



The Life and
Many Loves
of Jack
Nicholson

The Great Seducer

JACK

EDWARD DOUGLAS



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JACK NICHOLSON

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THE GREAT SEDUCER

Edward Douglas

E-book Excerpt

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FOR WILLIAM M. MENDENHALL, M.D.
“DOCTOR BILL”

To catch the life that throbbed behind the work, this is our task.

—LEON EDEL, *HENRY JAMES*

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PROLOGUE

NO NEED FOR VIAGRA

One of the most surprising things Cynthia Basinet saw during her millennial love affair with Jack Nicholson, the leading American actor of his time, with seventy-eight movies in forty-five years, was the sight of the legendary superstar, who was worth \$250 million, bringing home a doggie bag from a caterer's spread.¹ "He'd come home with the food from the set, all this Mexican refried beans and shit," Basinet said.² During the same decade that he reaped \$50 million for *Batman*, in salary and a brilliant back-end deal that gave him a share of merchandising—T-shirts, motorized Batmobiles, and a dozen other related items—the humble doggie bag seemed extraordinary to Basinet, as it would to anyone who saw him toss the bartender at the 2003 SAG Awards a \$100 tip for a single glass of wine,³ but it after all only encapsulated the essence of the character of Jack Nicholson—the serious actor who would do any concept movie (including Adam Sandler's *Anger Management*) if the price was

right, the great lover who couldn't keep a woman, the generous friend and husband who helped the former wife and mother of his son pay for a \$600,000 house and later tried to repossess it and evict her. "Don't ask him to put out \$100 for dinner, but if you need \$100,000, there's no problem," producer Harold Schneider said.⁴ He was a nest of contradictions carried to unimaginable extremes, just as his dancing eyebrows and flashing smile, the most familiar trademarks on the world's screen since Brando's biceps, concealed an unfixably morbid inner life. But whatever his issues, they haven't interfered with his reign as one of the world's favorite personalities, from the time he flashed his irresistible charm in *Easy Rider* in 1969 to his Oscar-winning curmudgeon in *As Good as It Gets* in 1998, his masterful turn as a hollow man in 2003's *About Schmidt*, and his aging playboy in 2004's *Something's Gotta Give*, a film that bears remarkable parallels with the actor's personal dilemma.

"He hadn't fallen in love since Anjelica [Huston], he said to me," recalled Basinet. "The saddest thing about Jack is, I know that man loves me more than anything in the world, but he does not know how to love, or he loves in a mean way. I had to teach him to love. You have to walk him along." As Alexander Payne, Nicholson's *About Schmidt* director, observed, great actors "have a very special relationship with the camera—it's almost as though they're able to tell the camera things they can't tell any single real person."

Asked how she first met Nicholson, Basinet said, "You come to this town as a model, who else are you going to meet? I mean, if you like to have a good time, you're used to a certain energy, and you're hitting the nightclubs." Actually, the first time she saw him wasn't in Los Angeles but in France, where, already a red-haired, raving beauty, she was working as a model. One night, she went to a Paris nightclub with some friends, including a man she'd been dating. Nicholson, who was often attracted to models, sat at a nearby table with director Roman Polanski, a close friend, and

some others. Cynthia was feeling ill at ease that evening. “All these friends of mine were together because of me, but we weren’t really relating,” she later recounted. “I felt really lonely.” Then she spotted Nicholson, who didn’t seem to be paying any attention to his companions, either. “He smiled at me as if he realized I was as lonely and stranded as he.” Somehow she related to him more than to her friends; it was as if both she and the famous stranger wanted “something more” out of life—and that life itself was never quite enough, that reality had fallen short of their dreams. “It was just a brief encounter, when our eyes met,” she recalled, but it set something in motion. “What I had been envisioning in an ideal man was actually embodied in one: Jack.”

She’d first been struck with the actor when, at twenty-two, she’d seen *Terms of Endearment*, around the time she was breaking up with her husband, but her awareness of the star went all the way back to her childhood in the San Fernando Valley, where she’d been born to a mother who was an artist and a father who was a working man. When the family moved to Northern California, she grew up wanting to be a singer, but most of her free time was devoted to looking after a retarded brother. She was eight or ten years old when her father saw Nicholson in *Easy Rider* and was so impressed he started riding his motorcycle again. “I felt as though my dad was grooming me to be a particular man’s wife, and I grew up feeling a certain person would embody my dreams.” She started to think about what would be her “ideal man, and to romance about him,” and from about fifteen on, she began to have dreams about the house they would live in; it wasn’t a mansion, wasn’t even particularly fancy, and there was something very lived-in about it, almost rundown.

At nineteen, she married a “frigging spoiled brat”—an ex-baseball player who worked for a computer-parts distribution company in Northern California. They had a son, Jonathan, but

the marriage soon fell apart. She went to Los Angeles, where, instead of realizing her ambition to sing, she found it easier, with her natural beauty, to fall into modeling—and to postpone her music career for whatever man was in her life. Modeling led to the jet set and an engagement to a man who had an elaborate estate abroad. Shortly after this relationship ended, she encountered Nicholson at the Paris nightclub.

Back in Los Angeles in the 1990s, she saw the superstar again. “I often ran across him in Hollywood, and he’d come up to me in clubs and say something kind of inane. My girlfriends were saying, ‘Guess who called me last night? Jack Nicholson.’ He was hitting on everybody.” For a while, they were no more than passing ships in the night. Still, she couldn’t get him out of her mind, sensing a strange affinity that somehow already existed. When she started taking acting classes, the other students called her “a female version of Jack Nicholson.” Then she heard that he was also going to be a guest at a Beverly Hills party she was attending, and decided, If he shows up, I’m going to make a concerted effort to talk to him, civilly, just to see what he’s about.

The party was a very small one indeed. There were only a couple of other guests, and one of them, like Cynthia, was a redhead. Nicholson walked in looking “really cool” in a Hawaiian shirt and clear horn-rimmed glasses. “It was just like my dad had shown up,” she recalled. “Jack had some Jim Beam and he went to put ice in it and then saw me and suddenly dropped the ice on the bar. He swooped down on it so fast, like no one would see it, and placed it in his glass, all the while trying to remain really suave. I thought he was so cute doing that. He came over and sat down next to me and started ranting on about what had just happened when he was in his car in traffic, and what had been playing on the radio.” An odd sensation came over her as she realized some kind of ESP was going on between them. “He was expressing things I was already

thinking in my head,” she remembered. “I also started to see how much he was like my dad—a union man, union boss, head of a plumbing company. Hanging out with Jack was like sitting in the garage with my dad and his friends.”

Later, they gravitated to a couch and relaxed together, talking easily. Cynthia, without explanation or warning, lay her head on his stomach. “Uh-oh,” Jack said, “I better, like, run to the bathroom.” As he started to get up, she grabbed his arm, as if implying, You’re not going anywhere. “I yanked him back down,” she recalled. “In my mind, I’d already had signs that it was going to happen this way, and the symbol I’d been given in a dream had to do with stomachs. Six months prior to meeting Jack, I had this dream. I have a lot of prophetic ones that guide me in my life. In this dream I was getting married, but all I could see of the groom was his stomach, and it was Harvey Keitel’s stomach.” Keitel had been Nicholson’s costar in *The Two Jakes* earlier in the nineties.

The day following the dream, she was invited to a barbecue, and when she arrived, she saw Harvey Keitel sitting in a Buddhist position, almost naked. “I could see his gut,” she said, “and I thought, Damn, that’s not the one. Though he wasn’t my type, I sat back and enjoyed the party, letting the other girls enjoy Harvey. So, cut to this night with Jack, we go to sit down on the couch and for some weird reason, I feel like I’m home and I put my head on his stomach.”

Not surprisingly, he invited her to go home with him. “I’d come to a fork in the road,” she remembered, “and I said to myself, Well, I can either go home, which is nearby, or I can say, Well, Basinet, you can go with Jack, and become a woman who is led by her pursuits. I have nothing to lose. I’m not with anybody at the moment. If you step away, later you’ll say, Oh, my God, and if you stay, he’ll give you his stuff, the key to why it’s succeeded for him for so long.” She was at a place in her life, she later recalled, “when you realize,

you better pull back, find out why all these things give you a good time and then make a product from that.” That’s how she’d fallen into modeling after nightclubs and jet setting, and how, later on, she would decide to break into show business as a singer.

Though Nicholson was still in an off-again, on-again relationship with a former waitress named Rebecca Broussard, whom he’d cast as his secretary in *The Two Jakes* and who was trying, not very successfully, to become an actress, “he made it very clear he was available,” Basinet said, “and so I didn’t feel funky.”

They left the party together, but she insisted on using her own car. “I don’t trust a man that much to drive me,” she said. Nicholson lived on Mulholland Drive, the high ridge of mountains that separates Beverly Hills from the San Fernando Valley, and when Cynthia walked into his house, she said, “Well, dang!” It was the same as the lived-in, time-worn house she’d seen in her dream years ago. “It had the same little baby kiddie piano in the entranceway. I had wanted one my entire life. My parents had one in the attic, but they’d never let me touch it because they were sure I’d break it.

“Jack’s house was two-story, very family style, with a deck. Being raised on art and following artists’ careers, I noticed his paintings. I had posters of the same frigging art he had on his walls, only his were the originals. And he had a framed quote by Eleanor Roosevelt in his bathroom. My first thought about his house was, It could be redone really cool. It needed some new energy. The kitchen’s old. The whole place is kind of run down a bit. Jack wants to be loved so much that he helps so many other people and not himself, like not redoing the linoleum in the family room and the carpets. He’s just caught in a mode.”

And she was caught in his spell—that old Jack magic—especially when he put on some music, standard romantic jazz- and pop-era classics. “A key thing between us was always the music,”

she said. “We were a little wild, happy just to find somebody to play with. There were no servants there—it was the holidays—and we were both lonely. Suddenly, we were all over each other. He was a virile lover, though obviously well into midlife. This was just prior to the advent of Viagra, and there was no way he could have been on it. That man did not need Viagra around me. [Later, when Viagra went on the market, Nicholson was an early investor in the company,⁵ and commented, in 2004, ‘I only take Viagra when I’m with more than one woman.’]⁶ He’s just a really endearing person, and there was something else. I was taking acting classes, wanted to be an actress, and Jack Nicholson was an actor. I projected my fantasy on him, and he got it and played it back. Later, we relaxed and watched TV.”

He brought out another stack of recordings. “People send him a lot of recordings so he has lots of music,” she said. “He used to make cassette tapes of his favorite songs, putting them all together. He has such a great knowledge of music. He remembers every frigging song.”

Finally, they went down to the kitchen, where she gradually became aware of “weird little coincidences.” They both liked to drink Earl Grey tea. Then, when she went to the bathroom, she saw that she and Nicholson used the same fragrance. “It was a flowery female one and a woodsy male one. I keep my perfume in the car, so I don’t know if [he took it, but] it would disappear.”

While still in the bathroom, she noticed that it was “filled with all these great paintings, including a Picasso, nudes, and little pencil markings, like the ones I used to make to chart my son’s growth in height through the years. I stood there trying to figure out how old his daughter was, and whether he’d let her come in there, because—well, you know how sexuality is perceived, and there was a painting that, when you sat on the toilet, you looked at. Picasso or something, a woman lying back. I’m not saying there’s anything

bad with your daughter seeing nudes, but she needs to validate her own insides before you start showing her projected images, especially when you're a father who's known to have issues of [sexuality]."

They continued to hang out that night, and then, as she started to leave, they shook hands.

"No matter what happens, let's be friends," she told him. He nodded and said, "We'll always be friends through thick and thin."

For the next two weeks, she occasionally thought about his daughter and the bathroom nude painting, and when she saw him again, he asked her, "You think it's okay that I bring 'Lorraine' [in the bathroom] and measure her height?"

"I was thinking about it last week," she said. "You can judge [for yourself], but I would get rid of that picture across from the toilet."

From that moment on, "we were together, and we were friends, then best friends," she said, "and we couldn't wait to talk to each other. More than anything, I just knew that this was a neat friendship." As lovers, they were always growing and changing. "It was wild in the beginning but then after a while, it was like the key just fit. It was like home." He wasn't a movie star to her anymore; just "that cute guy that sang to me and danced for me."

In the routine they developed, Nicholson came to her place Sunday evenings after spending the day with his two young children, usually wearing a golf sweater and khakis. "I fit into his life better that way, helping him wind down and start the week; I just felt we could get along better after he saw the kids on Sunday. Then I got confused about what day it was, and the first time he came to my house, it took him two and a half hours. He'd been way out in Malibu with Sean Penn [Nicholson's director for *The Crossing Guard* and *The Pledge* in the nineties]. Then he arrived at his house and called, and I still coaxed him to come. Later, when I realized

how fast he'd been driving, I was sorry I'd urged him to come. I thought, You don't have the right to play with another person's soul. Nor do you have a right to jeopardize [the Jack Nicholson industry]. A lot of people are very dependent on the commerce he creates. For four decades, people have been making money off him, and in time I would try to protect him from people using him, because it totally drained his energy. Gradually, I realized we were both alike in that we have a bit of the chameleon in us. We completely come in and project who we are, and take over a room and goof with it. Or, especially when the company is interesting, we mold ourselves into the group. Jack is wonderful to talk politics and music with."

Eventually she met Nicholson's old friends Warren Beatty and Robert Evans. The latter held court in his Beverly Hills mansion, but Cynthia found to her surprise that she couldn't relate to his friends, let alone take over the room. "I knew Bob from before Jack, but I just didn't want to be with those people. Sometimes he would just have these two women there. One time I met a couple of women up there and they were talking, and I could see that they just had a different reason of why they were in Hollywood, and what they were getting out of it, which is fine." Unlike Basinet, the glamour girls at Evans's house never seemed to be working on a project, and Basinet always had one in development, her current interest being "a book on facials."

Presumably that was a topic that would have interested the world-class beauties who flocked to Evans, but Basinet couldn't extract any feedback from these girls, who, she decided, didn't appear to spend much time thinking. She gave up on the scene at Evans's house, but elsewhere in L.A., whenever she found herself surrounded by superstar trendsetters and rich, fashion-conscious consumers, she regarded everything they did and said as potential merchandising opportunities, products or practices to go national

with, whether as a beauty expert, health guru, physical trainer, New Age counselor, nouvelle cuisine chef, or, ideally, as a performer. California was the breeding ground of them all.

“I ran into Warren [Beatty] twice,” she remembered. Many of Nicholson’s memories were tied to Beatty; the two men had in common a “history of the way you treat women and the way you are,” she said. “I think Jack has just such a brilliant mind, and I think Warren’s a charmer. Jack’s mind is learned, absorbed knowledge, not like Warren’s freethinking. Jack’s a lot more sincere, more cerebral.

“Jack began trying to find what would keep me around, what it was I wanted. We were so shy of each other that he would shake around me. His fame couldn’t buy me, not even when he put his Oscars in front of me. We really didn’t talk about work or movies; we talked about ourselves. I’d buy him Godiva chocolates, but the smallest little box, so he could eat the whole thing. The guy’s a genius, but he’d kind of lost his mind at this point and I began to suspect that it was too much work to have a relationship with this man. There were just too many walls to scale. He gave me a necklace and told me that it was paste [fake]. I wore it, and about a week later, my neck turned green.”

“You know,” Cynthia told him, “the necklace you gave me is turning green. Why would that be? It must not be real gold.”

“It’s not?” Nicholson said. “I think I paid two hundred dollars for it.”

As Basinet would discover, loving Jack Nicholson would turn into both an obstacle course with increasingly difficult hurdles, and a maze with no way out, like the treacherous hedge that defeated Jack Torrance in *The Shining*. Along with the experience of some of the other noncelebrities who loved Nicholson,

Basinet's time with him followed a pattern strikingly unlike that of such public personalities in his emotional life as Michelle Phillips, Anjelica Huston, and Lara Flynn Boyle. In the non-celebrity configuration, repeated over and over, an obscure woman became obsessed with Nicholson after making love with him, was ardently sought and courted, but strictly kept in the background, in an atmosphere of secrecy. These became the women of the harem, an unofficial, unstructured, floating sorority in which the members never met one another, but were all too aware of one another's existence. Nicholson seemed to want them and at the same time was repelled by them, a strange but unmistakable echo of his initial experiences with women—his grandmother, whose child he thought he was; his mother, who told him she was his sister; and his aunt, who also passed as a sister. These three extraordinary New Jersey women were responsible, in their well-meaning but lying ways, for bringing him into the world and raising him without ever letting him know that he was illegitimate, or who his true parents were. Denied his own mother, he would, in a sense, and perhaps understandably, never forgive womankind.

So much was going on in Nicholson's heart, too much for Basinet to deal with, like the ghost of Anjelica Huston and Nicholson's seventeen-year affair with her; Rebecca Broussard, the mother of two of his children, Ray and Lorraine, both born in the nineties; and the hellcat TV-series actress Lara Flynn Boyle, whose power over Nicholson seemed total and unbreakable despite frequent fights and breakups. How, in the midst of all this, could a warm and viable love affair proceed? Basinet knew she would be entering a world unlike any she'd ever known, but at least she'd be with a man who was her ideal friend and lover, possibly offering precious opportunities from the red-hot center of Hollywood power.

Young, talented, pretty, and with many available options for a safer life, she decided to plunge into Nicholson's world, headlong

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and holding nothing back. They made quite a match, Nicholson with “that little bit of male fascism that makes him dangerous, and, hence, attractive,” as *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael once wrote, and Basinet, with her steely tenacity that would prove, as Nicholson discovered, as strong as her devotion.

Chapter One

THE PRINCE OF SUMMER

Just as Nicholson ultimately became remote and unattainable for Cynthia Basinet, so were his parents forever distant from Nicholson. “I became conscious of very early emotions about not being wanted,” he said, “feeling that I was a problem to my family as an infant.” Quite literally, his parents would never permit him to know them—not even their real names or exact relationships.

According to one theory, his father was a man named Don Furcillo-Rose, who impregnated Nicholson’s mother, June Frances Nicholson, then a beautiful, red-haired, seventeen-year-old New Jersey girl and aspiring movie star, who’d been courted by gangsters and prizefighters, and appeared as a showgirl in a Leonard Sillman revue on Broadway. Furcillo-Rose, a song-and-dance man who’d worked the Jersey Shore with various bands, was married to another woman and had already fathered a son. Angry and outraged, June’s mother, Ethel May, banished him from her pregnant daughter’s presence in 1936, months before the birth of Jack Nicholson.¹

According to another theory, Nicholson's father was a band-leader/pianist/dance-studio owner who'd played the Jersey circuit with Jackie Gleason; his name was Eddie King, and he had featured June Nicholson on his radio show *Eddie King and His Radio Kiddies* before getting her pregnant. Later, threatened with deportation as an illegal immigrant, King went into hiding in Asbury Park, fearing that admission of having sex with a teenager would get him into even deeper trouble with the law. He was finally cleared and later married an employee at his dance studio.²

Even June herself wasn't sure who Jack's father was, and as Jack would later put it, he belonged to his "own downtrodden minority: the bastard."³ Putting the best possible face on his illegitimacy and its inevitably destabilizing effect on his life,⁴ he convinced himself that he had "the blood of kings flowing through my veins."

Jack's thirty-nine-year-old grandmother, Ethel May Nicholson (or "Mud," as he later nicknamed her), was a slender, pretty brunette. Gifted as a seamstress and painter, she was capable of taking care of herself and others, which was often necessary. Her alcoholic husband, a dapper window dresser named John J. Nicholson, decorated for Steinbach department stores in Asbury Park, but disappeared on binges and could be counted on for nothing. When Ethel May learned that her daughter was pregnant out of wedlock, she made an extraordinary decision. As the only female in the house who was married, Ethel May would assume the baby's parenting, even claiming to be his mother. Her decision was tacitly accepted by John J., June, and Lorraine. "You can't imagine the stigma and shame for a mother and child in that situation at that time," said "Rain"—Nicholson's nickname for his pretend sister Lorraine—who was fourteen when June became pregnant.⁵

After considering abortion,⁶ June crossed the Hudson River to Manhattan and remained there until the baby's birth, on April 22, 1937, at Bellevue Hospital. When Jack was two months old, she

returned home. Lorraine related, “Right after that, [June] got a job and was gone, which was OK. Mud just grabbed that baby and made him hers. My mother lived and breathed Jack. Everything Jack did was great to us.” Neighbors naturally gossiped, speculating on the identity of the father, many of them later noticing the resemblance between Jack and Eddie King, but eventually they accepted that the boy was Ethel May’s “change-of-life baby.” Jack grew up thinking that June, his true mother, was his sister, and that Lorraine, his aunt, was his other sister. When Jack was in his teens, Lorraine was tempted to tell him the truth—that June, not Ethel May, was his mother—but she held back, and he continued to live in ignorance until he was thirty-seven years old, long after he’d achieved stardom. “They were both so afraid of losing him,” Lorraine recalled. Ethel May and June suspected, not surprisingly, that he’d lash out at them in rage for practicing such gross deception. “He grew up with three mothers,” Lorraine added, “and even though he wasn’t close to June, no one ever deserted Jack.”

