Foreword

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SOME YEARS BACK, MOLLY WAS HOLDING forth at the head of a long table at McCormick & Schmick's on Congress Avenue when I noticed that Adam Clymer's menu was on fire. Adam was midway down a table of twenty-one diners, just close enough to Molly to follow one of her long riffs on Texas politics and too close to a candle on the table.

Adam is the quintessential *Times* man—former editor of the *Harvard Crimson*, arid sense of humor on good days, hard facts, reasoned analysis, and all that. He's the *New York Times* reporter Dick Cheney called a “world-class asshole.”

Molly adored him. Adam, that is.

Just in from Washington and travel-weary, Adam was the final arrival at a dinner party that had grown exponentially as waiters added tables—all on Molly's tab. (Molly would part ways with McCormick & Schmick after I told her its owners had tried to eliminate the minimum wage for waiters in Oregon and bankrolled Republican campaigns.) On this Friday night in December, however, she turned the restaurant's large dining room into her salon. Anyone lucky enough to be there—including Molly's “Chief of Stuff,” Betsy Moon; Liz Carpenter, Lady Bird Johnson's former press secretary; omnivorous state representative Elliott Naishtat; *Texas Observer* publisher Charlotte McCann; Jane's Due Process founder Susan Hays; Fox newsgirl Ellen Fleysher—was, well, lucky to be there.

I tried to get Adam's attention, but he was not to be distracted. So I removed the menu from his hand and smothered the flames with a clean dinner plate. It was no surprise that Adam missed his own fire. Molly was a marvelous

performer. She performed on paper, eight hundred words, three times a week for four hundred newspapers, until breast cancer ended it.

She also performed in the kitchen, where she could whip up a remarkable lobster bisque or a perfect steak au poivre. She performed at the table, where conversations were fueled by good wine and good food, or beer, burgers, and barbecue. She loved cuisine, haute and not-so-haute, served up with conversation, high- or lowbrow.

Regarding the not-so-haute, Molly and I once planned a magazine piece that would describe a white-linen dinner built exclusively on the recipes we found in *The Ron Paul Family Cookbooks*. That's Ron Paul, the Libertarian obstetrician Republican congressman adored by gold bugs, Ayn Randers, and conspiracy theorists (anyone who believes right-wing nuttiness isn't congenital might read up on the Kentucky Senate campaign of Dr. Paul's son Rand).

The cookbook has been filed away in my attic archives. But I recall ambrosia, a Spam recipe, Jell-O dishes, and green beans in cream of mushroom soup; it also had a Dream Whip dessert that I think required the crushing of Oreos. They embodied the congealed sixties-in-suburbia offerings that Johnny Depp's alien character found so utterly alien in the film *Edward Scissorhands*.

"We'll cook it. Alan Pogue will photograph it. Sweets will review it. And someone else will eat it," Molly said. Sometimes journalism requires sacrifices too great to bear.

I admit that I had misgivings about a book about cooking with Molly Ivins. It seemed that it was neither fish nor fowl, neither a cookbook nor a memoir. Yet the more I thought about it, the more the idea of a culinary memoir appealed to me.

Here's why: because she was a performer (she described herself as a professional Texan), Molly Ivins was a difficult person to know. Too often, even among large groups of friends, she was "in character" or "in voice." Molly's *métier* was that remarkable voice, appropriated from the gargoyles who pass for elected officials in Texas and from the decent elected officials who still speak in a genuine Texas idiom.

Yet there was much more to Molly than the public persona, as interesting and entertaining as it was. She was polyglot fluent, speaking Texan, Smith College English, and French. She was complex. She read broadly and deeply. She was loyal to a fault, often hiring a larger entourage of unemployed friends than did Elvis. She was an ardent Elvis fan and loved Jerry Lee Lewis enough to

buy a piano she never learned to play in hopes of someday mastering “Great Balls of Fire.”

It was in the kitchen and at the table with small groups of friends that Molly disarmed. It is Molly disarmed whom Ellen Sweets introduces to readers.

On the Sunday morning following the McCormick & Schmick dinner, Molly invited a group of about forty to brunch at Fonda San Miguel, an Austin Mexican restaurant that has cultivated a national following in the thirty-five years it’s been in central Austin. The brunch at Fonda, an elaborate buffet of dishes you would have to travel to Oaxaca or Mexico City to find, was the end of a weekend celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Molly’s beloved *Texas Observer*, which continues kicking ass and taking names in a state where a substantial number of asses need kicking.

At one end of a long table, my wife and I sat with Adam Clymer. Adam wore a sport coat, a freshly laundered white shirt, and dress slacks. Because it was Sunday, he had forgone the tie and was wearing a Washington Nationals baseball cap.

At the other end of the table sat Molly, in a *Texas Observer* shirt and dark velour pants so worn they were weirdly iridescent. (I always considered her something of a sartorial felon.)

Adam was magisterial, quoting polls and attitudinal surveys that defined the insurmountable challenge that lay between then-Senator Barack Obama and the presidency, when the other end of the table erupted in laughter as Molly wrapped up a story.

“You know,” Adam said with a smile, “she never fit in at the *Times*.”

She didn’t. But she found a home in four hundred smaller newspapers in smaller markets, where hundreds of thousands of readers isolated by geography and political beliefs devoured her columns. Those readers, who knew Molly on paper, will now get to know her in the kitchen.