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The Lost Girl

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How Boston's preppy recluse **James Spader** became Hollywood's go-to guy for sex and sleaze.

Misleading Man

BY NELSON HANDEL

With his sexuality, arrogance, and boyish charm, Boston's own James Spader built a successful, if quirky, film career. Then TV's David E. Kelley called with a proposition. What happened next surprised even Spader.



Delayed Gratification

By Nelson Handel

don't want to share anything," begins James Spader, as we sit down to talk. "I think there probably are performers who want to share their private stuff with the world, and therefore they don't mind letting it play out in public. I don't want to heal. I don't want to share." Suddenly, he reaches down to the coffee table between us and says, "That's funny. I use these same pens." He picks one up, studies it a moment, places it carefully where he found it, and keeps talking, as if that bizarre pause had never happened. "I just want to do the work, put it out there. If people watch it, that's grand and I appreciate their patronage, but I can't —" His voice trails off as he looks down and shudders a bit at the thought of the dirty laundry that fuels our celebrity-obsessed culture. Then he fixes me with that indelible stare of his, as if daring me to ask the next question. ♦ Great. Two months chasing an interview with this famously reticent star and we're off to a roaring stop. I breathe and take stock. ♦ The thing about actors — the really good ones — is that they are often hopelessly lost in the moment. Any moment. In the middle of a sentence, in the middle of a scene, they veer off in unexpected directions, like the cat that bolts from a room for no apparent reason; digressions so baffling it makes them seem eccentric, distracted, or simply lost. Space cadets, really. But when the camera pushes in, these moments prove the most revealing. This pen digression, for instance, suggests that James Spader sweats the small stuff. And it's true. Precise attention to detail marks every Spader performance.

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If you dolly back from the pen moment, the big picture comes into better focus. In 2003, Spader leapt from a peculiar film career to network television and performed something of a small-screen feat: Playing a morally conflicted character, he resuscitated a dying series, *The Practice*, and won an Emmy for best actor in the process, and then last year, he took that same character to a new series, *Boston Legal*, and made it a hit.

I'd been warned that Spader was not an easy person to get to know. The stare he's fixed on me recalls nothing so much as the look with which he administered an erotic spanking to Maggie Gyllenhaal's bottom in his 2002 film *Secretary*. Those who have worked with him say he is shy and pensive. I'd been told that to profile him is to describe a walnut while looking at its shell. "He's like a magician," says former *Practice* costar Camryn Manheim, "you don't really want to know how the tricks were done. If you were able to reach the four corners of James's soul, you might take the whimsy out of it."

As we sit there, the comparison resonates. His hands flourish in a surprisingly effeminate way. His words spin out like colored scarves, beautiful to look at, but you sense something that isn't being said. He steers your attention to what he wants you to see – the philosophical and abstract – and away from what he does not, namely his private life and his acting process. It's been a long and winding road for this Boston native to the stardom that many will argue he has always deserved. It required something more like serendipity – an offer out of nowhere, arriving at a particularly vulnerable personal moment, the end of a long marriage that produced two beautiful boys.

As I sit across from him in the nondescript greenroom of the studio outside Los Angeles where *Boston Legal* is filmed, fixed in his slightly cockeyed gaze, and try to imagine what's going on inside that head of his, what becomes perfectly clear is that James Todd Spader is not an actor lost in just any moment. This moment belongs to him.

