirited drug thief in *One False Move* and a hotheaded political strategist in *Primary Colors*. He plays the director of NASA in *Armageddon* and a well-meaning but two-timing Arkansas car salesman in *Waking up in Reno*. Thornton is not an easy actor to pin down. He's not the guy who will always get the girl or always save the day or always connive to blow up the planet—he's all over the thespian map.

"They leave it to people like me to play freaks and gays and fat guys and skinny guys and haunted guys or whatever," Thornton says after a brief rant about audiences' sheeplike craving for "warm, fuzzy, safe" performances. "Fortunately for me," he adds, "I'm all those things. In your life, your personality shifts according to who you're talking to. It's like, if you've been taking speed all morning and your mom's friends come over, suddenly you go, 'I'd better chill out. I can't be, like, taking a radio apart and putting it back together.'" He lets out a conspiratorial laugh. "You know what I mean? Really, all I do as an actor is adjust to different situations."

Of all the men he's portrayed, Thornton says only Ed Crane from *The Man Who Wasn't There* and Karl Childers from *Sling Blade* appear completely foreign to him. He explains, "I was able to watch *The Man Who Wasn't There* and never feel that it was me in the movie." Yet Thornton was able to dig through all those real and imaginary people within himself—the druggie, the polite son, the charmer—and find a little bit of Ed Crane.

"He's someone who wants to go somewhere else, because he doesn't fit here," he says, "and I definitely don't fit in. I know everyone thinks they don't fit in at some point, but I think a lot of people want to. I don't really want to."

Thornton's refusal to fit neatly into the movie star mold might explain the heyday the media is having with his personal life. Everyone who reads *People* magazine knows about his peculiar eating habits, strange phobias, and ex-wives. But the Billy Bob I met is having none of it. Of his love-'em-and-leave-'em past, he says, "People always say, 'Why'd you get married so much?' And I say I was in the South. I was young. People always wanted to get married," he explains. "And I would say, 'Okay, that's what you want.' But I was never intending to be with anybody until now; I knew it was wrong."

Thornton's current union with Jolie has been described as both dangerous and doomed, but Thornton dismisses the public skepticism about the relationship he describes as, "the only thing I've ever done

that's made any sense." He shows me two tattoos of her name: an elegant "Angelina" on his arm and a small "Angie" on his right calf. He shows me the vial of her blood that he wears around his neck, explaining that all the supposedly crazy things they have done are merely romantic gestures. "We gave each other our blood. Who gives a shit? When we were kids, we used to stick our finger and become blood brothers." And the grave plots? Thornton explains, "Angelina said, 'You want me to prove I'll always be with you?' and gave me our grave sites, side by side in Arkansas. And I signed a certificate to her in my own blood, sealed by a notary public, saying that I will never leave her. If people want to say that's weird or eccentric, they can kiss my ass because I think that's great."

