

Jane Fonda

*The Private Life
of a Public Woman*

PATRICIA BOSWORTH



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for Tom

We are so many selves. It's not just the long-ago child within us who needs tenderness and inclusion, but the person we were last year, wanted to be yesterday, tried to become in one job or in one winter, in one love affair or in one house where even now, we can close our eyes and smell the rooms. What brings together these ever-shifting selves of infinite reactions and returnings is this: There is always one true inner voice. Trust it.

—GLORIA STEINEM, *REVOLUTION FROM WITHIN*

Prologue

ONLY JANE FONDA could upstage Oprah Winfrey. It happened on February 10, 2001, during a performance of Eve Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*, which was being acted out by sixty megastars in front of a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden. The show was a fundraiser for V-Day, the international organization that works to prevent violence toward women.

I'll never forget it.

All the celebrities, including Oprah, stood in a semicircle reciting their vignettes about women's sexual triumphs and tragedies from index cards—all the celebrities except Jane, who had memorized her piece and when it was her turn stepped out of the circle and gave a spellbinding rendition about what it's like to watch one's grandchild emerge bloody and screaming from his mother's womb. By turns anxious, tender, and emotional, Jane ended the monologue with "*and I was there in the room. I remember.*"

The audience gave a loud cheer. At that point, Jane curtsied to a dark-haired young woman who was seated in the front row. It turned out the young woman was Jane's daughter, Vanessa Vadim. Months before, Jane had assisted the midwife at the birth of Vanessa's son, Malcolm. Jane was paying her homage.

Afterward there was a noisy party at the cavernous Hammerstein Ballroom. Jane was surrounded by so many admirers that I had to push my way through the crowd to congratulate her.

"I did it! I did it!" she exclaimed to me, eyes sparkling. She hadn't acted in thirteen years and she suffered from "such God-awful stage fright I was petrified I wouldn't be able to get through it," she confided to me, "but I did."

We gripped hands.

Jane and I have known each other since the 1960s. We were kids then, studying with Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio. I was an actress for ten years on Broadway before switching to journalism, while Jane was refashioning herself as Barbarella.

I wrote my first article about Jane in 1970 for *McCall's* magazine. She had just been nominated for an Academy Award for her searing performance as the suicidal marathon dancer in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* She went on to win Oscars for both *Klute* and *Coming Home*, movies that defined her political evolution.

For the next three decades I continued to write stories about her: when she was burned in effigy as Hanoi Jane, and a couple of years after, when the Gallup Poll listed her as one of the most admired women in the world along with Mother Teresa.

Jane polarizes, and the public remains fascinated by her. She has an extraordinary ability to reinvent herself in response to the times. Consider that she transformed herself from movie star to political activist to exercise guru to tycoon wife and now, in the twenty-first century, she's turning into an exemplary philanthropist. She doesn't generate, she reacts—to people, places, and events; everything about the fast-paced, chaotic reality that is American life turns her on.

But then I realize that above all she is a consummate actress who has an uncanny ability to inhabit various characters at will. She once told me, "The weird thing about acting is that you get paid for discovering you have multiple personalities." Jane can will herself into becoming whatever she wants to become. Which is why I wanted to write this book about her.

In 2000 I began researching. Jane had given the project her blessing, so I interviewed scores of her friends and colleagues. But Jane herself refused to speak to me. She said it was because she was writing her own memoir and didn't want to give anything away. Then in January 2003, she suddenly

changed her mind and invited me to come to her ranch in New Mexico for a week. “I’m going over my FBI files and you can help me. I don’t feel like doing it alone,” she said. I agreed, and I wasn’t surprised; Jane constantly changes her mind. That’s the way she is—full of contradictions.

I wasn’t surprised either to receive the following e-mail from her a couple of days later:

Sat 18 Jan 2003

Subject: Gulp

From: Jane Fonda

To: Patricia Bosworth

Deep breath. Big gulp. Here’s why: I have my own special personal stories about my life and I do have a big fear that I will give them away to you, because I do tend to let things just spill.

YET, I do trust you and would like to spend time with you so here goes:

I do have all my FBI files like I said and you are welcome to go through them provided you share what’s interesting (most isn’t) with me. This is a good way to avoid having to do it myself in exchange for you’re [sic] being there. How’s that? If it’s just us, it’s truly just us. I am not a cook and eat sparingly when left to my own devices. . . . Aside from that, when not writing I am engaged in heavy manual labor such as cutting down trees and clearing trail. You would be welcome to come along but not required to participate.

XXOO jane

Two months later I arrived at Jane’s 2,500-acre ranch outside Santa Fe. After she showed me around her comfortable, spacious home, we sat down in her vaulted living room, in front of a crackling fire, and drank red wine from oversize goblets. She told me how glad she was that I was writing her biography. There had already been nine published biographies of her, all written by men—all of whom, she believed, felt threatened by her. “I’m glad a woman is writing about me,” she said.

I began explaining why I wanted to write this book. Jane has fulfilled every female fantasy, achieving love, fame, money, and success on a grand scale. She’s a genuine American icon who won’t be remembered for her movies but rather for her outsize serial lives.

Jane interrupted. “I’ve already written five hundred pages of my book. How many have you got?”

“Not that many,” I admitted.

With that, she grinned. “What I really want to know is, who’s gonna be first?”

She is the daughter of Henry Fonda. His portrayal of Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* is embedded in the American consciousness. Jane has always willed herself to be the best at everything. She is also heir to a terrible childhood tragedy: her mother, Frances Fonda, slit her throat when Jane was twelve. Her suicide is the crucial event in Jane’s life and it haunts her to this day.

After the suicide Henry Fonda, always the perfectionist, became even more remote, escaping into his work and three more marriages; each wife seemed younger than the last.

Jane kept on battling for his love. She triumphed on Broadway and then went on to make forty-one movies, creating characters as disparate as the naive cowgirl in *Cat Ballou* and the giddy newlywed Corie in *Barefoot in the Park* to the tough-talking call girl Bree Daniels in *Klute*, for which she won her first Oscar. In her twenties she began to reinvent herself to attract and please a succession of father substitutes. She shifted seamlessly from playing film director Roger Vadim’s Parisian sex kitten, to political activist and exercise guru when she was married to radical Tom Hayden. Finally, she became the trophy wife of maverick billionaire Ted Turner, a man as famous as she is.

My 2003 visit to her ranch coincided with a turning point. Although she still considers herself primarily a social activist, Jane had decided to recycle herself as a movie star after thirteen years away

from the screen. At sixty-five, “It won’t be easy,” she joked. She’d hired a new agent; she had braces on her teeth; and she was trying out color contacts for her eyes. She’d also just had her breast implant removed. “My kids are so relieved. They tell me I look normal again,” she said.

She’d already turned down the remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* because she didn’t want her Hollywood comeback to be as a villainess. She told me that Cameron Crowe, who wrote *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Jerry Maguire*, was writing a new movie for her. She said she would be playing Leonardo DiCaprio’s tap-dancing mother in the film. She did not say she was now often obliged to audition for parts, including another role for which she was in competition with Anne Bancroft. I found it hard to believe these two Oscar-winning actresses had to compete against each other, but in the end the face-off was merciful: neither got the part. Ultimately, the Cameron Crowe project didn’t work out either.