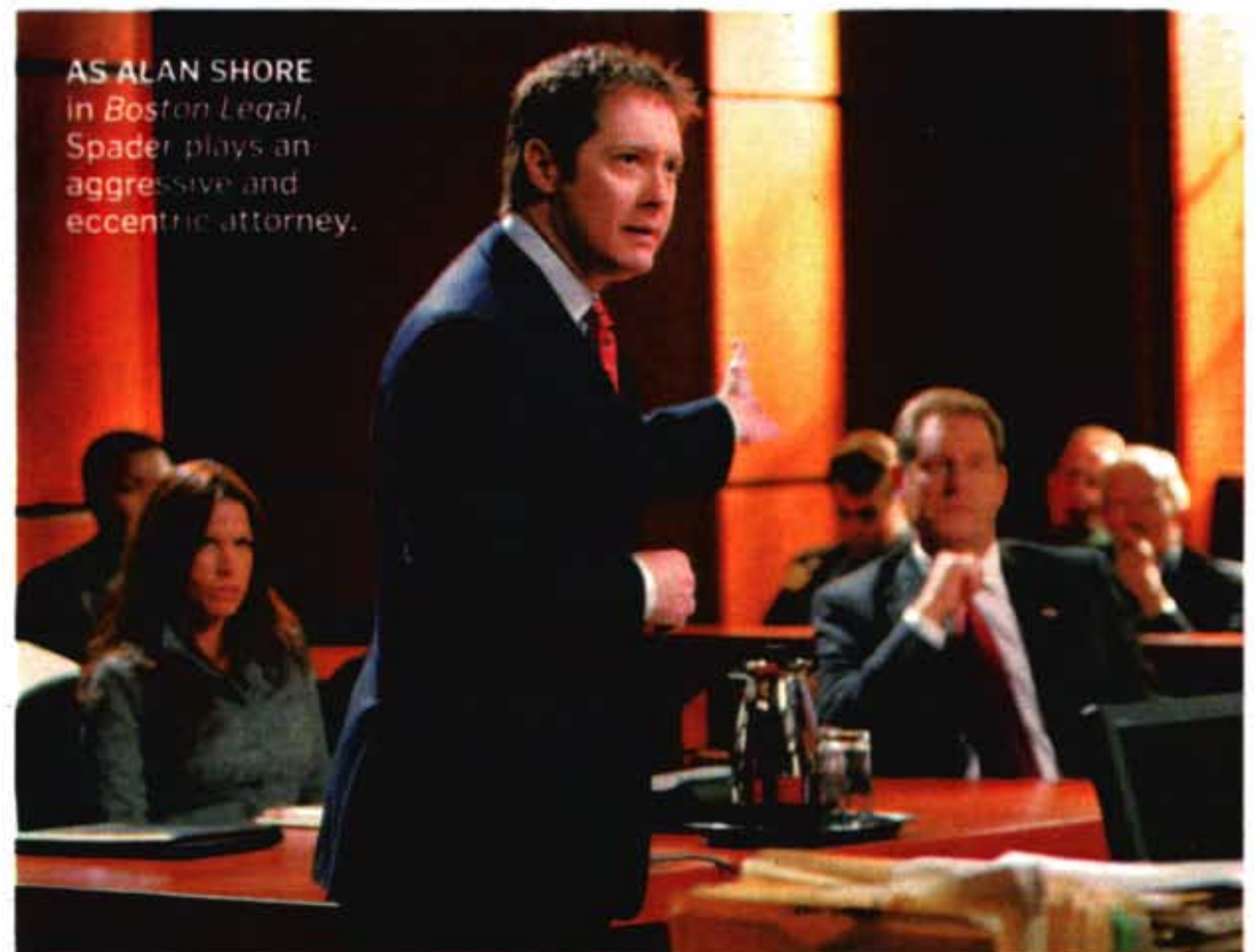
From 1987 to 1996, James Spader was one of the hottest young actors in Hollywood. His performance as the video voyeur with a penchant for desperate housewives in 1989's *sex, lies, and videotape* made him a pinup boy for the Radcliffe set. The irresistible mix of preppy good looks, sensitive intelligence, and combat-zone morality in such films as *White Palace*, *Less Than Zero*, and *Crash* gave him a unique appeal. But after his turn as a raunchy assassin in the independent ensemble drama *Two Days in the Valley*, in 1996, his career began to languish, and he scored only art-house notoriety as a kinky lawyer in 2002's *Secretary*.