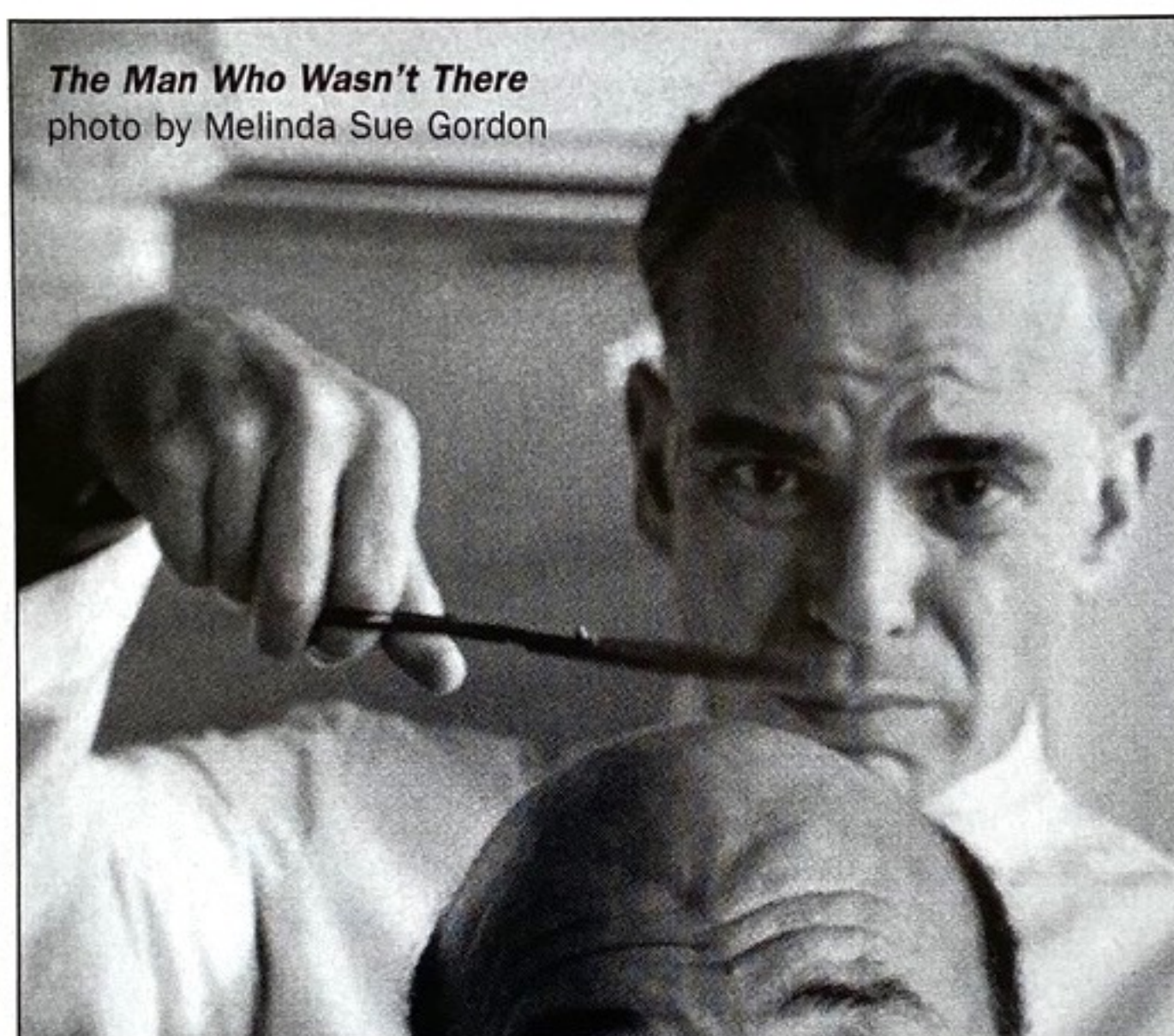
I get a chance to see the happy couple in action at our photo shoot, where Jolie makes a surprise appearance. She's wearing brown suede pants with a belt that says "Billy Bob" in brass studs. Thornton asks her if she wants to sit outside and read while we shoot and she responds, "I want to be near you."

When the photographer is taking close-ups, Jolie stands on the sidelines until she can no longer restrain herself from touching her husband and quite literally throws herself at his feet, wrapping her arms around his knees. As often reported, the Thorntons have a hard time keeping their hands off each other—in that grasping, clutching, swallowing way usually reserved for brand-new lovers. "We like each other so much," he says.

After viewing all the evidence, I am willing to buy the idea of a Billy Bob who's a regular guy trying to build a writing-directing-producing-acting-singing career and find a little bit of peace. And he seems to be doing a damn good job of it. This year could be officially called the year of Billy Bob Thornton: In addition to *The Man Who Wasn't There* and the release of his first solo CD *Private*

Radio, he is starring in *Daddy and Them* (which he also directed), *Bandits*, and *Monster's Ball*. He's also living in his dream house with his dream girl and together they're dreaming of a life on a ranch someday, where they are "gonna do more things that have less to do with movies," he says. As for the press and the public, well, Thornton assumes, "they'll lose interest, and someone else will take over as the new couple that has some horse in their living room or whatever."

But even as Thornton attempts to poke holes in the misperceptions about himself, he acknowledges that he is a different kind of movie star. *The Man Who Wasn't There* will make jaws drop. I tell him that it's startling to see this wild-man-rock-star-hillbilly-kook up there in black and white playing a beautiful, silent Montgomery Clift of a man. "That's true," he says thoughtfully, before beginning to laugh. "That's funny, isn't it, that you can go off in a movie and play a guy who wears suits in the forties. And then in life, you're like, you know—what you just said." ❖



The Man Who Wasn't There
photo by Melinda Sue Gordon

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