Though it was a merciful act in many respects, Jack was surrounded by crafty and deceitful women, a situation that would forever influence his attitude toward women. “Jack has a right to be angry—a legitimate beef,” Lorraine said in 1994. “If he’s got hangups today, they’re legitimate, too.” Not until 1974, when he was contacted by a *Time* magazine reporter researching a cover story, was the secret so long and scrupulously guarded by Ethel May, June, and Lorraine finally exposed. Upon learning that he was illegitimate, Jack was devastated, his entire sense of identity undermined and savaged, but at last he understood why he’d always felt like a second-class citizen, and why his lack of self-esteem always destroyed his love affairs and attempts at marriage. In 1975 he referred to “a terrible realization I had as an infant that my mother didn’t want me . . . and along with that came desperate feelings of need. Basically . . . I relate to women by trying to please

them as if my survival depended on them. In my long-term relationships, I'm always the one that gets left."⁷

Denied his real mother, he would never stop searching for her, and all his intimate relationships with women would be shaped by what had happened there on the Jersey Shore. "Somehow," he later ruminated, "in the sexual experience, I was making the woman into a sort of a mom—an authoritarian female figure; that made me feel inadequate to the situation, small and childish. I indulged myself in a lot of masturbatory behavior. I solved none of these problems in therapy. I worked them out for myself, but any of them might reappear."⁸

As journalist Chrissy Ulley sagely wrote in the *London Sunday Times* in 1996, "Despite this 'I love women, I love the company of women' line that he's always pushing, you know for sure that the reverse is true—that men who love women like this are in awe of them, they fear them, they don't understand them, but they understand how to play them, how to hurt them, how to make it work."

The wild philandering of Jack Nicholson, America's preening Don Juan, a pioneer and hero of the sex revolution of the sixties and seventies, was a reaction to his own bizarre, traumatic, and troubled childhood. "Under the circumstances, it's a miracle that I didn't turn out to be a fag," he said.⁹ What he didn't escape, however, were "castration fears"¹⁰ and "homosexual fears."¹¹

The most urbanized, densely populated state in the United States, New Jersey is a noisy, blue-collar melting pot, but at the same time, beautiful in places like Cape May, rich in history, and one of the key cradles of American independence. In 1776, Gen. George Washington staged a surprise attack against the Hessians at Trenton, followed by the Revolutionary Army's victories at Princeton—

which briefly became the U.S. capital—and Morristown. In 1904, Mark Twain and Henry James met at the home of their publisher, Harper's Col. George Harvey, at Deal Beach. Jersey was the home of three of America's best-loved poets, Walt Whitman of Camden, William Carlos Williams of Rutherford, and Allen Ginsberg of Paterson. At Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson was chief administrator before becoming president of the United States and Albert Einstein dreamed up the atomic bomb. The first movie was made there in 1889, Thomas Edison established the first movie studio near his labs in West Orange in 1892, and the first drive-in theater opened in Jersey in 1933. The state also lays claim to the first pro basketball game, played in 1896.

Jersey was the home of Terry Malloy of *On the Waterfront*, Tony Soprano, Joey "Pants" Pantoliano, the Amboy Dukes, Paul Robeson, President Grover Cleveland, Count Basie, Connie Francis, Whitney Houston, Meryl Streep, and Frank Sinatra, whose mother, Dolly, performed illegal abortions in Hoboken. The fabled Jersey Shore—127 miles from Sandy Hook to Cape May, dotted with holiday towns ranging from skanky to tony—spawned Jack Nicholson, Bruce Springsteen, Danny DeVito, and the annual Miss America contest at Atlantic City. Just a stone's throw from the beach and the famous boardwalk, Nicholson grew up in the middle-class section of Neptune City. "I was never an underprivileged kid," he said, and added, ironically, "I caddied at very nice golf courses."¹²

But he could also admit, "I lived a tense life . . . I never had great relationships with my family."¹³ In local bars, the man he called his father, John Joseph Nicholson, whom he'd later discover was his grandfather, would put away thirty-five shots of three-star Hennessy while Jack drank eighteen sarsaparillas. John J. was a "snappy dresser" and a "smiley Irishman," cheered at firehouse games as "a great baseball player" before he discovered apricot

brandy. Many years later, in 1987, Jack's love for John J. would be immortalized in his sympathetic portrayal of him as the Francis Phelan character in one of his best films, *Ironweed*. "I never heard him raise his voice," Jack recalled. "I never saw anybody be angry with him, not even my mother. He was just a quiet, melancholy, tragic figure—a very soft man." Before long, John J. disappeared, abandoning his family, though, like Francis Phelan in *Ironweed*, he occasionally and unexpectedly showed up, usually at Christmas, perhaps toting a raw turkey, as in *Ironweed*.

At 2 Steiner Avenue, in a roomy two-story house near Route 35, the Nicholson family's circumstances steadily improved as the independent and resourceful Ethel May established her own small business as a hairdresser, running a beauty parlor out of her home. Although her well-to-do Pennsylvania Dutch Protestant father, who was president of the Taylor Metal Company, had disowned her for marrying John J., a Roman Catholic, her family eventually forgave her and lent her the money to purchase a permanent-wave machine and beautician lessons in Newark.

After Jack's real mother, June, left home to tour as a dancer on the road, she married a handsome test pilot, Murray "Bob" Hawley Jr., during World War II, and remained in Michigan, where she'd been stranded in 1943. "She was a symbol of excitement" to Jack, who remembered her as "thrilling and beautiful." Lorraine, June's younger sister, married a railroad brakeman for the line that later became Conrail; George "Shorty" Smith, a former all-state football player, served as Jack's mentor and surrogate father. Shorty was an irresistible charmer and ladies' man, and Jack doted on him, later affectionately describing him as a barfly bullshitter. Obviously it was from his family that Jack Nicholson picked up two important lifelong loves: showbusiness and sports—and perhaps something else. Speaking of Shorty, Lorraine said he was an alcoholic, but so beguilingly "sweet" that women would let him get away with

anything, including “pinching boobs, that most men would’ve been killed for.”¹⁴

Jack once described himself in childhood as “a Peck’s Bad Boy and a freckle-faced mischief-maker.”¹⁵ Lorraine agreed and went even further, adding that he was spoiled rotten, lying down on the floor and throwing kicking and screaming tantrums by the time he was six. He insisted on Ethel May’s undivided attention, and if she so much as left him to answer the phone, his temperamental demonstrations “rocked the house like an earthquake,” Lorraine remembered. Understandably, years later, when he delivered the murderous “Heeere’s Johnny!” line in *The Shining*, very little rehearsal was required.

The troubled child was “overweight since I was four years old,” Nicholson later said.¹⁶ He would emerge from his origins in a houseful of women with a cynical philosophy about relations between the sexes: “[Women] hate us, we hate them; they’re stronger, they’re smarter; and, most important, they don’t play fair.”¹⁷ Where such ideas came from, he perhaps unwittingly indicated in a 2003 press conference for *About Schmidt*, in which he described a melancholy preschool experience with Ethel May and Lorraine. “I’m one of the kids who actually got coal for Christmas one year,” he said. “I had sawed the leg off the dining room table and then refused to cop. They went all the way down the line with me. I opened the package and there it was—coal.” He cried so hard the women finally relented and gave him his real presents—a sled and a baseball bat. “I had my way in the end,” he said.¹⁸

Early passions included the movies (he was a fan from the time he caught Bing Crosby and Barry Fitzgerald in *Going My Way* in 1945); sports (football and baseball; John J. took him across the river to see Mel Ott hit a homer); and comic books. “*Batman* was my favorite,” he said, and added, “The Joker was my favorite character.” After playing the Joker in 1989’s *Batman*, he remarked,

“There are certain parts people say you’re born to play. The Joker would be one of them for me.”

Significantly, the Joker was a dark, malevolent figure, and in Nicholson’s youth, the sense of something sinister was never far from his consciousness, the feeling that something was wrong with him—an ineradicable fatal flaw he could not escape. At six, he visited June and her husband, Murray, in Michigan, where the mother and son’s resemblance did not go unnoticed. Jack decided he wanted to stay, and Murray’s sister Nancy Hawley Wilsea was present the day he wouldn’t let go of June, screaming, “Don’t let her fool you. She’s really my mother. . . . Please, I want to stay.”¹⁹ Nicholson later denied that he’d ever caught on to the deception: “I never heard anything. Either that or I had the most outstanding selective hearing imaginable. It doesn’t matter. I had a great family situation there. It worked great for me.”²⁰

When June and her aviator husband, Murray Hawley, moved east, Jack spent more time with them. Scion of an old, established Connecticut family, Murray was the son of a noted orthopedic surgeon, and Murray and June lived “a very country-club life in Stony Brook, Long Island, where I always spent my summers in this very nice upper-class atmosphere,” he later told *Rolling Stone*.²¹ He grew close to their daughter, Pamela. Born in 1946, she was Jack’s half-sister, nine years his junior. Pamela would call him “Uncle Jack” until it was disclosed in 1974 that they were actually half-brother and half-sister. June’s marriage also produced a son, Murray Jr., before it ended in divorce.

Basketball was Jack Nicholson’s chosen sport; he participated in the game at Theodore Roosevelt Elementary, near Shark River, in an area adjacent to a black ghetto, “so my early basketball experience was being the token white,” he recalled. Already a streetwise hustler, Nicholson used the game as a way to cheat people out of their money. His friend Dutch Nichols remembered that every

weekend, he and “Chubs,” as he referred to the perpetually overweight Nicholson, would grab a basketball and follow the railroad tracks to Bangs Avenue, a dangerous Asbury Park neighborhood, dribbling all the way. They played two-on-two with any willing sucker, deliberately losing and then raising the stakes, starting at a dollar and quickly escalating to five dollars.

“Dutch would be shooting around,” Nicholson said, “missing everything, looking geekish, and [I] would be just sort of looking like Chubs . . . built low to the pavement, crazy eyes and slower than Sunday traffic on the Garden State.”²² Occasionally the scam of purposely losing the first round stopped working. One day, their opponents demanded their winnings after one round, but Nicholson complained that he was carrying the money in his sock.

“You don’t want me to have to take off my shoe and sock and everything, do ya? Don’tcha wanna play again?”

After some grousing, his gullible victims fell for it, and lost the next round—and five dollars, which Dutch and Jack grabbed and scrambled.

“Good thing you had that money in your sock, Chubs, ’cause I didn’t have a red cent,” Dutch said.

“Dutch, the only thing I got in my sock is a hole,” Jack confessed.²³

Mrs. Ginny Doyle, who taught Nicholson from ages eight through twelve, said he “never did a lick of work and always got the highest marks.”²⁴ He wasn’t “bookish smart,” she added, and he “preferred being known as the clown.”²⁵ The pranks and jokes didn’t fool Mrs. Doyle, who realized that “he was unhappy, disappointed by his father.”²⁶ The male bonding that he missed at home was amply available at school, especially in the toilets, locker rooms, and on the basketball court, where he embraced it with a vengeance. “I had a preadolescent mild homosexual experience as a child,” he said in 1972.²⁷

Though a Protestant, Ethel May gave her children a Catholic upbringing, deferring to John J.'s religion, and Jack was baptized in 1943 at the Church of the Ascension in Bradley Beach. He "sought out Catholicism on his own," he said, and he considered it "a smart religion," but he ended up an agnostic.²⁸ His only religion was, and remains, show business, which he was already so obsessive about as a boy that he sat through *The Babe Ruth Story*, the 1948 biopic starring William Bendix, five times. After that, all he talked about was acting. At school, he was invariably the first to volunteer for variety shows, and, in the eighth grade, he "sang ['Managua] Nicaragua' in a very fabulous Roosevelt family school variety show," he recalled. "I was supposed to be Frank Sinatra; my costume was a crepe paper, yellow and red, like Phillip Morris, and I thought, What does this have to do with Frank Sinatra?"

By the age of fourteen, "Chubs" stood at five feet nine, had dark brown hair, brownish green eyes, and slightly pointed ears, and was still running to fat, weighing 180 pounds.²⁹ The family moved to a flat at 505 Mercer Avenue in Spring Lake, a few miles south of Neptune. He started high school in 1950, when rock 'n' roll hadn't yet begun, but cool was in, spearheaded long before Elvis Presley by Ray Charles and Johnnie Ray. "I started off with Harry James," he said, "then *South Pacific* and all those wonderful old songs. [Although] we're the original rock 'n' roll generation, there's a crease in between there, a certain era of music that's never been revived, songs that were hits when I was in grammar school: 'A Huggin' and a-Choppin',' 'Open the Door, Richard.'"³⁰

Classmates at Manasquan High School differ in their accounts of Nicholson's social status. Nancy Purcell, today a sixty-eight-year-old Unity Church minister and mother of three daughters in Lynchburg, Virginia, recalls him as "everybody's friend. A real outgoing, fun kid."³¹ A less charitable classmate referred to him as "a fat Irish kid who wasn't good enough to play basketball so he man-

aged the team and worked the scoreboard.”³² Nicholson went out for freshman football but was too runty for the varsity; he also went out for freshman basketball and later made high claims for his performance as the “sixth man” who “steadies the team.”

Whatever his ability, and despite his lack of self-esteem, Nicholson was a popularity-seeker nonpareil, and sports was the surest route to acceptance in Manasquan’s in-crowd of jocks and cheerleaders. Having popular friends gave him the feeling of self-respect he lacked inside. “Someone like me always worries about the cataclysmic experience that might jerk away the facade and expose you as the complete imbecile that, deep in your heart, you know you are,” he later said,³³ adding, “peer group was everything.”

He successfully cultivated a cool attitude, imitating the style of the class favorites he observed at their hangout, the Spring Lake canteen in the local library’s basement, where the boys wore pegged corduroys, single-button suit coats, and stiletto thin ties. “It was the age of the put-on,” he said. “Cool was everything. Collars were up, eyelids were drooped. You never let on what bothered you. . . .”³⁴ There was a lot of visible rebellion, aside from the D.A. haircut. I used to like to go to school in a pair of navy-blue cuffed pegged pants, a black or navy-blue turtleneck sweater, maybe a gray coat over it, and a black porkpie hat that I’d gotten from the freeway in a motor accident that involved a priest.”³⁵ One of his classmates was future astronaut Russell Schweikert.³⁶

With Nicholson’s wit and creativity, he was able to charm the golden ones, and soon was going with them to the beach, to New York, or the Algonquin Theater on Main Street in Manasquan, watching his favorite actors, Marlon Brando and Henry Fonda. He wrote sports stories for the school newspaper, *The Blue and Gray*, and, foreshadowing *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, played a nut case in a school production of *The Curious Savage* by John Patrick.

“When we had a dance you just got the greatest suit you could get a hold of,” he said. “Always pegged, pleats, blue suedes, thinnest tie, shoulders, one button in front.” In 2003 he added, “My records were played at school dances.” Classmate George Anderson stated, “Jack wasn’t one of the heroes, but he made them his friends.”³⁷

Basketball, Nicholson once said, “is the classical music of sports. It’s a question of match-ups, plays, grace, strength, speed—the most competitive game, bar none.”³⁸ In his sophomore year he was busted down to equipment manager, keeping score and looking after uniforms and balls. His uncontrollable temper got him into trouble when, enraged by a rival team’s stratagems, he invaded their locker room and trashed their equipment. Thereafter, he was banned from all Manasquan sports.³⁹ “He was really not an athlete,” explained George Bowers, Manasquan’s assistant coach, but Dutch Nichols, one of the school’s best athletes, defended Jack, blaming a “personality conflict” with the coach. According to Dutch, Nicholson knew how to dribble, was fast on his feet, and managed a neat outside shot.

After shedding his baby fat, Nicholson had a moderately athletic physique. People were beginning to notice his sharply etched facial features, all the more noticeable under his spiky crewcut hair and eagle-wing eyebrows.

One day in 1953, as he stood talking in the hallway at school with Nancy Purcell, who’d just broken up with her boyfriend, Nancy said she’d probably spend the senior prom night at home. Sixteen and still a junior, Nicholson said, “You have to go. I’ll take you.” That night he arrived at her house in a gray suit, and slipped a white carnation corsage on her wrist. She wore a black and white formal her mother had made, and remembered that Nicholson “was a great dancer.” The prom ended with a jitterbug, and later they went to an après-prom party, then directly home. He was a

“sweet” teenager who “didn’t kiss me goodnight,” she said. “It was our one and only date.”⁴⁰

The psychological baggage he was carrying prevented the normal development of a healthy ego; he didn’t particularly like himself, even disdaining his most unarguably attractive feature: “I don’t like my smile,” he said.⁴¹ His Achilles’ heel was “lack of self-confidence,” he added. “Sometimes I’m not able to take in the positive communication that’s directed at me because I’m not sure I deserve it.”⁴²

In his senior year he decided he wanted to become a journalist or a chemical engineer. Taking note of his keen intelligence and chiseled good looks—heroic brow, dazzling eyes, perfect nose, wide smile, and shining, even teeth—Lorraine urged him to leave home and make something of himself, but all he wanted to do at that point was have a good time. He and his friends would “go to New York on weekends, get drunk, see ball games, bang around. . . . School was out, we just went to the beach all summer. And had fun, getting drunk every night.” Even friends who didn’t necessarily like him or consider him attractive began to call him “the Great Seducer,” he said, “because I seemed to have something invisible but unfailing.” That something, of course, was charisma—star quality.

As a lifeguard at Bradley Beach during his sixteenth summer, he met his first movie actor, Cesar Romero, star of such Twentieth Century-Fox Technicolor extravaganzas as *Coney Island* and *Carnival in Costa Rica*. When Nicholson asked him what Hollywood was like, the Latin leading man said, “Hollywood is the lousiest town in the world when you’re not working,” but nothing could dampen Nicholson’s elation that special summer, when he was lean, glowing with youthful handsomeness, and had all the right moves. He was “tremendously streamlined . . . in the water,” his

future partner, Anjelica Huston, said years later. “Jack swims like Esther Williams.”⁴³ Standing in a boat just beyond the breakers and sporting his mirrored sunglasses, white oxide on his nose and lips, a black coat, and a prisoner’s hat, he preened for admiring girls from Teaneck, New Jersey. “When you got to be a lifeguard,” he said, “you were the prince of summer. . . . It didn’t do me much good, but a lot of other guys made a lot of hay with it. . . . Like most people of that generation, I didn’t think I was adept at anything.”⁴⁴ His classmates voted him both the class optimist and the class pessimist.⁴⁵

He considered attending the University of Delaware but knew it would entail a “double effort” to afford it. “I was lazy,” he said, “and I had been working since I was eleven.” Now seventeen, he began to feel that his destiny lay in Los Angeles, where June had relocated in 1953. New Jersey, he decided, was “a futile state.” After his graduation in 1954, he suddenly disappeared, flying to California on money borrowed from Lorraine. “I turned around one day and he was gone,” said Dutch Nichols. “No goodbyes.”

Nicholson had sound reasons for making a hasty exit, later explaining, “I think it’s very important for people to have something to leave home for. . . . Otherwise, it’s the gin mill and mom.”⁴⁶ Ironically, if unwittingly, it was to his mom he was fleeing, though he still believed June to be his sister.

Harry Gittes, one of Nicholson’s earliest Hollywood friends, said, “Jack’s ‘mother’ wanted to be in the movies and so did he, and he followed her out here, not even realizing she was his mother at the time.” He arrived in L.A. in September 1954, wearing the standard Ivy League fifties’ uniform—sweater; poplin, khaki-colored windbreaker with a zip front; blue jeans; and penny loafers.

Staying with June and her children in an Inglewood apartment, he rarely ventured out for the first six months except to shoot pool or go to the beach or racetrack, where he’d sometimes win

\$300 to \$400 on the horses. “It was great, just like home,” he said.⁴⁷ Finally, a big loss forced him to give up gambling. “I had no friends,” he recalled, “I was living on my own. . . . I had no car. . . . It seemed like ninety years before I got to know some people.”⁴⁸ Ethel May came out from New Jersey to help June, a heavy drinker, with her children, and eventually settled in L.A. herself.⁴⁹

His half-sister, Pamela, who had a full face with freckles and bangs, was important to him, affording the hero-worship that helped keep his confidence up as he labored in a menial job in a toy store. June, a secretary at an aircraft corporation, refused to encourage his artistic side, fearing that he would get no further than she had. Both having bad tempers, they turned her apartment into a battleground. “She hated me,” he said. “No, not hated me. I mean, we used to have incredible fights. She projected all her fears onto me. By the end of her life [she would die at forty-four], she was a total conservative and she saw me as a bum. She felt her own experiment had been nothing but doom. And there I was, this promising person frittering away his life as an unsuccessful actor.”⁵⁰

Retreating to the beach, Nicholson first tasted the heady, marijuana-scented atmosphere of the Beat Generation.⁵¹ Jack Kerouac had visited L.A. in 1947, and by the midfifties his moral and cultural revolution had started on the West Coast. A few years later Janis Joplin would make Venice Beach her first California stop, long before she settled in San Francisco. In Venice, Nicholson discovered crumbling faux-Venetian palaces and canals filled with garbage, but Ocean Front Walk was teeming with the bikers and bohemians—the first-generation West Coast beatniks. In bull sessions at the Venice West Coffee House, the Grand Hotel, the Carousel, the Westwind, the Matchbox, and the Gas House, they formulated the beat agenda, defying authority and rejecting the values of a mainstream America obsessed with appliances, tail fins, and TV. “This scruffy, lazy, ineffectual, and inept bunch of

dropouts were actually engaged in a moral quest,” said David Carradine, who read poetry at the Venice West before striking it rich in the *Kung Fu* television series and playing Woody Guthrie in *Bound for Glory*. “Thomas Jefferson, Thoreau, Gandhi, Socrates, Christ all told us to set out on this search; and they were all held up to us as models.”