How can I accurately describe our conversations in the five days that followed? Jane is a prodigious talker. I taped and took notes, and everything she said ended up, in one way or another, in this book. She talked and talked and talked on a vast range of subjects: The importance of Michael Moore’s documentary on the Columbine massacre; Jimmy Carter; the United Nations; her travels to New Delhi, Mumbai, and Jerusalem. Marilyn Monroe. The joys of being a grandmother. Her first husband Roger Vadim, and his sexual vulnerability; her dreams; her brother, Peter’s, courage; her son, Troy, and his dynamite performance in *Soldier’s Girl* where he played a GI in love with a transsexual.

She also talked about Sue Sally Jones, her beloved tomboy friend from grade school, with whom she’d recently reunited. Simone Signoret. The glories of a good martini and the ecstasies of pot. She talked about Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, the book that has meant more to her than any other book. She talked about her daughter, Vanessa’s, talent as a filmmaker. She talked about her obsession with trees—big old trees, with thick, twisted roots. She talked about moving full-grown trees from one of Ted’s ranches in New Mexico to her ranch, oak, fir, maple, and poplar. “I am too old to plant young trees.” She talked about when she had planted trees at her farm outside Paris and the way Henry Ford had planted trees years ago at their family home called Tigertail.

While I was listening to her, I decided Jane looked exactly the way she did when I first met her at the Actors Studio, over thirty-five years ago. The same long, sad face, an exact replica of her father’s. The same clear-eyed gaze and elegant remoteness. She was warmer than I expected, and sometimes quite funny, but she was so tightly wound I wondered if she could ever really relax. She was impeccably groomed. When I commented on the cut of her tight blue jeans, she said. “Oh, I have fifty pairs.” I expressed surprise. “Well, Ted has twenty-seven ranches. I used to keep clothes at every ranch so I would never have to pack.”

Every so often the phone rang. Once it was Kofi Annan, the secretary-general of the United Nations. Then it was Ted Turner. Jane spoke to him soothingly, as one might to a child. “You’re a good man, Ted. Don’t rush into anything too quickly.” They talked for quite a while. When she hung up she explained what had just transpired. She spoke in staccato sound bites—a habit she had honed over years of interviews. “Ted is trying to break up with his old mistress Frederique. They just aren’t getting along. He’s met some new girl, Rebecca something. Ted and I are close. Sometimes we even travel together. He’ll probably come to the ranch again. He gave me this ranch as a divorce present. I like to see him. I like to see him go. I feel sorry for him. He can’t be alone. Sometimes I take him into my lap and rock him like a baby.”

“Aside from the womanizing, what broke you up?” I asked.

“Ted needs constant companionship. Keeping up with him was absolutely exhausting. His nervous energy almost crackles in the air. He can’t sit still, because if he does, the demons will catch up with

him.”

Suddenly she confided she was happier than she'd ever been in her life. “I'm free!” And then she added, “I love living alone for once.” She was about to move into her new home in Atlanta, four lofts renovated into a single gigantic apartment in Buckhead, one of the city's wealthiest enclaves.

As she spoke, I was conscious that all around us were photographs of Henry Fonda, reminders that he remained the central presence in her life. She did not deny it. “My dad shadows me,” she said. “I dream about him. Think about him. Wonder if he'd approve of what I'm doing now.”

She will eventually write in her memoir, *My Life So Far*, “All my life I have been my father's daughter. Trapped in a Greek drama like Athena who sprang from the head of her father Zeus. Discipline and drive started in my childhood. I learned love through perfection.”

But she is also her mother's child. Obsessed with her looks. Obsessed with money. Obsessed with sex.

At 7:00 P.M. we ate a supper that Jane prepared herself: broiled salmon, vegetables, and salad. Jane ate rapidly. Her plate was clean in less than five minutes. “Ted used to bolt his food. I got in the habit,” she explained.

At 9:00 P.M., after watching CNN for a while, she announced cheerily, “I'm going to bed. I get up before six every morning. Want an Ambien? I get 'em cheap in Paris.” I told her no thanks. She returned moments later, looking very glamorous in a black satin nightgown, balancing a big stack of DVDs in her arms. “Brought you some movies. They're from the Academy. All Oscar-nominated films. *The Pianist*, which I voted for. I think that'll win, but we also have *Frida* and *Road to Perdition*.”

The following morning sun streamed through the windows as I walked into Jane's gleaming modern kitchen; the air was fragrant with bunches of fresh flowers in crystal vases. Espresso was waiting for me, as were whole-wheat bread, cheese, fruit, and a note from Jane—“I'm in my office. Come and get me”—signed with a smiling face. (Her mother signed her notes that way.)

I found Jane hanging up the phone at her desk. “I just spoke to my grandson, Malcolm. He calls me ‘Gamma,’” she said with a look of pleasure. With that she rose and guided me into her bedroom to show me her glittering canopied bed, its draped fabric studded with tiny slivers of mirrored glass. “This is called a sorcerer's bed,” Jane told me. “It keeps out evil spirits.”

We then moved on to a mirrored dressing room, where she pointed out a portrait of herself at age seven with her mother. Jane's expression in the photo is sullen. Her mother's is melancholy. “I hated to have her touch me,” she said. “Isn't that awful?”

There were other photographs in the room—of a youthful Henry Fonda standing tanned and exuberant next to his wife, who in this photo is smiling. They are posed on a tennis court holding rackets. “He never loved her. I always knew that,” Jane said curtly. Then she changed the subject: “Let's go for the FBI files.”

Finally she led me down a long, tiled hall and into a small, sunny room overlooking the Pecos River. Stuffed animals and an assortment of hats and caps hung on a hat tree. Jane turned on a beautiful Tiffany lamp and pointed to a pile of boxes stacked high. “Twenty-two thousand pages,” she said.

She asked me to look for references to the trip she took to North Vietnam in 1972. Like other activists, Jane had gone there to investigate the bombing of dikes in the Red River delta near Hanoi, which Nixon publicly denied. The dikes protected thousands of acres of villages and rice fields, where 15 million Vietnamese peasants lived. Jane filmed her visits to Hanoi's destroyed dike system, villages, and hospitals, as well as her meetings with Vietnamese children and American POWs. She

wanted to document the damage and publicize the evidence back in the United States. The only copy of the film mysteriously disappeared after she screened it at a press conference in Paris. She thought the CIA must have taken it.

For the next couple of days I sifted through piles of reports but found no references to the film. The documents were printed on coarse white paper with thick black lines obscuring informers' identities. Jane told me one of her bodyguards at a rally turned out to be an informer. "I discovered reporters who were informers. It was a whole network."

The files revealed the FBI's obsessive, illegal, and ultimately fruitless surveillance of Jane as she opposed the Vietnam War. FBI agents opened her mail, tapped her phone, combed through her past—even planted a false story in the press that she wanted to kill the president. Meanwhile Nixon kept pressuring the Justice Department to charge her with treason. He hoped to ruin her reputation.