Meanwhile, in May of 2003, David E. Kelley, creator of *The Practice* and *Ally McBeal*, got a Sunday morning call from ABC. *The Practice* was struggling for ratings in its seventh season after the network had moved it to Monday nights. They told Kelley that renewing the Emmy-winning series for a final year would require him to cut production costs nearly in half. "There was no dialogue," Kelley says, "no give and take, no real negotiation. They gave me 24 hours to decide."

He knew that hitting the new number meant slashing the large and richly paid cast. It was an agonizing choice: kill a show born as a labor of love, or kill off half its cast. Kelley chose the latter, and then tried to figure out how to revive his crippled child. "*The Practice* was populated by decent, righteous people," he says. "I decided to add a character that would give you no assurances." Alan Shore was born.

Boston Legal executive producer Bill D'Elia, a longtime Kelley collaborator, puts it more bluntly: "Shore was like a hand grenade thrown into a crowded theater. We knew he would shake things up."

In Kelley's mind, Shore's character would be devious, brilliant, and ethically challenged. He needed to find an actor who could embody Shore's unlikable traits and make the audience love him at the same time. Spader sprang to the top of the list. To Spader, fresh from performances in such forgettable dogs as *Speaking of Sex* and *Supernova*, the opportunity tantalized. "David just came out of left field," he says, "and I think I'm a sucker for surprise. It was unprecedented what he



AS ALAN SHORE
in *Boston Legal*,
Spader plays an
aggressive and
eccentric attorney.

had done to *The Practice*, creating the most extraordinary upheaval with this thing he had built and created. I liked the hubris of it. I'll allow myself always to be more intrigued by something surprising than something I expect."

Practice costar Manheim found Spader hands down the best actor she's ever worked with. "To act with him is a little scary," she says. "He sees through you. Every moment is full and real, and he brings an ease to acting that many of us haven't figured out yet. And yet," she adds, "I feel safe in his company."

So did the audience. His Boston patrician air – stemming from his attendance at some of the finest private schools in New England – married to his reputation as an actor not afraid to explore the darker regions of human morality, gave him a sexy, dangerous edge perfect for a lawyer practicing on the fringes of the law. Ratings shot back up. Spader became the buzz of Hollywood. "Shore was sort of the Cat in the Hat of this firm," says Spader. "His job was to create havoc and try to dance above the fray."

The hand grenade worked. Talk immediately began about building a new show around Spader's character. Most new series, even spinoffs, emerge from extensive planning and development that lead to a pilot episode and a plan for the show called "the book." Kelley, working with D'Elia and other longtime collaborators, decided to do it on the fly. "We had no script, no pilot, no book for the show," says D'Elia. "We didn't even have a conceptual conversation. We used the last six episodes of *The Practice* to feel our way into this. We built a world for these characters to exist in, and then explored. It had never been done before."

They hired new actors, including the comely Lake Bell and Rhona Mitra, threw them into a new firm, Crane Poole & Schmidt, and brought in William Shatner to play Denny Crane, the aging rainmaker. Then they messed around. "To find the tone," says D'Elia, "we went from serious to funny to funnier to a mix."

Spader sweated the small stuff. He's known to be a stickler on the set, indulging the kinds of behaviors that get other actors branded "difficult." He instigates rewrites when the script doesn't "surprise" him and refuses to do almost anything that he can't find the truth of.

"James comes with his 'A game' all the time," Shatner says. "We were doing a scene where James enters the frame and then listens while I say something. He stepped in, and just as I was about to speak, he stopped the take and had to do it again. The entrance rang false to him." When Spader and Shatner began to mix it up, D'Elia says, he realized they had caught lightning in a bottle. "There was a genuine chemistry between the two of them that transcended the writing and directing," he says. "They're like Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello – not just the humor, but something that you didn't expect." Suddenly, after years of playing outsiders and deviants (he rather notoriously made love to

Deborah Kara Unger's leg wound in 1996's *Crash*), Spader had found a character that connected with popular culture. Alan Shore is a kind of ethically challenged Robin Hood, behaving badly for good reasons, acting basely for a higher purpose. Spader's moment had arrived.

