

Possessed

The Life of Joan Crawford



DONALD SPOTO

The Life of **Possessed** Crawford

DONALD SPOTO

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for Ole—
again, and always

... right next to the right one ...
—Tim Christensen, Danish composer and lyricist

I'll do my own thinking, thank you—and my own existing.
—Joan Crawford, as the title character in *Daisy Kenyon* (1947)

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INTRODUCTION

November 18, 1952

ALMOST SIXTY YEARS later, the envelope's California postmark and Thomas Jefferson's profile and the purple stamp remain unfaded. The content is still clear, too—perfectly typewritten and signed with a bold flourish:

Dear Don,

Thank you for writing such a sweet letter.

I am so happy that you liked my new picture, "Sudden Fear." It was a challenge for me, and there were some very hard scenes. But I enjoyed working in San Francisco, and I was very lucky to work with fine actors like Mr. Jack Palance and Miss Gloria Grahame.

I am so impressed that you read Miss Edna Sherry's book that our movie was based on. I don't think there are many eleven-year-old movie fans who do that!

Thank you again for writing to me. I hope you will stay in touch, and that we will meet some day. Good luck in school!

Your friend,
Joan Crawford

I WAS TAKEN TO the movies for the first time on my fourth birthday, in June 1945; the program was an afternoon of Disney cartoons at the Pickwick Theater in Greenwich, Connecticut. When my family moved briefly to White Plains, New York, at the end of that year, I was frequently treated to a matinee at the Pix Playhouse. Then, from 1947 (when I entered first grade) to 1959 (when I left home for college), I went almost every Saturday afternoon either to the RKO Proctor's or to the Loew's in New Rochelle—or to the nearby Larchmont Playhouse, where I saw the thriller *Sudden Fear* in late August 1952. I pestered my mother until she somehow obtained the Hollywood address of the movie's distributor, RKO Radio Pictures. She cautioned me that if I wrote a fan letter telling Miss Crawford how much I liked her movie, I should not expect a reply: "Movie stars don't have time to answer letters from strangers, so try not to be disappointed."

As it happened, my youthful enthusiasm for *Sudden Fear* was not misdirected. A few months after I had pasted Joan Crawford's reply into my scrap-book, the picture was nominated for four Academy Awards, including one for Joan Crawford as best actress of the year. She had already won the Oscar six years earlier, for *Mildred Pierce*, but it took me a long time to catch up with that movie—and much longer to have any clear idea about the actress, her life and her long list of achievements.

By the time of *Sudden Fear*, Joan was in her midforties, well past the age (according to Hollywood's strange standards) for leading ladies to play women in love unless the character

were doomed or pathetic. (That year, the estimable Shirley Booth, fifty-five, was anointed best actress for her role as the grandmotherly wife Lola in *Come Back, Little Sheba*.) But Joan Crawford was having none of the conventional wisdom that nice middle-aged women are supposed to be indifferent to passion. The role of Myra Hudson in *Sudden Fear* was her own choice; she was the movie's de facto executive producer; she supervised the development of the character and collaborated on the screenplay; and she tackled with enormous gusto the part of a wealthy, successful playwright longing for love. Myra does not retreat quietly to her life's upper balcony just because she happens to be forty-something.

By 1952, Norma Shearer and Greta Garbo—Joan's two rivals during her years at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer—had long since retired, and Marlene Dietrich was performing in nightclubs. But Joan Crawford kept fighting for new roles for older women, and she succeeded. For half a century, she assessed what the public wanted in each era: the jazz baby during the 1920s; the independent thinker of the 1930s; the troubled postwar woman of the 1940s; the romantically starved woman of the 1950s; the horror queen of the 1960s and 1970s. But those broad categories never exhausted the range of her roles.

MY PARENTS HAD BEEN in high school in the early 1930s, when Joan was already a major star, and when I returned home from the Larchmont Playhouse that Saturday afternoon in 1952, I was astonished to learn that she was very well known to the older generation. By then, 80 percent of Joan Crawford's total motion picture output was behind her: of her eighty-seven feature films, there were only eighteen after 1950. But like *Molly Brown*, she was unsinkable, unpredictable, indomitable. "I remember that she was a champion Charleston dancer before she was a movie star," my mother said when I received Miss Crawford's reply, "and she has the trophies to prove it." Crawford spanned generations, movie styles—in fact, movie history itself.

Never content with her past achievements, Joan sought only to extend the frontiers of her talent and experience; indeed, one of the major themes of this book is that few are her equals in terms of the sheer volume, variety and quality of her performances. In addition to her movies, she was heard on dozens of radio dramas from the 1930s through the 1950s, and then she eagerly turned to acting on television, appearing on many of the most popular programs of the time—*The Jack Benny Program*, *I Love Lucy*, *Route 66*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *The Virginian*. Steven Spielberg's first job in the industry was directing Joan in a terse, tense half-hour thriller. Only work in the theatre eluded her: as she admitted, she suffered from paralyzing stage fright that was exacerbated by a poignant shyness in the presence of strangers.

Joan's accomplishments in television are remarkable: twenty dramas; forty appearances on talk shows; thirteen variety and comedy shows; a dozen award programs and game shows; half-dozen tribute specials; commercials; and public service announcements for charities. Until grave illness forced her to withdraw from the world toward the end of her life, she considered retirement a dirty word.

But a mere catalogue of achievements does not justify a full-scale biography. After surveying the shelf of chronicles published about Joan since her death in 1977, the question must be addressed: Why another life story? Quite simply, because perhaps no other mov-

star—with the possible exception of Marilyn Monroe—has been so underappreciated and misrepresented by rumor, innuendo, fabrication, unfounded allegation and rank distortion.

Joan Crawford was neither Joan of Arc nor the arch she-devil of popular misconception. She was a recognizably human and passionate woman who entertained millions; she made egregious mistakes and learned from them; and she always had a legion of friends and countless admirers. One's fame or power or influence was never the criterion for friendship with Joan, and she was on warm terms with people from every walk of life. The shift in public opinion from respect to contempt only began a year after her death, with the publication of a book called *Mommie Dearest*, which alleged that Joan was a sadistic alcoholic who took special pleasure in torturing her adopted children.