In 1975, Jane filed a million-dollar lawsuit against Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Charles Colson for conspiring to discredit and destroy her life. In 1979, while Jimmy Carter was president, the U.S. government finally admitted all wrongdoing and released the files it had gathered on her. When she won, she refused the government's offered settlement.

Every so often we took a break and drove around the ranch. We careened along bumpy, winding roads up and down hills, across mountains, finally splashing through the Pecos River, which curls around much of Jane's 2,500 acres. At one point we passed a gleaming man-made lake stocked with fish. Jane loves to fly-fish. "It's like practicing Zen," she said.

Near us rose jagged, prehistoric-looking cliffs of reddish stone; beyond were rolling hills thick with cottonwood and ponderosa pine. Bears roam there, and deer and wild dogs. She keeps chickens, because she loves fresh eggs.

About four miles from the house are a big red barn and stables for Jane's six horses, one a white stallion she had just bought from Mike Nichols. A golden retriever named Roxie romped in the field. "Larry David gave Ted and me Roxie when he and the entire *Seinfeld* cast came up to Montana for a visit."

We usually ended up at Jane's fitness gym. It's equipped with every kind of exercise machine imaginable as well as a library of her exercise tapes. Over the next few days I tried to keep up with Jane as we bent and stretched. I was no match for her, but she was kind enough not to point this out.

The phone continued to ring periodically. Once it was her stepdaughter, Nathalie Vadim, who runs Jane's foundation's battered women's shelter in Maine. Then came a call from twenty-nine-year-old Mary Lou Williams, the child of Black Panthers whom Jane unofficially adopted in the seventies. The third call was from her daughter, Vanessa, with whom she has always had a volatile relationship. "Sometimes I think she will be angry with me until I die. She won't forgive me for leaving her to speak out against the war." Jane has no problems with Troy, her beloved son from her marriage to Tom Hayden. "But then I took him everywhere with me when he was a baby," she said.

I asked her why she wanted to go back to making movies, and she answered, "Because I need the money." How was this possible? She'd made a fortune with the Workout tapes and her movies. There were also rumors that Turner gave her \$100 million in stock as part of their divorce settlement. "I can't tell you the amount, but it was generous," she admitted. "And he gave me this ranch, too." She added, "I need money because I support a lot of people, as well as my foundations."

"You've always supported so many people, including your first two husbands."

She had paid the gambling debts and back taxes of her first husband, Roger Vadim; she paid for her second husband's political campaigns. Jane didn't mention the money loaned or given to friends in need—hospital bills taken care of, tuitions paid. Recently, she took a college classmate who was going

blind to see the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. She also invited two of Roger Vadim's former wives and Vanessa to go along. "It was fun," she said.

She'd begun speaking to Tom Hayden again, thirteen years after their acrimonious divorce. "I wanted to be friends; we share our son." Just a couple of weeks before, Hayden had visited the ranch with his new wife and adopted child and then suffered a massive heart attack. A helicopter flew him to a hospital in Santa Fe, where he had a triple bypass and made a full recovery.

Once during that week we both had a massage at the ranch. The young masseuse arrived, literally trembling with excitement, anticipating giving Jane Fonda a massage. "You go first," Jane told me brusquely. I found the experience wonderfully soothing and relaxing. Jane had her massage next. Afterward she padded into my bedroom looking displeased. "She wasn't very good."

"I thought she was great."

"I've been having massages all my life," Jane declared. "My mother loved having massages. Anyhow, I know a good masseuse from a mediocre one." I learned when I should stay out of Jane's way. She confided that she sometimes takes Prozac for her mood swings.

Usually, after she had gone to bed, I'd watch one of the eight movies she had given me, including her documentaries *Fuck the Army* and *Introduction to the Enemy*, the latter of which she made with Haskell Wexler and Tom Hayden in North Vietnam.

Sometimes I couldn't sleep, and I'd wander back into the living room trying to collect my thoughts. A stuffed bear's head jutted out over the fireplace. "I shot that bear," Jane had informed me proudly just after I arrived at the ranch. "After I killed him I started to cry." She added with a bawdy, explosive laugh, "I guess it's not politically correct for me to hunt, but I enjoy it. I didn't want to be stay-at-home wife when I was married to Ted, so I learned to hunt and fish."

Our time was always scheduled right down to the mini-second; Jane never wasted a minute. An hour and a half for taping and talk, a half-hour for lunch; occasionally I would still be asking her questions. Then a break and she would disappear into her office to work on her own book, or she would go outside to confer with her staff. She was overseeing a big ranch, after all, and there was much to attend to. There were gardens to be planted, and she was building a swimming pool on the hill, as well as a playground for her grandchildren.

Every so often a pleasant young woman named Karen would slip into the kitchen, bringing fresh supplies as well as the newspapers and mail. Karen also worked for Ted Turner; she cooked for him on his various ranches—she was always on call. Ted and Jane shared her, "but it works out," she said. Although Karen was in and out a lot, it always felt as though Jane and I were alone at the ranch. The household gleamed. It was run magnificently.

While I was there, there was a dinner party with a doctor and his wife from Boston who talked to Jane about how she was building her foundation, the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (G-CAPP), dedicated to empowering teenage girls and preventing early pregnancy. We were joined by Gordon Miller, an old friend of Roger Vadim's who now lived on an adjoining ranch. At one point he whispered to me, "Jane is coming into her own now that she's left Ted. She is finally becoming Jane Fonda."

Before I left, I showed Jane a photograph I had found in an old *Harper's Bazaar*. It's a portrait of the Fonda family circa 1948; they are posing in their garden. Henry Fonda is in the foreground gazing into space. Jane is watching him intently. Peter glowers next to her, and Frances Fonda hovers in the background, an anxious expression on her face. It's as if she's anticipating that something terrible is about to happen. The image is unsettling, almost eerie.

“I have the same picture!” Jane cried out. “I’ve been studying all our expressions under a magnifying glass—especially my dad’s. It was when our family was about to break apart. Dad was in *Mister Roberts*; my mother and he were barely speaking. She was away at hospitals a lot.”

“Did your father ever discuss the suicide with you?”

“No, he never talked about it ever and I never brought it up with him.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to upset him.”

She wouldn’t discuss her mother’s suicide. “Are you in denial?” I asked. “Sure, I’m in denial. That’s the way I survive,” she snapped. “Let’s say I remember what I *want* to remember. What I can bear to remember.”

Once, long ago, Jane told a reporter, “My mother was crazy and my father was never a father, so I had to deal with these lacks and I had to deal with all the people inside my head. I have always dreamed—vivid, powerful dreams, often nightmares. My life did not provide me with a narrative, so I had to make one up.”

My last night at the ranch, I couldn’t sleep. Around dawn, I realized that in working on our books Jane and I had become locked in a kind of mutual endeavor—and mutual anxiety.

Jane says she often shakes and cries when she writes, and so do I. Maybe it’s because we have motives we haven’t expressed. We are protecting ourselves; we are both very polite. In later years, we will relax and enjoy each other’s company.