Nicholson loved making the scene, describing it as “jazz and staying up all night on Venice Beach.”⁵² In a 1969 interview, he added, “I’m part of the generation that was raised on the Beats, West Coast cool jazz, *Exodus*, Jack Kerouac. I think silent people make better movies anyway, since film is a visual medium. Silent Generation? I guess I’m not so silent myself. I’m maybe the spokesman for the Silent Generation.”⁵³

But as far as June was concerned, he was going to hell in a hand basket. A later friend of Nicholson’s, John Herman Shaner, who appeared on television in *The Walter Winchell File* and *M Squad*, had drinks one night with June, and recalled, “She was bitter that show business had passed her by, and she didn’t make it. . . . That is what she said: That she had a lot of talent and it was never recognized. And that she was worried about Jack. . . . She thought he was exceptionally smart. I’m not so sure she was happy about him being an actor.”⁵⁴ More to the point, she wanted her son to get a job or go back to school and train for a profession. Later, Nicholson said, “I can imagine that at times of high conflict June was dying to say to me, ‘Do it because I’m your mother, you prick!’”⁵⁵

When the atmosphere in the apartment turned toxic, she finally kicked him out. Though he would nurse a grudge, it was as if he’d at last been liberated to get into the movies, and he walked all the way from Inglewood to Sunset Boulevard, traversing Baldwin Hills and trudging up endless La Brea. He didn’t speak to June for over a year, later recalling, “She thought I’d had enough time to ex-

periment, that all I was interested in was running around, getting high, and pussy. Naturally, I strongly disagreed with her.”⁵⁶

The big lie hadn't worked for either June or Jack, creating confusion and anger all around. Not until decades later, when the truth was out, was Nicholson able to say, “Certain things about my relationship with my actual mother, whom I thought was my sister . . . were clarified when I learned the truth. Just small things, like body English. Your mother relates to you differently than your sister does. I felt a new empathy for my mother. I remember thinking, when my sister doted on me, What are you worried about? But of course a mother would worry.”⁵⁷

Clearly, he was getting nowhere fast in Los Angeles, either professionally or personally. Don Devlin, another early Hollywood pal, said, “Jack started his sexual career later than most of his friends. He was a very good boy, and behaved himself extremely well in his early years.”

He could easily have sunk into terminal lethargy, and the world would never have heard of him. “I am an anti-work-ethic person,” he said. “The only question I ever asked myself was whether I should have ever done anything at all.”⁵⁸

Then, one fateful day, he decided to go over to Culver City, to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the largest of the movie studios, and try his luck.

Chapter Two

HIP, SLICK, AND COOL

In show business, the mail room is the traditional starting place for pushy, ruthless, sexy go-getters like Sammy Glick, the unstoppable protagonist of Budd Schulberg's novel *What Makes Sammy Run*. Helen Gurley Brown, David Geffen, Barry Diller, Mike Ovitz, Bryan Lourd, and Kevin Huvane are classic examples of shrewd trainees who plundered the mail-room files, reading big shots' letters and memos to learn the business.¹ It was on Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's bottom rung, the cartoon-department mail-room, that Jack Nicholson landed, in May 1955, after applying to the studio's labor-relations desk "and going back until I found a moment when nobody had a cousin or a brother or anybody out of work," he recalled.²

He also "got into acting by being a fan—I wanted to see some movie stars." For \$30 a week, he delivered messages and mail, largely for animation virtuosi Fred Quimby, William Hanna, and Joseph Barbera, creators of the Tom and Jerry Cartoons. A

starstruck eighteen-year-old, Nicholson spotted such celebrities on the lot as Gene Kelly, Rita Moreno, and Grace Kelly, and, in his spare time, helped organize a studio softball league, playing outfield. He also belonged to the animation golf team, having been introduced to the sport by June.

After moving into an apartment in Culver City, he acquired a black '49 Studebaker—and two roommates: a Jersey high school chum, Jon Epaminondas, who showed up in L.A. in the autumn of 1955, and a colleague from Metro known as “Storeroom Roger,” who worked in the props department. Epaminondas, a sinewy ex-marine, was trying to make it in show business. Often, the three roommates went to the movies, after Nicholson decided what they should see. He chose topflight American fare like *Picnic* and *The Man With the Golden Arm*, or foreign films like Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *Diabolique*. The era of art-house cinema was just dawning, and Nicholson’s first great teachers were the “ini’s,” as he called them: Federico Fellini and Roberto Rossellini, as well as Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, and Luchino Visconti. Finding little honesty in American film acting, he respected the gutsiness and earthy power coming from overseas, as well as the stark symbolism of Bergman.

On occasion the roommates triple-dated, making the scene on the Sunset Strip, where they hung out at the Unicorn, a coffee house–bookstore. One night at the Hollywood Palladium, during a sensuous slow dance to a big band, Nicholson ended up “shooting off into the girl.” Running to the men’s room, he blotted his trousers with toilet paper.³ Another time, the three amigos picked up some Vegas dancers and repaired to the girls’ apartment. “My point of view was simply to try to seduce everyone I could,” Nicholson later recalled. “I had trouble with *ejaculatio praecox*. . . . [I’d] poke her eight times and right away [I was] coming.” In order to bring his partners to orgasm, he’d get “the chicks off without

balling them through manipulation of some kind, or [I'd get] another chick to share the load." If he went three days without having sex, he'd become "filled up, and then I'd have a premature ejaculation, which is really a form of impotence. The root of it all was some kind of pleasure denial; it was pretty unsatisfactory for the women involved."⁴

Sometimes he had better luck having sex with a girl he didn't like. "I had a few hate-fucks and they were groovy," he said.⁵ Later, with the help of Reichian therapy, he developed stamina as a lover, but he never achieved a satisfactory feeling about himself. Nothing would ever be enough, and life would always disappoint him, except when he was at the movies, which took him "away from reality, from what's outside the theater, for a couple of hours. I'm a romantic. I see reality, know how things are. . . . But I want them to be another way—something more." Women were a particular disappointment. "In my fantasy," he said, "I've wanted the women I've known to be that something more. I've let myself imagine that they have been. But I also see what they are. That's why I've never settled down with a woman."⁶ His dissatisfaction with womankind—roughly half the population of the planet—amounted to a dissatisfaction with life in general, which sprang, of course, from his fundamental dislike of himself. Though attractive and likable as an adult, he would always be the lost child who felt unwanted, the overweight kid called Chubs, chasing after cheerleaders and jocks. Self-esteem and contentment eluded him.

In early July 1955, Nicholson's grandfather, whom he still thought of as his father, was hospitalized in Neptune with cancer of the colon and a heart condition, dying two weeks later of cardiac arrest. The loyal and steadfast Lorraine had cared for him throughout his final illness. Catholic burial followed on July 26 at Neptune's Mount Calvary Cemetery. Nicholson thought it prohibitively expensive to fly back to New Jersey "just to go to a fu-

neral.”⁷ Though he understandably had little respect for John J., he loved him dearly, and his influence would show up in many ways in the years to come—the glasses Nicholson would wear in *Easy Rider*; virtually the entire characterization of Francis Phelan in *Ironweed*; and Nicholson’s dapper wardrobe, particularly his spectator shoes. John J. was basically a good egg, despite rampant irresponsibility, and as Nicholson grew older and learned that John J. was his grandfather instead of his father, it would become easier to forgive him for abandoning the family. “I certainly knew my father,” he would say in 2004. “He just didn’t happen to be my biological father.”⁸

In Culver City, on the Metro lot one day, Nicholson caught the eye of producer Joe Pasternak.

“Hiya, Joe!” said the feisty messenger.

The veteran producer of *Destry Rides Again* and *The Great Caruso* arranged for Nicholson to have a screen test but later dismissed him as too high-voiced for the movies and advised him to “get some diction lessons and some acting classes while you’re at it.” Nicholson hadn’t come to California to go to school, which sounded too much like work, and when Pasternak learned that his counsel had been ignored, he told Bill Hanna, “What’s wrong with the kid—everybody wants to be an actor.”

Nicholson certainly did, but hopefully via an easier path. Like Shelley Winters and Marilyn Monroe before him, he haunted Schwab’s Drug Store on Sunset Boulevard. He went on casting calls and engaged an agent, Fred Katz, but Katz was a dinosaur from the age of vaudeville, and came up with no jobs. In the spring of 1956, Bill Hanna arranged for Nicholson to become an apprentice at the Players’ Ring Theater on Santa Monica Boulevard near La Cienega, and Nicholson appeared in the small role of Phil, a prep-school student, in *Tea and Sympathy*, along with Felicia Farr (the future Mrs. Jack Lemmon), Edd Byrnes, and Michael Lan-

don. While the latter two scored TV series and went on to fame as Kooky in *77 Sunset Strip* and Little Joe in *Bonanza*, respectively, Nicholson toiled on in obscurity, but at least he made some valuable contacts at the Players' Ring, including Dennis Hopper, who had a leading role before dropping out to do a movie. Actor John Gilmore, who received good notices in William Inge's *A Loss of Roses*, recalled that Nicholson always seemed like an outsider, and Nicholson later explained, "I was on fire at this point inside myself, but none of it was visible to anybody; it was all covered up with fake behavior."⁹

His job at MGM was in peril. The movie industry had entered a period of radical change due to increasing competition from TV, which was still fairly new in the 1950s but catching on fast. Tightening its belt, MGM decided to eliminate cartoon and short-subject production, shutting down the animation department. "I thought, This is it," Nicholson recalled. "I'm not meant to be an actor. Then I didn't work for nine months, a year. I didn't make another penny. I [was] living on unemployment." At last he found work as an actor in television on *Matinee Theater*, where he was billed eighth in a cast of nine, and on *Divorce Court*, which paid him \$350 a week. In his first year of acting, he earned \$1,400; in his second, \$1,900.

Unrewarding parts on television led to his lifelong disdain of the medium, which he referred to as "the cancer of film," the opium of a "post-literate generation."¹⁰ Much more fulfilling were the dramatic classes he finally began to take, at the suggestion of a Metro pal, aspiring actress Luana Anders. Jeff Corey had coached James Dean, Pat Boone, Anthony Perkins, Dean Stockwell, and countless others in the garage behind his house on Cheremoya Avenue in Hollywood, charging ten dollars for two classes a week. A character actor who'd appeared in *My Friend Flicka*, one of Nicholson's favorite movies, and *Bright Leaf*, Corey was no longer able to

work in films because he'd run afoul of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), which in the fifties thoroughly intimidated the Hollywood studio chiefs and landed many performers, directors, and writers on the infamous blacklist.

A classmate of Nicholson's, Robert Towne, an English major at Pomona who resembled Donald Sutherland, assured Nicholson he was going to be a star. Another classmate, Carole Eastman, was also supportive, but Jeff Corey was much less sanguine and even considered "terminating [Nicholson] for lack of interest." Fortunately, Nicholson "never got pissed off or uptight about criticism," Corey recalled. More impressed with Nicholson on the tennis court than in acting sessions, Corey said his student "played a very muscular game, like a New Jersey kid . . . ballsy, fun-loving." Often, before class, Nicholson played handball with Robert Blake, the former child star of *Our Gang* movies, later immortalized as Little Beaver in TV's *Red Ryder*, and, later still, as the suspected murderer of his wife Bonnie Lee Bakley.

When Nicholson's Culver City roommate Jon Epaminondas left for New York to study at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, he found himself homeless, and had to count on Bob Towne to put him up, or on Ethel May, who lived in Inglewood, or June, who'd moved with her children to North Hollywood. In a pinch, he could always stay with Luana Anders or, better still, with his new girlfriend, Georgianna Carter, a blonde he met in acting class, whose parents always made him feel welcome. The first of numerous young women to believe he had matrimony in mind, Georgianna thought Nicholson "boyish," with a "soft look . . . which he lost somewhere along the line."¹¹ He took her to Ethel May's apartment for a fried-eggplant dinner, after which he treated the women to his W. C. Fields imitation. Ethel May liked Georgianna so much she gave her a permanent wave. "Pretty soon," Georgianna recalled, "I couldn't do without him."¹²

June sometimes drove to work with Georgianna, who was employed at JC Penney in the San Fernando Valley. Lorraine and Shorty also moved to California, and after Lorraine found work as secretary to a buyer, Nicholson brought friends to Sunday dinner at their apartment in Burbank. Everyone assumed that Nicholson and Georgianna would get married—everyone but Nicholson, who had his hands full at the time helping take care of June’s children, Pamela and Murray. After her husband died of a brain tumor in Canada, June raised the children alone, and Nicholson contributed to their support.

Eventually Nicholson and Bob Towne, whom he nicknamed “Flick,” took an apartment together in Hollywood.¹³ They tried to pick up starlets, who were a notch above acting students in the Hollywood pecking order, but these ambitious girls weren’t interested in nobodies.¹⁴ The apartment-sharing experiment with Towne proved equally unsuccessful. “I tried moving in with Towne, but that only lasted one day . . . I don’t think either of us was particularly easy to live with,” Nicholson later recounted.

Although Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, and James Dean dominated the contemporary, naturalistic acting style, Nicholson decided to resist their influence, because they were “as great as it gets,” and the public didn’t “need any more of these people. . . . When I started off there were twenty-five people walking around L.A. in red jackets who looked exactly like James Dean because he was very extreme and quite easy to imitate—which missed the point entirely.”¹⁵ The great character actors of the past were his models—Charley Grapewin, Walter Huston, Walter Brennan, Edward Arnold, Charles Bickford, Spencer Tracy, and Humphrey Bogart, who depended less on naturalism than old-fashioned theatricality. He also admired Steve Cochran, the raven-haired, virile heavy in *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Storm Warning*, and *The Beat Generation*. As for “my favorite film actor or actress,”

he singled out the most mannered, histrionic thespian of them all, Bette Davis. Determined to be his own man, he eschewed slavish adherence to any single acting theory.

Jeff Corey was in many respects ideally suited to be Nicholson's first coach, for he was also eclectic in his approach to acting. Although well versed in the Stanislavsky Method, the technique that shaped Brando, Geraldine Page, Kim Stanley, Paul Newman, and a host of mid-twentieth-century stars, Corey also drew on such other disciplines as the more formal, less intuitive Delsarte chart, which listed the logical gesture to accompany emotional, physical, and psychological states. One of Nicholson's classmates, good-looking six-footer Roger Corman, who was about to launch a whole new genre, the exploitation film, later recalled, "I was impressed by Jack from the beginning, particularly in the improvisations, in which he combined dramatic power with humor, never at the expense of the drama, but in support of it, giving it additional dimension and color. It is rare for an actor to have that broad a range." Nicholson later stressed that the essential ingredient in improvised acting was spontaneity: "It's from the subconscious that the unpredictable comes. . . . [and] much of the actor's techniques deal with his ability to answer his impulses spontaneously."

The citadel of the Method was Lee Strasberg, Elia Kazan, and Cheryl Crawford's Actors Studio in Manhattan, where Marilyn Monroe, at the peak of her fame, was studying in the fifties, and Nicholson wanted to get into its L.A. branch, Actors Studio West. He auditioned the same night as an Off-Off-Broadway actress named Anna Mizrahi, a Sephardic Jew from Venezuela who'd recently moved to L.A. Lee Strasberg said, "I've never seen such a sensational pair of legs," and browbeat the panel of judges into accepting Mizrahi and turning down Nicholson. Lee Grant, one of the judges, recalled, "We violently objected. I mean, Jack was going to go on to be one of the great and we knew it."¹⁶ As Nichol-

son explained in 1976, the Studio held him “in abeyance” for years, though it accepted his contemporaries, including Steve McQueen, Faye Dunaway, Jane Fonda, Robert Duvall, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman, and Sally Field. Nicholson’s impression was that the Studio’s powers-that-be thought he “act[ed] too well. . . . The person evaluating didn’t know if I was that way or I was just acting.”

In 2004 Nicholson added, “There’s probably no one who understands Method acting better academically than I do, or actually uses it more in his work.”¹⁷

Since Jeff Corey “didn’t think I would make it in films,” Nicholson recalled,¹⁸ he went on to study with Eric Morris, author of the acting text, *No Acting Please*, and actor Martin Landau, future Oscar winner for *Ed Wood*. After the Landau class broke up, he again tried to get into Actors Studio West. Accepted at last, he undertook one of the techniques Strasberg taught known as “diagnosis of the instrument,” and later described it:

“Stand there in class, weight equally distributed on both feet, don’t move, look at the class, relate to each person in a real way, sing a nursery rhyme [such as ‘Three Blind Mice’] with each syllable a beginning and an end unto itself, and don’t run ’em together ’cause it’s not about singing. Very, very few people could do it. . . . The idea is to get the physical body, the emotional body, and the mental body into neutral. Then you should be able to hear through the voice what’s actually happening inside. . . . It’s a way of locating the tensions, the tiny tensions, the problems with your instrument that get in the way of getting into a role. . . . One of the main ones everyone’s got is heinie tension. . . . You have to get to nothing before you can do anything.”¹⁹

In his first scene as a member of the Actors Studio, Nicholson, Sally Kellerman, and Luana Anders performed an unproduced play about God by their friend Henry Jaglom, who’d later write and

direct Nicholson's film, *A Safe Place*. "Nicholson was absolutely electric," said Jaglom, "and everybody began asking, 'Who the fuck is this?'" Nicholson and Kellerman, who was then thirty pounds overweight,²⁰ spent a lot of time offstage as well; "Sally Kellerman used to sit on my lap and tell me about her boyfriends and her problems," he recalled.²¹ They assuaged their anxieties and insecurities by consuming "sweeties and souries"—ice cream and potato chips. For Sally, Nicholson was "always available when I needed him—a true friend."

Together with Don Devlin, later the coproducer of the Julie Christie film *Petulia*, and Harry Gittes, a photographer, Nicholson rented a house at Fountain Avenue and Gardner Street, which became "the wildest house in Hollywood for a while," according to Nicholson.²² Gittes said that when their circle of friends went on the town Saturday nights, they always consulted Nicholson first, because he knew where the parties were. "You pick up Harry and bring him to Bill's and we'll all meet there," Nicholson would say, planning everyone's social life and putting together events. Already, he had a retinue that streamed behind him like the tail of a comet.

Later the namesake of Jake Gittes in *Chinatown*, Harry Gittes was born in Brookline, Massachusetts. "Jack and I met at some party in Laurel Canyon," he recalled. "I was trying to get a start in the ad business, the only person in his crowd who didn't want to be an actor. Jack was young and gorgeous and already going bald, but not trying to hide it, so people would be able to come to grips with it. We used to ride around in a Volkswagen; we'd pull up next to a carful of girls, and he'd just smile, and they'd flip out of their minds. I wouldn't even be there."

Nicholson and Gittes started a show-business softball league. "Guys really bond best over sports," Gittes said. "I was convinced that my mother liked him better than she liked me and that he

liked her better than he liked me. My father died when I was three and a half years old. So [like Nicholson] I didn't have a father either. I had a very tough stepfather. I was brought up by a very strong mother."

According to Gittes, Nicholson already had his career and personal life all laid out in a master plan. "Jack, it's like Stalin and his five-year plans," Gittes told him, and added, "He's so fast and can ad-lib so well that people think what he does is off-the-cuff. That's the biggest misconception about Jack Nicholson. It's all planned. He's very calculating. Every five years, he comes up with a new five-year plan."