SPADER WAS BORN IN BOSTON, raised in the northern exurbs and then down by Buzzards Bay, where he's maintained a home (next door to his parents) for all of his adult life. "I grew up a Red Sox fan," he says. "I grew up going to Fenway Park and the Museum of Fine Arts and the Science Museum and Symphony Hall and going to the Common, walking around. My whole family at different times lived and worked in Boston."

But he adds, "In terms of identifying with Boston as my hometown? No."

His parents taught at the Brooks School in North Andover, where they also lived. Spader grew up on campus, surrounded by older kids and a rich fantasy life, which he asserts is central to who he has become. "I played cops and robbers and pirates and all the rest when I was a kid, but I didn't want to grow up and be an actor and play cops and robbers and pirates. I wanted to grow up and be that, be cops and robbers and pirates."

For high school, he attended Phillips Academy in Andover as a day student. He confesses himself a lousy student, and the sheltered ivy walls proved too small for a kid lost in his imagination. The stage provided an escape. High school pals describe a nice-enough kid hooked on the theater and possessing "the ego" needed to succeed. Spader dismisses those years as a time of "bravado."

"It was just a hobby," he says. "It was great. You could be older than you are. You could find yourself in provocative situations with people that you would never find yourself with. That girl that you had a crush on? Suddenly, you're married to her. Suddenly, things are intimate and provocative between the two of you. You're sharing a drink. It's watered-down cola, but you're sharing a cocktail. You're having a smoke. You're talking about [sex]. You're touching each other. You're staying up late. You're staying after school. All of a sudden, you're wearing a suit. It was great fun to do that."

But Spader wanted a real escape. His first chance came with his driver's license. "My father rode his bike to the classroom," he recalls, "so I took the car, and I just was gone. I would spend nights away. I was gone and excited to be." His frequent wanderings gave him ample

opportunity to project himself into the lives of the "real people" he would meet. "I really, truly believed that as much as I might be able to make a go as an actor, I just as much believed that it might be viable to be a private investigator. I mean, it was always just fantasy." Fantasy became reality at 17, when, fed up and ready to go, Spader dropped out of Andover and moved to New York City. There, he says, he could "just bury myself in imagination. I mean, that's really where I lived, that's what I loved, and New York just seemed like someone's imagination." He held the requisite struggling-actor jobs – bartender, yoga teacher, messenger – but what the city really gave him was an opportunity to try on different guises in the real world. "When I moved there, I completely believed that anything was possible. I believed I could become part of the fabric of the city, and not by portraying someone, but truly."

Unlike actors for whom day jobs are a byway on the journey to their real passion, Spader has always professed that acting was his sideline, something that earned a few bucks while he got on with reality, immersing himself in life's possibilities. "I had this hobby, acting, alongside this string of part-time jobs. But mostly, I had this sort of fantasy that I was going to join the New York Police Department or get together with this guy who likes trucks or get a crew together and knock off Tiffany's." Call him the accidental actor.

"Then something happens, and all of a sudden you start to get paid for your hobby. Suddenly you're not a messenger anymore, or mopping floors or shoveling [manure]" – which he did – "or driving a truck or whatever the hell it is, and you're getting paid for your hobby. I just became an actor."