I believe Jane is confident that whoever she is and whatever she’s accomplished with her life (and that’s plenty) will transcend what I have to say about her.

But she also knows that what I write will have some impact on that tangible reality called reputation, and I will be judged by what I write about her. I am drawn to Jane Fonda for many reasons. If I judge her at all, it’s because I see many of the same rationalizations and delusions in myself as a woman.

I left the ranch early Friday morning to fly back to New York. Jane and I had breakfast together. She was all set to drive me over the mountains to a taxi that would be waiting outside the ranch’s gates four miles away to take me to the airport in Albuquerque. Before I left, I asked Karen to take a picture of us, and I have it tacked to my bulletin board as I write: Jane looking very much like a movie star in her tight jeans and jacket, me looking rumpled and a bit giddy.

Then we climbed into the Land Rover but Jane couldn’t start the motor. She was furious. She had just bought the car. “I drove it into Santa Fe yesterday. What the hell?” She got on her cell phone and so did Karen. I think somebody even rang the bell in the bell tower. Within seconds, it seemed, three cars appeared out of nowhere, driven by various ranch hands. One of them chauffeured me down to the waiting cab.

On the plane I began to wonder why Jane had never expressed much interest in any of the people I had been interviewing for my book. They were friends and colleagues from every phase of her life. “I live in the present,” she kept saying. “I live in the moment. I don’t want to live in the past.” Then I remembered what her brother, Peter, had told me: “Jane has one version of her life, but you should gather the others because they are equally interesting.”

Peter was right. In the next seven years I gathered an incredible array of stories from lovers, friends and enemies, many stories that have never been told. They are funny, sad, wondrous, strange, marvelous stories befitting a movie star activist who has played every archetypal female onstage and off—and continues to do so.

Part I

DAUGHTER: 1937–1958

My only major influence was my father. I became my father's "son," a tomboy, the one to bait fishing hooks with bloody worms and pretend I didn't mind. I was going to be brave, to be tough and strong, to make him love me.

— JANE FONDA

SHE WAS BORN Jayne Seymour Fonda on December 21, 1937, by cesarean section at Doctors Hospital in New York. Her thirty-two-year-old father, the up-and-coming young actor Henry Fonda, paced back and forth outside the delivery room, smoking cigarette after cigarette while the nurses did their best to ignore him. He'd just flown in from Hollywood, where he'd been filming *Jezebel* opposite Bette Davis. Jane was his first child. Originally he had been nervous about becoming a father. He wasn't sure he was ready. But then he realized how much he wanted to create a family. He'd had it written into his contract that if his wife went into labor during filming, he could be with her in New York.

He was a tall, lanky man, with a slow smile and a modest, self-effacing manner. He'd already starred in *The Farmer Takes a Wife* and *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, in which he played a magnetic, hot-tempered idealist. *Lonesome Pine*, which he made in 1936 (and the first to be shot in Technicolor on location), was the movie that established him as the archetypal Midwesterner: shy, honest, with a distinctive loping gait and a homespun drawl.

That evening Fonda could have gone downstairs to the hospital dining room and supped on a quite imaginative menu. Doctors Hospital, located on East End Avenue, a block away from the mayor's home, Gracie Mansion, was famous for its superb chef, who served up delicious food and the finest wines to patients and their guests. Socially prominent New Yorkers—including the Rockefellers, the Pells, and the Vanderbilts—preferred Doctors Hospital because it was “more like a hotel” than a hospital.

Jane's mother, Frances Seymour Brokaw Fonda, wanted her baby delivered there for that very reason. Friends could visit and share a cocktail while she showed off her handsome movie star husband. The view over the East River was magnificent, especially in the evenings when the bridges spanning the river glittered with a million lights.

But Fonda didn't care about the view. As soon as his wife was wheeled out of the recovery room, he started clicking away with his Leica. He was an avid photographer. Taking pictures of his baby daughter would become an obsession.

The pictures, which Jane has kept, show her in her crib or being held by a masked nurse. There are none of Jane with her mother, who made it clear that she wished the baby had been a boy. Frances already had a seven-year-old daughter, nicknamed “Pan,” by her first husband, the late financier George Brokaw, and she longed for a son. Jane learned of her mother's preference early on, and it made her feel terrible.

That afternoon Fonda took snapshots of the baby until the nurses insisted he stop; his wife needed her rest. So he vaulted off to a pay phone down the hall and sent a telegram to William Wyler, his director for *Jezebel*:

I admire your pictures and I would like to work for you. I am eighteen minutes old. Blonde hair and blue eyes, weight: eight pounds ... and I have been called beautiful. My father was an actor.
(Signed) Jayne Seymour Fonda.

Over the next several days Fonda continued taking pictures of his baby daughter—*click! click! click!* He was pleased about becoming a father and never tired of gazing at the tiny pink bundle in the crib. Perhaps he saw himself mirrored in her face—the sad, downturned mouth, the beautiful liquid Mediterranean eyes. “There is a strong Fonda look,” he told Lillian Ross when she interviewed him for *The New Yorker* in 1958.

Fonda's ancestors from Genoa, Italy, migrated to Holland in the 1400s and then moved to America in 1642. They were among the first Dutch settlers in upstate New York, where they established the town of Fonda. By 1888, most of the Fondas had settled in Nebraska. In 1900, Hank's father, William Brack Fonda, a stern, unimaginative man, married a lovely young brunette named Herberta Jaynes, who was an ardent Christian Scientist. Their son was born in Grand Island, Nebraska, on May 16, 1905. Six months later, the family moved to Omaha, where Bill established a successful printing plant and bought a white clapboard house in the center of town.

One of the few Democrats among mostly Republican neighbors, Fonda Sr. was the son of a man who had joined the Union forces at the age of seventeen and fought in the Civil War. He was not demonstrative and Hank inherited that trait, along with his father's dark good looks. All his life, whenever he passed a mirror he'd say to himself, "That's my father!"

Of his family, Hank declared, "They were wonderful." His two younger sisters, Harriet and Jayne—both good-natured, friendly, loyal souls—adored him. They were talkers, unlike their bashful brother who barely spoke. As a little boy he'd communicate by standing on his head or walking on his hands. When he really liked something he'd perform a graceful cartwheel, and he could have been an acrobat but he also had a great comic gift as a pantomimist. One of his earliest creations was a character he named Elmer, a ten-year-old idiot boy who imitated fishes by wiggling his fingers. He also excelled in athletics and was a top-notch Boy Scout. As a teen, he got into one ferocious fight with a tough Irish boy whom Fonda punched out before being carried home on the shoulders of his cheering friends. His sister Harriet talked of nothing else for days. Yet Fonda remained painfully shy, especially with women. He finally went to bed with a prostitute when he was nineteen, but only after he had gotten very drunk.

Hank Fonda originally wanted to be a journalist, but at the University of Minnesota in 1924 he found that he preferred sketching pictures to doing his homework. After two years he dropped out of college and returned to Omaha, where he took a temporary job at the Retail Credit Agency in town. He earned \$30 a week and soon was very bored.