THE BOOK YOU ARE holding is an attempt to set the record straight on a number of critical matters concerning Joan Crawford's complex character. Not the least of these issues is, in fact, *Mommie Dearest*, which ought to be judged in light of certain matters often ignored. In many ways, Joan was a jumble of contradictions, but the contradictions provide clues to what has been mostly discounted or denied—specifically, that she was much more than just a movie star: she was demonstrably one of the screen's most talented actresses. I have attempted to support this large claim by examining all her extant feature film performances (seventy of her eighty-seven motion pictures).

The list of collaborators testifying to her professionalism comprises a virtual Who's Who of memorable names in film history: Clark Gable (with whom Joan appeared in eight pictures), John Gilbert, Robert Montgomery, Gary Cooper, Melvyn Douglas, James Stewart, Spencer Tracy, the brothers John and Lionel Barrymore, John Wayne, John Garfield, Dana Andrews, Henry Fonda and Cliff Robertson. Her directors included some of the most inventive and stylish filmmakers of her era—among them, Edmund Goulding, Clarence Brown, Robert Siodmak, Leonard, Dorothy Arzner, Frank Borzage, George Cukor, Otto Preminger, Michael Curtiz, Robert Aldrich and Lewis Milestone.

Joan's critics claim that she had no gift for comedy, and that the so-called weeping woman's movie was the extent of her range. But that assertion can be made only by those who have not seen comedies like *Chained*, *Forsaking All Others*, *Love on the Run*, *The Women*, *Susan and God*, *When Ladies Meet* and *Above Suspicion*. Those movies prove that she was certainly a gifted exponent of high comedy—a fact that comes as a surprise to those who identify Joan Crawford only with *Mildred Pierce*, *Humoresque* or *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*

BORN LUCILLE FAY LE SUEUR, she was renamed in a studio-sponsored publicity contest. As Joan Crawford, she never took an acting lesson, nor did she ever study with a drama coach. Working by instinct, intensely focused and observant, she was completely self-educated; her first husband, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., told me, "She never ceased in her efforts at self-improvement and was dedicated to her art—to a point of almost religious devotion."

Joan moved through several phases in her fifty-year career—from Broadway chorus girl to flaming flapper, from silent movie vamp to comic mannequin, from dramatic actress to

businesswoman and corporate executive. Through it all, she was tenacious, tough and tender. When people met her, they were often surprised to see that the woman who seemed so much larger than life on-screen was just slightly over five feet tall.

Perhaps because she had come from a crude, poor background and was mistreated in her childhood, Joan always insisted—sometimes even to her own amusement—that people demonstrate exquisite manners and courtesies, toward both herself and others. “People were in awe of her, but she was never in awe of herself,” recalled her friend, the director Herbert Kenwith. “She could speak with all kinds of people on their own levels.”

That quality was evident one day not long before Joan died. She was leaving a Manhattan restaurant when a team of construction workers recognized her and whistled loudly. “Hey, Joanie!” shouted one of them.

Smiling, she went over to shake their hands. “I’m surprised you fellas know who I am!”

“You’re one in a million,” said a workman. “They sure don’t make them like you anymore, baby!”

She loved it.

CHAPTER ONE

A Prairie Bernhardt

| 1906–1924 |

SHE WAS OVERDRESSED, overweight and overanxious. Standing outside La Grande railway station in downtown Los Angeles, she felt a momentary desire to hurry back into the terminal and board the next Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe train that would take her back home.

But she had no home now, and except for a few dollar bills and some coins, she had no financial resources. Her most recent income—for working during the Christmas shopping season in Kansas City—had paid for some new clothes. The train ticket to Chicago, and from there to Southern California aboard the Los Angeles Express, had been subsidized by her new employer.

She was about five feet three inches tall, red-haired and freckled. Her dark complexion camouflaged a few of her 140 pounds—too much weight, she knew, for her small frame. But soon she would be dancing again (day and night, if she had her way), and dancing was her preferred method of weight loss. She clutched her purse and put down the rattan valise that contained her few outfits and—her only extravagance—two pairs of dancing shoes that were just right for the shimmy, the Charleston and the Black Bottom.

It was January 1925, the wild era of the so-called flappers and bright young things who emerged after the Great War, and she was a charter member of the new age. She smoked, she drank—even during those Prohibition years, alcohol was not hard to obtain—and she danced until dawn; she flirted, she wore makeup, she was giddy and took risks. She replaced stiff corsets with loose undergarments and raised her hemline to the knee. She conformed to no conventional standard of behavior; so far, she had lived fast, clinging to life as if she might lose it at any moment. She refused to wear long hair piled on top of her head, as her mother's generation did; instead, she cut and bobbed her hair short. She was a new, modern woman—and frankly sexual, without inhibitions. She never talked about her freewheeling love life; she simply got on with it.

THREE DAYS EARLIER, ON a wintry afternoon, she had said good-bye to her mother in Kansas City. Now, bundled in a woolen coat and wrapped in a patchwork scarf, her hair tucked beneath a dark cloche, she awaited the man assigned to greet her. The perspiration trickled down her back, for the cold-weather outfit was unnecessary: the sun shone brightly at midmorning, and the temperature was climbing toward seventy.

The railway station and surrounding sidewalks of downtown Los Angeles were thronged with motley travelers. There were poor families from the Indian Territories; East Coast businessmen in striped suits, their watch fobs glittering across tightly buttoned vests; society women, draped in chiffon and pearls; and, it seemed to her, a veritable congress of begrimed

and bewhiskered cowboys wearing broad-brimmed hats, leather chaps and colorful bandanas. This cross section of humanity might have been mistaken for a group of players dressed for various productions at a Hollywood movie studio.

Some moments later, a young man, sprucely attired in a summer suit, approached her. As he had meticulously rehearsed his brief introduction, he removed his rakish straw boater, picked up her suitcase, said that his name was Larry Barbier and asked if she was Miss Lucille Le Sueur. She smiled nervously, said yes and they were spirited away in a waiting taxi.¹

Larry, as she was told to call him, was an assistant to the assistant to the associate publicity director of the company for which she was about to begin working. He said that he was going to show her an interesting neighborhood near the hotel where a room had been booked for her, and he instructed the driver to head for an area south of the city of Santa Monica known as Venice, on the shore of the bay, twelve miles from downtown Los Angeles. Larry said that he lived in Venice, right near the beach, and that she was welcome to visit any time.

