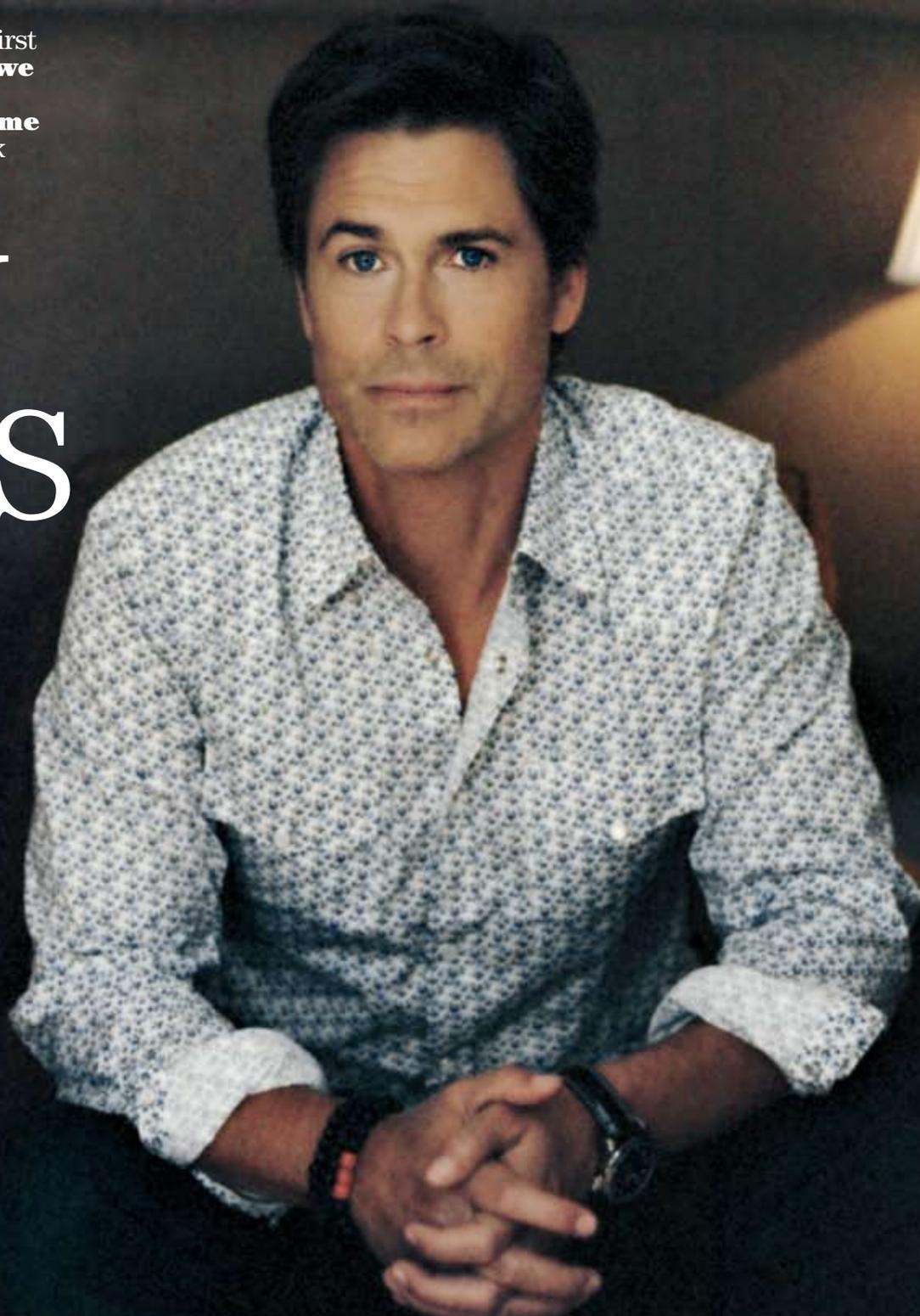


A founding member of the Brat Pack and the first celebrity to have a sex-tape scandal, **Rob Lowe** is now a decidedly presidential figure, and the author of a new best-selling memoir. **Tim Hume** meets the world's most handsome policy wonk
Photography: **Victoria Birkinshaw**

Pretty serious



Rob Lowe, acting like he's listening. The newly minted author has moved on from his hard-partying past and reinvented himself as a would-be leader.



Well, this is awkward. Rob Lowe has barely sat down in the London hotel suite booked for our interview when he starts miming. Bearing witness to mime can be unsettling at the best of times, but particularly when it's being performed by one of Hollywood's favourite sons in a small, airless room with three people in it. The photographer has suggested taking shots of Lowe in full conversational flight, but the idea is vetoed: he doesn't like being photographed with his mouth open. He offers in lieu "some really good acting".

"This is me acting like I'm talking to you," he says, fixing me with his iceberg-blue stare, and feigning a deep philosophical reckoning, pulling gesture after gesture as a minute ticks slowly, silently by.

