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*John*  
**DOLAN**  
THE HEAT OF THE **MOMENT**



The

# Heat

of the moment

*John Dolan's lively,  
lovely chaos theory*

BY LORNA GENTRY



**A** green photographer and fine printer, John Dolan landed in New York City in the early 1980s, fresh from a post-grad sojourn in Europe that inspired

him to take photography seriously. For the first three years, Dolan worked in the darkrooms of various New York fashion photographers. The money was good, the work plentiful.

Then he met Sylvia Plachy, the *Village Voice* photographer extraordinaire, these days also known for being the mother of actor Adrien Brody. Plachy needed a printer and she offered Dolan \$5 an hour plus soup. "I had been in love with her pictures for so long that I was happy to do it," says Dolan.

The decision changed his life. Plachy's profound lessons imploded Dolan's modus operandi, with shockwaves of self-awareness that propelled him in a new direction. More than two decades later, Plachy's wisdom remains fresh in his mind.

For three years Dolan worked in Plachy's attic, printing hundreds of 5x7s every day. "Week after week I was seeing that she was photographing these artists and writers and getting something that hadn't been seen before," Dolan recalls. "I knew it was because her personality was able to unlock people."

The key, he learned, is to not separate humanness from photography. "Seeing someone as good as she was, seeing her life and family, taught me how to incorporate my life with my style and eye. A lot



of photographers hold back or remove themselves from situations. Sylvia taught me that when you do a portrait, you have to meet the person halfway, you have to have some empathy with your subject. I was a shy young photographer, holding back, observing. She helped me come out of my shell.”

#### ENTERING THE CIRCLE

It was during his brother’s wedding that the *aha!* moment hit him. Dressed in his best man outfit, Dolan slipped a Leica in his pocket before heading to the ceremony. Throughout the day he would step back to snap pictures. When the wedding guests began a circle dance for the bride and groom, Dolan stood back to shoot, but realizing the best man should take part, he stepped into the circle. Everything clicked.

So this is what Plachy meant, he thought. Don’t be separate, be part of the scene, feel the emotion and crystallize on film the

texture of the moment. “When I got the film back and saw what I’d gotten without thinking, the number of pictures per roll...that was a new high.”