His first break came in 1981 as Brooke Shields's brother in *Endless Love*. Five years later, in quick succession, he made *Pretty in Pink*, *Wall Street*, and *Less than Zero*. It was this last performance, as a rich-kid drug dealer of uncertain sexual orientation, that put him on the map. He was grouped in the public mind with the "Brat Pack," that '80s phenomenon that included Rob Lowe, Andrew McCarthy, Molly Ringwald, and Robert Downey Jr. But even then he was a thing apart. He was cool, but not Lowe cool; dangerous, but not Downey dangerous; handsome, but with his cockeyed stare and uneasy smile, not Charlie Sheen handsome. He had a vulnerable, sexy intelligence and became a late-night fantasy for the thinking woman. Any Spader highlight reel quickly recalls the voyeurism of *sex, lies, and videotape*. // CONTINUED ON PAGE 32

Ace of Spader

—He's a TV star now, and his surprise hit show, *Boston Legal*, will be back this fall. But it was the surprises in his 36-film career that turned audiences on to his talent. And his penchant for roles that ooze sexuality.

Endless Love (1981) His small role as Brooke Shields's brother marked Spader's transition from failed TV pilots and movies-of-the-week to the big screen.

Pretty in Pink (1986) Welcome to the Brat Pack. Spader established his bona fides as the wealthy yuppie you love to hate in this Molly Ringwald film written by John Hughes.

1 Less Than Zero (1987) Spader's turn as an omnisexual drug dealer nearly stole the show from fellow Brat Packers Andrew McCarthy and Robert Downey Jr. (at left, with Spader, in top photo). Though often lumped with

this rising generation of actors, Spader says he never felt a part of any group.

sex, lies, and videotape (1989) Spader broke free of his Evil Yuppie pigeonhole in a film that established him as a sexy, sensitive leading man while legitimizing the nascent independent film movement.

2 White Palace (1990) This sexy – and controversial – May-September romance film co-starred Susan Sarandon (middle photo). Despite the studio's hopes of incendiary box office results to match the film's steamy sex scenes, audience response was flaccid.

Wolf (1994) Spader reverts to evil, wife-stealing yuppie in this Mike Nichols film starring Jack Nicholson. With Michelle Pfeiffer as the third side of the triangle, this horror parable of modern living scored a hit.

Stargate (1994) A surprise hit from Director Roland Emmerich, Spader's wide-eyed wonder as a genius Egyptologist thrown into a parallel dimension propelled this sci-fi film to international success.

Crash (1996) Spader speaks of this auto-erotic thriller from director David Cronenberg as one of his most challenging and creatively satisfying.

"It's the one thing that had resonance in terms of creeping in and staying inside me," he says. "It took a long time to recover from the intensity of the shoot."

3 Secretary (2002) After six years of forgettable films, Spader scored a modest hit on the art-house circuit in this entertaining exploration of bondage and discipline, business-style, with Maggie Gyllenhaal (bottom photo). Prior to its release, David E. Kelley made the fateful call that would put Spader in the cast of *The Practice* and on prime-time TV.

– Nelson Handel



Delayed Gratification

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May-September explicitness of *White Palace*, bizarre auto-eroticism of *Crash*, and the bondage and discipline of the more recent *Secretary*. If anyone can explain why there are so many ads for spanking erotica in the back of *Harper's* magazine, you would imagine Spader can.

But unlike others of his generation, especially Lowe and Downey, whose reputations were built by their real-life, bad-boy exploits, Spader, a married family man, developed his by limning those behaviors on the big screen. For a young man who tended to get lost in fantasy, it was like living your life in a

this studied nonchalance seems more an act of will than a real life choice, as if it's important to his sense of self to remain above the fray, yet desired. Even in the 14-hours-a-day, nine-months-a-year grind of episodic television – where stars are routinely contracted for five or seven years – Spader professes himself “still sort of visiting.” One wonders if he doth protest too much. “You define what you care about in life,” he says. “Sometimes with people their work is the most important thing to them, and sometimes the work enables you to do other things that are more important to you. I probably am closer to that.”

“Sometimes with people their work is the most important thing to them, and sometimes the work enables you to do other things that are more important to you,” Spader says. “I probably am closer to that.”

Penthouse Forum letter: You are safe and secure with your wife and children, but a day at the office always seems to involve some meter maid, nurse, or randy secretary.

