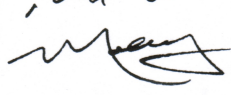




MOLLY RINGWALD

April 6 99

Dear Elaine,

I just wanted to thank you personally for the lovely article you wrote. It was the first piece that I have read in a long time that I recognized myself in. (I usually don't!) It was very respectful and thoughtful of you. Best of luck to you, and I hope our paths cross again. - 

DRIVING MISS MOLLY

Molly Ringwald Loves The Open Road

by elaine ash photography julie dennis brothers hair/makeup fernando navarro stylist thomas halstead

Opening night of Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, "How I Learned to Drive," at the Mark Taper Forum. The audience flutters in recognition at the sight of a flame-haired girl. Her words ring out, clear and true, filling the 750 seat theater, as she shape-shifts from narrator to girlish character, to full-fledged woman. The crowd is hushed, expectant, watching a familiar. They like this actress, want her to be good. She skillfully wends through a labyrinth of story dark and light, to a disquieting finale: her molestation at the hands of a favorite uncle, a character who's lain in wait, years, for her eighteenth birthday (the first sultry night she'll no longer be considered "jailbait").

Keeping characters sympathetic in a piece this difficult is a walk on the razor's edge for actors. So it comes as gentle surprise that the lead is Molly Ringwald, better-known for coming-of-age movies circa 1985, than controversial social documents. Despite sojourning abroad for the last few years, she's back in hometown Los Angeles, and there's a ring of approval in the theater applause.

It wasn't always so. In the mid-eighties, Molly crested the kind of popular fame that many covet and few accomplish; the cover of Time at age 18, photographed by Helmut Newton for Rolling Stone, her likeness in every facet of the international press. Molly Ringwald was "it." Pauline Kael of the New York Times coined her appeal "charismatic normality," a term quoted time and again by writers extolling her trilogy of successes in John Hughes' films, *Sixteen Candles* (1984), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Pretty In Pink* (1986), a segment from which the New York Times called "one of the greatest angry seamstress scenes since Scarlett tore down the green velvet draperies." A quick video-refresher reveals her performances have withstood time and winds of change; Molly's acting speaks for timeless youth, faithfully recorded by Hughes' doting camera.

Mid-eighties, Molly Ringwald was crown-princess of Generation X, an "Everywoman-under-21." She was muse to writer/director Hughes, who fashioned characters specifically for her. Flocks of groupies, "Ringlets," copied the young star's hair, clothing, mannerisms.

For the most part, Molly handled it well, stabilized in no small part by her family origins which were not without grief, but not lacking in blessings, either. Born February 18, 1968, in Sacramento, Molly was the fourth child of mother, Adele, and jazz-musician father, Bob, who lost his eyesight at age ten. The Ringwalds' first child died of leukemia at age three and a half, and her father has said this gave Molly a "sense of vulnerability and mortality." The family had an inkling that Molly's childhood singing and acting might be more than a passing phase when, after playing in Truman Capote's "The Grass Harp," and a fifteen-month stint in the west coast stage production of "Annie," she was cast in 1981 in Paul Mazursky's *The Tempest* with John Cassavetes and Gena Rowlands. At age 13, Molly was nominated for a Golden Globe.

Blame it on youth, or the pressures of fame, or even a "call for attention," but Molly publicly withdrew from Hughes in '86, even as their work reaped multi-millions at the box office, commenting to Time Magazine, "...I don't think we'll work together again real soon." After that, communication ceased and Hughes moved on, writing, among many others, *Home Alone*, *101 Dalmatians*, *Flubber*, and directing *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

Suddenly, Molly wasn't a teenager anymore and "teen films, good ones, disappeared." A short string of movies failed to grand slam: *The Pick-Up Artist* (1987), *For Keeps* (1987), *King Lear* (1987), *Fresh Horses* (1988), and *Betsy's Wedding* (1990). By the early nineties, weighted with feelings of "enormous responsibility to everyone," Molly Ringwald did the unthinkable by Hollywood standards. She left. Destination: Paris.

The initial reaction was disbelief. One agent laughed and said, "Have fun. See you in a few weeks." Another predicted ruin. But when her mother heard, she burst into tears, "because she hadn't heard me that happy since I was a child. She knew I was staying."

During self-imposed exile, Molly backpacked in Europe and the Far East, learned to speak French, and absorbed culture far beyond the realm of Hollywood. She walked the streets in refreshing anonymity, and met a French man, novelist Valery Lameignere. She fell in love. The experience allowed her to decompress from the Hollywood-driven

career-focus she'd held since age 13. And still there were occasional films, one entirely in French dialogue.

In the years she's been considered "away" (since '92), Molly's still managed to work on American soil: "The Allison Gertz Story" (ABC), nominated for an Emmy; "The Stand" (ABC), a mini-series; "Townies" (ABC), a thirteen episode series; "Women - Men" (HBO); and *Office Killer* (1997), artist Cindy Sherman's directorial debut.