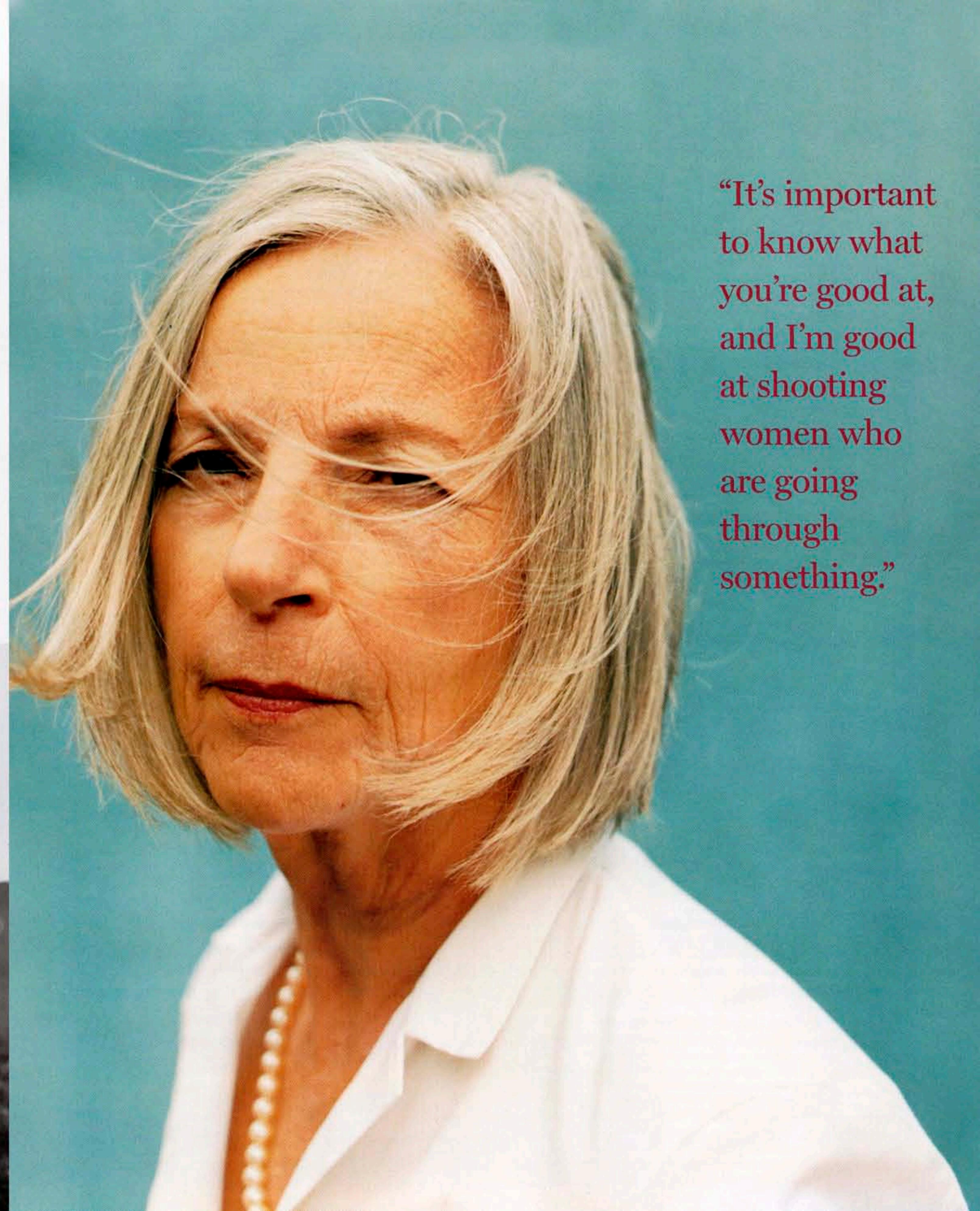
Dolan knew wedding photography was right for him, and early success reinforced his clarity. “In the beginning the pictures were making themselves because it so suited my personality,” he says. During weddings “everywhere I looked I saw something that inspired me—everywhere. Weddings are rich and complex, a nexus of fashion and documentary, all the things that I was interested in.”

The challenge was landing clients who understood his style. “I tended to find people who loved photography and made it a high priority on their list. We were looking for each other. They would say to me, ‘If you come away from our wedding with one great picture that would be fantastic.’ They raised the bar for me.”

The more weddings he photographed, the more he discovered about himself, personally and professionally. For example, when people around him get nervous, Dolan gets calm. In fact, he thrives in chaos, probably because he eschews control. “I get paralyzed in studio situations where a CEO gives me 20 minutes for a portrait,” says Dolan. But in the throes of a wedding with unexpected things happening “that’s where I shine. It’s important to know what you’re good at, and I’m good at shooting women who are going through something.”

Dolan excels at photographing all women, actually, and not just during transition. “They let me in a lot more than men [do],” he explains. “That’s like running into a brick wall. Men always look at me suspiciously, like with the job that I have I must be getting away with something.” Photographing brides, he says, “There’s a subtle tension that everyone enjoys. I’m

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giving them attention and they know I’m going to make them look good.”

Dolan’s brides are beautiful, in part because he takes his job seriously, as an archivist and artist. “I felt I was one of a small group of people revitalizing the fine art of wedding photography. Something happened to wedding pictures in the 1960s,” he says. When weddings became more casual, the pictures got casual, too, and in the 1970s “they went to hell.”