Planned by a man named Abbot Kinney, who made his fortune manufacturing Sweet Caporal cigarettes, Venice was designed to resemble its Italian namesake: it was a fanciful enclave of Los Angeles, the movie capital of the world and a kind of ultimate fantasy land. Kinney had envisioned romantic canals connecting the streets, with beaches and shops linked by bridges to residential areas on flower-banked shores. Construction of lagoons and cottages was begun in 1904, and in 1905 the canals were filled with water. Kinney persuaded merchants, hoteliers and restaurant owners to build in the style of the Venetian Renaissance and to complete the effect, he imported two dozen gondoliers from Italy, who arrived with a repertory of their native melodies. Venice, California, soon became known as the Playland of the Pacific, and a few months after Miss Le Sueur's arrival, it was sucked into the booming metropolis of Los Angeles.

In those days before freeways and wide boulevards, the journey from the railway station to the hotel required almost four hours as the taxi negotiated heavy traffic along dusty local streets. By midafternoon, they had finally arrived at the Hotel Washington on Van Buren Place, in the separate inland municipality known as Culver City.

Residents of the Washington routinely complained that the rate of four dollars a week was cutthroat extortion; indeed, the word modest was too glamorous a description for the rudimentary accommodations. There was only one bathroom for every thirty guests; a sink with cold water stood in the corner of each tiny room; the electrical system worked erratically; and a single telephone near the front desk had to do for all the residents. But Miss Le Sueur might not have been dejected: after all, her residences in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and New York had not been more luxurious.

The advantage to living on Van Buren Place was its proximity to Lucille's new employer. A few blocks distant was the company to which she would soon report for work; within its gates and behind its walls were lakes, orchards, jungles, railway stations, parks, streets and neighborhoods of many eras—everything required by a modern motion picture studio.

WHEN LUCILLE LE SUEUR arrived in California, a relatively new form of public entertainment was swiftly becoming a vast corporate industry—and the company that had engaged her was at its

epicenter. Nine months earlier, in April 1924, New York theater owner Marcus Loew, who already owned Metro Pictures and Goldwyn Pictures, added Mayer Pictures to his holdings. This he did in order to appoint forty-year-old Louis B. Mayer—ruthless, patriotic and paternalistic—as chief of Los Angeles studio operations for the new conglomerate. At the same time, Loew appointed as head of film production Mayer's assistant, the cleverly and physically frail twenty-five-year-old Irving G. Thalberg, known as the boy wonder of Hollywood. For decades afterward, the business headquarters of the new studio were in New York, the home of Wall Street financiers.

With a little pressure from Mayer, the newly formed megastudio was named Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer: MGM, or simply Metro. With remarkable rapidity, the studio could boast (as one savvy publicist put it) “more stars than there are in the heavens”—typical Hollywood hype, but not entirely inappropriate for its impressive roster of popular contract players, which eventually included Lionel Barrymore, Wallace Beery, Jean Harlow, Jeanette MacDonald, Norma Shearer, Clark Gable, Myrna Loy and Greta Garbo.² More than any other movie studio, Metro was deeply involved in the personal lives of its employees—specifically, in the tight control of a tidy public image for each contract player. For Mayer and his colleagues, this was simply a matter of protecting their investments.

From the 1920s to the early 1940s, this studio was the most successful in Hollywood: it never lost money during the Great Depression and released a feature film every week, along with cartoons and short subjects. The eventual decline of the studio was primarily (but not only) caused by the rise of television and by the United States Supreme Court ruling against corporate monopolies, which forced the studios to divest themselves of theater chains. Without Loew's movie houses, Metro could not survive.

None of this was foreseen in 1925. That year, 49 million people (more than 40 percent of the American population) paid an average of ten cents to see a total of 576 silent black-and-white films. This was the heyday of stars like glamorous Gloria Swanson and demure Lillian Gish; of audacious Douglas Fairbanks and sensual Rudolf Valentino; of exotic Pola Negri and amusing Marion Davies. Metro was about to produce *The Merry Widow*, with dashing John Gilbert, and soon it would release the epic *Ben-Hur*, which showcased the glossy eroticism of Ramon Novarro.

Along with the established stars and vast numbers of technical workers at various studios, extras for the common crowd scenes in movies picked up their paychecks each week. In 1919, a total of thirty-five thousand people worked in some capacity for the movie industry; by 1925, that number had doubled, and most of the studio workers labored six days every week. Lucille was prepared for hard work when she arrived at Metro, as instructed, on Monday, January 12, 1925. Two months later, she celebrated her nineteenth birthday.

LUCILLE FAY LE SUEUR was born in San Antonio, Texas, on March 23, 1906. By the time she registered for the new Social Security program in the 1930s, she had already become accustomed to stating her birth year as 1908; there was, after all, no official document to the contrary, for in 1906, birth certificates were neither mandatory nor routine in Texas. And so, with the encouragement and complicity of studio publicists, she established her birth year as

1908, effectively diminishing her age by two years. According to California law, however, the studio could not have hired a seventeen-year-old in 1925 without parental approval, and that was neither required nor requested in her case. Lucille had applied for a work-study program at Stephens College, Missouri, in 1922, and at that time she truthfully gave her age as sixteen. She certainly could not have hoodwinked anyone at Stephens into accepting her if she was in fact only fourteen years old.

By 1936, magazine articles occasionally reported her true birth year (without correction from the subject or her bosses) and she herself revealed it at least once. The occasion was a meeting in November 1967 with the Trustees of Brandeis University, who named her a Distinguished Fellow in recognition of “her interest, time and service to a host of civic and philanthropic causes.” By that time, she had donated a large cache of personal effects to the university.³

The extreme paucity of facts concerning Lucille’s parents has not prevented a platoon of writers from spinning fanciful tales about her family and their backgrounds, employment and characters. But very little can confidently be established. Her mother’s name was Anna Be Johnson, and she was born in November 1884, very likely somewhere in Texas. Lucille’s father was Thomas Le Sueur, born about 1868 in Canada or (say some sources) in Tennessee. Of the couple’s earlier lives and of their marriage, nothing is known except that Tom (and some records identify him) abandoned his wife and children either just before Lucille was born or just after—she never provided any information on the matter. Anna then took in laundry and found local odd jobs to support herself and her two children. The little family was grindingly poor and remained so for years to come.