An encouraging sign of maturation is reconciliation with John Hughes. While in Paris, Molly locked herself in a bedroom for six hours and wrote a letter to put right the past. Now she's rumored to be attached to his next film, *The Visitors*, a comedy slated for production in 2000.

Last year came an invitation from Kevin Williamson to appear in *Killing Mrs. Tingle*. Williamson's directorial debut follows writing his *Scream* franchise, which achieved Hughes-like popularity with the newest generation of teen and twenty-something actors and their audience. Starring Helen Mirren as the most-hateful teacher, Mrs. Tingle, and Katie Holmes as her student, Molly steps in as substitute teacher when Mrs. Tingle's mysteriously abducted.

A day after the opening for "How I Learned To Drive," La Ringwald brunched in the Chateau Marmont garden and talked about fame, France, films, Claire Danes, John Hughes, pedophilia, and making peace with the past.

Venice: The night I saw the play there was such a feeling of warmth in the audience.

Molly Ringwald: I felt that a lot. And I guess for as young as I am, I've been around a really long time. I went through a really difficult time in my twenties where I didn't feel that love. I felt like [people were saying] "Well, you've been up on top and we're bored now and we want something else." But since I have come back, there's been enough time for people to have a different perspective on me. And I've felt a lot of warmth and acceptance from a lot of people.

There's a feeling that "She's a hometown girl and she's ours."

It's a nice feeling. It's [my character], 'Lil Bit's story, and if the audience are in any way put off by her, then they don't get what



the play's about. If I, as a personality, can bring people closer to that character, then I think it's fantastic. This is my favorite role, hands down. You'd think I'd be sick to death of it because I did it for five months in New York, but I'm always finding new things.

Have you gotten mixed reviews because the subject material is so difficult?

I don't read reviews because I don't think that they help me while I'm doing it. I find out if they're good or bad and I leave it at that. What the play is about, for me, is a quote directly from Paula (Vogel, the writer) where she says, "It's about the gifts that you get from the people who hurt you."

Paula Vogel got a Pulitzer for writing about pedophilia, while Todd Solondz was attacked. Did you see his film, *Happiness*?

No, I read the script and wanted to do it, but he cast somebody else and I boycotted it! (laughs) I was up for Joy (played by Jane Adams), and I understand he cast it completely differently than me, so he obviously had something different in mind. I do want to see it because I think he's a really talented filmmaker and just judging from the script, I thought it was fantastic. I think people can gain a lot more by letting go of the hysteria we have around subjects like pedophilia and incest and sexual harassment. I think people just get to such an hysterical pitch when they deal with these subjects that you end up not really getting the true representation of what it's about.

These people, I don't think they're monsters. They're people who are disturbed, have problems, and do bad things. But they're not monsters, that's just a TV movie myth. And I like writers like Paula Vogel or Todd Solondz that look in a more realistic way.

Where do you call home?

New York City. I have a *pied-a-terre* here in L.A. And Paris, of course. Valery is there.

What has the Paris experience given you?

It made my world bigger, gave me perspective, gave me a safe haven, a wonderful relationship with a man I love very much, the ability to speak another language which is just like a passport to another culture, since I don't think you can truly understand a culture without understanding its language. I did a Canadian indie movie in Montreal, last May, *Requiem for a Murder*, and it was great to speak French. It's like old French, like we would speak Shakespeare's English. There's a lot of old words they kept that the Parisians don't have any more.

How did you meet Valery?

On a movie. He was working on the crew. He's a writer, but he was helping a friend out over the summer, doing different jobs on the movie.

What did you learn from the French style of filmmaking?

It seems a lot more human. It doesn't seem as much like a business, the crews are smaller. You tend to learn everybody's name and know everybody. Here, crews are so big it's hard to figure out what everybody's doing; films are overpopulated I think. There, the lunches are better, longer, and they serve wine, which is kind of cool. I've only done one film that was in French except for working with Jean-Luc Godard (*King Lear*, *Seven Sundays*) and he's not a good example because he makes films completely different from anybody over there. There were only four people in his crew!

What was the reaction when you originally decided to stay in Paris?

I had an ex-agent who told me my career was going to be ruined, that I couldn't do what I was doing. There could have been truth in what she was saying but it wasn't my priority at the time. It wasn't important to be in the rat race and be thinking about career planning. I'd done that since I was 13 years old, and really needed a break.

Tell me about *The Visitors* and working with John Hughes.

I don't know anything about it. It's just a rumor. But somebody else asked me about that, too. I'd love to, but there's no contract been signed. I think it would be fun. It's a remake, you know, of a French movie, *Les Visiteurs*, one of the highest grossing French movies of all time.

Why don't I report that it's a rumor, but you wish it were true?