#### KISS OF DEATH

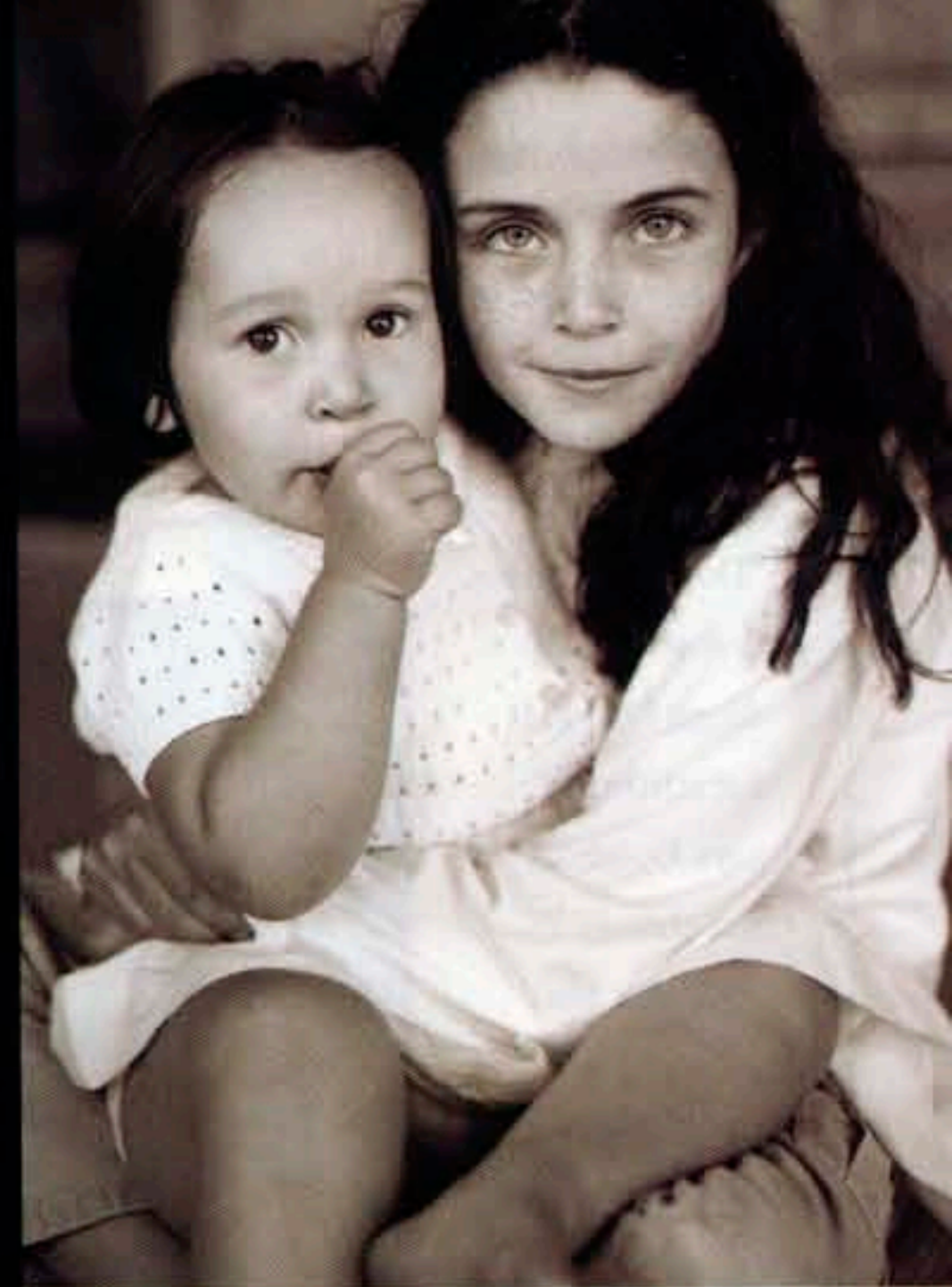