As the L.A. Beat Generation scene moved inland from Venice Beach to the Sunset Strip, Nicholson's social life began to sizzle. According to cartoonist/playwright Jules Feiffer, who'd later write *Carnal Knowledge*, the fifties were the cauldron of all that would come to a boil in the following decade. "In the 50's, there was rage and dissent, however closeted it was. The patina was conformist, but exciting things happened. Abstract Expressionism was quietly emerging, the whole civil rights movement was beginning and in Paris, Beckett was writing *Waiting for Godot*. The culture was reinventing itself under a patina of conformity."²³ Stylistically and intellectually, Nicholson's generation would translate complex existential dilemmas into streetwise American vernacular. As critic Frank Rich would write in 2003, the Beats and their offshoots, the hippies, provided "the template for much of the music, mores, and social change that now define mainstream American life."²⁴

Roger Corman said Nicholson "was part of the hip scene in Hollywood, of which I was a part, but on the outskirts. Jack was in the center." The Beat Generation flowered in such coffeehouses and bars as Mac's, Luan's, Barney's Beanery, the Renaissance, and the Sea Witch. They flocked to the Troubadour to see jive-talking comedian Lenny Bruce use obscenity to dynamite the impacted

repressions and prejudices of middle-class society. At the same venue, Joni Mitchell, the Byrds, and the Doors would shortly revitalize popular music. Sally Kellerman was waitressing at Chez Paulette's, where Nicholson got into a disagreement with a hood, and was on the verge of a fight when Robert Blake intervened and defused the situation.²⁵ At Pupi's, Nicholson told an officious waitress, "You say one word and I'll kick you in your pastry cart," later reprising the scene in *Five Easy Pieces*.²⁶ Many evenings started at the Unicorn, and, when it closed for the night, moved on to the Sea Witch. If Nicholson didn't score on the Strip or Santa Monica Boulevard, he'd hit Cosmo Alley, a coffeehouse between Hollywood Boulevard and Selma, where he once caught sight of Brando visiting his waitress-girlfriend. At Ash Grove, a folksingers' club on Melrose Avenue, Nicholson blacked out after leaving with singer Jack Elliot and actor John Gilmore.²⁷

Everyone usually ended up at Canter's Delicatessen on Fairfax for the best brisket, pastrami, and matzo ball soup west of the Hudson River. Often, Nicholson went to BYOB parties, and hosted quite a few himself when he shared the house on Fountain Avenue with actor/producer Bill Duffy. "We'd get nineteen half-gallons of Gallo Mountain Red and get everybody drunk," Nicholson recalled. "I guess you could call them orgies by the strictest definition [but] . . . I've never been in an orgy of more than three people. . . . We smoked a lot of dope, usually in the toilet or out in the backyard or driveway, 'cause it wasn't cool to do it in public."²⁸

In these dawning days of the sexual revolution, Nicholson found it impossible to "go to sleep if I wasn't involved in some kind of amorous contact." Roommates moved in and out of Fountain and Gardner, including sculptor Dale Wilbourne, who married Georgianna Carter, and was succeeded by photographer Dale Robbins and actors Bill Duffy and Tom Newman. "There was a

pinochle game going or we would have folk-singing or wine-drinking nights two or three times a week,” Duffy recalled. “Jack’s room was always neat. His desk where he used to write all the time was piled with books.” With acting jobs so scarce, Nicholson’s current five-year plan was to become a screenwriter or director.

According to Don Devlin, Nicholson’s personal life could hardly have been more active, or explosive. “Once he got into his seductive mode, he really went after it with a vengeance,” Devlin recalled. “These [relationships] were very strong and filled with huge emotional ups and downs, every one of them falling into an identical pattern. Jack is such an overwhelming character that girls were always madly in love with him. Then he starts to behave fairly bad, then he starts to lose the girl, then he goes chasing after her again, then the relationship changes—the girl usually gets the upper hand. . . . Then he becomes like a little boy.”²⁹

An exception to this pattern was Helena Kallianiotes, a belly dancer who worked in a Greek dive in Hollywood. Like Gittes and Harry Dean Stanton, she became a part of Nicholson’s extended family, remaining in his life for decades. “I was married but breaking up, so were Jack and his girlfriend,” Kallianiotes recounted. “So, I ended up [living with Nicholson]. It just evolved. Jack has always protected me—even from the beginning when I showed up at his house with a black eye. I brought a couple of couches. . . . Jack had a yellow Volkswagen convertible complete with dents.”

THE CRY BABY KILLER

At last, the professional breaks started coming in 1957.³⁰ His first agent, Fred Katz, died 1956, and in September the following year, in Schwab’s Drug Store, he met his next agent, Byron Griffith, who represented James Darren and Connie Stevens, and helped secure

Nicholson the leading role in *The Cry Baby Killer*, produced by Roger Corman, who in a few short years had become a major force in independent films. Though Nicholson later said that acting classes prepare a student for his eventual shot at stardom, *The Cry Baby Killer* would be the first, but not the last, of numerous shots that fizzled for Nicholson, despite all his studies under Jeff Corey and others. Nor would years of working in Roger Corman films turn Nicholson into a star. “Fast and cheap” could have been Corman’s motto, for his usual deal with American International Pictures (AIP) was to deliver a film for \$50,000 as a negative pickup fee, plus \$15,000 as an advance against foreign sales. Being directed by Corman was the antithesis of glamour. As soon as Corman finished one shot, he’d tell the actors to grab a reflector and follow him to the next setup. Though spartan on the set, he lived lavishly, owning, in his thirty-first year, when he met Nicholson, a Beverly Hills canyon home. Already a veteran producer of fifteen movies, he dated such actresses as Gayle Hunnicutt (later Mrs. David Hemmings) and Talia Shire of future *Rocky* fame.³¹

Many of the seminal figures of the burgeoning 1970s film renaissance—the so-called New Hollywood—sprang from the Corman factory: Nicholson, Bruce Dern, Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Sally Kirkland, Robert De Niro, Peter Bogdanovich, James Cameron, Francis Ford Coppola, Ron Howard, Robert Towne, Martin Scorsese, and even Sylvester Stallone, who showed up in Corman’s *Death Race 2000* and *Capone* a year before *Rocky* made him a star.³² For a salary of \$500, Corman offered hopefuls a way of breaking into an industry notorious for screening almost everyone out, rather than welcoming new talent.

A *Rebel Without a Cause* wannabe about a sensitive high school student who turns juvenile delinquent, *The Cry Baby Killer* was budgeted at \$7,000, and took only ten days to film. At a sneak preview on Hollywood Boulevard in 1960, Nicholson was rocked by

alternate jolts of pride and disgrace, later calling it “a horrible experience . . . because the audience just went absolutely berserk. . . . I’m happy that most people haven’t seen them,” he added, referring to all the Corman films and other B’s he made over the next ten years.

He played another vulnerable teenager in *Too Soon to Love*, an exploitation picture about premarital sex and bickering parents. In a small role in *Little Shop of Horrors*, originally titled *The Passionate People Eater*, and shot for \$30,000, he played a masochistic dental patient who insists, “No Novocain—it dulls the senses.” When Nicholson attended the opening at the Pix Theater at Sunset and Gower, he remembered how the audience had laughed at his first film. “I took a date,” he recalled, “and when my sequence came up, the audience went absolutely berserk again. They laughed so hard I could barely hear the dialogue. I didn’t quite register it right. It was as if I had forgotten it was a comedy since the shoot. I got all embarrassed because I’d never really had such a positive response before.” For a low-budget 1960 B picture, *Little Shop of Horrors* would prove to be remarkably durable, later spawning a 1982 Off-Off-Broadway musical, which was so successful it moved to Off-Broadway’s Orpheum Theater and ran through 1987. David Geffen’s 1986 movie version of the musical starred Rick Moranis, Ellen Greene, Vincent Gardenia, John Belushi, Steve Martin, John Candy, and Bill Murray. Then, in a 2003 revival directed by Jerry Zaks, the musical again emerged as a hit of the Broadway season.

In the spring of 1960, Nicholson tried out for his first mainstream production, *Studs Lonigan*, Philip Yordan’s version of James T. Farrell’s ambitious trilogy of lower-middle-class, Irish Catholic life in Chicago from 1912 to the early 1930s. Warren Beatty was to play the lead, but, even though he was still an unknown, Beatty demanded rewrites, and was swiftly dropped. Handsome but ineffectual Christopher Knight won the lead, and Nicholson was

wasted as a gang member named Weary Reilly. “The reason I got it, I think, is that readings consisted of improvising situations from the book and I was the only actor in Hollywood with the stamina and energy to read the seven-hundred-page trilogy,” he said. “I was pretty strong in improvisation because everything [Jeff Corey] teaches is from the basic root of improvisation.”³³ But the film was “no more than a pale flicker of Farrell’s massive trilogy,” according to the *New York Herald-Tribune’s* reviewer. As in all his early efforts, Nicholson showed not a trace of the gigantic talent that would later burn up the screen in *Easy Rider*.

In 1960’s *The Wild Ride*, he played a psychotic killer in the mold of Brando’s *The Wild One*, and Georgianna Carter played his girlfriend. Nicholson dismissed the film as “just bad. . . . I needed the work. . . . [It] was the only job I could get. Nobody wanted me.”³⁴ By the time it was released, Nicholson and Georgianna had broken up, despite his friend John Herman Shaner’s attempt to effect a reconciliation at a fish fry. “We had an argument about getting married,” Georgianna recalled. “I was stunned to hear that [Jack] didn’t want to.” He was more interested in Sandra Knight, but he played the field, also dating dancer Lynn Bernay, a former Rockette. According to Bernay, he made her feel more like “a sister” than a girlfriend. He later explained, “You can’t make a movie unless you’re making a woman or at least thinking about making a woman, and that is the secret of my craft.”³⁵

He met his next agent, Sandy Bresler, when he joined the Air National Guard, which Nicholson called “the great rich kids’ draft dodge. We were all draft dodgers. We didn’t want to be in there. I started worrying about going into the Army in about the fourth or fifth grade in New Jersey. I wasn’t afraid of getting killed. I just didn’t want to waste the time.” He was not called up for active duty until the summer of 1961, during the international crisis over the Berlin Wall. “It was one of the great JFK’s big numbers before they

got mad and shot him,” Nicholson said. “We waited it out in Van Nuys, a whole year. We all hated it. . . . I have the effect of completely demoralizing whatever unit I’m in, in a thing like that. There’s just something about me. . . . You do learn something. You could say the same thing about jail, but I didn’t see any guys rushing off to get in.”³⁶ He would later draw heavily on this experience for his role in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, in which he’d incite the inmates of a mental institution to rebel against mindless authority.

Then just beginning as an agent, Sandy Bresler was his bunk mate when they served together at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Nicholson underwent training as a firefighter, and found it “exhilarating” to be set afire in his asbestos burn-proof firefighter’s gear.

Although he worked in Senator John F. Kennedy’s first presidential campaign, he became disillusioned after Kennedy’s victory, objecting to the president’s aggressive Cold War policy and the Bay of Pigs. Perhaps no politician could have pleased him, for his hero was the saintly Mahatma Gandhi. Despite Nicholson’s conviction that “overstepping in politics minimizes our effect as an artist,” he held some strong views, including one that committed him to absolute nonviolence. “I’m not willing to shoot anyone,” he said, “not even one person to save twelve.” In 1964, he would crash the Democratic National Convention in L.A. with John Herman Shaner and director Monte Hellman. When Nicholson shook hands with President Lyndon B. Johnson and held on a little too long, savoring the sensation of touching absolute power, the security guards started to move in, but Nicholson let go just before they sprang into action. Later, after he became famous, he would support liberal presidential hopeful George McGovern, but somewhat halfheartedly, explaining he didn’t offer more financial help because “the money symbol in politics is obviously a dangerous

one, as time has shown.” The one issue outside of show business he felt passionately about was the legalization of dope. “I’m on all those referendums like the marijuana initiative,” he said, “and I send them money.”³⁷ According to Beverly Hills psychiatrist Carole Lieberman, marijuana is “a gateway drug—people think it’s harmless, but if you use it, it’s easier to go to the next step, using pills or cocaine or heroin.”³⁸ Twenty years later, Nicholson said, “I’m sorry I ever said I smoked pot.”³⁹

In the summer of 1961, Nicholson and Burt Reynolds were up for the same part in the quickie Western *The Broken Land*, and Nicholson won because he knew how to ride a horse, having learned at Sam’s Rocking Horse Stables in a distant part of Griffith Park in Burbank. Though Nicholson’s career was as lackluster as the B pictures he was making, at last his personal life began to make sense. On June 17, 1962, in his twenty-fifth year, he married twenty-two-year-old Sandra Knight, a barefoot-hippie type from Pennsylvania with long brown hair, “beautiful and very voluptuous, big bosoms and lots of hair,” in Helena Kallianiotis’s description. “She and Jack kind of looked alike—had the same nose. . . . They were fiery.”⁴⁰ Millie Perkins, the ex-Mrs. Dean Stockwell, was matron of honor, and Harry Dean Stanton was best man. The newlyweds moved around the corner from Nicholson’s old apartment at Fountain and Gardner, making their home at 7507 Lexington.

THE RAVEN AND THE TERROR

When Nicholson went to work again for Roger Corman in *The Raven*, his costars were the legendary horror-movie actors Vincent Price, Boris Karloff, and Peter Lorre. Since Price, star of *The Fly* and *House of Wax*, was one of Ethel May’s favorites, Nicholson

brought her to the set and introduced her around. Price, Karloff, and Lorre mistakenly assumed that Jack Nicholson was the son of AIP cofounder Jim Nicholson. “Vincent and Boris used to joke among themselves, ‘Nepotism! Nepotism!’ and roar with laughter,” recalled Sam Arkoff, the other partner in AIP.⁴¹ “Jack was somewhat in awe of Karloff, Lorre, and Price,” Corman said, “and they treated him very well because they could see in their improvisations together during rehearsals that he was good. He worked very well with them.”

“I loved those guys,” Nicholson said. “It was a comedy, and Roger gave us a little more time to improvise on the set.” Unwittingly, Nicholson was getting experience as a screenwriter, since the actors made up scenes as they went along. He stayed up late at nights, knocking out a screenplay with Don Devlin, *Thunder Island*, about international politics and an assassination attempt, later filmed by Twentieth Century-Fox as a B-budget action picture with Gene Nelson and Fay Spain in the leading roles. While still working on *The Raven*, Nicholson picked the brains of Peter Lorre, star of the German classic *M* and *The Beast With Five Fingers*. “I was mad about him,” Nicholson recalled, “one of the most sophisticated men I ever knew.” Lorre told him stories about Humphrey Bogart, his costar in *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca*, as well as about Bertolt Brecht and the Nazi era in Germany.

When *The Raven* wrapped, Corman realized he still had two days’ use of the expensive Gothic sets, and quickly cooked up another horror quickie, *The Terror*, offering Nicholson the leading role opposite Karloff.

“Great,” Nicholson said, “but I need some money. Can Sandy [Sandra Knight] play the lead?”

“Sure,” Corman agreed, and later added, “I cast Sandra in several other films. I always thought she’d go on to have a major ca-

reer. For whatever reason, she didn't, but she had the beginnings of a good career and appeared in a number of films. Perhaps she gave it up after they married—I don't know. It seemed to me that they were a perfect couple. She had some of the same characteristics Jack had, including intelligence and a sense of humor."

If marriage wasn't good for Sandra's career, it was, in Nicholson's view, a setback for his as well. Even before he was famous, he liked being known as a rogue. "It was good for business," he told *Playboy* interviewer David Sheff in 2004. "On the other hand, I settled down for a while when I was twenty-five, and that was less good for my career."⁴²

"Why was it good for business?" Sheff inquired.

Since Nicholson was not yet famous at twenty-five, why would a reputation as a stud have been of any use in getting roles, unless casting directors were expecting sexual favors? But Nicholson only replied, "It's better than being thought of as a shit."⁴³ Years later, in 2004, he told *Esquire's* Mike Sager, "If I had started out today, would I have wound up doing porn pictures to make a living?"⁴⁴

Corman assigned his "ace assistant," Francis Ford Coppola, to direct *The Terror's* exterior shots, which were filmed in Big Sur, a wilderness area of mountains and seacoast in north-central California, near Monterey. There, amid giant redwoods, soaring eagles, and cliffs that plunged a thousand feet down to the Pacific Ocean, Nicholson and his wife had one of their happiest times. "Sandra got pregnant up in Big Sur with our daughter, Jennifer," he recalled.

Working with Coppola proved difficult. While filming in the surf off Pfeiffer Beach, the actor nearly drowned in his waterlogged period costume. "I came flying out of there and just threw that fucking costume off while I ran, freezing to death," he said. "When we got back to town, Francis tried to blame me for going over budget. . . . He didn't know that I was pretty close with

Roger . . . [who] didn't believe I was to blame. . . . It had more to do with shooting in Big Sur—and trying something you never do on a Corman picture, which was run cables up from the rocks into the mountains. Roger's way would be to just shoot from up on the road. But Francis hadn't worked with Roger that much so he hadn't had that disdain for any kind of production expense burned into him yet."⁴⁵ Nicholson asked if he could have a crack at directing a scene after the company returned to L.A. "It's simple shooting," he told Corman, who agreed for the actor to work one day as a director, gaining invaluable moviemaking experience. Other Corman protégés also directed scenes, but they didn't "exactly *mesh*," Corman admitted. Nicholson added, "I believe the funniest hour I have ever spent in a projection room was watching the dailies for *The Terror*." Peter Bogdanovich, future director of *Paper Moon*, recalled, "When I watched *The Terror*, I remember thinking, Gee, I hope Jack makes it as a director or writer because he's not much of an actor here."

Sam Arkoff threw a wrap party on the set, and his wife and sister-in-law brought Jewish delicatessen. "Roger had these actors he always used and they were always hungry," said Arkoff. "I think they never ate between his pictures." After the film's release in 1963, critics dismissed it as "faux Poe." Curtis Harrington later "ran into Jack at the Los Feliz movie theater," the director recounted. "*Films and Filming*, in reviewing his performance as a vapid young man, wrote, 'Jack Nicholson is the most wooden thing this side of Epping Forest.' I quoted it to Jack when I saw him. This was long before he became famous. He had a wonderful sense of humor, and laughed it off."

In 1963 Nicholson was in the running to portray Robert Kennedy in a proposed film version of RFK's book *The Enemy Within*, but Kennedy preferred Paul Newman (and never forgave Newman when he turned down the role).⁴⁶ That summer, just as

Nicholson was preparing to leave for location shooting in Mexico for his second major-studio film, *Ensign Pulver*, he learned that his mother, June, whom he still regarded as his sister, had cervical cancer. Accompanied by Ethel May, Lorraine, and his pregnant wife Sandra, he visited her in Cedars of Lebanon Hospital the night before his departure. After years of disparaging his acting efforts, June was glad to see him making money at last—\$350 a week, SAG minimum—and urged him to go to Mexico and fulfill his Warner Bros. contract. Though only forty-four years old, she looked like an old woman, her weight having dropped from 120 to 80 pounds.

“Shall I wait?” she asked him. He interpreted her meaning to be, “Shall I try to fight this through?”

“No,” he said, in effect releasing her from further suffering. Later, going down in the elevator, he slumped to the floor and started crying hysterically. In Mexico, he filmed throughout July on a Navy cargo ship anchored off Puerto Marques, near Acapulco. On July 31, 1963, June died without ever telling Nicholson she was his mother. He missed June’s funeral mass at the San Fernando Mission Cemetery. Ethel May, the woman he still regarded as his mother, was also ill, having contracted a progressive muscular disease.

On the day he returned from Mexico, September 13, 1963, his daughter Jennifer was born. “I knew life had changed,” he said. “It really was a eureka experience. Through whatever self-delusion, I thought I had solved some of life’s problems—and then complete vulnerability again, through the child. . . . It is [a child’s] death that’s under all your fears all the time.”⁴⁷

Unable to afford a babysitter, he and Sandra took Jennifer along when they attended a party at the beach home of Robert Walker Jr., star of *Ensign Pulver* and the son of the late Robert Walker, who appeared in such World War II films as *Since You Went*

Away and See Here, Private Hargrove, and Jennifer Jones, Oscar winner for *The Song of Bernadette*. As Walker Jr. served his guests 1959 Lafite Rothschild, Nicholson walked around with his baby daughter in his arms. "You just loved to hang out with Jack," Walker said.

Other new friends included Tuesday Weld, Larry Hagman, and Samson DeBrier.⁴⁸ Curtis Harrington, director of the underground Dennis Hopper film, *Night Tide*, remembered, "Jack was married to Sandra Knight when he came to the home of Samson DeBrier, who ran a kind of salon in Hollywood on Barton Avenue, off Vine Street, near Santa Monica Boulevard. Sam had been raised in Atlantic City and went to Paris when he was nineteen years old after having written André Gide some fan letters. Gide opened the door and grabbed him and pulled him in and they had a slap and a tickle. Later, Sam received letters from Gide, and Sam played the lead in *The Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, which Kenneth Anger filmed at DeBrier's house.

"Sam DeBrier never slept until the wee hours, waking at 2 P.M. and having open house to his friends all night long." Stanley Kubrick dropped in, as did James Dean and Anais Nin. According to Nicholson, DeBrier liked to turn out the lights and read from his memoirs. "I didn't know many people who had been André [Gide's] lover, so it was very exotic to me," Nicholson said, calling DeBrier "one of the great Hollywood puries, someone very expressive of the L.A. culture, the Hollywood electric whiz-bang kids."⁴⁹ James Dean arrived one night with John Gilmore and a one-legged woman, who told Nicholson, somewhat cryptically, that one of the guests at the party was responsible for her handicap. Dean was eager to talk about Anger's *Pleasure Dome*, and launched into an intense conversation with DeBrier. When Gilmore attempted to introduce Nicholson, Dean appeared to snub him, but it was nothing personal, according to Gilmore, who

later explained that Dean's hearing and eyesight had been temporarily impaired as they'd ridden their motorcycles to the party in a strong wind.