Despite the imaginations of those who have supplemented missing facts with colorful fictions, Lucille’s early years remain clouded in obscurity—until 1910, when a census recorded that Anna, seven-year-old Harold (always called Hal) and four-year-old Lucille were living with Anna’s new husband, Henry J. Cassin, in the town of Lawton, Oklahoma. Curiously, the Cassin marriage was publicly recorded as Anna’s first; indeed, she may never have married Le Sueur.

Lawton, a sleepy town eighty-eight miles southwest of Oklahoma City and the headquarters of the Comanche Nation, was no busy, crowded metropolitan area. But it boasted the Ramsey Opera House, and Cassin was the booking agent and manager for its repertory of musicals, traveling shows, vaudevilles, dance recitals and just about anything that came to town capable of attracting paying customers.

“Daddy Cassin,” as Lucille referred to him even after she learned that he was not her father, was the only adult to lavish anything like attention and affection on the little girl. “He was the center of my world—a short, stocky and black-haired man with small brown eyes and a calm manner. A mature man, he was not the type to romp with children, but I could always crawl on his lap—he made room right inside his newspaper. And I knew he loved me.” Born about 1867, Cassin called her Billie, a common nickname at that time for children of both genders. For a dozen years, she identified herself as Billie Cassin. “If I could really give credit to the people who helped me the most,” she said years later, “I guess he’d top the list.”

Cassin often took her to his theater—where, for example, he once featured a classical-trained ballet dancer—and, in 1912, treated six-year-old Billie to a performance of something

called the “Gypsy Fantasy.” They went backstage to meet the dancer, who embraced Billie after the child said that she wanted to dance, too. The young woman gave the child a pair of used ballet slippers and told her that she would have to work very hard. This counsel was once taken to heart, and Billie began to offer impromptu dance recitals in a nearby barn or on the family’s front porch. With no more inspiration than the Gypsy Fantasy, she leaped and whirled, usually to the unlikely tune of the popular song “Wait ‘Till the Sun Shines, Nellie” for which she dragooned this or that neighborhood boy to accompany her as impromptu warbler.

“Henry Cassin encouraged me,” she recalled years later. “He seemed to think I had talent. This made my mother furious—no daughter of hers was going to be a dancer. But his word was real to me. The opera house must have been shabby, but to me it was glamorous. It was the life I wanted.”

But her terpsichorean aspirations were interrupted by a painful mishap that summer. Either jumping on purpose or falling by accident, Billie fell from her front porch onto shards of a broken glass bottle. Bleeding profusely, she was gallantly carried inside and comforted by a teenage boy until a doctor arrived. The role of this impromptu Prince Valiant was assumed by a seventeen-year-old high school boy named Don Blanding; he, too, had artistic ambitions later realized when he became a successful poet, journalist and author of a dozen books. When they next met, twenty years later in Hollywood, Blanding celebrated the childhood incident in a lyric he wrote in honor of the dancer who had become a star.

She was just the little girl who lived across the street,
All legs and curls and great big eyes and restless dancing feet,
As vivid as a humming bird, as bright and swift and gay,
A child who played at make-believe throughout the livelong day.
With tattered old lace curtains and a battered feather fan,
She swept and preened, an actress with grubby snub-nosed clan
Of neighborhood kids for audience enchanted with the play,
A prairie Bernhardt for a while. And then she went away.
We missed her on the little street, her laughter and her fun
Until the dull years blurred her name as years have ever done.
A great premiere in Hollywood... the light, the crowds,
the cars, The frenzied noise of greeting to the famous movie stars,
The jewels, the lace, the ermine coats,
the ballyhoo and cries,
The peacock women’s promenade, the bright mascaraed eyes,
The swift excited whisper as a limousine draws near,
“Oh, look! It’s Joan. It’s Joan. It’s Joan!” On every side I hear
The chatter, gossip, envy, sighs, conjectures, wonder, praise,
As memory races quickly back to early prairie days ...
The little girl across the street, the funny child I knew
Who dared to dream her splendid dreams and make her dreams come true.

THE HEALING OF THE injured foot required a long recuperation, a protracted break from dancing and

an absence from elementary school. But Anna disallowed any childish indolence, and so Billie was literally a working girl—"scrubbing floors for money to help my mother. I didn't have much education, and for years I had an inferiority complex about my background. Maybe that's why I had such a need to accomplish something." The added income from Billie's work was even more necessary when Henry Cassin—perhaps overwhelmed by his financial obligations that could not be covered by his wages from the opera house—was accused of embezzlement. He was acquitted in court, but not in the eyes of Lawton's upright citizens, who boycotted the opera house, cold-shouldered him and Anna and forbade the children to consort with Hal and Billie, whose earliest memories were of social ostracism.

By the time the girl was ten, the Cassin household had relocated to Kansas City, where Henry found a less interesting job, managing the New Midland, a shabby residential hotel in a squalid neighborhood. Anna went to work at a laundry service, where she also introduced her daughter to the exacting routine of a drudge. Hal, on the other hand, did not have to work to earn his keep: always his mother's pet, he ignored school with impunity, preferring another pastime—drinking homemade liquor with his buddies.

Irregularly, Billie attended classes—first at a public grade school and then at St. Agnes Academy, where the nuns took pity on the unhappy child whose family did not have the money for full tuition, and offered Billie free classes in exchange for duties such as serving meals to the students and cleaning the rooms of the boarders. Like them, Billie lived at the convent school from Monday to Friday and returned home on weekends, a routine that she endured from 1916 to 1919.

The unfortunate result of her teachers' good intentions was to alienate Billie from her classmates, who treated her as did her mother—like hired help. "I agree with whoever says that a miserable childhood is the ideal launching pad for success," she later reflected. But she was also remarkably frank in assessing the times when she behaved imprudently:

I never had any close chums. Instead of being pretty, I was "different" {because} my mother wasn't a very good seamstress, so my dresses were always too long or too short. I kept thinking I might be popular if I stood out more, so I did three things—I walked around looking as though I was self-assured, but I came off brassy. I did little things to mother's dresses to make me look different, but I came off {like} a freak. And I worked my ass off learning how to dance, but I became an exhibitionist... I was lonely at home and lonely at school, but a lot of it was sheer stubbornness and perverseness. I guess maybe I didn't want to conform, and I paid the price for that.