I grin and squirm (am I in the scene? If I attempt some banter will I intrude on his performance?), and am reminded of why I was sceptical about his newly published memoir. Lowe is trained to present flattering impressions of himself, instinctively aware of where the light is catching his phenomenal features. All memoirs are self-serving in a way, but could any be more so than a Hollywood actor's?

"I know how to be honest and authentic – I've been doing it forever," he says, arguing that actors peddle the truth – just "masked by the character someone else has created". A fictional sort of truth, then. "That inherent mistrust of actors is really misplaced," he says. "The notion that actors must be great liars – to me, it's never made any sense. What do I know about being an astronaut, or a cop? I find the truth in fiction."

I'm not sure I buy his line of argument, but I was wrong about the book. *Stories I Only Tell My Friends*, which charts Lowe's journey through stardom, scandal and rehabilitation, is pacy, wise and entertaining, and proving a surprise word-of-mouth hit on US bestseller lists.

After an opening chapter in which Lowe most nakedly signals the light in which he hopes to be regarded, by recounting his bromance with the aristocratic, immortally glamorous John F. Kennedy Jr., the book quickly heats up. It names names and doesn't gloss over low points: chief among them Lowe's starring role in Hollywood's first celebrity sex tape.

When a grainy VHS circulated of the 24-year-old, then one of the preeminent playboys of the 1980s, in a ménage à trois with a 16-year-old girl, his excuse was that he had assumed she was of age – he'd met her at a bar at which the doorman had insisted on seeing his ID, despite his celebrity.

Unlike today's aspiring socialites who "accidentally"

leak porn to launch their careers, the scandal torpedoed his. He never nailed a canonical Hollywood role: *St Elmo's Fire* and *About Last Night*, both pre-dating the affair, remain career highlights. But, after years in the wilderness, Lowe was reborn as a strong comedic actor and in-demand small-screen performer.

"Sometimes being a trailblazer is overrated," writes Lowe, without rancour. Today, he credits the scandal for ultimately leading him "through a painful, long and circuitous path... to greater happiness and fulfilment than I could have ever hoped for".

After flings with some of his era's most desired women – Nastassja Kinski, Demi Moore, Princess Stephanie of Monaco (who phoned her staff while on her first date with Lowe to instruct them to clear out her then-resident boyfriend's belongings) – Lowe finally found love with Sheryl Berkoff, a "sexy and big-spirited blonde girl... different from all the other girls in my orbit".

Sheryl is a makeup artist: "an artist of the face", he writes, in the exuberantly earnest actorspeak that permeates the book (roles are invariably "gifts"; even *Wayne's World* was a "triumph"), and she's an unexpectedly appealing part of Lowe's narratorial charm. Sheryl, now the mother of their two teenage sons, supported him through rehab when he "actively and consciously decided" he needed a more meaningful life. And now she's on the phone, her voice bleeding into the room.

"Hey baby, I'm just in the middle of an interview. What's up?" asks Lowe.

"I love you so much and I want to get crazy with you," she says.

"That sounds good," he replies.

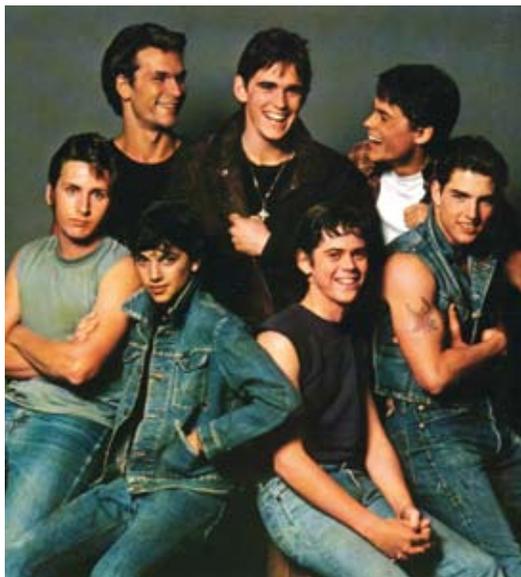
Nearly 20 years into a marriage, this degree of ardour might be remarkable if directed toward anyone other than Lowe, a slab of all-American beefcake blessed with the kind of chin you could use to drive in a tent peg. At 47, Lowe still has his bastard good looks, and a body he was justifiably comfortable flaunting shirtless on the cover of last month's *Vanity Fair*. In the flesh, though, you can see they are faintly fading. With his hint of eye makeup and blow-dried, almost feathered coiffeur, courtesy of a duo of Teutonic stylists who periodically enter the room to fuss over him, he's drifting ever so perceptibly towards the strong-jawed lesbian look of Bruce Jenner and other Peter Pans of Tinseltown.

"There is just no way anyone is likely to take a... boy as pretty as I was seriously," Lowe writes of his looks, but they came into their own when the nerdy, aspiring actor moved from Ohio to Malibu >>

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With wife Sheryl in 1990.



The Outsiders, 1983.



As Billy Hicks in St Elmo's Fire.

with his flaky, New Age mother after she divorced his womanising lawyer father.