In the late summer of 1964, Nicholson, who'd never left the continent before, sailed from L.A. to Manila, where his next two films, *Backdoor to Hell*, a WWII adventure, and *Flight to Fury*, a plane-crash survival yarn, were shot on location, for \$80,000 each. One of his costars, Jimmie Rodgers, had scored a No. 1 hit recording with "Honeycomb" and was attempting to become an actor. Rodgers described Nicholson as a "needler," someone who liked to provoke trouble and then laugh it off as a joke.⁵⁰ Monte Hellman, who directed both films, observed that Nicholson "likes to lose his temper, because it's a high. . . . He's nervous when he's not in the spotlight." Nicholson would not hesitate to throw a temper tantrum if it was the only way to reclaim "the center of attention," Hellman added.⁵¹

Manila was "prostitute heaven," recalled movie executive Jack Leewood. "We were screwing the same dames. It was fun and games."⁵² One night, as Nicholson was making it with a Filipino hooker in a motel, she shrieked, "The Terror strikes!" just as she reached her climax. Nicholson, who wasn't even aware *The Terror* had opened in the Philippines, was too startled to continue, and surrendered to coitus interruptus.⁵³

Returning to the U.S. mainland in October 1964, he attended a Christmas party at Jimmie Rodgers's large house in the San Fernando Valley, where a band was playing in the backyard. The decor inside the house represented affluent L.A. ostentation at its worst, including a \$6,000 inlaid glass coffee table. Rodgers noticed Jack "standing there, looking around the room. . . . The look on his face was, 'So this is what it's like.'"⁵⁴

Nicholson and his wife were experiencing marital difficulties. "The scene in *The Shining* comes out of this time," he said,⁵⁵ re-

ferring to the sequence in the 1980 movie in which a writer scolds his wife for interrupting his work. “My beloved wife [Sandra Knight] walked in on what was, unbeknownst to her, this maniac,” Nicholson recalled.

“Even if you don’t hear me typing,” he told her, “it doesn’t mean I’m not writing. This *is* writing.”

His work days stretched to eighteen hours when he and Monte Hellman, bankrolled by Corman, formed their own companies in December 1964 and filmed two “thinking man’s Westerns,” *The Shooting* and *Ride in the Whirlwind*. He acted in both and contributed the screenplay for the latter. His old friend from Corey’s class, Carole Eastman, wrote *The Shooting* under the pseudonym Adrien Joyce. Nicholson coproduced both pictures for \$85,000 each and called them “exploitation pictures, but you could sneak some quality into them.” Raising money, producing, acting, writing, directing—such multitasking fervor left him virtually no time for Sandra and Jennifer, and he later described himself as “this young kid who’s trying to sort of dive sideways onto the screen, sort of hurl himself into a movie career. All I see is this kind of fearful, tremulous, naked, desperate ambition. Which is pathetic.”⁵⁶

Inevitably the unhappy Nicholsons drifted apart. “We were becoming a burden not only to each other, but to our child,” he said. Helena Kallianiotes was a guest at Nicholson’s card parties, where other players included Ethel May, who often came by to be close to baby Jennifer. “We’d come to Jack’s with our pennies in our socks and play,” Kallianiotes recalled. Sandra “got turned on. . . . She fell in love with God,” Kallianiotes added, “and Jack couldn’t compete. . . . Jack cheated a lot.”⁵⁷ Nicholson blamed “the secret inner pressure about monogamy” and professional rivalry. He felt that his “increasing celebrity” intimidated Sandra. “You can’t turn the celebrity off to save the relationship,” he said.⁵⁸

The day they decided to end their marriage, he was “out on the

lawn with John Hackett and we were doing a brake job on my Karmann Ghia . . . this massive undertaking to save fifty dollars, and that day I got two jobs. One to write a movie [*The Trip*] and one to act in one [*Rebel Rousers*].”⁵⁹ When Nicholson and Sandra dropped acid while he was researching and writing *The Trip*, she had a frightening hallucination. “She looked at me and saw a . . . totally demonic figure,” he said. “For whatever reason, either because it’s true about me, or because of her own grasping at something, it was pretty bad. But there were lots of reasons for our growing apart. I was working day and night, and I couldn’t take the arguments: they bored me.”⁶⁰

Although Nicholson’s LSD trip stirred fears of homosexuality and penis amputation,⁶¹ he continued using the drug,⁶² becoming a part of Peter Fonda’s turned-on social circle in the Hollywood Hills. Referring to Nicholson, Fonda said, “There is a real deep hurt inside; there’s no way of resolving it, ever.”⁶³ Their marriage crumbling, Sandra finally told Nicholson to leave,⁶⁴ and in the spring of 1966, he leapt at the opportunity to go to France with Don Devlin to see if he could sell foreign rights in his Westerns. “European critics consider them classics,” Nicholson claimed.

At the Cannes Film Festival on the Riviera, his B Westerns accrued a modest underground following. Carrying the prints in hatboxes, he worked hard at making contacts, meeting Tony Richardson, Nestor Almendros, and New York Film Festival director Richard Roud. “I was a festival rat,” he recalled. “I ran around with Bernardo [Bertolucci].”⁶⁵ He listed his main influences as “Roman Polanski, [who became] a friend of mine, and Milos Forman. I met Milos hanging around the film festivals; his *Loves of a Blonde* was playing.” With Nicholson’s cocky manner, he approached everyone as if they were old buddies, and managed to dispose of distribution rights in the Westerns to the Netherlands and West Germany.

“Jack Nicholson was in Cannes trying to sell two pictures that cost \$4,000 between them,” recalled Robert Evans, Paramount production head. “He starts talking to me, and I don’t understand a word he’s talking about.” But every time Nicholson smiled, Evans found he couldn’t take his eyes off him, and decided to make him an offer. By Evans’s estimate, Nicholson had never received more than \$600 for any picture he’d made to date.

“Listen, kid, how would you like to play opposite Barbra Streisand in *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*? I’ll pay you \$10,000 for four weeks’ work.”

“I just got a divorce, and I’ve got to pay alimony. I have a kid. I have to pay child support. Can you make it \$15,000?”

“How about \$12,500?”

“I love you,” Nicholson said, enveloping Evans in a bear hug. “I’ll never forget you as long as I live.”⁶⁶

Nicholson’s official separation from Sandra, who was aware that he played around overseas, was announced April 1, 1967. In divorce papers on file at the Los Angeles County Courthouse, dated August 8, 1968, Nicholson was accused of “extreme cruelty,” and the decree specified that both partners be “mutually restrained from annoying, molesting or harassing the other.”⁶⁷ Sandra got possession of four-year-old Jennifer and also took the 1959 Mercedes, leaving Nicholson his Karmann Ghia and a court order to pay \$300 per month child support and \$150 monthly alimony. He was worth \$8,000 in cash at the time and owned stock securities. Sandra soon moved on with her life, remarrying, and raising their daughter.

Taking along his manual typewriter and looking forward to some uninterrupted writing time, Nicholson moved in with Harry Dean Stanton, later remembering, “Harry Dean I found very easy. He’d already been living in his place at the bottom of Laurel Canyon a year or two when I moved in, and he still hadn’t un-

packed his boxes. The living room was completely barren. I wrote *The Trip* over in the corner at a desk. Bare floor with a record player on it, and I used to dance around, then go back and write like a fiend." A rural mountain community near West Hollywood, Laurel Canyon was home to rock legends Carole King, Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon, Michelle and John Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas, Jackson Browne, and Frank Zappa, as well as herds of deer and packs of coyotes. The steep boulevards winding up from the Sunset Strip were lined by oak, eucalyptus, and pine, and quaint cottages perched on the brink of drop-offs. Immortalized in the Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young song, "Our House," Graham Nash and Joni Mitchell's love affair took place in their Lookout Mountain greenery, and Jim Morrison wrote "Love Street" about Rothdell Trail. "Laurel Canyon is an inspiration," said Tim Mosher, a former punk musician. "You can write. It's quiet. You can be alone with your thoughts."⁶⁸

Unfortunately, as *The Trip* would prove, Jack Nicholson's literary efforts were only a notch or two above Jack Torrance's "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," the endlessly repeated sentence that constitutes the totality of the novel Torrance writes in *The Shining*. So far in his career, Nicholson's work had been restricted to "the kind of trash only a mother or a *Cahier* critic could sit through and love," Rex Reed wrote in the *New York Times*, and more trash was on the way.

HELL'S ANGELS ON WHEELS

In 1967 Nicholson filmed *Hell's Angels on Wheels*, playing a sensitive grease monkey turned biker. Researching the role, he went to Oakland to meet Sonny Barger, the Hell's Angels honcho, who'd sold the rights to the Angels name to AIP and was cooperating in

the making of the film. “A toke for a poke?” Barger said, offering Nicholson a joint. When the latter took it, Barger hit him in the stomach, and Nicholson bent over, choking and coughing. As promised, he’d received a poke for a toke—the Hell’s Angels idea of humor. “Jack mixed right in,” Barger remembered. “He carried himself very well as far as we were concerned.” The incident explains the origin of Nicholson’s famous “shit-eating grin,” which, according to director Richard Rush, was first seen in this film. Rush volunteered to cast Nicholson’s girlfriend, Mimi Machu, a flower child and former dancer with long brown hair, in the role of Pearl. She appeared under the alias I.J. Jefferson. Their affair would go on for four tempestuous years. According to Sonny Bono, he’d once had an affair with Machu. Sonny’s illegitimate son, Sean, was born in 1964.⁶⁹

Successful at the box office, the film failed to win critical approval, apart from László Kovács’s photography, which caught the severe beauty of California’s highways and desertscapes. As for Nicholson, *Variety* wrote that his performance consisted of “variations on a grin,” and the *New York Times* critic thought he looked “rather dazed.” In 1967 Nicholson went straight into another biker epic, *Rebel Rousers*, appearing with Harry Dean Stanton, Bruce Dern, and Diane Ladd, and sporting the wool mariner’s cap that would resurface the following decade in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, anticipating a punkish fashion fad of the 2000s. *Time*’s reviewer wrote that Nicholson “looks like an all-night coach passenger who is just beginning to realize he has slept through his stop.” Nicholson accorded it the dubious distinction of being “the only movie of mine I’ve never seen.”

He wrote and starred in *The Trip* in 1967 for Roger Corman, later recalling, “Roger knew I had taken acid and we were both serious on the subject. Roger was my whole bottom-line support then. I had done the Westerns but I had pretty much given up as

an actor. I really didn't have much else going then, kind of a journeyman troubleshooter. He knew he couldn't get a writer as good as me through regular ways. I was happy to write it and make a more demanding picture out of it."⁷⁰ In Nicholson's screenplay, he drew on his disappointments in marriage and career, as well as his encyclopedic knowledge of the psychedelic hangouts on the Strip. His protagonist, a part he expressly tailored for Peter Fonda, was a director of television commercials who feared he'd sold out, and whose marriage was breaking up; attempting to make sense of his life, he took LSD, had a bad trip, which his best friend—a juicy role Nicholson created for himself—helped him survive.

"Look, if 'Dernsie' can play it, I owe him, man," Corman told Nicholson, referring to Bruce Dern, the star of his most successful film, *The Wild Angels*.⁷¹

Corman wasn't convinced that Nicholson was star material. "I had used Jack successfully in leads, but I began to wonder why other people weren't also picking him up. . . . I just assumed my judgment was not shared by older—and wiser—minds."⁷² In *The Trip*, Dern costarred with Fonda, Dennis Hopper, Susan Strasberg, Salli Sachse, and Luana Anders. Despite Nicholson's disappointment over having failed to make the cast, he maintained his friendships with Corman and Bruce Dern throughout the shoot, which took place over three weeks in the summer of 1967. More significantly, he established strong ties with Fonda and Hopper. The picture earned \$6 million and was featured at the Cannes Film Festival, where it played to a packed house.

In Corman's lame gangster saga, *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre*, Nicholson delivered his small part in a strange, choked gangster voice, later used by Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*. Bob Evans put Nicholson up for the role of Mia Farrow's husband in *Rosemary's Baby*, but director Roman Polanski deemed Nicholson too sinister in appearance, and cast John Cassavetes instead.

Packaging his next film, *Psych-Out*, for himself, Nicholson wrote the original script and played a psychedelic rock 'n' roller named Stoney. Mimi Machu haunted the set, monitoring her boyfriend's bed scenes with costar Susan Strasberg, who sensed that Nicholson was uncomfortable and possibly working out some sexual hang ups. Critics found the film "less than compulsive" and dismissed it as a "meretricious effort."

At his lowest ebb—having failed to break into the mainstream as actor, writer, or director—Nicholson was strolling down Wilcox south of Hollywood Boulevard one day, some manuscript papers stuffed under his arm, and wearing scruffy clothes and worn-out shoes, when John Gilmore drove by and offered him a ride. "Everything's all fucked up, man," Nicholson said. "I want to write. I'm through with acting. . . . Parts are shittier and pictures are shittier."

Reminiscing five years later, Nicholson demolished his entire AIP oeuvre with the remark, "I never dug them. I'm not a very nostalgic person. They were just bad."⁷³

These failures did nothing to diminish his passion for the art of cinema, and he remained an inveterate moviegoer. At a Writers Guild screening in 1966 or 1967, he jumped up after a movie that had impressed him and started clapping and screaming. The others remained in their seats except for director Bob Rafelson, who also stood up and cheered, and then went over to Nicholson.

"We obviously both liked the picture," Rafelson said, "so let's go out and get a cup of coffee."

It was a turning point in the lives and careers of both men. After conversing with the ardor of new best friends, Rafelson told him, "We're like Colossus, we bestride two worlds: art and industry. Which should get us a big pain from the stretch."⁷⁴ Their synergy would shortly make movie history and help create the New Hollywood.

Bob Rafelson had a wiry body, a softly contemplative and friendly voice, and curly hair. A New York hipster and Dartmouth dropout who'd gone west to work in television production, he'd once thrown a chair at a Universal executive. Together with Bert Schneider, a rich Beverly Hills brat whose father Abe had headed Columbia Pictures and whose brother Stanley currently ran the studio out of New York, Rafelson produced the rock band/TV show *The Monkees*, a huge hit. Both Rafelson and Schneider immediately adopted Nicholson, recognizing his potential and undertaking his initiation into the higher reaches of hip Beverly Hills. At "Bert and Bob's," the next generation of actors, rockers, and writers were then converging and networking. In the Spanish-style Beverly Hills home Rafelson shared with his wife Toby, on Sierra Alta above Sunset, Nicholson, who was usually with Mimi Machu, mingled with Dennis Hopper, Brooke Hayward, actor-writer Buck Henry, and Bert and Judy Schneider. Schneider's brother Harold once remarked, "Bert would fuck a snake." Nicholson concurred, warning a friend, "*Never* bring a woman that you're serious about around Bert or Bob."⁷⁵

After Rafelson and Schneider formed Raybert Productions, with offices at Columbia Pictures on Gower Street, they hired Nicholson, for substantial money, to write a film, *Head*, based on their *Monkees* TV show. Nicholson, Rafelson, and Schneider went to Ojai for several days of brainstorming with the four Monkees—Peter Tork, Davey Jones, Mickey Dolenz, and Michael Nesmith—and during script conferences, Nicholson acted out all the parts. Although Nicholson no longer wanted to be an actor, focusing instead on directing, Rafelson and Schneider were so impressed that they decided to cast him in some future film, over Nicholson's protests. "I can't get a job," he told them. "It's all B-movie parts, C-movie parts. I've given up." Rafelson disagreed, feeling Nicholson "had this amazing talent. . . . great teeth . . . funny eyebrows.

And as we walked through the park at lunchtime he'd do these great animal impersonations. I thought, I can make capital out of this man. I told him we were going to make a movie and he would be the star. What was more, we were going to make a movie every two or three years and it would cover our entire life together."

Monkee Davey Jones said they killed "a ton of dope"⁷⁶ while tape recording their idea session. Structurally, Nicholson's concept for *Head* was nonlinear, in the fashion pioneered by *A Hard Day's Night*. Later, Nicholson and Rafelson repaired to a desert retreat and put together the script, which was filmed in February 1968 with Victor Mature, Annette Funicello, Carol Doda (the first topless dancer), Sonny Liston, Frank Zappa, Helena Kallianiotes (as a belly dancer), and Teri Garr.

To stir up publicity, Nicholson and Rafelson decided to create a happening on the streets of Manhattan the day *Head* was to open at Cinema Studio, putting up posters featuring the head of literary agent John Brockman. They accosted a policeman in front of Bonwit's on Fifth Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street, where Nicholson tried to stick a poster to the cop's helmet. He was handcuffed and thrown in jail with Rafelson, who later recalled, "Finally, we managed to get out and didn't make one line of news."

As he worked on *Head*, Nicholson was also seeing his friends Fonda and Hopper and listening to their dream of making the great American biker movie, one that would transcend the Hell's Angels baloney they'd all dished up in Corman's *The Wild Angels*, *Hell's Angels on Wheels*, and *Rebel Rousers*. Hopper envisaged a film that would tell young people not to be afraid of the increasingly oppressive U.S. government and would embolden them to change the nation's prowar, antidope policies. "Learn to protect yourselves," he wanted to tell them. "Go in groups, but go. When people understand that they can't tromp you down, maybe they'll start accepting you."⁷⁷

In trying to hammer out a deal for the movie, Fonda and Hopper had difficulty agreeing on terms with Roger Corman and AIP, and took it to Nicholson, who smelled success, remembering how profitable *Hell's Angels on Wheels* had been for Corman. He agreed to intercede with Bob Rafelson because "neither Dennis nor Peter knew how to present an idea." Nicholson advised Rafelson and Schneider that *Easy Rider* "would make endless amounts of money," and they agreed to take a meeting. Suddenly, all the stars were in alignment for Nicholson's breakthrough.

Chapter Three

THE BIG WOMBASSA

EASY RIDER

Nicholson wasn't in the original cast of *Easy Rider*. Rip Torn had the role of George Hanson, the pot-smoking ACLU lawyer with one foot in the counterculture and the other in the establishment. When Torn asked for his part to be better written, Dennis Hopper said, "Screw you,"¹ and Torn quit, saying, "I'm not going to do your shitty film."² In February 1968, as the first scenes were shot in New Orleans, Nicholson was still in L.A., working at Raybert on *Head* postproduction and in preproduction for another project, *Drive, He Said*. On location, violent conflicts erupted between Fonda and Hopper. "This is *my* fucking movie, and *nobody* is going to take it away from me," Hopper shrieked.³ On speed and wine the day the graveyard scene was filmed, Hopper reduced costar Karen Black to tears, humiliating her in front of the entire company.

“They had gone down to film Mardi Gras live before they even finished the script,” Nicholson recalled. “They had some problems down there between the partners.” On March 1, after six days in the Big Easy, cast and crew returned to L.A., and Fonda told Bert Schneider that he couldn’t continue to work “with Dennis in such a megalomaniac-like routine.”⁴ Schneider went straight to Hopper and said, “I want to tell you about your friend Peter Fonda. He told me, ‘Hopper’s lost his mind, he’s obviously crazy.’ Peter and your brother-in-law Bill Hayward tried to get you fired. So you’re not confused about who your friends are.”⁵

Schneider decided to try a new tactic, and assigned Nicholson as troubleshooter on *Easy Rider*. When Nicholson joined the company on the road, he found the production in chaos, and it was clear to him that Hopper and Fonda were still reluctant to accept him, but at least valued him “as a consultant because I had done some drug-related films.”⁶ Although everyone “wanted to kill one another,” Nicholson later recounted, he set out to solve the production’s problems. “I got them Leslie Kovacs,” he recalled. “They changed casts. I got them my production manager, who put a new crew together. By this time, Bert was a little uneasy, so he asked me to take this role [of George Hanson, recently vacated by Rip Torn] largely because of the fact that I knew production, knew this crew, I knew this situation.”⁷

When offered the role by Schneider and Rafelson, Nicholson said, “Yeah, I can play this part easy,”⁸ and later recounted, “I jumped at the chance. Acting is a vacation for me.” Hopper, who had inflexible ideas about casting, was not thrilled when Schneider told him, “Use Nicholson.” He was afraid Nicholson “would ruin my movie,” Hopper recalled. “I had my mind set on Jack Starrett, who became a director. . . . I’d never seen Jack do anything like that. I saw him as a Hollywood flasher, not as a country bumpkin.”⁹ Fonda later wrote, “Hopper resisted my notion of Nichol-

son taking over. He said that Jack was from New Jersey, and he wanted an actor who was a Texan like Torn was.”¹⁰ According to Nicholson, neither Fonda nor Hopper wanted him for the part:¹¹ “I had to beg them for the role.”¹² Hopper and Fonda viewed him as hopelessly mired in B crap but tolerated him as a troubleshooter in order to take advantage of his proven ability to get good nonunion people to work cheaply. Finally, Schneider told them to “shut up” and rammed Nicholson’s casting as George Hanson down their throats, telling them he was “going to be a star.”¹³ At last, Hopper told Nicholson, “Great, go do your number.”¹⁴

By the time the company got to Taos, New Mexico, Nicholson “had joined us,” Fonda recalled, “and we did a few days of riding shots.” Nicholson took the passenger seat on Fonda’s bike, and it couldn’t have been dicier as they sped over wooden-planked bridges, which were full of gaps. “With Jack as baggage the whole thing became impossible,” Fonda said. “Whenever the front end got railed, Jack clamped his thighs together. I have several cracked ribs that Jack could sign.”