So when I decided I was going to be a dancer, it was for three reasons: I wanted to be famous, just to make the kids who had laughed at me feel foolish. I wanted to be rich, so I'd never have to do the awful work my mother did and live at the bottom of the barrel—ever. And I wanted to be a dancer because I loved to dance ... I always knew, whether I was in school or working in some dime store, that I'd make it. Funny, but I never had any ambition whatsoever to be an actress.

During her time at St. Agnes, the Cassin marriage became progressively more troubled. The exact cause of the final rupture is impossible to determine, but one weekend Billie returned home from school to find that Daddy Cassin had simply departed—an event, she recalled, that made her feel "as though the world had ended." After one chance meeting with Billie a few months later, he never saw her again. Henry Cassin died, at about the age of fifty-five, of

October 25, 1922, and was buried in Lawton. Bitter, lonely and overworked, the now twice abandoned Anna subsequently had little good to say about men—an attitude she communicated to her daughter. You had to be careful ... you couldn't trust any man ... you had to hide your purse or he'd steal from you ... you shouldn't believe anything they said, they're all liars ...

Anna took the children to live in the only place she could find work—in another laundry. “She made arrangements for herself and the two children to live in one unused room behind the laundry,” her granddaughter recalled, “[where] it was hot in the summer, freezing in winter. There was no cooking stove, no proper bathroom, and there were three people living in just one room.”

Such was their life until Anna took up with yet another man, this time a dissolute character named Harry Hough, who apparently took liberties with young Billie and was caught by Anna in the act of fondling the girl. With that, Lucille was sent off to the nearby Rockingham Academy, where she worked under even more unpleasant conditions than she had known at St. Agnes. The headmistress at Rockingham evidently believed that young girls were best disciplined by corporal punishment. “I was the only working student, and I had to take care of a fourteen-room house, cook, make beds and wash dishes for thirty other boys and girls. The headmistress was really a cruel tyrant, and there was so much work to do that no time remained for studying or learning. I don't remember going to classes more than two or three times a year. But I do remember the broomstick applied to my legs or backside for reasons I don't remember. I was a drudge there the way I was at home, and sometimes I had the feeling that the headmistress was just making an example of me—if the students did something bad, this was what would happen to them.”

After Lucille repeatedly begged her mother to bring her home, Anna relented—only to push her back into slave labor, working for long hours as a laundress. Years later, she recalled that there was a complete absence of communication with her mother—a coldness exacerbated by Anna's habit of smacking her daughter's face or arms or legs for any reason or no reason. Hence the two women who most influenced her early years—her mother and the school principal—demonstrated only stern discipline and no positive reinforcement. Lucille's brother, meanwhile, was neither corrected nor punished.

There are numerous accounts of Lucille's schooling. Most chroniclers have stated that she completed the traditional twelve years of elementary and high school and then briefly attended college, from which she withdrew after one term. This wildly overstates the extent of her education, about which she herself was far more honest. “Moving pictures have given me all the education I ever had,” she often said. “I never went beyond the fifth grade—I had no formal education whatsoever. When I read scripts, I had to look up words in the dictionary—how to pronounce them and what they meant—in order to learn the lines properly.”

After the fifth grade, she was essentially hired to work, and although she had the right to attend classes, there was no time for that. Therefore she quite accurately said that she had “no formal education.” Indeed, that lack of schooling was part of the inferiority complex to which she often referred, and for which she tried to compensate during her entire life. Family provided some endorsement; her awareness of some good performances gave another. But

she always felt inadequate, and people who feel inadequate often demand extravagant forms of approval to meet their limitless needs.

Never satisfied with what she had accomplished, Billie pressed forward to what she might achieve in the future. Always attracted to intelligent and creative people (not merely bookish academics), she later embarked on a lifelong program of self-improvement—to which her husbands and friends bore witness; some were even appointed as de facto pedagogues.

DURING HER TEEN YEARS, Billie became quite popular because she loved to dance and knew how to flirt. A few miles south of downtown Kansas City is Westport, the heart of the region's nightlife. Built along the Santa Fe Trail, the area always had an abundance of diners, cafes, and dance halls that attracted crowds of young people, especially on weekends. By the time she was fifteen, Billie was frequently seen at the Jack-o'-Lantern Dance Hall in Westport.⁴ Full of energy and motivated by a desire to forget her dull routine, she danced the nights away whenever possible.

On one evening at the Jack-o'-Lantern in 1919, Billie met a handsome young trumpeter named Ray Thayer Sterling. Three years older and a senior at Northeast High School, Ray was earnest, bright, witty—and, as his classmates said, “sensitive,” the code word for “gay.” Because she had initially thought of him as potentially her first love (if not her true love), Billie was at first disappointed. But she was eager for friendship, and so Ray became her confidant, encouraging her ambition to be a dancer and aspire to a better life. “Ray was the one I called when anything went wrong,” she said long after he died, “and I loved him with my whole fourteen-year-old heart. He wanted me to go out and get my dreams. Once I was in the process of realizing them, I lost him.” They maintained an uncomplicated friendship until she left for Hollywood.

In the late spring of 1922, when Billie was sixteen, her mother was offered employment as a dormitory housemaid at Stephens College, a school for women in Columbia, Missouri—120 miles from both Kansas City (to the west) and Saint Louis (to the east). After some fiddling with the details of her previous education, Anna and Billie submitted an application for the girl to enter Stephens that autumn. Once again, it was arranged that she would earn her tuition by waiting on tables in the college dining room.

The work-study deal did not turn out to be the problem, but Billie's complete lack of preparation for university studies did. With nothing more than elementary school in her academic past, she was not an ideal candidate for college courses. “I was simply not equipped,” she recalled. “No one could help me, and I was in dire need.” Fearful and embarrassed, she packed her suitcase and headed for the railway station. As if on cue, the president of Stephens College, James Madison Wood, also arrived at the station, on his way to a lecture engagement. “I don't belong here,” she said when he asked her destination.

As she spelled out her dilemma, he did not try to convince her to return to college courses—that would have been absurd advice. Instead, he encouraged Billie to develop a realistic sense of her talents and, when possible, always to stay with a project. Although it seemed unlikely that evening marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship, later maintained by earnest correspondence until his death in 1963. Daddy Wood, as she called him—the father figure

who succeeded Daddy Cassin—always followed her career with affectionate enthusiasm.