Yeah, that's good! That's fine! Everybody wants me to make another John Hughes film.

It's true that you made peace with him.

I did write him a letter. [There was] an article that was a positive piece on me, but the angle was critical of John, and I felt it was unjust to him. Sometimes journalists feel that in order to write, if they compliment one person, they have to attack someone else. Nobody wants a puff piece, there's got to be something edgy about it. I wanted to write something to John just to say I was sorry, and it ended up becoming an eight-page letter. We had gone through a really long time without talking, and the longer time had gone by, it felt like a rift. So I sent the letter and he sent me an enormous bouquet of flowers with a note thanking me, which was very nice and made me feel very good.

Making peace says a lot about where you are.

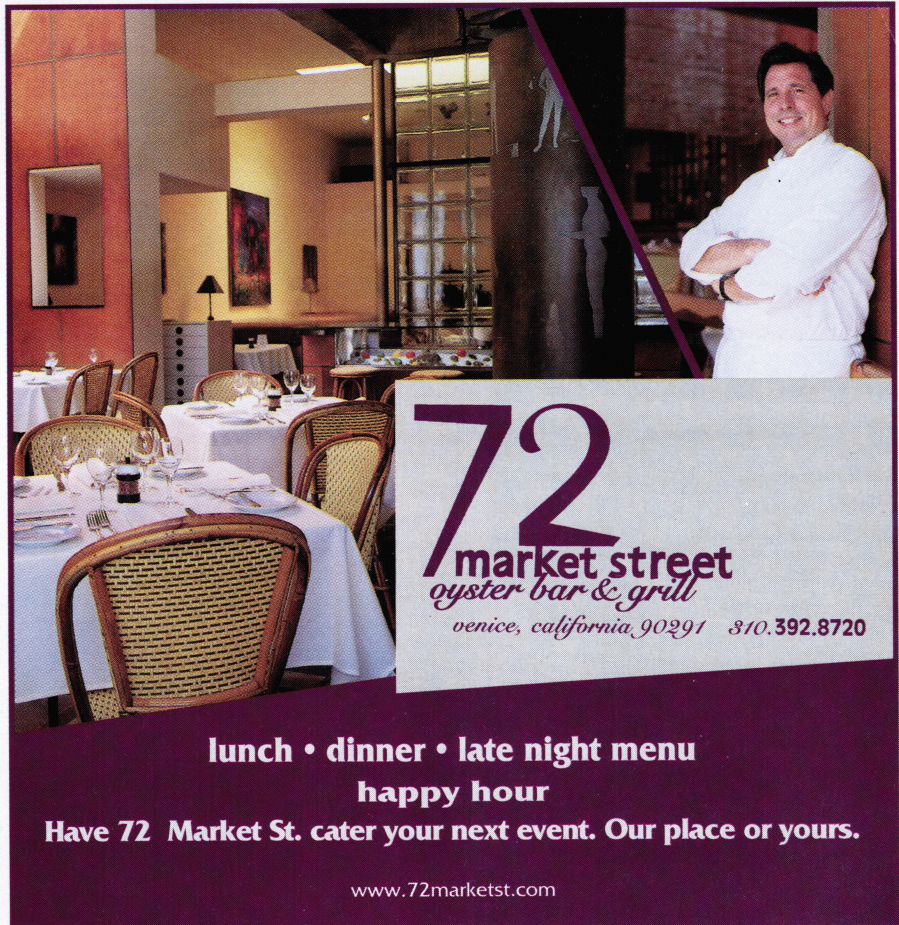
Years before, an agent or manager said, "You should write to John Hughes," and I couldn't even begin. The letter I wrote, there was no ulterior motive other than to tell him how I felt. [After], I felt fifteen pounds lighter. This brings us back to the play, because it is very much about making peace, about forgiveness. It really is one of the most important things to forgive. The philosophy I live by, it's best to take care of things as fast as possible, things that can make you angry. If I don't take care of it, I obsess on it. That's the kind of person I am. I'm trying to be flexible, "supple" as Valery would say.

Did that help you quit smoking?

You should have seen the way I smoked! I think everybody's getting disgusted [about smoking] at the same time. I went to a hypnotist and he said, "Yeah, you know that [smoking is bad] but you don't get it. You don't have an emotional connection to it. Because if you did, you wouldn't be relaxed and comforted by a cigarette, you'd be terrified by it." I do have a very addictive, compulsive personality. I'm so glad I never tried heroin.

What do Mom and Dad think of your bi-continental lifestyle?

They're fine with it now. Mom and Dad have a funny rapport with Valery, always making French jokes, but I think they're really happy that French culture is a part of my life. When I went to Paris, I really wasn't expecting to stay there. So when I first met Valery, there was a big attraction, but I didn't think it was necessarily going to go anywhere since he lived in France and I lived in America. See, [the] way I do things is, I



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