Just 30km from Hollywood, Malibu in 1976 was "a wonderful mix of normal, working-class families, hippies, asshole surfers, drugged out reclusive rock stars, and the odd actor or two". Living nearby was Martin Sheen, whose two boys, Charlie and Emilio, became Lowe's good friends. Along with fellow Santa Monica High buddies Sean and Chris Penn (a "madrigal-singing maniac" named Robert Downey Jr. was another classmate), they took advantage of their freedom in this strange, parent-free playground not to chase girls and get wasted like the surfers – who considered Lowe an "actor fag" – but to shoot recreations of *The Six Million Dollar Man* on video.

The town teems with stars of past, present and future. Lowe scores a TV role alongside a black girl named Janet, who tells him she's going into music: "If my brothers can do it, so can I." When another of his performances is due to air, he's disappointed that the girl he's dating doesn't invite him to watch the screening at the house of her mother, Dyan Cannon, who has acted alongside Warren Beatty. They watch it instead at her father's: it transpires he is Cary Grant.

It's Lowe's role as a "greaser" in Francis Ford Coppola's 1983 teen ensemble piece *The Outsiders* that eventually catapults him and other cast members into the big time, their posse of hard-partying, female-friendly stars gaining notoriety as the "Brat Pack". Lowe can't quite put his finger on exactly why so many of this generation was drawn from his neighbourhood. "It's sort of like why in 1968-69, Laurel Canyon brought you the Byrds, Jackson Browne, Joni Mitchell and the Mamas & the Papas. Every once in a while there's a moment in time and a location that just explodes people. It's luck, timing, desire, talent, likemindedness."

A "good midwestern son and people pleaser", Lowe was an incongruously upright figure on the louche Californian moral landscape, right up to the point he found fame. He recounts its inescapable G-force, how he felt like a Sasquatch whenever "sighted" in public. When he's cast as sax-playing bad boy Billy Hicks in *St Elmo's Fire*, he finds the role so empowering that it transforms him. "For so many years I was the nerd," he writes. "Now I have the part of the guy I could never be, no matter how hard I tried, and people love me in it. So I run with it. For a long time."

Having been a cautionary tale himself, what does Lowe make of his friend Charlie Sheen's predicament? "I actually think he's going to be okay. He's smart,

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he's tough. He plays it his way, always has, and he has a lot to show for that," he says. "The very things that make people great and interesting and achievers can also be their Achilles' heels."

He and Sheen talk about rehab "all the time", but "agree to disagree" on its merits. "Everybody has a different path. My path doesn't work for Charlie. He hates it, thinks it's full of like cult-like Nazis and stuff. Part of me admires that – he's like, 'This is who I am, man.' His lack of hypocrisy is brilliant. I adore him. What a maniac."

Sheen's troubles, though, reflect an unhealthy celebrity culture over which Lowe now has serious

misgivings. "I'm profoundly grateful for the life it has given me, but I have a deep ambivalence about many things in Hollywood – what it celebrates as a culture. You take the good and try to excise the bad as much as you can."

That the post-wilderness Rob Lowe should sound less like Billy Hicks and a lot more like *The West Wing's* Sam Seaborn (the other defining role of his career) is unsurprising. Lowe is likely the world's best-looking policy wonk. He spent months on the campaign trail for Dukakis and Schwarzenegger, has dabbled in environmental activism, and once dated a woman he had developed a crush on after glimpsing her on C-SPAN testifying in Washington. Even his sex scandal came about when he was on the lash after the 1988 Democratic convention.

The role of idealistic White House deputy communications director Seaborn was one Lowe clicked with "on first blush and on the deepest of levels". He writes, in ringing, Sam-the-American-Eagle prose: "My interest in policy, in public change, in service. My deep love of the majesty of our flawed democracy... Sam Seaborn, I realise, is my idealised self."

The pretty boy wants to be taken seriously, at last. And he has political aspirations. Reviews for his book have praised his transformation from callow heartthrob into a man of wit, character and wisdom – the *New York Times* described him as "the sturdiest" of his cohorts. The gamble of presenting himself publicly "without the mask" is proving successful in boosting and refurbishing his image.

"It's definitely not part of any plan," he says. "But I like the idea of service. If I could find the right fit, I would definitely think about it, skeletons and all. Can you imagine the kind of attack ads they'd run against me? 'Do you want this man representing California?'"

Unlike his close buddy Schwarzenegger, whose transgressions were kept secret, Lowe's demons are now the stuff of anecdote, addressed openly and with good humour, effectively defanged. A lifetime in the public eye must be some sort of training for government, I venture.

"It is," he says, becoming animated. "The ability to lead is the ability to communicate, and listen, and inspire," he says. "By the way – that's what actors do every day!"

"To listen – the great ones do that almost exclusively. Then they put the best and brightest around them."

Lowe's entourage today might only extend to the best and brightest in hair and makeup, but expect that to change.

People mistrust politicians even more than they do actors, I point out. "Right. But that's for good reason," he laughs. I can't tell if he really believes that or not. He'll be a natural on the hustings.