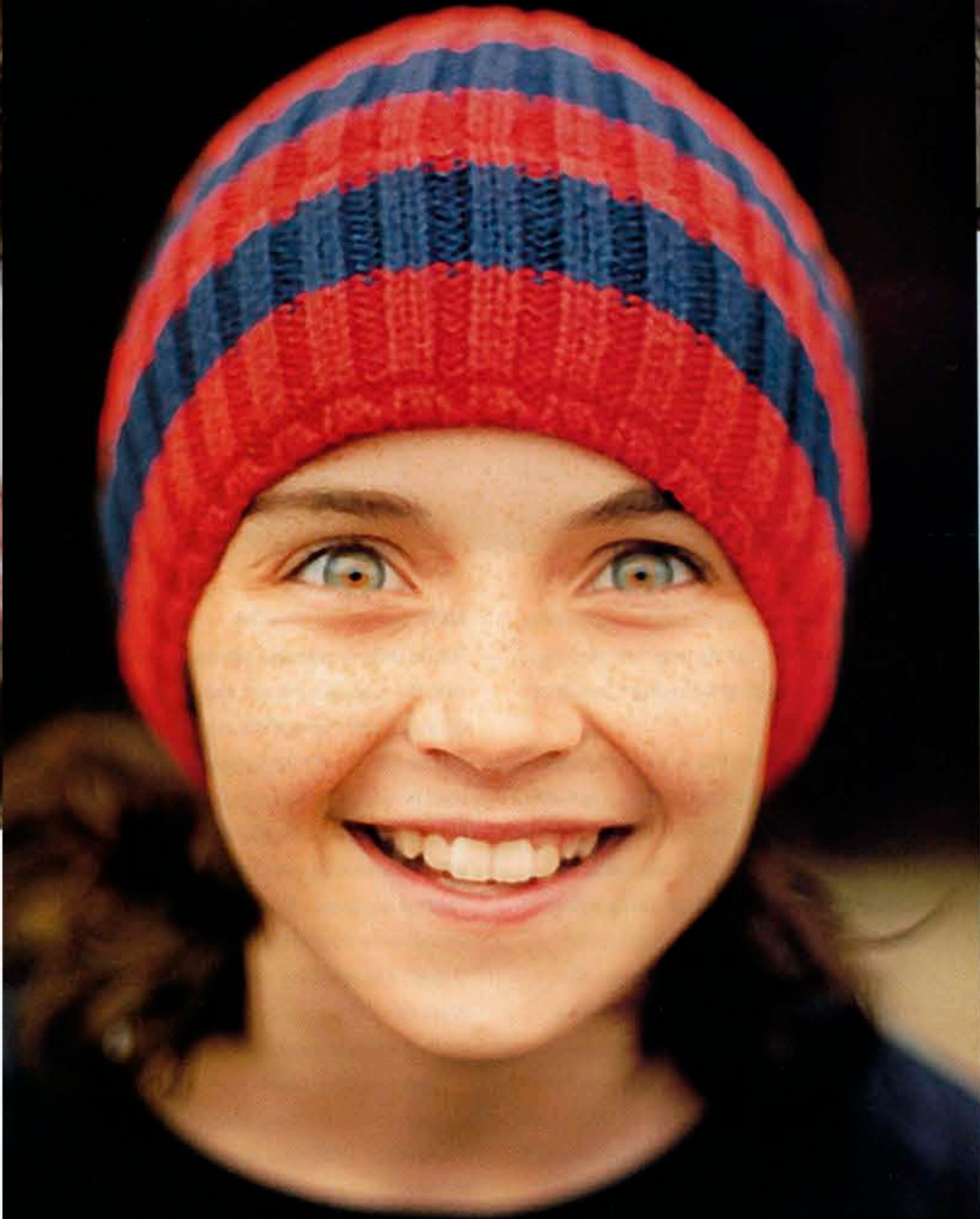
While Dolan’s clients were happily spreading