Then, on a fluke, he got into acting. Marlon Brando's mother, Dodie, who ran the Omaha Community Playhouse, encouraged Fonda to apprentice there. He ended up working backstage, running lines with actors, painting scenery, and even playing small parts. Soon he was asked to be the lead in a local production of a play called *Merton of the Movies*, a Broadway hit by Marc Connelly and George S. Kaufman. When he told his parents he had accepted the role, his father became angry and said he shouldn't give up his real job for play-acting and the two began to argue. Both were stubborn, but somehow Fonda's mother calmed them down. For the next few weeks Fonda rose early, hurried to the Retail Credit Agency, then rehearsed in the evenings. He and his father didn't speak; he didn't talk to anyone.

But all the Fondas were at the Playhouse to see him triumph as Merton, a Kansas bumpkin who goes to Hollywood. Hank got a standing ovation. Afterward at a little party at home, Fonda Sr. just sat silently behind a newspaper until Hank's sister Jayne offered a slight criticism. With that William Fonda spoke for the first time in hours. "Shut up! He was perfect!" Whenever Hank told that story to Jane and Peter, his eyes would glisten with tears. "It was the best review I would ever get," he said.

"When I walked out on the stage," he said, "the short hairs on the back of my neck seemed to stand up and my skin tingled. I could forget myself and become another character." He had found himself. Suddenly, all he wanted to do was act, escape from himself. "I always thought I was very boring," he said.

In contrast, Frances Seymour, who would become Fonda's second wife (he was briefly married to the actress Margaret Sullavan), seemed to think she was pretty terrific. "She was always 'up,' the most lively one of all, like a butterfly!" said Laura Clark, who met Frances in 1935 when she was twenty-

eight and just widowed. Her husband, George Brokaw, had died and left her a million dollars.

“[Frances] invited me to the wonderful parties she gave on her Long Island estate and at the club El Morocco,” Laura said. “Men just fell over themselves when they saw her.”

She was a volatile woman with pale blond hair perfectly coiffed and a lean, elegant figure kept trim by constant dieting. Her moods rose and fell; she wanted to control everybody. She seemed to radiate sexuality. She liked to claim that her family was both rich and well connected, speaking often of her cousin Millicent Rogers, a Standard Oil heiress. Frances’s grandfather, Horatio Seymour, was governor of New York before he ran for president in 1868 and lost to Ulysses S. Grant. However, Frances hadn’t started out with many advantages. The eldest of seven sisters, she was born in Brockville, Ontario, in 1908. As a little girl, she and her family moved to a farm outside Morrisburg, New York, on the Saint Lawrence River where her mother, Sophie, raised chickens and sold apples and eggs to neighbors to make ends meet. Ford Seymour, her husband, once a successful lawyer, could no longer hold a job, let alone handle money. He had become a raging alcoholic and was later diagnosed as a “paranoid schizophrenic.” In time Cousin Millicent helped with money and packages of clothing, but it was Sophie who was the sole financial provider for the family.

“My mother was from old Canadian stock,” Frances wrote in an autobiography she started in 1949. “Any guts I had, I inherited from her. She had one hell of a life with my father.” Frances would remember her childhood as utterly miserable; she and her sisters were kept locked in the house and saw no one because Ford Seymour hated visitors. “My father used to spank us so long and hard my mother would scream at him to stop.” Then, at the age of eight, Frances was sexually abused by a piano tuner, and that left her traumatized and guilty, though she kept it a secret until she told Henry Fonda after they were married. But he had little sympathy for her. He didn’t understand the terrible burden of sexual abuse. He didn’t know that if a girl is molested, she will often not blame her adult perpetrator; she will blame herself.

Frances’s sexuality became one of the few qualities that had value to her, and it led to promiscuity in her adolescence. In her autobiography she would remember her teenage years as filled with “boys, boys, boys,” and she would later refer to her one-night stands as “peccadillos.” She would go on to have several abortions. She glowed as a young woman, but she was tormented and insecure.

In 1924, Frances moved to Fairhaven, Massachusetts, to live with the Rogers family and finished high school there. The Rogerses continued to help the Seymours financially, and Cousin Millicent, described by gossip columnists as “the Bohemian debutante,” became Frances’s inspiration. Millicent’s world was one of continuous, extravagant celebration: tennis tournaments, regattas, and gala weekends filled with banquets. By twenty-two she had already been married to and divorced from an Austrian count and had danced with the Prince of Wales. She took Frances to lavish parties at the Ritz in New York, as well as to costume balls. She shared her passion for fashion and collecting Gauguin paintings, Persian rugs, and antique jewels with Frances.

Frances always felt shy and intimidated by her cousin’s sleek confidence. “I was the poor relative, she used to say. By the time she graduated from high school Frances had become obsessed with accumulating money, which, she had realized, meant security, a place in society, beautiful clothes and jewels—and power.

Vowing to become “the fastest typist and the best secretary anyone could hire,” Frances descended on Wall Street, determined to marry a millionaire. She attended the Katharine Gibbs Secretarial School and found a job at Morgan Guaranty Trust Bank, where she learned about investment firsthand. She educated herself about stocks and bonds and interest rates, studying the market and poring over the *Wall Street Journal*. At age twenty-one, at a penthouse lit by candlelight, Frances met the immensely wealthy fifty-two-year-old industrialist and former congressman George Tuttle Brokaw, who’d just divorced writer Clare Boothe (who went on to marry Henry Luce). Determined to seduce

him, Frances confided to a mutual friend that she found older men sexually very attractive; besides, George reminded her of her father. After a whirlwind courtship of six months, she purchased a gold wedding band from Tiffany's, tied it up with a little pink ribbon, and showed it to Brokaw during lunch, saying, "Don't you think it's about time?" His mouth fell open. "When do you want to get married?" he asked.

Clearly Frances knew how to make things happen.

The wedding, which took place in January 1931, was a major event of the New York social season, with five hundred guests including the Fishes and the Stuyvesants. After the honeymoon, the couple lived in splendor in the historic Brokaw mansion on Fifth Avenue and 79th Street, which was spacious but gloomy. Soon Frances had a daughter, Frances de Villers, nicknamed "Pan." But her marriage was a disaster. Brokaw was an alcoholic, and when he got drunk he beat Frances savagely.

In the spring of 1935, Frances persuaded Brokaw to go to a sanatorium in Greenwich, Connecticut, to dry out, but it didn't take. Brokaw sneaked liquor into his room and even hid it on the grounds; the nurses and doctors couldn't stop him. He kept on drinking until May, when he staggered into the sanatorium swimming pool and drowned. Frances's suffering was eased by the settlement. She inherited a million dollars, and Pan was the beneficiary of a trust fund worth several million dollars more. Frances could now take care of her mother financially. She asked her to live with her and to help care for her daughter.