“In that little talk at the train station at Columbia,” she said years later, “Daddy Wood gave me more to benefit me through life, more human education than all the hours in the classroom put together. He’d be surprised to learn the places where I have heard him repeating his words—while I was a member of a cheap road show, while I was kicking in the chorus on Broadway, in cabarets and Hollywood dance halls. I could always hear him say ‘Don’t run away; let your record do you justice.’ And I’ve always tried to obey him.” They exchanged news and greetings, and once he sent her a signed photograph of himself: “A friend of the Billie who was—and the Joan who now is—and is yet to be.” It was among the few personal framed pictures still in her possession when she died.

BY DECEMBER 1922, BILLIE and her mother were back in Kansas City. But she refused to return to work in a laundry; instead, for most of the next year, she held down jobs wrapping packages and selling women’s clothing at local emporia. “At that time, I weighed one hundred and forty-five pounds of baby fat. I was self-conscious, unsure, and my ‘style’ was strictly dreadful. I hated my round face, I hated my freckles, my big mouth and eyes. I tried to stretch [myself] as tall as possible, tossed my head in the air, poked my chin out, and dared people to notice me.” The challenge worked, and Billie became a popular girl in her neighborhood.

The freewheeling life of the Roaring Twenties characterized young people everywhere, and Kansas was no exception. Young men pursued their dates with sweet talk and stolen caresses—and, in that Prohibition Era, with homemade moonshine and “iced tea,” which sounded innocent but packed a wallop. By law, alcohol could not be manufactured, sold or purchased in the United States from 1920 through 1933, but legislators did not take into account American ingenuity: spirits could be obtained almost anywhere without much difficulty, and the consumption of alcohol actually increased during Prohibition. Traveling musicians had bountiful supplies of liquor (and drugs like cocaine) to distract them and to attract prettier girls. And with the proliferation of roadsters and jalopies after the Great War, nothing more than the backseat of a car was required for a romantic evening.

Of Billie’s habits and social life at that time, almost no details have survived, and she provided no clues. A few imaginative writers have asserted that, for money, she frequently danced nude at private clubs and even appeared in short loops of pornographic “flickers.” But there are neither witnesses nor material evidence to support these claims; still, the absence of facts has not deterred people from concocting tales. It is certain, however, that she was a champion Charleston dancer.

One summer evening, Ray Sterling took her to a dance competition at the Ivanhoe Mason Temple. After her number, Billie was introduced to the booking agent for a singer named Katherine Emerine, who made the rounds of country theaters and needed a dozen local chorus girls as her “backup,” to high-step and croon in unison while Emerine sang and told theater stories. She was about to open in Springfield, Missouri, but her act needed three or four more chorines.

Billie was on a bus the next morning and made a sufficient impression during the two-week engagement that she was invited to contact Kate Emerine again if ever she traveled

Chicago, the singer's home base. Having worked in the show as Lucille Le Sueur, not Bill Cassin, she returned to Kansas City with hopes renewed and forty dollars in her pocketbook for her wages for performing.

Convinced that her aspirations were neither naive nor ill founded, Lucille could not tolerate much longer the tasks of wrapping packages and answering department store telephones for twelve dollars a week. She headed north in search of Kate Emerine before the end of 1923, apparently to her mother's indifference.

Whereas Kansas City in the 1920s had occasional police roundups of petty crooks, the city newspapers rarely featured headlines announcing riots or murders. The situation was far different in Chicago, where dozens were killed and many hundreds injured in the race riots of 1919, and things worsened in the years following. As labor and economic problems increased after the war, so did the volume of major crime. No one was quite sure whether there were more shotguns than barrels of bootleg whiskey coming into Chicago every day. Al Capone had little difficulty establishing a foothold in the Windy City, where the municipal government seemed to learn much from his strong-arm tactics. Con artists and swindlers like "Yellow Kid" Weil found Chicago a virtual university where complicated systems of theft and exploitation could be learned and perfected. On many streets downtown, there were houses bearing signs that warned "Venereal Disease—Keep Out!" You had to be (in the language of the day) "a tough dame" to survive on your own in Chicago during the Roaring Twenties.

To her dismay, Lucille could not track down the elusive Miss Emerine. Instead, she was referred to a booking agent named Ernie Young, who, during the winter of 1924, placed her as an "entertainment dancer" in some of Chicago's more disreputable strip clubs, for a salary of twenty-five dollars a week. This kind of employment paid for her rent in a tumbledown boardinghouse and kept food on the table, but it might soon have led to disaster if Young had not, after a few days, transferred her to the Oriole Terrace, a Detroit nightclub at East Grand Boulevard and Woodward Street.

This was no sleazy venue. Detroit was, in fact, the home of some of the most important jazz orchestras and influential nightclub acts in American musical history. Beginning in 1924, for example, the Danny Russo–Ted Fio Rito Orchestra (led by the latter, who considered Fio Rito more exotic than Fiorito) established its legendary status through a long engagement at the Oriole Terrace.

Lucille was at once made a frontliner in the dancing chorus of every show at this nightclub and it was no surprise to the management (or to her) when the Broadway impresario J. Shubert regularly took his seat in the audience. He and his brothers owned eighty-six theaters across the United States and took in over \$1 million in ticket sales every week. J.J. regularly scouted the country for talent, and Detroit's Oriole Terrace was always a stop on his travels. The new Shubert musical revue, *Innocent Eyes*, was about to open on Broadway, and a lineup of energetic chorines was needed. Not actresses. Not singers. Just pretty background glamour. Off to New York went Lucille Le Sueur.

The previous Christmas, she had been home in Kansas City, with no idea if she really had a future as a dancer. Now, just eight weeks later, she was in New York, ready to begin rehearsals for a Broadway show starring Mis-tinguett, one of the best-known entertainers in the world.

LUCILLE CAME TO NEW YORK at a time when the theatre was enjoying an astonishing postwar explosion. That year, there were 196 new productions in New York—88 dramas, 6 comedies, 26 musicals and 15 revues. Among the notable productions were new works by George Kelly (*The Show-Off*), Eugene O'Neill (*Desire Under the Elms*), George Gershwin (*Lady, Be Good*), Sigmund Romberg (*The Student Prince*), Rudolf Friml (*Rose-Marie*) and George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly (*Beggar on Horseback*). Katharine Cornell, as *Shaw* in *Candida*, appealed to sophisticated theatregoers, as did Helen Hayes (in a revival of Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*) and Ethel Barrymore (in Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*). In addition, the Marx Brothers drew packed audiences, and there were extravagant new versions of Florenz Ziegfeld's *Follies*, George White's *Scandals* and Earl Carroll's *Vanities*—some of them featuring nude models, who were legal so long as they remained motionless onstage. Those who fancied the New York theatre were kept very busy queuing for tickets.