Along the way were attempts to make more mainstream films, like *The Watcher*, *True Colors*, and *Critical Care*. All looked good on paper, but none except the surprise science fiction hit, *Stargate*, clicked with audiences. Overall, he led an anticareer, happening into projects rather than pursuing them, seemingly motivated either by whimsy or because his money was running out. More important always were the frequent road trips, often in the company of his then wife, Victoria, and long stretches of doing nothing but indulging *la vie*. “I’ve had a lazy career,” he admits, “sometimes one film a year, sometimes none. I’m walking around in the street and doing this other thing, living, that I’m much more interested in. I just do some acting on the side.”

Given the 36 films on his resume,

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, Spader provoked controversy when he starred with Susan Sarandon in *White Palace*, a steamy film about a sexually charged relationship between a young man and an older woman. Last year, almost immediately after they decided to create *Boston Legal*, Spader found himself playing a scene that every leading man dreads. Costar Lake Bell, then 25, turned her enormous eyes and impossible lips to him and said, “Yeah, you’re sexy. For an older man.”

Forty-five years old. Dad-turning-gray-and-slowing-down-a-bit old. Joining-the-Lions-Club old. Even in “40-is-the-new-30” Hollywood, it sounds old. And if you were born in 1960, as Spader was, in the waning years of the baby boom, you grew up facing the crushing weight of a demographic reality – the gazillion people who were changing the world and inheriting the mantles of leadership were all five to 15 years older than you. But his career defied demographics. The WASP-y good looks, the distracted charm – something about him earned him breaks. He was the young kid who hung with grown-ups, the one whose age you couldn’t quite pin down.

“I’ve always been old for my age,” he says. “I hate to say it, but I think it’s the reason why I always liked playing bad guys or playing these certain odd characters through the years. They were fungible in terms of age; it could be anything. The only sense of age that I’ve ever had is the feeling that I’m not the right one.”

With *Boston Legal*, that may finally be changing. His once athletic physique has softened with middle age and an extra 25 pounds or so. The weight adds gravitas; what may have seemed distracted and mercurial in his youth

presents itself now with added force of character. “I’ve found that I’ve started growing into myself,” he says. “I’ve spent a certain period of my life uncomfortable about not knowing. The thing, more than anything else, that I have started to glimpse, to be able to feel and touch and see, is being comfortable without knowing. I think that’s nice, and you get it with age.”

Artists often do their best work in times of personal turmoil. So perhaps to understand why Spader’s star shines so brightly right now you must consider his highly guarded personal life.

Unlike his sexually charged and morality-challenged characters, Spader settled down early. He met his wife, Victoria, soon after he moved to New York, in the ‘80s. She often traveled with him, either on location or just on the road. They were married in 1987 and had two sons, now both rambunctious teenagers. However, after almost a quarter-century together – virtually all of their adult lives – they were recently divorced. It’s a subject expressly off the table during our conversation.

It doesn’t require much effort to imagine what a tectonic shift it is to lose the home life and stability provided by such a long relationship. “I think some people spend their lives trying to find that feeling of home,” he says. “I’ve been very lucky and have known that feeling. At different times in my life, it’s come and gone. It requires certain feelings of safety and security, which aren’t always in place. But I think you can take it with you to other places.”

It seems not coincidental that *Boston Legal* presented itself at the moment in Spader’s life that it did. The move from film to TV, the maturing from boy to man, the added weight, and that inevitable redefinition of self that follows the termination of a long, intimate relationship

SOLUTION TO THIS WEEK'S PUZZLE

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all point to a life in transition. Spader has crossed a threshold and emerged (or is still emerging) into a bright white light. At least professionally.

And though he insists that Boston is not home, certainly the make-believe Boston of *Boston Legal* is. It's a place where the sky is always blue, it never snows,

and people stand outside at night in unbuttoned overcoats speaking with breath that never fogs. In this place, in this moment, Spader seems right at home. **BG**