The following year Frances traveled to Europe with her brother Ford and his fiancée. Their first stop was London, where she was introduced to Henry Fonda on the set of the movie *Wings of Morning*, in which he was starring opposite the French actress Annabella. After one look, Frances decided he would be her next husband, though he was rumored to be having an affair with Annabella. That didn't stop Frances, who asked him to have dinner with her at the Savoy Grill that same night. ("That's the last I ever saw of Hank romantically," Annabella said later. "He was hooked.")

According to Jane in her autobiography, *My Life So Far*, "Then Mother carried a 'strange luminosity'; often victims of abuse carry [this kind of] luminosity because of the sexual energy that was forced into their lives far too early." Fonda described Frances as "bright as a beam from a fellow spot." She was charming and alluring—she had breeding and class, and he was impressed by the way she organized everything. The day after their first date, when she discovered he wasn't filming, she arranged for him to go with her on a boat trip up the Thames and they had a chance to talk. After several more dinners she suggested Hank join her and her brother for a long weekend in Paris: "We have a lovely flat there, we could go over and have fun—go to Maxim's, see the town."

Eulalia Chapin, Frances's best friend at the time, recalled how she must have impressed Hank Fonda. "Frances was very gay, very flirtatious, adorably so. Hank used to tease her about it. She was always talking, talking, talking."

Their courtship moved on from Paris to Berlin, where they attended the 1936 Olympics and saw Nazi soldiers—what seemed like thousands of them—goose-stepping and heiling "*Der Führer*." Fonda managed to snap candid photos of Hitler with his movie camera, fairly close up. The German dictator was shaking his fist and screaming crazily. "That guy is totally mad," Fonda said at the time. He and Frances were both put off by the Nazis, so they hired a car and drove to the romantic city of Budapest where they spent hours walking along the Danube. Frances was clearly besotted, but Fonda seemed rather complacent about their affair. He wouldn't pop the question. When they returned to Paris, she drafted a telegram to her mother, which read: "Arriving in New York, will announce my engagement to Henry Fonda." When she showed the wire to him, he shrugged and mumbled, "Sure, fine."

Ten days later they were back in Manhattan, attending dinners in their honor in East Side brownstones and penthouses overlooking Fifth Avenue. Fonda preferred taking Frances to the jazz joints of Harlem. He felt uncomfortable with the wealthy conservative Republicans who dominated

Frances's social circle. They hated the Democratic president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but Fonda had voted for FDR and supported the New Deal. He started to realize that he and Frances were quite different. But for the moment they tried to compromise and pretend they enjoyed everything about each other.

Frances wanted her husband to love Pan as she did and Fonda tried at first. He spent a few afternoons with the four-year-old before the wedding. Pan remembers, "My first memory of Henry Fonda was when we met and he knelt down so he could be on my level. I must have liked him, because I asked him to read to me right away. He did."

Pan was the flower girl at their wedding, which took place in Christ Church on Park Avenue on September 16, 1936. The bride wore a gown of pale blue taffeta and tulle. The groom sported a black morning coat, top hat, and ascot and remarked to his best man, Josh Logan, that he felt as if he were on a movie set. After the reception at the Hotel Pierre, they flew to Omaha to meet the Fonda family. Frances told the story of their courtship repeatedly to his sisters, how she took one look at their brother and decided that she was going to marry him. It became family lore, along with the fact that Frances's father was directly descended from Edward Seymour, First Duke of Somerset, who was brother to Henry VIII's third wife, Jane Seymour. Edward's cousin, Lady Jayne Grey, was beheaded by Queen Mary I during an attempted takeover of the throne in the sixteenth century. Frances insisted that Hank read Shakespeare's play so he could get a better picture of her dramatic ancestry. Fonda was impressed enough to agree that Lady Jayne Seymour should be the name of their firstborn daughter. (Jane was addressed as "Lady Jayne" by both of her parents until the age of eight, when she refused to answer to it anymore, "because it made me feel too different.")

A week after Jane's birth, the Fondas returned to Southern California to the comfortable ten-room house they'd rented temporarily on Chadbourne Drive in Brentwood. They began looking for a house to buy, but they didn't care for the Moorish palaces and Spanish haciendas the real estate agents showed them and ultimately decided to create something special of their own. They found the property they wanted—a nine-acre tract high on a hill above Sunset Boulevard—but it wasn't for sale. They promised each other they'd just keep after the Mountain Park Land Company until the company changed its mind.

Frances bought a Buick ("Frances always drove a Buick," Fonda said) and purchased a house for her mother and father down the block. Her father, Ford Seymour, was by this time a shadowy figure who didn't seem to participate in family life and who disappeared frequently for weeks at a time. Everybody assumed he was off on a bender. It didn't seem to bother Sophie. "Oh, he'll be back when he needs a pair of clean socks," she'd say.

Frances supported her parents and helped her sisters and brothers as well. She never talked about it and used money inherited from Brokaw, which she kept in a separate account. In the evenings, the Fondas preferred to stay at home with close friends like Jimmy Stewart and the *Life* photographer John Swope. Their tight little circle included Josh and Nedda Logan; Tyrone Power and his wife, Annabella; and a film editor at Fox named Watson Webb, who was especially close to Frances. Then there was Eulalia Chapin, Frances's most intimate confidante. The Fondas attended the A-list dinner parties at David O. Selznick's home and Gary Cooper's ranch, as well as at the opulent Holmby Hills mansion of the producer William Goetz, whose wife, Edith, was one of Louis B. Mayer's daughters. Frances was often the center of attention. "She had the most amazing collection of precious stones," Watson Webb remembered. "The women at these dinners—Joan Crawford, Edith Goetz, Rocky Cooper, Ginger Rogers—were all very competitive about their jewelry. But none of them could hold candle to Frances Fonda. There was one necklace she wore, aquamarine mounted in platinum with diamonds set in platinum ropes—a knockout. Frances said she had a little man at Harry Winston's in

New York who helped her choose her jewels: ‘He always shows me the best emeralds and rubies.’”

Back home, Jane was kept isolated in the nursery and overseen by a crisp, efficient nanny who insisted Hank wear a mask whenever he visited his tiny daughter. He complained to his wife, who told him he had to wear the mask; she didn’t want her child infected with germs.

“So I never got to kiss Jane goodnight when she was a baby, or hold her in my arms. I think we both felt deprived,” he told his biographer, Howard Teichmann. He did, however, pick her up surreptitiously; and when Jane was a little older, she would crawl into his lap and try to hug him. By then he didn’t respond. “Dad never said, ‘I love you,’” claimed his daughter.

Hank Fonda always had difficulty verbalizing affection. He seemed to believe it a weakness to show any feeling; his father said it was *disgusting* to break down and cry. So Fonda usually appeared remote. But that didn’t stop him from photographing Jane obsessively. It was one of his ways of communicating with her. There was always a visceral exchange between father and daughter whenever she stood in front of him and struck a pose. Early family albums are crammed with seemingly idyllic pictures. Fonda would amass a lively photographic record of Jane and Peter in both stills and home movies.