On May 20, 1924, *Innocent Eyes* opened at the Winter Garden Theater, with music by Sigmund Romberg and Jean Schwartz, and a cast of ninety-four performing dozens of numbers. The show ran for eighteen weeks and 126 performances before closing on August 30. Because she was not a headliner but merely among the chorus, Lucille was not mentioned in any news or reviews of the show.

Then and later, neither she nor anyone else provided details of her offstage life in Manhattan. As she said, "Dancing was the main thing. And I dated. I'd learned, by then, that you couldn't take those dates seriously, because the men were just out of college or married or engaged, and having a fling with a chorus girl was the 'in' thing. But those 'Johnnies' treated us to some damned good times."

INSTEAD OF TRAVELING TO other Shubert theaters with the national touring company of *Innocent Eyes*, she accepted an offer to remain in New York, where, four days after the final performance, she appeared in the next Shubert and Romberg musical revue—*The Passing Show* of 1924, also presented at the Winter Garden; her salary was thirty-five dollars a week (\$440 in 2011 valuation). "I was never good enough to be in the first line of the chorus on Broadway," she admitted. "I was in the second line." The critics found the production mildly diverting but not much more, and the show passed into history on November 22, without benefiting the careers of anybody in the company—except one.

Harry Rapf, who worked with Louis B. Mayer, was a producer at Metro and one of the original organizers of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences—a clever designation for an institution designed to resist the unionization of every craft working in the industry. In the summer and autumn of 1924, Rapf was in New York, attending shows every night and scouting for young men and women with potential for the movies. Metro had to grind out "product," to supply all of Marcus Loew's 110 East Coast theaters with new pictures every week. Hence the studio was committed to churning out a picture a week, and in fact, they did so. By the summer of 1925, they wrote down a net profit of almost \$5 million.

At the end of November, Rapf invited a few chorus girls from the nowdefunct *Passing Show* to a Manhattan studio for brief screen tests, and Lucille Le Sueur was among them. She was

indifferent to the prospect of movie acting, for her sights were firmly set on a dancing career in New York. With almost somnolent indifference, she stood, walked, glanced, smiled and turned this way and that for a screen test that apparently has not survived.

With no promises made by Metro and no immediate prospect of further work in New York, Lucille headed to Kansas City for the Christmas holidays; there, at least, she could count on the encouragement of her old friend Ray Sterling and some former dates only too eager to oblige her to parties and dances.

But at Christmastime, a telegram arrived at her mother's apartment, which Lucille had been given to Rapf as a temporary address:

Studio offers you a contract starting at seventy-five dollars a week. Leave immediately for Culver City, California. Contact MGM office for travel expenses and details.

“When Miss Le Sueur came into my office,” Rapf told a magazine editor while she was still packing her clothes in Kansas, “I knew that she had that rare thing—personality. She is beautiful, but more essential than beauty is that quality known as screen magnetism. Even before we made camera tests of her, I felt that she possessed this great asset. Her tests proved it.”

And so, on Saturday, January 3, 1925, Lucille Le Sueur arrived in Los Angeles, unaware of a detail that was clarified some weeks later. The “contract starting at seventy-five dollars a week”—which she signed before the end of that month—gave Metro the right not to renew her employment after six months if they found her unsuitable; but if the company did choose to renew the deal, her salary would rise to one hundred dollars a week for the second half of the year. That was a respectable income (equal to over \$1,200 weekly in 2010), but there were no assurances of job security and there were many fine-print demands. Very quickly, snow in Kansas melted away in her memory.

¹ Depending on which public and family records are consulted, the surname is variously spelled Le Sueur or LeSueur (or even Le Seur). Lucille and her family used the first form, with the space.

² Later, Metro added dozens more to its long list of contract players, among them Gene Kelly, Jane Powell, Lana Turner, Judy Garland, Ava Gardner, Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy, Grace Kelly, Ann Miller, Esther Williams, June Allyson and Elizabeth Taylor.

³ Joan Crawford's adopted daughter Christina always insisted that Lucille Le Sueur was born in 1904, but that cannot be. Lucille's brother, Harold Hayes Le Sueur, was born on September 3, 1903—hence March 1904 would have been impossible as the birth date of the next baby. (The oldest Le Sueur offspring, named Daisy, was born and died before 1903)

⁴ This dance hall was still operating in 2009, as the Jack-o'-Lantern Ballroom, at Westport Road and Main Street, Kansas City.

CHAPTER TWO

The Flapper, Flapping

| 1925 |

LUCILLE FIRST CAME to Metro's offices on Monday, January 12, 1925, with two pair of sturdy dancing shoes for the day's assignment. But that week the studio had a surplus of dancers and plenty of what was called "background glamour." Producers were looking for new actors and new faces for new pictures. "I got panicky—I'd never thought about acting, but I realized, as I watched pictures being made, that I'd have to do more than dance if I ever got in front of a camera." Nevertheless, there she was, and she signed her contract on Friday, January 16—"a member of our stock company," as casting director R. B. McIntyre confirmed in a memo to Mayer, Thalberg, Rapf and the payroll clerks.

To compensate for the gaps in her professional preparation, Lucille spent many hours wandering around the Metro lot, wherever scenes were being rehearsed or filmed. She watched actors and spoke to those who gave her a moment of their time, and with her hundred-watt smile and Southern-accented charm, she put questions to cameramen, directors and every technician she could beguile into conversation. In the process, she established some lifelong friendships with, for example, the actors William Haines, Eleanor Boardman and Marion Davies, and another newcomer named Myrna Loy.

"From the day Lucille arrived in Hollywood," according to journalist Adele White Fletcher, who knew her for over a half century, "she worked ceaselessly towards becoming a star. Aware that her youthful plumpness would be exaggerated by the cameras, she jogged every morning before going to the studio—this in a day when no one but athletes had even heard of jogging!"

The newcomer was a quick study in every aspect of filmmaking; she may have lacked formal education, but she had a keen native intelligence. A studio writer, director and producer named Paul Bern noticed her; he was a cultivated German immigrant who quickly became a mentor and guide to Lucille, as he was to other young actors. Bern was known and admired perhaps especially because he made no demands (sexual or otherwise) on those for whom he was both a generous protector and an unofficial tutor.