Before Nicholson had arrived, the company had occasionally tangled with local rednecks, but with Nicholson on board, it was easier going. “Once I agreed with Schneider that he should do the part he turned out to be great all around,” Hopper admitted. “I thought he had more natural charm than anybody I’d ever met. He has this great personality and an innate sense of diplomacy. He’ll walk away before he’ll escalate any tangle, and he would never harm another person. Jack is a great, loyal friend and a wonderful man.”¹⁵

During seven weeks of filming, Fonda and Hopper always made sure Nicholson was stoned on pot before calling “Action,” and Fonda advised him “to hold the hit in his lungs a little longer. . . . He was letter perfect, and very stoned, a pro.”¹⁶ But as everyone who has seen the movie knows, Nicholson was hardly

letter perfect in his famous, rambling UFO speech in front of the campfire, during which he blew a line. “Den-Den *wanted* Jack to be stoned for real,” Fonda continued. “Jack’s ‘going up’ was part of really being stoned, forgetting what you were talking about, losing the thread, as it were. And the laugh was so genuine, so true to the grip of reefer madness. . . . Dennis left the moment just as it was shot.”¹⁷

Nicholson too recalled the difficulties of the campfire scene. “Each time I did a take or angle,” he said, “it involved smoking almost an entire joint. We were smoking regular dope, pretty good Mexican grass. . . . Now, the main portion of this sequence is the transition from not being stoned to being stoned. . . . an unusual reverse acting problem. And Dennis was hysterical off camera most of the time this was happening; in fact, some of the things that you see in the film—like my looking away and trying to keep myself from breaking up—were caused by my looking at Dennis off camera over in the bushes, totally freaked out of his bird, laughing his head off while I’m in there trying to do my Lyndon Johnson and keep everything together.”¹⁸

During the campfire scene, the most memorable one in the film, Fonda and Hopper realized Nicholson was walking away with the picture. “Those guys killed him off because he was stealing the picture,” Bruce Dern said. “They’d had enough of watching Jack in the daily rushes.”

Bert Schneider was not reassured when he came to Taos to check on the progress of his investment. “Dennis threw a shit fit,” Fonda recalled. Even worse, the key grip pulled a gun and “shot at the executive producer.”¹⁹ Luckily, he missed. While still in Taos, Nicholson dropped acid with Hopper, who later described it as “a wonderful trip.”²⁰ The two were driven to the grave of D. H. and Frieda Lawrence at a mountain ranch commanding a view of several states. They tripped at the tomb for hours, lying in front of the

shrine and later bathing naked in nearby hot springs with a beautiful girl, then running back down the road as the girl followed in a truck, keeping them in the headlights. “We’re geniuses, you know that?” Nicholson told Hopper. “We’re both geniuses. Isn’t it great to be a genius?” Nicholson was under the impression when he returned to the village that their motel was under imminent Indian attack.

His role completed, he left the company in Dallas in order to do “post” on *Head* in L.A., as well as participate in the editing of *Easy Rider*. He told Rex Reed, “I got to edit my own part, so I picked the best shots and everything.”

All the forces had now come together to bring Nicholson to the pivotal point of his life: Corman, Fonda, Hopper, Rafelson, and Schneider all had a hand in it. Nicholson, Fonda, and Hopper would go on to superstardom, Rafelson and Schneider to major power.

In 2003, Harry Gittes said, “I saw a very early screening, and Jack just jumped off the screen. He stole the movie. I was extremely happy for him, and extremely sad for myself, because I knew he was gone.”²¹ Gittes blamed Schneider and Rafelson for advising Nicholson to get rid of his “lame-o” pals from his B-picture past.²² Without his old friends, who were not afraid to tell him the truth, he would be surrounded by sycophants and in danger of losing touch with reality. “He was no longer going to be [the same],” Gittes lamented.²³ Schneider and Rafelson “brought out his mean side, the hardball side of Jack.”

Even prior to *Easy Rider*’s U.S. premiere, there were signs that something seismic was happening to Nicholson’s career. In the spring of 1969, accompanied by Mimi Machu, and schlepping film cans of *Easy Rider*, he went to the Cannes Film Festival. “Cannes is where I met all the people I know in the film business,” he said. “Of course, you were freer to get loaded back then, so it

was more rockin' than today [2002].”²⁴ In France in 1969, the air was full of revolutionary zeal; the nation had virtually closed down the previous year due to rioting and strikes. In Cannes, Nicholson, Fonda, and Hopper, looking very hip, created a small stir when they arrived at the Palais and ascended the red-carpeted stairs, Fonda sporting a Union Army uniform, signifying that America was engaged in another Civil War. Nicholson later described the screening: “I’m one of the few people who was actually present at the moment I became a movie star. I could actually sense it in the audience. The film was going along, they were giving it its due, appreciating its . . . new imagery, the fact that Dennis was doing a beautiful job. And then my first scene came along, and the audience just went sssssss— It was great.”²⁵

Hopper won the 1969 Cannes Film Festival award for the best movie by a new director; very likely the only reason Nicholson wasn’t singled out was because Cannes did not have a category for supporting players.

Easy Rider opened at the Beekman Theater in New York on July 14, 1969. Made for \$501,000, it recouped the investment in one week, in one theater. An unusual sight on the fashionable East Side, barefoot hippies thronged the theater and turned the toilets into dope dens. The film came at precisely the right moment—the end of the tumultuous sixties—and enraptured the public by expressing the disillusionment and estrangement of the boomer generation that had witnessed Vietnam, the Cold War, and the assassination of its democratic leaders. There was a feeling throughout the film capital and the press that Hollywood had at last portrayed what the contemporary world was really like, forging a bond with young people in the process. *Life* defined the “style of a New Hollywood [as] love beads . . . and blow[ing] grass.”

The film made Nicholson the front man of the hippie revolution, and at last gave him, at thirty-two, a viewpoint and philoso-

phy as an actor. Henceforth he would try to choose roles in which he could both reflect and shape the contemporary personality. He called it riding the sociological wave, sometimes cutting back as he surfed the curl, always in harmony with the generational developments of his time. From now on, he wanted to play “cusp characters. I like to play people that haven’t existed yet, a future something, a cusp character. . . . Much in the way Chagall flies figures into the air—once it becomes part of the conventional wisdom, it doesn’t seem particularly adventurous or weird or wild.” In much of his future work—*Five Easy Pieces*, *Carnal Knowledge*, *The Last Detail*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, *The Shining*, *Batman*, *Terms of Endearment*, *As Good as It Gets*, *About Schmidt*—he would be ahead of his time, challenging, iconoclastic, trailblazing.

There were also the purely practical considerations of maintaining his hard-won stardom, and he adopted a rule that guided him in choosing scripts: “If there are two really good scenes [for the leading man] it means that the part’s probably pretty good.”²⁶ These ideas help explain what would become one of the most relevant—and enduring—careers in the history of film. His role in *Easy Rider* was one of his two signature portraits of the defeated rebel, showing what happened to the Beats, Kerouac, Brando, Dean, Ken Kesey, and Clift as they passed from rebellion to despair. The other would be *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, which illuminated the predicament of the fallen angel and became a metaphor of the human condition.

He nailed the character of George Hanson by going back into his own past and finding gestures and props that would galvanize the character and the movie. He wore the same glasses that his grandfather, John J. Nicholson, had worn. “Not literally,” he said, “but the same. I needed age for that character. I was considerably younger than what I was playing.”²⁷ A fallen angel, his grandfather was an alcoholic who destroyed his early promise and came to a

brutal end, though Nicholson always appreciated his kindly nature. Those are the qualities that shine so endearingly from George Hanson. Nicholson made them real by seeing the world through the eyes of the man whom he still thought of as his father.

The critics, many of them seeing Jack Nicholson for the first time, since exploitation films were rarely covered by the press, loved him on sight, and considered the picture to be “the focal film of the late sixties.”²⁸ Even those who had reservations about the picture recognized Nicholson’s talent; the *New York Times* reviewer Vincent Canby wrote that *Easy Rider* was a routine biker potboiler until “a strange things happens. There comes on the scene a very real character. . . . As played by Nicholson, George Hanson is a marvelously realized character . . . the only person in the movie who seems to have a sense of what liberation and freedom are. There is joy and humor and sweetness. . . . *Easy Rider* never quite recovers from his loss.” Stanley Kauffmann of the *New Republic* wrote, “There is a crazy sweetness in Nicholson that is pathetic without ever asking for pathos.” On Nicholson’s home ground, the *Los Angeles Times*’s Charles Champlin threw him the ultimate accolade: “One of the consummate pieces of screen acting.”

Even more thrilling than the rave reviews was a telephone call from Stanley Kubrick.

“I want you to play Napoleon for me,” said the director of *2001*.

“Fine,” Nicholson said. “When do I start?”²⁹

Later, Kubrick executive Jan Harlan explained that Napoleon fascinated Kubrick as a “worldly genius who fails. How could someone so intelligent make so many mistakes?” Like many other directors, Kubrick was fond of “battle analogies,” Nicholson said. In battles, as in movies, “anything that goes wrong causes catastrophe.” Though Kubrick had lined up 5,000 Rumanian cavalrymen, his financial backers withdrew their support when an-

other film about Napoleon, starring Rod Steiger, opened to little business.

Praise from critics and such living legends as Kubrick went straight to Nicholson's head, and suddenly, despite his dislike of politics, he felt capable of anything. Arriving in a restaurant for an interview, he drew stares from the executive lunchers, who gaped at his thick beard, long hair, bellbottom jeans, white-striped red T-shirt, and antique brown-and-white shoes. "I really feel obligated to do something like run for the presidency," he told the reporter, who later wrote, "I can think of worse choices. . . . To watch this fellow appear on the screen is to discover a truly unique individual, a man of infinite raffish aristocratic charm and an acute sensibility."³⁰ Unlike many stars, Nicholson didn't bother to feign modesty, nor did he despair over loss of privacy. Like the true exhibitionist he was, he thrived on notoriety. "We all seek attention in the first place," he said, "and you don't get to complain about it after you get it."³¹ Henry Jaglom thought he went too far, fueled by "his arrogance at the expense of his reason and suddenly he's going to be president of the United States. He has delusions of grandeur in those areas."³²

In New York in the summer of 1969 to promote *Easy Rider*, Nicholson was staying on his expense account at the posh Regency Hotel when he learned that Ethel May was in a New Jersey hospital, and he later referred to her as a "charity patient."³³ Being a movie star didn't necessarily confer immediate wealth. Ethel May did not always recognize Nicholson when he paid her several visits over the following months, nor did she release him from the big lie of his parentage. She was, however, aware of his success, and happy that his years of struggle had paid off.

One day, Nicholson was scheduled for a press interview at Downey's Steak House at noon, but at five o'clock that morning, he received a call telling him that Ethel May had had an attack.

Getting to Neptune to her bedside proved a harrowing experience, beginning with car-rental companies who refused to give him a vehicle because he didn't have a credit card. "It's always a mistake to try and do anything with cash," he complained. "Nobody trusts cash anymore." Finally he prevailed on a friend who had a credit card to make arrangements with Avis, but then he faced another hassle with Manhattan traffic and the daunting bridge-and-tunnel routes to Jersey. "I was thinking I was going to have to cope with a dying mother," he recounted, "and the problems of just getting around in the city seemed overwhelming." When he arrived at the hospital, Ethel May's voice could be heard in the corridors, screaming his name, but her condition improved, and he was able to return to Manhattan for his interview.

Arriving at Downey's late, the bearded actor struck the reporters as totally frazzled, and he explained that he'd been up all night. The interview was continued the following day in his luxurious Park Avenue hotel suite, and a reporter later noted "the incongruity in the very idea of a bearded underground type just being at the Regency." More journalists turned up every few minutes, and Nicholson's phone never stopped ringing. Slouched on a divan, surrounded by reporters, he enjoyed his position to the hilt, taking calls from the top directors of the decade—Kubrick, Mike Nichols, Roman Polanski, and Michelangelo Antonioni—all of whom were pursuing the latest new star.³⁴ Despite the obvious impact of *Easy Rider* on his career, he was as reluctant as ever to acknowledge any help from outside, remarking, a few years later, "People think *Easy Rider* changed my career around, which I guess is true, but since *Easy Rider*, I've taken no new work. Everything I've done—*Five Easy Pieces*, *Carnal Knowledge*, writing and directing *Drive*, *He Said*—I was scheduled to do before *Easy Rider* was released."³⁵

During the Regency interview, he elaborated on these and

other projects. “Bob Rafelson’s been writing something for me for several months. I’ve been kind of not wanting to know what it’s about. It takes place on a train for the most part. Essentially, the guy is returning to his home town, escorting a coffin back. In *Easy Rider* I left; in this one I go back [Rafelson lost interest in the project, but Henry Jaglom’s script, *Tracks*, was eventually filmed with Dennis Hopper in the role originally crafted for Nicholson]. In January I’ll direct a film . . . *Drive, He said*. . . . Then I’ve been talking to a few people. Talking to Mike Nichols about his next picture, the one he’s writing with Jules Feiffer. And to Larry Peerce about *The Sporting Club*. It’s about two guys in their 30s in upstate Michigan. The members of the club are the elite people in the area. Membership is passed on only to eldest sons. There’s this annual ‘do’ they have and they open up a 100-year-old time capsule. And then . . . anyway, it’s really loony [he never made the film]. I had to pass up Dick Rush’s college picture, *Getting Straight*. I guess I’ve lost my standing with him. Now I’ve got more work than I can handle, and this is a guy I’ve done my last three pictures with.”³⁶

Yet another project, but one he failed to mention, was *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, the first film he shot after *Easy Rider*, though he and Bob Evans had been discussing it ever since Cannes. He played Barbra Streisand’s stepbrother Tad Pringle. In November 1969 he told reporter Harry Clein, “I took the job for the money.”³⁷ Elsewhere he claimed he accepted the role to avoid typecasting, and yet Tad Pringle was, like George Hanson, a well-to-do hippie.

Though Bob Evans finally gave him the role at the Sherry Netherland,³⁸ Nicholson characteristically declined to thank Evans publicly, telling a reporter, “I was hired off *Psych-Out*, which they were looking at for the lighting effects. ‘That’s the guy we want,’ they said. I wasn’t so sure, though, and I turned it down five

times before accepting it. . . .³⁹ They kept offering me more money.”⁴⁰

He'd had to audition for the role—“just me and [director Vincente Minnelli] in the room, *a cappella*, me singing ‘Don't Blame Me’ to Vincente Minnelli. . . . It blew my mind.” During filming, Minnelli gave him little guidance until Nicholson at last said, “Look, Vincente, I don't *mind* being directed.” The underappreciated actor was restive throughout the shoot, seeing so much that was wrong and wasteful in big-studio productions. Despite his conviction that he'd already learned everything about filmmaking, and despite the way his ideas had always been readily accepted on Poverty Row—the industry's term for minor studios—he found himself being treated like a tyro by the mainstream pros on the set of the Streisand picture. “I've only done that one big-budget ‘A’ film,” he said in November 1969, “and I wouldn't be in the movies if that's what making movies is like. . . . Roger Corman, Dick Rush [gave me] a very free sort of position. If I have an idea, normally it gets implemented. On *Clear Day*, my ideas were not implemented for this character. They rejected those shoes [pointing to his spectator wing tips]. If I had dressed the character, he would have looked right. . . . I did please Vincente Minnelli—because in my own theory of acting, I must please the director, and I think Minnelli is good—but each night I was unhappy.”

He felt he could have produced *Clear Day* for \$2 million instead of the \$12 million it cost, had he been in charge. They overspent on the set, which had a bad scrim, and he claimed he could have shot his scene better “and for nothing” on the roof of a Manhattan apartment house. In 1969—still decades away from the millions he'd collect from *Batman*—he complained of inflated superstar salaries, saying, “The fees are too high. Not just Streisand, [who] sets the standard for everybody.”⁴¹ Much later, when he

ascended to Streisand's pay bracket, he would become one of the most outspoken defenders of huge Hollywood salaries.

He liked working with the pop diva, later telling Rex Reed, "Streisand treated me great, man. I don't think she saw *Easy Rider* . . . so it wasn't because of that. She tried to help me in scenes, you know? She was always telling me things to do."⁴² Reed thought him naive for failing to realize Streisand was a well-known control freak. In a later interview he revised his estimation of her only slightly, remarking, "I know what people say about Barbara but it has lots more to do with themselves than with her. She figures she's carrying the movie and wants to do her best. She was helpful and encouraged me in my singing."⁴³

On a Clear Day You Can See Forever was an abysmal flop. *Time* said Nicholson had taken "a giant step backwards from *Easy Rider*,"⁴⁴ and *Newsweek* wrote, "Nicholson seems to have forgotten how to act." Obviously he was in danger of being written off as a one-hit wonder, but when the 1969 awards season rolled around, he was nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe for *Easy Rider*, and the prestigious New York Film Critics Circle and the National Society of Film Critics both voted him best supporting actor of the year. On his first night in New York for the awards, he chose to see *Citizen Kane*, rather than make use of comps for a rock concert at the Fillmore East.

Rex Reed interviewed him in his suite at the St. Regis just before he went over to Sardi's for an award presentation. Reed found him fidgeting and roaming around the hotel room as he munched on a chicken sandwich, downed a Coke, and chatted with a publicist, an agent, and the ubiquitous Mimi Machu. "He has surprisingly tiny features, soft hands, and thinning hair, and looks like a slightly seedy Eagle Scout who is always being stalked by a battalion of slightly aggressive field mice," Reed wrote. Machu burst into laughter when Nicholson told Reed that the only reason they'd

brought Terry Southern into *Easy Rider* was because no one would have financed it with Dennis Hopper as director; without the prestige of Southern's name, it would have been viewed as just another "Peter Fonda motorcycle flick."

When it was time to leave, Nicholson asked, "Will they let me in at Sardi's without a tie?" Machu assured him that as a winner he'd have no trouble, and he took off his tie and tossed it on a chair.

"Will I have to give a speech or anything? I think I'll just say, 'I accept this award in the name of D. H. Lawrence.'"

Machu giggled. Reed told her that her name reminded him of a boat, and Mimi said, "Or a mountain." Then, when Reed asked Nicholson if success was going to spoil him, he said, "Anybody in the world can get me on the phone."

"Some people called up last night from downstairs wanted autographs," Machu said. "I wouldn't let them come up."

"I went down when she wasn't looking," Nicholson said. "The main difference now is money . . . I go for whatever's fair. Only at this point *fair* is a little bit different."

He and his entourage took the elevator downstairs and hopped in a waiting limousine. Arriving at Sardi's for the New York Film Critics Circle's party, he was relieved to see that Jon Voight, the best-actor winner for *Midnight Cowboy*, also wore no necktie, striking an antiestablishment stance at an event at which everyone else was dressed to the nines. Meeting columnist Earl Wilson, Nicholson said, "This is my lady Mimi." Later, dining at Trader Vic's, "she got to kissing [Nicholson's] fingers," Wilson reported in the *New York Post*, "and I kept wondering what there is in the Revolution that can make a girl want to kiss your fingers. This lad Nicholson's pro-pot and has used LSD. . . . He looked at me and said, 'I wish you would say you met a guy whose values you disagreed with but you liked him.'"⁴⁵

The 1969 Oscar nominations were announced on February 16, 1970, and everyone seemed to favor Nicholson, *Newsday's* critic writing, "If Jack Nicholson doesn't win this year's Best Supporting Actor Oscar, there's no meaning to the awards at all."⁴⁶ Still in his early thirties, Nicholson jauntily proclaimed, "If I get an Oscar, I won't feel like I've stolen anything."⁴⁷ On another occasion, he quipped, "I'm voting for myself though I don't expect to win." His competition was not particularly impressive: Rupert Crosse for *The Reivers*; Elliot Gould for *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*; Anthony Quayle for *Anne of the Thousand Days*; and Gig Young for *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Both Fonda and Hopper were passed over by the Academy for producing and directing *Easy Rider*, but at least they received a nomination, together with Terry Southern, for original writing.

At the Oscar ceremony, held on April 7, 1970, at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in the Los Angeles Music Center, Nicholson asked Dennis Hopper if he could meet Michelle Phillips, the stunning blond singer in the pop-folk group the Mamas and the Papas, known for their cool, lush harmonies in "California Dreamin'," "Monday, Monday," and "Go Where You Wanna Go."

"Oh, you'd like to meet her? You'll probably be living with her within three months," Hopper said.⁴⁸

Easy Rider won no Oscars that night. Hopper and Fonda lost to Bill Goldman for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and the old guard preferred veteran supporting actor Gig Young over newcomer Nicholson.⁴⁹ Perhaps the most obvious omission from the nominees was László Kovács for his innovative cinematography in *Easy Rider*; the winner in that category was the conventional *Butch Cassidy*. The Old Hollywood wasn't ready to bow out yet.