And he was illustrating for her, too, painting the nursery with fanciful drawings of Oz characters. He decorated the ceiling with nursery rhymes. He loved to paint, to spread bright colors on canvas. He seemed to dance with his brushes. He also sculpted a bust of Frances looking very regal, but it dried out and cracked, so after that he devoted himself mostly to sketching. As soon as she could, Jane began copying him, holding a crayon in her pudgy hand.

But Henry Fonda had little time to paint. Over the next five years he would make ten movies; he starred in *You Only Live Once* (directed by Fritz Lang), playing a young ex-con persecuted for a murder he didn’t commit. In *Jesse James* as the tobacco-chewing Frank James, brother of the legendary outlaw, you totally believe Fonda’s metamorphosis from Kansas City farm boy to tight-lipped man with a gun. He delivers Jesse from a jail surrounded by soldiers, and then accompanies him in a breathtaking escape scene from a bank ambush. *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther called it “a beautiful characterization.” Fonda was able to project facets of his own distinctive personality into an amazing variety of characters. But it was his Nebraska upbringing that kept him accessible to the heart of America. John Steinbeck always thought Hank expressed the gentle side of his mother and the harsher qualities of his father.

It was the era when the big studios—MGM, Twentieth Century Fox, Warner Bros., Paramount, RKO—churned out more than four hundred films a year and honed the public images of their biggest stars. The pictures made during this period would become legendary, and so would the actors who starred in them: Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*; Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*; Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*; Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Fonda never found his “type” as completely as several of his contemporaries did. He was not as sardonic as Humphrey Bogart was as detective Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. He wasn’t as romantic as Clark Gable or Cary Grant (although he was Grant’s equal when it came to playing high comedy—he could be hilarious). He wasn’t as laid-back as Spencer Tracy or as tough as Jimmy Cagney. He wasn’t as macho as John Wayne, or as mannered as Jimmy Stewart. Like Gary Cooper he projected an almost preternaturalness on the screen. He never seemed to be acting. He invested his performances with a kind of intensity that was forever youthful. “[He] keeps his own grace and talent as light as possible,” the film critic Manny Farber wrote. “In his best scenes, Fonda brings together .. a flickering precision and calculated athleticism mixed in with the mulish withdrawing.” He could switch effortlessly from a simple rural type to a civilized urban gentleman, or some enormously

attractive combination of the two.

Young Mr. Lincoln, which Fonda made in 1939, established him as the archetypal American, complete with false nose, wart on cheek, and stovepipe hat. His is the definitive characterization of the great man as a young jacklegged lawyer from Springfield, Illinois. His homespun, drawling style, alternately dreamy and tough, illuminated the part. This movie marked the beginning of his association with the director John Ford, with whom he would make five pictures and create his most memorable role, the angry farmer Tom Joad, in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It was the story of sharecroppers who leave the Oklahoma Dust Bowl during the Depression to become migrant farm workers in Northern California.

Twentieth Century Fox was producing the movie, and Darryl Zanuck, the shrewd, cigar-smoking president in charge of production, wanted Fonda to play Tom Joad, but only if he signed a seven-year contract with the studio. Zanuck had big plans for Fonda.

At first Fonda said no. He'd been jumping around from studio to studio for seven years and he relished his independence. He disliked Zanuck because, he said, "all he cares about in life are movies and satisfying his cock."

But Zanuck was adamant about that contract, and Fonda really wanted to play Joad, a character he identified with. He had read every book Steinbeck had written, and he appreciated the rural American characters Steinbeck was immortalizing. His agent, Leland Hayward, got him as good a financial deal as possible so he finally signed. Filming began in the summer of 1939.

Shot on location in dusty Okie camps and the sweltering San Joaquin Valley orange groves, and directed by John Ford, with Greg Toland's sweeping, uncompromising camera work and Alfred Newman's magical use of the Red River Valley folk song as a musical theme, *The Grapes of Wrath* is an American masterpiece.

"There is possibly no more touching utopian speech in pictures than Tom Joad's vision of a better world at the conclusion of this movie," Peter Bogdanovich wrote. "But it is Fonda's extraordinarily beautiful incantation of this man and those words that make the moment both transfixing and ultimately transcendent. 'I'll be there,' he tells his mother. 'When the cop beats up a guy, I'll be there.'" His rural twang and his direct simplicity illuminate this memorable role. Fonda recalled how he and Jane Darwell didn't even rehearse the mother-and-son scene, "but Ford made us wait all afternoon until we were very keyed up. Then we shot the scene in one take and John said, 'Print it,' and he walked off without a word to us. Onscreen it really is brilliant."

Fonda was nominated for an Academy Award. He didn't win—but his best friend, Jimmy Stewart, did, for *The Philadelphia Story*.

He had played one of the greatest roles in film history, but under the studio system his next role was as one of Lillian Russell's tuxedoed suitors in a biopic, starring the very blond singer Alice Faye. It was painful for him to act in such second-rate productions, but he had no choice. And in the next year he also had to act in *The Return of Frank James* and *Chad Hanna*, but he gave strong performances in those movies.

Even so, he deeply regretted signing the seven-year contract with Twentieth Century Fox. He felt enslaved and overwhelmed by "such dumb material." He longed to return to the theater, where he could escape into a role and really create a character. But he couldn't share these frustrations with his wife because Frances thought his complaints about his "lousy movies" were pretty silly, since these same "lousy movies" were making him a rich man.

Frances was happy to be organizing her husband's life, along with his financial affairs. While married to George Brokaw, she had served as vice president of Morgan Guaranty Trust and had become even more knowledgeable about investments. She moved their money around; she bought and sold

property, always making a profit. She talked to their Wall Street broker every day. She preferred business talk to show business gossip. Often when Henry came home from the studio, the only thing Frances wanted to discuss was this stock or that bond or such-and-such an interest rate. He would ask about Jane instead.

When Jane was two, Hank taught her how to swim. It was the most loving, most sensuous experience she ever had with her father, and she never forgot it. “He would take me into his arms, walk down the steps into the swimming pool, and play with me in the water. I would bury my nose in his shoulder on the way down the steps and smell his skin. He always had a delicious musky smell that I loved ... the smell of Man. Yes, he was happy with me when I was little—and deep down I knew his was the winning team, the one I’d do anything to join.” Her godfather, director Josh Logan, would sometimes watch them splashing around in the water. “Jane seemed deliriously happy,” Logan said. “But when Hank pulled her out of the pool and set her down she would cry hysterically after being taken out of his arms.”

She longed to spend entire weekends with her father, but she wasn’t allowed to. Weekends were his special private time, when he and Jimmy Stewart would climb the hills behind the house and fly their kites. She would watch them from the living room window—those two lanky movie stars with their rumpled hair and engaging grins—standing on a grassy rise together in the wind. They were both men of few words, and they liked nothing better than to fly their kites in utter silence.

Near evening, as dusk fell, they would wander back to the house and play jazz on the Victrola: Benny Goodman, Hoagy Carmichael, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington. Jane would wonder what they were thinking as they sat together on the couch and listened in rapt attention to the music.