John Arnold, who had photographed fifty-two films since 1914 and became the head of Metro's camera department, also took Lucille aside and showed her how, with the right makeup and eyeliner, she could significantly improve both her appearance and her chances of success. He also filmed a few brief scenes of Lucille alone, so that she could see what he meant. "I'm not saying I was good," she recalled. "I just wasn't impossible." But she was extremely self-critical about what she saw: "a big mouth" she didn't like, as well as "shoulders wider than John Wayne's, not much in the bosom area, and a lot of bones that showed. The only thing in my favor was my legs and my eyes." But over time and with the help of wardrobe designers, she learned to exploit for the best what she once regarded as

handicaps.

She also developed poise and confidence before the camera with the patient help of studio photographer Tommy Shugrue, employed by Metro to inundate newspapers and fan magazines with eye-catching photos of contract players, usually young women placed in situations and in attitudes that had nothing to do with any movie at all: the idea was simply to promote the studio and its roster. There were photos of Lucille and others at the seashore or walking a dog, or tossing a ball, or cheering a team of athletes.

When attractive young men invited Lucille out on a date, she accepted—but only if they went dancing, and only to a place frequented by columnists and photographers, for she knew she had to be seen in order to make an impression. “Everybody was on the make,” she said years later, “and I don’t mean just for bodies. The men you dated didn’t want you—they wanted to be seen with you and get noticed.” For her part, Lucille was winning dancing trophies by the dozen: before 1927, she had collected eighty-four silver cups for dancing the Charleston and the Shimmy.

BY THE END OF her first month at Metro, things had changed forever. Lucille was cast as the double for Norma Shearer in *Lady of the Night*, directed by Monta Bell. Shearer played two roles, and when both characters had to appear in a single shot, Lucille stepped in, back to the camera, to play one or the other. “I tried to watch everything Norma did, for she was the wonderful being, a star.”¹

Shearer made no secret that she had set her matrimonial sights on powerful Irving Thalberg, and Monta Bell made no secret that he had his keen eye set on Shearer. But he was no competition for the head of production, who had ordered that Norma was to be meticulously photographed. This Bell did—which was no easy task, for despite her beauty, Shearer was slightly cross-eyed, which challenged cinematographers.

Born in Montreal in 1902, Norma Shearer had already appeared in more than two dozen movies. Her parents were severely disabled emotionally, and her sister, Athole, spent more than forty years in an asylum until her death in 1985. Despite her achievements and favorable public image, Norma lived in dread of inheriting the familial tendency toward mental illness. Her brother, Douglas, however, was not only psychologically healthy, he was also a brilliant technician, and from the beginning of the talkies, he supervised Metro’s sound department for decades.

Following her affairs with directors Victor Fleming and Monta Bell, Norma had turned her attention to Thalberg, convinced he would be her ticket to better roles. For the present, however, Thalberg was pursuing actress Constance Talmadge.

On February 23, Metro released *Lady of the Night*—along with dozens of photographs of Lucille Le Sueur that were unrelated to the Shearer movie but added to the sexy but inoffensive image Mayer and Thalberg preferred their contract players to project. The publicity department began to receive some mail about the anonymous girl in the still photos, and one enterprising journalist learned that she had appeared without credit in the Shearer picture. With that, Mayer’s staff and the editors of *Movie Weekly* joined forces in a contest common in the world of movie publicity, from the earliest days through the 1950s. The plot

was simple, and this time it involved Lucille Le Sueur, whose name Mayer thought was the silliest and least pronounceable he had ever heard. And so the contest—"Name Her and Win \$1,000"—was announced on March 27, with the victor to be announced that summer.

DURING THE EARLY DAYS of the movie industry—for about twenty years, beginning in the early 1890s—very few actors were identified in the films that were unspooled in penny arcade nickelodeons and music halls. People worked anonymously in these "flickers," which were considered a form of entertainment for the lower classes, on a par with carnival sideshow. Performers with theater experience feared they would be denied future employment if it became known that they had appeared in these fake pantomimes, and so established stage actors like Sarah Bernhardt and the members of the Comédie-Française appeared only briefly in the early cinema. In addition, the first nickelodeon owners, worried that performers would demand higher salaries, were hesitant to promote them by name.

The first person credited in a movie was Florence Lawrence, a stageperformer since childhood who had worked for Thomas Edison's company from 1906 and later appeared in films under the direction of D. W. Griffith, one of the first directors to employ a kind of stock company of players (most notably, Lillian Gish). At the same time, a comic actor, director, writer and producer with the stage name Max Linder made a fortune in and for Pathé Frères in France.

By 1920, movies had become somewhat more respectable fare, and audiences, recognizing their favorite performers from picture to picture, wanted to know more about them. Producers saw financial advantages in creating and promoting certain players they so-called "stars," perhaps because they shone brightly in the darkness of movie theaters. Mary Pickford—"America's Sweetheart," forever photographed in outfits far too youthful for her age—was perhaps the first true American movie star; she had foreign counterparts like Francesca Bertini in Italy, Suzanne Grandais in France and Shotaro Hanayagi in Japan.

The so-called golden era of the studios—a period of twenty years, from the end of the First World War to the beginning of the Second—coincided with the fame, fortune and power of great movie stars, who became absolutely essential in promoting the products. (Directors, on the other hand, were mostly ignored, and for a very long time, few of them—with exceptions like Chaplin and De Mille—had any real clout; most were regarded as secondary to a movie's success.) It became clear with each passing season that neither talent, acting ability nor studio publicity had much to do with the creation of a star: that was the result of the public's need. The French philosopher Edgar Morin was on the mark when he wrote, "The imaginary life on the screen is the product of this genuine need for an anonymous life to enlarge itself to the dimensions of life in the movies; the star is its projection. People have always projected their desires and fears in images," and the movies are but the most recent sign of this (literary) projection.

Of course the studios had to recognize what audiences wanted, and they had to respond to this need. The conventional wisdom held that only the stars and producers turned movies into hits, and so Hollywood executives selected young people they felt the public liked and essentially created identities for them—even to the point of changing their names and insisting on certain patterns of conduct in their private lives. Archibald Leach, an acrobat

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