Money continued to pour in from *Easy Rider*, and Schneider and Rafelson transformed Raybert into a larger company, BBS—Bert, Bob, and Steve—the latter being Schneider's high school

friend Steve Blauner, an intimidating, red-bearded, bead-wearing, three-hundred-pound businessman who was added to the partnership when the details of running the company began to bore Schneider.⁵⁰ Nicholson was virtually a fourth partner at BBS, which was about to help revolutionize the motion-picture industry. In the four-story BBS building at 933 North La Brea, which included a fifty-seat screening room, the executives compared penis sizes and called one another “babe” and “doll.” According to one staffer, the BBS males “took a macho pride in fucking the same women at different times, from the starlets right down to the typists.”⁵¹ A dope peddler regularly made the rounds of offices, as did acid king Timothy Leary, counterculture warrior Abbie Hoffman, and the Black Panthers’ Huey Newton. More significant than its role in the fleeting sixties style of radical chic, BBS was an avatar of change in a then-moribund movie industry. A unique communal feeling at BBS spelled the end of the dominance of the producer and rise of the auteur—not to mention a more equitable sharing of profits. Though nothing much of a material nature had yet changed in Nicholson’s life, he was definitely in for a percentage, however minuscule, of *Easy Rider*’s epic gross earnings, reported to be \$30 to \$45 million. Film historians disagree about who was responsible for such retroactive largesse; David Thomson credited Bob Rafelson, but the equally authoritative Peter Biskind said it was Schneider who gave Nicholson points. Schneider also assigned minute percentages to photographer László Kovács, editor Donn Cambern, and location manager Paul Lewis.

For all their air of flower-power purity, the BBS gang “were the meanest people I’d ever met in my life, brutal, inhumane inflictors,” said Harry Gittes.⁵² “Whatever your weakness was, Bert would be on it like stink on shit. . . . I have never forgiven Jack for getting involved with these guys.” Nothing, however, could long come between Gittes and Nicholson; they were friends for life. In

2003, Gittes recalled, “I had left L.A. and gone back to New York and become successful. Jack used to come out and visit, and this was the time in our lives when I was way ahead of him. For years I was more successful in the ad business than the movie business. He was still very much a struggling actor, and he was always trying to get me back to L.A., back into the movie business, because he liked my brand of creativity.”

Long before Nicholson became rich, Schneider assured the actor his financial future was so bright he could afford to purchase property in L.A. Following his advice and accepting his loan, Nicholson let Schneider help him look for a place, and bought an \$80,000⁵³ house on Mulholland Drive in 1971—two stories, eight rooms, four bedrooms, three baths, the obligatory L.A. swimming pool, and a black Jacuzzi that had been gouged into rock, where Nicholson was soon enjoying twilight dips. “I borrowed everything,” Nicholson said.⁵⁴ He later acquired the guest house, and his idol, Marlon Brando, owned the third house in the compound, originally built by Howard Hughes, and purchased by Brando in 1958.

The hilltop compound was situated in a private canyon in the mountains between Beverly Hills and the San Fernando Valley. Eventually, both Warren Beatty and Bob Rafelson moved to Mulholland Drive,⁵⁵ which Nicholson compared with Manhattan’s Fifth Avenue as the most desirable parcel of real estate in L.A. Access to the compound was unimpeded, a driveway of several hundred feet winding up from Mulholland before dividing into a fork, the right prong leading to Nicholson’s house, and the left to Brando’s.⁵⁶ By the following month, experiencing classic house-buyer’s remorse, Nicholson had nightmarish visions of sudden unemployment, inability to meet his house payments, eviction from Mulholland, and ending up back in the flats of Hollywood. “This

week I can pick and choose what I do, but we know people in this business forget very quickly,” he said. “I’m already into the problems of my personal life—the auguries of the ultimate demise of everything—and [afraid of being] back in a one-room apartment on Fountain.” But he didn’t pull out of the deal; it was just his imagination of disaster working overtime.

His combination of overweening ego and cringing self-doubt had not abated with the advent of worldwide adulation. “The Big Wombassa,” his nickname for stardom, didn’t alter the way he felt about himself. Fame and fortune he defined as “what you think you’re going to get but don’t get when you get what you want. . . . I find myself apologizing for being a film star if I’m interested in a person socially.”⁵⁷ Quincy Jones, the multitalented musician-producer whose Laurel Canyon residence included a tennis court, became a new friend—and frequent tennis partner. “When we finished playing tennis,” Jones recalled, “we’d start to question each other about our present states and our old ladies. . . . Jack’s whole gang came up together and took over the business at the same time.”⁵⁸

A few years later, attending the 1973 wedding reception of Quincy Jones’s daughter Jolie at the patrician Hotel Bel-Air, “Jack dropped somebody’s ‘coke’ spoon in the toilet,” Jones recalled, “and he asked the maitre d’ for a monkey wrench. . . . There is Jack, in a white jacket, underneath the toilet, trying to unscrew the big bolt there to get the coke spoon out. . . . There are now six broads in the men’s room, watching the action. And when Dick Zanuck hit the room I could see his eyes drop out of his head. I don’t think he’d seen too many scenes like this before.”⁵⁹

Up on Mulholland Drive, Nicholson and his neighbor Marlon Brando were soon “sharing women,” according to Brando’s girlfriend Pat Quinn, who played the title role in 1969’s *Alice’s Restau-*

rant. Quinn found Brando to be an experienced and sensitive lover. “Once Jack moved in next door,” she recalled, “Marlon was going after his women, and it became another Hollywood game.”⁶⁰

Now that Nicholson had a place of his own, he decided to live as a nudist, so he could overcome self-consciousness about his body. “I was nude no matter who came by. . . . Roger Corman didn’t like it much. I wasn’t throwing my wang around . . . but it startled him nonetheless. My daughter [Jennifer, born in 1963] understandably didn’t like it. . . . Harry Dean Stanton loved it. He couldn’t wait to come over and be nude.” At the end of his three-month experiment, he felt “very comfortable” being naked in front of others, but admitted in a 2004 interview, “It didn’t last.”⁶¹

In January 1970, Ethel May lay dying in a charity bed at the Geraldine L. Thompson Medical Home at Allenwood, New Jersey, of Deamato myositis and chronic myocarditis, complicated by diabetes and osteoporosis. Why, one might wonder, was the mother of an Oscar-nominated actor, at whom producers and directors were flinging scripts, reduced to charity? Despite his new fame and critical accolades, Nicholson was not in the elite circle of such high-earning actors as William Holden and Elizabeth Taylor, nor would he be for some time to come. The purchase of his Mulholland house was accomplished only with the help of a loan. “I lived in this house when I didn’t have a nickel,” he said. As for his promised percentages, those can be very slow in coming. The longer the middleman—whether a movie studio, book publisher, record company, or agent—hangs on to an artist’s money, the longer the middleman can collect interest on it. The polite term for this widespread practice is “slow pay.”

Ethel May finally expired, at age seventy-one, on January 6. “I felt the grief, the loss,” Nicholson remembered. “After I asked at a

certain point for everyone to leave, when she was in the funeral home for what they call the viewing, I stayed for an hour or so sitting next to the casket.” She was buried January 10 at Monmoth Park in New Shrewsbury, New Jersey. For all he knew, she was his mother, for she had died without setting the record straight. He felt “no hidden grievances,” he said, since he and Ethel May had never hesitated to air their differences. When he finally learned the truth several years later—that his real mother had abandoned him—he recalled an old, drug-induced episode in which “I got back to the terrible realization I had as an infant: that my mother didn’t want me.”⁶²

Clearly everyone wanted him now. He worked steadily throughout 1970 and, in his personal life, in addition to his tempestuous affair with Manchu, he was seeing other women, including Candice Bergen. Bergen confided in Nicholson after her breakup with Terry Melcher, Doris Day’s son, who once considered recording and filming Charles Manson. Melcher was a member of Nicholson’s wide circle of friends from the music world, including Phil Spector, Quincy Jones, and Lou Adler. When Manson, a devil worshiper, was later tried for mass murder, Nicholson appeared in court among the spectators and took notes, explaining, “I just wanted to see it for myself.”⁶³ Actually, anything having to do with demonics seemed to intrigue him. He lapped up the writings of Nietzsche, and years later he’d become the personification of evil in such films as *The Shining* and *Batman*. In the latter he’d say, “Ever dance with the devil in the moonlight?” and another signature line was George Hanson’s “Did ya ever talk to bullfrogs in the middle of the night?”

It was through Nicholson that Candice Bergen met her next lover, Bert Schneider, who struck her as “charming, sweet, persistent, overpowering, and smart.” According to an employee of BBS, Nicholson helped himself to groupies on his film sets and to girls

he met at parties: “When Mimi wasn’t there, it was any girl he could find.” Though passionate, the relationship with Machu was not viable. “We were two maniacs who couldn’t live together or apart,” she said. Her days with Nicholson were numbered. Not the least of the Big Wombassa’s charms was that, soon, he could have anyone and anything he wanted.

FIVE EASY PIECES

During the filming of *Five Easy Pieces* in the winter of 1969–1970, Nicholson seemed perversely compelled to perpetuate the identity fabrications and deceptions that had been visited upon him by his family.

It all started when Bob Rafelson had an image of Nicholson in a shot that was as bizarre and original in its way as the famous sequence in *La Dolce Vita* of the religious statue being hoisted onto the Vatican by helicopter. “I have this vision of Jack out in the middle of a highway, the wind blowing through his hair, sitting on a truck and playing the piano,” Rafelson said, and told Eastman to write a movie about a concert pianist.

Filmed in the course of forty-one days in Bakersfield, California; Eugene, Oregon; and British Columbia, Canada, *Five Easy Pieces* was essentially built “around me,” Nicholson excitedly told another member of the cast. It was every actor’s dream: to play himself in a major motion picture. Actually, Eastman based the protagonist only partly on Nicholson, also drawing on the life of her brother, who “drifted almost mysteriously from place to place,” and on Senator Ted Kennedy, “whose position as the youngest in his own celebrated family suggested the kinds of competitive feelings and fears” she wanted to explore. The original script, before it

was altered by Rafelson, had the hero plunging off a bridge, Chappaquidick-style, and dying.

Five Easy Pieces presented a new kind of male in American cinema, one who deconstructed not only the usual he-man stereotype of masculinity but, cutting closer to the bone of contemporary reality, unmasked the counterculture rebel, showing him as a far more intriguing creature than Brando, Dean, or Dustin Hoffman—or, for that matter, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper—had ever envisaged. Again, Nicholson was riding the sociological curl, giving a watershed performance not only in the history of films, but of acting itself. Rafelson's spare, precise direction and Eastman's quirky genius were indispensable components in his achievement, which, in effect, brought the artistry of British and European cinema—the Angry Young Men, Italian neo-realism, and the nouvelle vague—home to America. Drugs were also a component; on the set, Rafelson served as pharmacist as well as director, and coproducer Richard Wechsler recalled, “He’d say, ‘Do you think we should give Jack some grass or some hash for this scene?’”⁶⁴

In the prophetic opening shot, as the credits rolled to the strains of “Stand By Your Man,” a shovelful of dirt was dumped in the viewer's face, as if bearing out Nicholson's often-stated promise to challenge the audience—in this case, with everything that was wrong about America in the seventies. “Dirt,” said one of the characters. “How did this place get so dirty?” The lead role, Robert Eroica Dupea, a California oilfield rigger living in a trailer, was a wasted pianist. The title *Five Easy Pieces* derived from a child's piano-lesson book. After “auspicious beginnings,” Dupea had turned his back on performing and hit the road. Alienated from his father, he yearned for the stability of an emotional commitment but was never able to settle down. Though a good pianist,

he was not special enough for a concert career. As a man, he was also incomplete, incapable of sustaining a relationship with another human being. Dupea was another of Nicholson's cusp characters, a self-destructive artist, a fallen angel, someone who didn't yet exist but, in the troubled society of the time, was morphing from late sixties idealist into early seventies nihilist—from rebellion to despair.

Anyone who was over thirty in the Nixon years knew what Nicholson was saying in *Five Easy Pieces* and his next two films, *Carnal Knowledge* and *The King of Marvin Gardens*: frustration with the status quo and estrangement from the mainstream of contemporary, oppressive, warlike society had led to a chilly nihilism: down with everything, it seemed to say—the state, law, order, and all institutions, for all had been irreparably corrupted. Freedom would only be possible if the idea of God were destroyed, along with morality, marriage, family, property, justice, and civilization. Rebuild the world from scratch, letting personal pleasure be the only guide.

Bobby Dupea lived with a pretty but pathetic girl named Rayette Dipesto, played by Karen Black as a sexy, clinging, cloying mess. Rayette longed to be a country singer; like Dupea, she was good but not exceptional. Dupea took her with him when he drove to visit his family in the Pacific Northwest after his father suffered a stroke, and en route they gave a lift to a couple of Lesbian hitchhikers, Palm Apodaca and Terry Grouse. One of the girls was played by Nicholson's friend Helena Kallianiotis. Palm Apodaca was on her way to Alaska, where she hoped to escape the greed and pollution sinking America. "Crap, filth. . . . People are filthy," Palm said. "They wouldn't be as violent if they were clean. Filth—that's what starts maggots and riots. I don't even want to talk about it." George Hanson's discontent in *Easy Rider*—"This used to be a

great country—what went wrong?”—had turned into national self-loathing.

Palm’s screeds became an oddball tour de force as delivered by Kallianiotos, a martial-arts expert who’d previously played the roller-derby nemesis of Raquel Welch in *Kansas City Bomber*. Kallianiotos was in the famous “no substitutions” scene in *Five Easy Pieces*, Nicholson’s battle with a waitress, who symbolized brutish institutional authority. He asked the waitress for a side order of wheat toast with his entree, a plain omelet. When the waitress informed him with a touch of sadistic satisfaction that wheat toast was not one of the precise combinations on the menu, and he’d have to accept a muffin or a coffee roll, he cleverly out-argued her, ordering a chicken-salad sandwich on wheat toast, without butter, lettuce, or mayonnaise. “Now all you have to do is hold the chicken, bring me the toast, give me a check for the chicken-salad sandwich and you haven’t broken any rules.”

“You want me to hold the chicken, huh?”

“I want you to hold it between your knees.”

“You’ll all have to leave. I’m not going to take any more of your smartness and sarcasm.”

The scene ended with Dupea knocking everything off the table and walking out. It was the first instance, though certainly not the last, of Nicholson’s famous coiled inner spring, an unexpected eruption of violence as shocking as Brando’s table-clearing explosion at Blanche DuBois’s birthday party in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But in *Five Easy Pieces* the gesture became a resonating metaphor of the individual’s fight against the network of insane rules that govern society, a theme that would be further developed in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Henry Jaglom claimed credit for the restaurant sequence, saying that Rafelson had asked him to write a movie for Nicholson, *Tracks*, which included such a scene,

though it was cut in the Dennis Hopper version. “Carole thinks she wrote it,” said Jaglom. “I think Jack is convinced he wrote it. Bob Rafelson is convinced he wrote it. It’s all *Rashomon*.”⁶⁵

Nicholson called Dupea “an extraordinary person posing as a common man.” It was indeed a remarkable role, one that summed up, as in no other movie ever made, the contradictions of the American male, torn between the creative impulse and redneck virility, between Pouilly-Fuissé and Bud, Chopin’s Prelude in E Minor and Tammy Wynette’s “D.I.V.O.R.C.E.,” elitist women and earthy waitresses. In creating Bobby Dupea, Eastman drew on fifteen years of shared experience with Nicholson, including his confrontation with the snotty waitress in Pupi’s pastry shop in Hollywood when he was still an unknown, and his sad relationship with his grandfather John J. According to Nicholson, *Five Easy Pieces* was “a life mixture of all our lives.”⁶⁶

The “secret” to his character, he explained, was “the fact that I was playing it as an allegory of my own career. . . . ‘Auspicious beginnings,’”⁶⁷ i.e., the bright Jersey boy who skipped college to become a beatnik. He constructed the Dupea characterization from “that time in my life, which Carole knew about, well before *Easy Rider*, when I was doing a lot of TV and [B] movies. . . . So in playing the character, I drew on all the impulses and thoughts I had during those years when I was having no real acceptance.” In the script, the words “auspicious beginnings” occurred in the scene between the protagonist and his stroke-crippled father, who was unable to speak.

When they shot the sequence, there’d been a tense morning on the set. Nicholson was in conflict with Bob Rafelson, who felt the actor wasn’t emoting enough, that his toughness would turn the audience off.

“Hey, I want you to cry in this movie,” Rafelson said.

It went against Nicholson’s grain as an actor; he never ap-

proached a scene that directly, and later recalled, “This is the last kind of direction you want to hear.” Finally, he wrote his own speech, trying for as little verbiage as possible. “And that ‘auspicious beginnings’ is what I thought the guy was all about,” Nicholson related. “On take one, away I went.” Bobby told his father:

“I don’t know if you’d be particularly interested in hearing anything about my life. Most of it doesn’t add up to much that I could relate as a way of life that you’d approve of. I move around a lot, not because I’m looking for anything really but because I’m getting away from things that get bad if I stay. Auspicious beginnings, you know what I mean? I’m trying to imagine your half of the conversation. My feeling is I don’t know that if you could talk we would be talking. That’s pretty much the way it got to be before I left. Are you all right? I don’t know what to say . . .”

Suddenly, thinking of the yawning void in his own life where a father should have been, Nicholson at last began to sob as he delivered the rest of the soliloquy.

“We were never that comfortable with each other to begin with. The best I can do is apologize. We both know that I was never that good at it anyway. I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

Later, Nicholson said, “I think it was a breakthrough, for me as an actor, for actors. I don’t think they had this level of emotion really, in almost any male character until that point.” Good as Nicholson was, he was by no means the first male actor to go all the way emotionally. Just to name three, Gary Cooper in *Meet John Doe*, James Stewart in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and Clark Gable in *San Francisco* were all as memorable in their tears as Nicholson.

“I’ve been asked whether I was really thinking of my own father and his tragedy during that scene,” Nicholson said. “Of course I was.”

At one point while still on Vancouver Island, Nicholson fell in love—or maybe it was only, as with Dupea and Rayette, lust. One

cold night, the cast members were in a forty-two-room seaside mansion, passing around a steaming container of vegetable soup. Nicholson noticed that after each person took a sip, she or he passed it on, and the next person wiped the cup where the other's lips had been. But when Nicholson handed it to the girl next to him, a leggy, toothy blonde who'd been in *Hair* on Broadway, she not only failed to wipe the cup, she licked the place his lips had touched, catching a bit of carrot he'd left.

"You're not an intellectual," he said. "You're a sensualist. A fucking sensualist like me."⁶⁸

Twenty-four-year-old Susan Anspach was five feet four inches, blond, blue-eyed, and had a perfect pink-and-white complexion. "I first met Jack in the summer of 1969 through the audition process for *Five Easy Pieces*," she said. "I already had a one-year-old daughter, whom I'd named Catherine after the heroine in my favorite book, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Jack and I were lovers during the shooting of [*Five Easy Pieces*]."⁶⁹ With her short, curly hair, her air of independence and strong will, she was very much the new woman of the dawning seventies, which would see the advent of Gloria Steinem, *Ms.* magazine, and women's liberation. Freedom, Susan had already learned, was not without its price; her rich grandfather had disinherited her when she'd married a blue-collar worker.

Nicholson confided in her that "he had wanted Dusty's [Dustin Hoffman's] part in *The Graduate*."⁷⁰ So had just about every other actor of his generation, including Robert Redford. When Nicholson, still mired at the time in potboilers like *The Trip*, had read in *Variety* that the hangdog, forlorn, but stubbornly courageous Hoffman had scored the role of the decade, he'd cursed and then gone out and tied one on.⁷¹ In 1967, *The Graduate* made an instant star of Hoffman, while Nicholson had to endure two more years of obscurity. Candice Bergen, who read for the role

Katharine Ross finally won, would have to wait for decades, and television's *Murphy Brown*, for stardom.

Two other cast members in *Five Easy Pieces*, Karen Black and Sally Ann Struthers (as she was still known before *All in the Family*), also had crushes on Nicholson. "I felt like this girl from Illinois," Black said, "but he'd tell me I was fine— 'just the way I want you, Blackie. You're the best.'" One night, Black dressed up to go out to dinner with him, putting on perfume, and he said, "Blackie, you're real uptown tonight." They liked to listen to music and dance, and she called him "a wonderful dancer." She had "quite a crush on Jack, but he couldn't see me as the girl for him. You have to be eighteen and skinny . . . I was just a little too earthy."⁷² And Anspach was just a little too prickly, according to Black, who said, "He used to cry after breaking up with his girlfriend [who] was blond and wore overalls a lot."⁷³

But he continued to prefer Anspach, whom Rafelson had originally wanted to play Rayette. Anspach had worked in the legitimate theater, which would win her no points with Nicholson, who had no interest in the stage. "The actor's technique that I follow is to eliminate the audience," he said. "[In the theater] the audience is there. I wish they weren't. I like it in the movies."⁷⁴ Anspach recalled, "He said that I was pretentious on the set of *Five Easy Pieces* because I mentioned I'd worked on the New York stage with Robert Duvall, Jon Voight, and Dustin Hoffman. How was I to know he had wanted Dusty's part in *The Graduate*?"⁷⁵

Anspach was viscerally opposed to Rafelson's concept of Rayette as a submissive, lovable anachronism. "I could never play Rayette as cute and sympathetic," she told the director. "I would have to show a lot more rage and pain. As I don't want to argue with you on the set about it, I'll pass on this one." The still-unknown Ellen Burstyn was considered for the role of Rayette before Karen Black was finally cast.