Hank and Jimmy Stewart had met in 1928 when they joined a little theater called the University Players on Cape Cod. Other actors included Josh Logan, Myron McCormick, and Margaret Sullivan. Hank played character parts—an Italian nobleman, a has-been boxer—and many romantic leading men. Logan summed up what made him special even back then: “Hank would wipe us all off the stage by seeming to do nothing.”

After four years with the Players, Fonda and Stewart moved to New York to try their luck on Broadway. Desperately poor, they shared an apartment on West 63rd Street with Logan and McCormick. They called the place “Casa Gangrene” because the shower curtain in the bathroom stank of mildew.

They would haunt the casting offices and read for shows, but nothing happened. Neither could get any work. At one point Fonda persuaded Stewart to play his accordion in Times Square while he passed the hat to the few people who stopped to listen.

But Hank never even thought of giving up. He had been obsessed with acting from the minute he had started out at the Omaha Playhouse at nineteen. “Acting was a game of make believe,” he told *Playboy* interviewer Larry Grobel in 1981. “Like a young kid playing cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians.” Once he was onstage he found he could be another person. “I wasn’t self-conscious at all [when I was] playing a part,” he said.

He kept auditioning and auditioning, and in 1934 his luck changed. Leonard Sillman was casting a new musical revue and Fonda went in to try out (he’d always had fantasies of becoming another Fred Astaire). Asked if he could sing, Fonda said no. Dance? Nope. “Well, what can you do?” Sillman asked irritably.

“I do baby imitations,” Fonda told him. “Baby imitations from one week to one year.” It was an act he’d been perfecting at family gatherings and parties for years. And with that he began pantomiming a man driving a car and diapering a baby at the same time.

Sillman doubled over with laughter. “You’re hired!”

Fonda found himself cast opposite another unknown—a goofy girl named Imogene Coca. They costarred in *New Faces of 1934*, and it was a huge Broadway hit. During the run, he had an affair with Coca, whom Fonda described as an “adorable little clown, with so much talent!”

From then on, his life moved very fast. The debonair Leland Hayward, who had become the most powerful theatrical agent in the country, handling such talents as Garbo, Astaire, and Dashiell Hammett, sent him out to Hollywood, where he signed a movie contract with Walter Wanger for \$1,000 a week. The following year, Jimmy Stewart signed with MGM; he and Fonda rented a house together in Brentwood. Orson Welles met them at that time and said, “I thought these guys were either having the hottest affair imaginable or were two of the straightest men in the world. After spending a couple of hours with them, I decided they were the straightest human beings I had ever met in my entire life.”

Fonda wished his mother were alive to see his success, but she had died of a blood clot just before *New Faces* opened. As soon as he could, he flew home to visit with his ailing father, who was weak from kidney disease. He took with him a print of *The Farmer Takes a Wife*, and they watched it together. Hank’s father wanted to retire and run a chicken farm and so Hank promised he would buy one for him, but he didn’t get the chance. Bill Fonda died a couple of weeks later at fifty-five.

Fonda missed his parents. “I adored them,” he said. He remained close to his two sisters, who had stayed in Omaha and visited him frequently in California. He still had a hard time believing his great good fortune—so much money in the bank; more scripts than he could read in a week; a beautiful, devoted wife, Frances; and Jane, his adorable baby daughter, as well as his stepdaughter, Pan, to whom he dutifully paid attention.

“All this happening to a boy from Nebraska,” he’d drawl when he was in a good mood, and he was in one when he and Frances took off for a vacation in Chile and Ecuador in late 1939, just as war was erupting in Europe. Jane was left in the care of her nanny.

The trip was very important for the Fondas. They forgot about their usual preoccupations, investments and acting, and devoted themselves to each other. They tried to avoid talking too much about the news. The Nazis had invaded Poland, and Britain and France had declared war on Germany. Soon after they returned to California, Frances discovered she was pregnant again, and she was so happy that for a short time she stopped fussing over their investments.

ON FEBRUARY 23, 1940, Peter Fonda was born at Leroy Hospital in New York. He weighed nine pounds. Back in Hollywood, his father was so tickled that he ran around the set of *The Return of Francis James*, the movie in which he was starring, yelling, "I've got a fullback!" And then he showed the entire cast the lovely photograph that had been taken of Frances and the baby and had run in all the newspapers. She had a jubilant expression on her face because she'd always longed for a son. (She had planned to adopt a boy if the new baby had been another girl.)

Frances soon fell into a depression. It was her third cesarean and she was having a difficult recuperation. She became agitated and anxious and remained in the hospital for weeks. It's probable she was suffering from postpartum depression, though years later she would be diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

Eventually Hank flew east to be with her, and her mood brightened, but he had to return to Hollywood after the weekend and took the baby back with him, feeding and changing him on the long flight to California. Frances remained in New York for seven weeks at the Hotel Pierre, under the care of a team of doctors, before traveling west in a chauffeur-driven car.

Fonda hadn't been home for more than a couple of days when he showed the home movies of "Mummy and the baby" for Jane and her half sister, Pan. Jane recalls staring at the jiggly color image of her mother kissing Peter's tiny fist over and over, and she burst into tears and ran from the room. "I was not happy, I can tell you," she said. She began feeling doubly rejected when her mother returned and focused all her attention on Peter. She wouldn't let Frances touch her for a long time, and if she did, Jane would cry. "You couldn't forgive your mother," her grandmother Seymour wrote in a letter to Jane. "You thought that she had rejected you for Peter."

In one of the many interviews he gave before his death in 2010, Andreas Voutsinas, Jane's coach, recalled, "Jane told me her mother would come into the nursery and start fussing over Peter, hugging and kissing him, and Jane would just stand there watching. Her mother wouldn't even speak to her except to ask, 'Isn't he the cunningest child?' It got to be unbearable. Since her father seemed unable to show her any affection either, Jane felt totally unloved."

She felt especially ignored on her birthdays. She started brooding about that and grew more and more sullen. As the holidays approached, her mother noticed and asked why, and Jane blurted out that she hated her birth date, December 21, because it was so close to Christmas and she would receive fewer gifts. Frances assured her that she would do something about it.

After a week Frances handed her a beautifully wrapped little box tied with a big satin bow. Inside there was a scribbled note that said, in effect, "Darling—I am giving you my birth date, April 14, as a present. From now on we can celebrate our birthdays together," and she signed it "Love, Mummie," with a smiling little face next to it the way she always signed her notes to her children. It was one of the few warm moments Jane and Frances shared, as were the times when Jane crawled into her mother's bed in the mornings and was read to from Grimm's fairy tales and the Oz books.

At five, Jane was pudgy and frowning and constantly in motion. She had a new friend, Brooke Hayward, also five years old, who had just moved in down the block. Brooke was the daughter of Leland Hayward and his ebullient wife, the actress Margaret Sullavan, who had earlier been married to Henry Fonda. Known for her throaty voice and sharp-tongued manner, she'd just been nominated for an Academy Award for the movie *Three Comrades*. Since their divorce a decade before, she and Hank Fonda had not seen each other much, but now Hank took every opportunity to drop by the Haywards' house with the excuse that he was "picking up Lady Jayne out of the sandbox."

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