the word, other New York photographers were haughty. “Doing weddings was the kiss of death from a New York magazine photographer’s standpoint,” he says. “I’d go to parties and people would talk about what projects they were working on, things like Bosnia or Nicaragua, and I’d say I was doing weddings. They’d look down on that, until they heard who I was shooting for and the kind of pictures I was getting.”

Dolan’s style was turning heads; even celebrities called. First it was NBC’s Today show co-host Matt Lauer and his wife,

Annette, who continue to commission him every year to photograph their children. He also photographs Jerry and Jessica Seinfeld’s children, and actor/musician Will Smith hired him to photograph his wedding to Jada Pinkett. After meeting Dolan, actor Ben Stiller hired him to photograph his wedding. Says Dolan of the assignment, “He collects modern photography, so it was fun to have someone who knows the art of it.”

Meanwhile, Dolan’s work was catching the supercritical eyes of magazine editors and art directors, and they hired him to



photograph their weddings. Doors opened to editorial work. Art directors would tell him, "Do what you're doing for weddings but do it for editorial," says Dolan. A sea change in style was also afoot. "The 1980s in New York were a flashy time and my style really wasn't happening. In the '90s the style changed, becoming naturalistic, softer and more humane, so I started getting work."

At first, he was primarily doing work for women's magazines. "There's a sensuality to my approach. I'm pretty romantic so my picture stories are optimistic, not hard hitting." He photographed for *Martha Stewart Weddings* magazine; *In Style*, for which he took on the unfamiliar role of paparazzi to photograph Jennifer Lopez's first wedding; *Real Simple*, for which he shoots a monthly column; and *Self*, where his sensuous style is a perfect fit.

In fact, Dolan's jobs for *Self* magazine have been downright dreamy. Typically, he's sent somewhere warm and gorgeous with an art director, three or four models and a limited shot list. "Just go make beautiful pictures, they would tell me. In February they sent us to Jamaica to the most exquisite hotel any of us had ever been to," says Dolan.

## Weddings are rich and complex, a nexus of fashion and documentary.



"That's a theme that goes through my work," he continues. "The less hard I try the more the picture is there. If I start directing people, the picture looks forced. It's counterintuitive, not the work ethic of most of the country. We have a really tight team and we're very buttoned down, but we try to trick the models into thinking it's just a day at the beach. It's actually hard to get models to stop modeling, but that's the goal."

### NOT GOOD ENOUGH

While Dolan's organic approach is progressive, the tools he uses are classic: Rolleiflex E3 2.8, Leica M6 and Pentax 67. No digital. But he isn't totally unplugged, either. On the road he uses a 12-inch Apple PowerBook G4 laptop, and in the office he works at a G5 tower with a 23-inch Apple Cinema HD Display. Flatbed scanners—Epson 4870 and Canon 9950F—are there for scanning photos only. "I don't like scanning negatives because I don't think the scanners are good enough yet, but scanned prints are beautiful," he says.

Dolan and his Manhattan officemates, photographers Philippe Cheng and Holger Thoss, have a full-time studio manager and printer (C-prints are outsourced to a local lab). "The magazines I work for don't want digital—yet," he's happy to report. He

"The creative director, Cindy Searight, kept telling everyone that we were not working. It's the hardest thing to unplug a bunch of New Yorkers."

But approaching the work in a relaxed, unforced manner is what gives it a sensuous, playful look, and that's what they were going for. "It's so great when it works because there's a slight taste of it not being a huge photo shoot. Cindy knew I could make pictures without controlling things. She needed ambiguous pictures to go with a story about how you feel about your body weight. It was an incredible opportunity to make some really lovely pictures. There's one of a totally naked woman standing on a rock in the middle of a lake doing yoga. It was an effortless picture because we didn't overwork it. All the elements were there.

continues to mourn Agfa film and has switched to Kodak and Fujifilm, but he wonders when they'll be next. Ever the optimist, Dolan still sees promise for film and paper in the digital dominion. "I think it will make film and paper more valuable, more niche," he says.

Only time will tell, but meantime Dolan says it's vital for every photographer to know how to print, even if using Photoshop exclusively. "You need some game plan for the print, and that's what darkroom training gives you, an approach to the print. Photoshop's fine with me, but I don't get pleasure from it. We don't manipulate in Photoshop. For my Web site we may pump up [images] a little, but it's basically what I would do in the darkroom."

The years in the darkroom honed Dolan's powers of observation, already a strong suit. "I was an early observer and collector," Dolan says of his childhood in Bethesda, Md. "I would ally myself with writers over painters. I wasn't terribly visual. But I can tell the emotional temperature in a situation really well; that's my strength." That instinct allows him to navigate situations, even walking into a roomful of strangers. That's one reason he likes detective novels. "Photographers and detectives have a similar skill set."

With so much editorial and commercial work—clients include Sundance and Lexus—Dolan now shoots only three or four weddings a year, but after 15 years he still loves it. "It's like taking a trip on a river raft," he laughs. "You get on when it's calm and it gets rougher as you go along, until it gets wild and you think you're going to fall out before things finally calm down. There's always a beginning, an end, and a wild ride in middle."

But what a sweet ride it's been. ■

To see more of John Dolan's work, visit [www.johndolan.com](http://www.johndolan.com).

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