Anspach's was the kind of guts and integrity Rafelson wanted in another character in the movie, the concert pianist Catherine Van Oost. She was finally cast in the role despite, not because of, Nicholson, who wanted Lauren Hutton as Catherine. Carole Eastman wanted Jeanne Moreau. In the end, Rafelson prevailed, and Anspach got the part.

To give Anspach her due, she captured the equanimity of a mature artist as Catherine Van Oost and projected the quiet assertiveness of the new brand of liberated woman just then beginning to appear on the American scene. But, watching the film today, one longs for an actress less diffident, more powerful, and can only imagine what Jeanne Moreau would have done with the role, turning Catherine into a figure of mystery and allure. In contrast, Karen Black made an unforgettable impression with her colorful, poignant, precisely etched Rayette, and *Five Easy Pieces* would turn her into the highly visible and popular (if short-lived) star of *Portnoy's Complaint*, *Cisco Pike*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Day of the Locust*, *Nashville*, and *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*—a status Anspach would never attain, though she would continue to work as an actress for many years.

Nicholson was both drawn to and repelled by this “avant-garde feminist,” as he called Anspach, “who—when I met her—was proud of the fact that she already had a child whose father no one knew.”⁷⁶ It was around this time that he also remarked, “Sometimes I think all women are bitches.”⁷⁷ Anspach once said, “The women’s movement was about everybody being independent and fair,” and she admitted that she “used to fight all the time” with Nicholson, adding, “I like people I can fight with.”⁷⁸ Years later, she’d reflect, “I feel I am mom personified in his life and the target of an anger he had toward his mother or his grandmother or women in general. If he can spew all his rage at me, he will have

conquered Mother . . . I know he does tend to think of himself as a victim.”⁷⁹

She remembered that Nicholson often spoke of how Mimi Machu was tearing him up, throwing parties in his absence on his credit card and warning him that she was thinking about dating a man known as a great lover. Anspach also had issues with Nicholson, feeling they were “not totally trusting each other’s way of life. . . . I didn’t trust his relationships with women based on what I’d observed and I don’t think he was very secure with me because of my straightforwardness.”⁸⁰

Understandably, as Anspach fell in love with Nicholson, it became increasingly “painful,” she recalled, when he kept talking about Machu. “It bothered me to see somebody I cared about putting himself through that kind of thing. . . . And seeing Jack so upset about it, rather than angry, really sad and loving this person who was treating him this way, upset me, too. . . . We had a very strange relationship. . . . If the world were an island and we’d been totally alone we’d have been very much in love.”⁸¹

She wanted to get pregnant again, and, as Joe Eszterhas would later write in *Hollywood Animal*, “Jack Nicholson never wears condoms.” Susan recalled, “He knew very well that I was planning to have a baby, but as it didn’t seem to interest him I left it at that. I got pregnant in December [1969]. . . . Everyone involved in the movie suspected that Jack was the father.”⁸²

One day, Rafelson shot thirty-nine takes of a sex scene between Nicholson and Anspach. “Jack had one toot [of cocaine] every six takes,” she said. “He frequently left the set to snort cocaine.”⁸³ She concluded, “His drug-taking is an indication of his lack of happiness.”⁸⁴ Coproducer Richard Wechsler agreed, commenting, “Jack takes drugs for the same reason I did—it made me feel better.”⁸⁵ Marijuana had become a beloved habit—“I’m a so-

cial smoker,” he said,⁸⁶ and added, “I guess I’d be called an old pot head.”⁸⁷

After watching the dailies, Nicholson told Anspach, “Ansie, you should see this film—we are gonna be rich. We’re gonna be rich!” But as screen lovers they were not destined to follow John Gilbert and Greta Garbo, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, or Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn; whatever chemistry they had in bed together did not carry over into their work. As actress Geena Davis would observe in another context, many years later, “Don’t ever sleep with your costar. It’ll ruin the sexual tension.” Eventually Nicholson and Anspach had “a really bad falling out,” Anspach said.⁸⁸ There were disturbing parallels between what happened in the movie and in reality. On screen, Bobby Dupea asked Catherine Van Oost to become his mistress, despite the fact that she was engaged to his brother. Drawn to him but disgusted by his amorality, she called him “a person who has no love for himself, no respect for himself, no love of his friends, family, work, *something*—how can he ask for love in return?” The other woman in his life, Rayette, was cruelly dumped by Dupea, who abandoned her at a gas station on a bleak, rainy day, hitching a ride with a trucker and not even saying good-bye. In real life, Nicholson left Anspach while she was pregnant.

Back in L.A., Nicholson and Machu fought over his dalliances. When he learned that Anspach was pregnant, he attempted to set up a meeting, but she stood him up and, in 1970, while she was still pregnant, married Mark Goddard, an actor who played Don West on TV’s *Lost in Space*.⁸⁹ Described by Susan as “drop-dead-good-looking,” Goddard was willing to take care of her and the expected child.⁹⁰ In September 1970, Susan “couldn’t make the New York premiere of *Five Easy Pieces*,” she recounted, “because I was about to give birth.” Caleb Goddard, named after James Dean’s character in *East of Eden*, and surnamed after his

stepfather, was born in Los Angeles on September 26, 1970, six days after *Five Easy Pieces* was released. According to Anspach, Nicholson said “there was no need for him to have a blood test or tissue culture to confirm his paternity.”⁹¹ He attempted to visit the mother and baby, but, by then, Anspach had already been married to Mark Goddard for three months, and her new husband understandably wanted no part of Nicholson.

Even before the premiere of *Five Easy Pieces*, it was clear that BBS had another hit, one that would further enhance Nicholson’s reputation. The film was flown up to Vancouver, where Nicholson had returned for location shooting in Jules Feiffer’s *Carnal Knowledge* under Mike Nichols’s direction. Feiffer had at first objected to casting Nicholson in the lead role, but after seeing *Five Easy Pieces*, he agreed with Nichols that the actor was going to be a bigger star than Brando. Nicholson’s sister Lorraine later attended the screening of *Five Easy Pieces* at the New York Film Festival and remembered, “Except for the pounding of my heart, I could not hear a whisper in the audience. When the last scene was over, there was an instantaneous explosion of applause and cheers. Then a standing ovation for the performers. Tingling with pride, I watched Jack rise to acknowledge the tribute. It was a marvelous moment. But I also felt a surge of pain and regret. If only Mud had lived four months longer.”⁹²

Released the following day, just four months after the National Guard fired into a throng of students at Kent State University in Ohio, killing four, and Nixon’s invasion of Cambodia, *Five Easy Pieces* opened at the Coronet in New York, and the public embraced it, feeling that shock of recognition that accompanies a work of art when it’s truly new and relevant. Though the ensemble acting was brilliant, the film’s highest achievement was the writing; Eastman and Rafelson poetically captured the grave, soul-searching zeitgeist of early-seventies America—ambivalence to-

ward the counterculture in the wake of the 1968 student riots in Paris; the repression of the yippies at the Chicago Democratic National Convention; and the Hell's Angels savagery at the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont. The movie was as dark and bristling with change as the time that spawned it.

Richard Schickel wrote in *Life* that Rafelson, Eastman, and their "exquisitely subtle" cast "create a texture, a complex and ambiguous set of human relationships that will not, I think, ever fade from memory." Nicholson, the critic added, was "one of the few truly gifted movie actors we have." Pauline Kael wrote in the *New Yorker* that *Five Easy Pieces* describes "as if for the first time the nature of the familiar American man who feels he has to keep running because the only good is momentum. . . . Nicholson plays him with a bitter gaiety." *Time* observed that "the role allowed Nicholson not only to turn on his own bursting temper but to flash the charm that has its greatest single emblem in his smile." *Vogue* said Nicholson was "superb."

With regard to his aesthetic and sociopolitical convictions, Nicholson once said, "I think if what you are doing is too naked, you will alienate those who disagree and the people who already agree will fall in line with you."⁹³ Accordingly, *Five Easy Pieces* did not address specific societal issues, creating, instead, an allegory of the bleak American predicament in 1970, when the nation had not yet decided, after the revolutionary tumult of the past decade, whether it would become a dictatorship under Nixon, with severe restrictions on personal and press freedom, or continue as a democracy. The hippie and yippie leaders had failed as dismally as Nixon, and a deep and bitter cynicism for both the left and the right set in. When Bobby Dupea disappeared at fade-out, heading for the frozen north, it was an act of nihilism: he was following in the tracks of the rattled Lesbian Palm Apodaca, who hated everything. The next stop for Dupea was perhaps the loony bin, just as

one of the next steps for Nicholson, as an actor skilled at interpreting the battered modern psyche, would be *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

In the following years, critics would discern even deeper levels of meaning in *Five Easy Pieces*, viewing it as the universal tragedy of the hero who attempts to respond “to the imposition of identity or class conditions from without,” which results in “existential aporia . . . a timeless, archetypal conflict between seemingly irreconcilable cultures and subjectivities.”⁹⁴ This insight, expressed by critic Colin Gardner in his essay on “Deconstructing the Anti-Hero in *Five Easy Pieces*,” dovetailed with Bob Rafelson’s statement, “If my films have anything in common, it’s that they tend to focus on characters who are struggling to overcome the burden of tradition in their lives.”

Dennis Bingham, in his book *Acting Male: Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood*, went even further, suggesting that Nicholson was a deliberately self-conscious or absurdist Brechtian actor who was more complex than the relatively monodimensional Dean and Brando, simultaneously embodying and critiquing the characters he played by assuming a series of masks. Bobby Dupea, for instance, was a talented musician assuming the identity of a roughneck, but he wore any number of other masks. In the bowling-alley scene, in which he flirted with two girls, played by Struthers and Marlana MacGuire, he was a cultivated pianist pretending to be a redneck pretending to be a television car salesman. “[Nicholson] excelled in roles that posed the male as not so much a player of the game as a player of parts,” Bingham wrote. “He made a masquerade of masculine conformity, revealing a character’s confident male identity as an unconscious oedipal identification with monstrous paternity.”⁹⁵

On February 22, 1971, Nicholson received his first Best Actor

Oscar nomination, along with George C. Scott (*Patton*); Ryan O'Neal (*Love Story*); James Earl Jones (*The Great White Hope*); and Melvyn Douglas (*I Never Sang for My Father*). In the Best Picture category, Rafelson and Wechsler were up for Oscars as coproducers of *Five Easy Pieces*; Karen Black was nominated as Best Supporting Actress; and Rafelson and Eastman (again under the pseudonym Adrien Joyce) were nominated for Best Story and Screenplay. Rafelson had already won the New York Film Critics Circle's directing award.

Nicholson somehow intuited that he was going to lose, "and deservedly so," he said, announcing his intention to vote for George C. Scott. Although Scott let it be known that he would refuse the award if he won, the Academy voted him Best Actor, since, according to the *Los Angeles Times's* Paul Rosenfield, "the powers that be in Hollywood want what they can't have."⁶ In retrospect, it seems incredible that, when the awards were presented at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on April 15, 1971, Scott's impressive but retro Patton won over Nicholson's coruscating, hip Bobby Dupea; that insipid Helen Hayes (*Airport*) defeated the heartrending Karen Black; and that Francis Ford Coppola and Edmund H. North won Best Story and Screenplay for *Patton* over Rafelson and Eastman. In their history of the Oscar, *The Academy Awards*, Gail Kinn and Jim Piazza called *Patton's* win over *Five Easy Pieces* in the Best Picture category a "sin of omission," adding that *Five Easy Pieces* was "a landmark film for its—or any—time."

After attending the Oscar ball with Nicholson, Michelle Phillips called him "a fun date. This was early in his career when he was a star, but not yet a megastar. He was very charming arm candy for me that night. Jack never wanted to look like the penguin in the tuxedo. He was always a bit edgy in the way he dressed, and he kind of started that hip men's style of dressing where you didn't just wear a white shirt with a little black bow tie. He would

not conform to something like that. We had a good time [with Leigh Taylor-Young and Ryan O’Neal, who was nominated for Best Actor in *Love Story*], lots of fun, lots of drinking, but I did go home alone. Jack dropped me off at my house.”⁹⁷

In the 1970’s, the decade of California rock, Michelle Phillips, the Mamas and the Papas meltingly lovely blond sex symbol, was the essence of Hollywood hip. Arriving in L.A. in the summer of 1965, Michelle, her husband Papa John Phillips, Cass Elliot, and Denny Doherty became the warm-up band at the Whisky A Go-Go, a club that, along with the Rainbow Bar and Grill, the Troubadour, and the Roxy, formed the center of the newly interacting worlds of film and rock. Nicholson’s best friend, record mogul Lou Adler, a handsome charmer who dated Britt Ekland, Ann-Margret, and Shelley Fabares, produced the Mamas and the Papas’ debut album. Before their marriage ended in 1968, Michelle and John Phillips led the rock invasion of Bel Air, where their home became party central for Janis Joplin, Art Garfunkel, the Lovin’ Spoonful, Jim Morrison, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones. Candice Bergen remembered, “By sandal and sole, Bentley and Rolls, they came to the Mamas and Papas high on the hill . . . swallowing Librium like Life Savers, ‘windowpane’ acid, maybe mescaline.”

Lou Adler owned the Roxy, where Nicholson hung out in the ultraprivate upstairs room On the Rox with such other Adler pals as Ryan O’Neal, Cher, Warren Beatty, Michael Jackson, Cheech and Chong, and Michael Douglas. “You couldn’t get more inside,” Cheech said. The waitresses at On the Rox were the prettiest girls in town. “That was like fishing in a hatchery,” Cheech added. “Oh, baby.”

Nicholson, Beatty, and Dennis Hopper caught Ozzy Osbourne, Elton John, and Rod Stewart at the Rainbow Bar and later partied at the exclusive VIP haunt Over the Rainbow. The Eagles,

Fleetwood Mac, and Dan Fogelberg played the Troubadour; Adler booked Neil Young, Graham Nash, and Cheech and Chong into the Roxy, where *The Rocky Horror Show* premiered with Tim Curry and Meatloaf; and Johnny Rivers, Frank Zappa, Sonny and Cher, Van Halen, Mötley Crüe, and the Doors held forth at the Whisky. It was the hey-day of the L.A. stoner culture, and Nicholson was in the middle of it, and of the punk and glam-metal scenes that followed. Recalled Slim Jim Phantom, the Stray Cats' drummer, "Jack Nicholson was in the audience dancing in the front row getting pushed around by all the rockabilly kids."

According to author Jim Harrison, who'd later write *Wolf* for Nicholson, "Lou Adler and Nicholson . . . handled L.A. as if it were their own personal birthday cake. Going to the [L.A.] Lakers basketball games drew you away from the quarrels of meetings, in addition to just seeing splendid basketball, which never quite works on television. Jack and Louis had seats on the floor next to the visitor's bench where the game was improbably visceral and the subtlety of the moves detectable."⁹⁸ When Adler's son Nicholai was born, Nicholson became his godfather.

Five Easy Pieces predictably fattened Nicholson's bank account, appealing to everyone across the social spectrum from rednecks to eggheads. "Since *Five Easy Pieces*, I am a primary gross participant," he revealed.⁹⁹ Costing \$876,000—very inexpensive for a major feature—it didn't take long for his percentage points to click in.

It was in 1970–1971, the time of *Five Easy Pieces* and *Carnal Knowledge*, that Nicholson gained his reputation as one of the all-time swingers, bringing it on himself by telling *Newsweek*, "I've balled all the women, I've done all the drugs, I've drunk every drink."¹⁰⁰ He became cafe society's stud du jour. During a party in

a Manhattan brownstone, several women followed him into a bedroom, where he stretched out on a king-size bed, willing to take on all comers. Iman, the high-fashion model who later married David Bowie, was all over him. “So I’m sexy,” he told a reporter. “Is that a crime?”¹⁰¹ Whatever it was, intimacy wasn’t a part of it. His habit of giving everyone he met a nickname was a way of both holding people at bay and making them feel special, “a sign of affection and disaffection at the same time,” according to “Curly” Rafelson. Bob Evans was “Mogul”; Mike Nichols “Big Nick”; Art Garfunkel “Art the Barf”; Candice Bergen “Bug”; Harry Gittes “Wonderful Harry”; Steve Blauner “Blautown”; Monte Hellman “Bomber.” Rafelson observed, “It keeps him in an authoritative position, keeps the relationship a little distant.”¹⁰² Bob Evans had the same habit, calling Nicholson “Irish.”

Despite Nicholson’s distaste for actors who engaged in active politicking, in 1972 he let Warren Beatty talk him into campaigning for Senator George McGovern, the Democrat who opposed President Nixon the following fall. At the Oscar ceremony on April 10, 1972, at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion—the night Jane Fonda won for *Klute* and Gene Hackman for *The French Connection*—Nicholson sported an Op-Art shirt and a McGovern button, sans jacket, heralding a heretical decade full of political, moral, and fashion breakthroughs. Beatty also enlisted support for McGovern from Asylum Records’ David Geffen, the power behind the Eagles; Linda Ronstadt; Joni Mitchell; and Laura Nyro. Geffen introduced Nicholson to Mitchell, and a short if intense relationship began. Nicholson, Mitchell, Geffen, and Beatty together went to a benefit concert featuring Barbra Streisand, Carole King, James Taylor, and Quincy Jones that raised \$300,000. Later, Beatty called on Nicholson to serve as a celebrity usher, along with Julie Christie, Ryan O’Neal, Candice Bergen, Jon Voight, Goldie Hawn, Gene Hackman, Lee Grant, Paul Newman,

and Dustin Hoffman, at a Madison Square Garden rally in New York, where the concert featured Peter, Paul, and Mary, Dionne Warwick, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, and Simon and Garfunkel. As an usher, Nicholson was a bust, shrinking from the huge crowd, but he was demonstrably affectionate with supermodel Veruschka when, wearing a white suit, he attended an après-concert dinner at the Four Seasons restaurant with a group that included Hawn, Voight, and Shirley MacLaine.

The six-foot-one-inch-tall Veruschka was the Countess Vera von Lehndorff, whose East Prussian father had been executed in World War II for trying to assassinate Hitler in the famous 1944 officers' plot. At eighteen she started posing for photographers like Helmut Newton and Richard Avedon and gracing *Vogue* covers. After her appearance in Antonioni's *Blow-up*, such movie stars and rock musicians as Nicholson and Mick Jagger, who'd traditionally hooked up with actresses or singers, looked to the runways of Seventh Avenue, London, Milan, and Paris, and to fashion-magazine covers, for their girlfriends and wives.

Nicholson, Newman, Hoffman, and the rest of the celebrities Beatty assembled for his January 1972 Madison Square Garden concert raised \$400,000 for McGovern. The Hollywood troglodytes supporting Nixon included Jack Benny, John Wayne, Cesar Romero, Charlton Heston, Dorothy Lamour, Jane Russell, Bob Hope, and Debbie Reynolds. The election, one of the most crucial of the century, would pit the young and hip against the old and square. The nation had a chance to renounce the corruption of war and Watergate and get back on the track of moral progress it had tasted under President Kennedy.

In the fall presidential election, Nixon's landslide victory over McGovern "left a bitter taste not so much about politics, but about

American social life in general,” Nicholson said.¹⁰³ Actress Coco d’Este, who later married David Carradine, recalled, “During the McGovern election era in Hollywood, Jack and Warren Beatty were always the hot guys who went to the Troubadour on Santa Monica Boulevard. They were the big political guys then and they had all the little chickies around them. Jack dated a waitress at the Troubadour who was heartbroken after it was over. She should have stayed away from him. Ha! She was a petite blonde with curly hair. He was there every night, became a permanent fixture, as did Tommy Smothers and Cheech and Chong. It was the most fabulous era. Don Henley had just become an Eagle, and they were beginning their rehearsals.”¹⁰⁴

The freewheeling scene at the Troubadour was nothing compared with some of the sexual stunts Nicholson would pull as director of his first mainstream Hollywood feature, *Drive, He Said*.

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NOTES

Much of this book is based on primary sources—new interviews with Cynthia Basinet, Roger Corman, Curtis Harrington, Jennifer Howard, Denise Beaumont, Steve Tisch, Veronica Cartwright, Harry Gittes, Leslie Cyril, and numerous others, who requested anonymity. Some of Jack Nicholson's quotations are from his 2003 press conference for *About Schmidt*.

Most secondary sources below are identified in short-form; more complete publishing details may be found in the Selected Bibliography. Most of the secondary-source research was done at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills. Though some of the clippings were incompletely sourced, they are all available at the Margaret Herrick Library for inspection by writers and film scholars.

Prologue: No Need for Viagra

1. Peter Biskind, the respected film historian, writes in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998, p. 118: "For Jack, success meant never having to pay for yourself. He never picked up a check if he could possibly avoid it. His home was filled with freebies he'd hustled, or which had just appeared, unsolicited, manna from movie star heaven—bags of expensive golf clubs, heaps of fine Italian shoes."
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About the Author

EDWARD DOUGLAS is the pseudonym of a well-known biographer.

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