

JACK
KEROUAC'S
FORGOTTEN
FAMILIES
Jim Jones

USE
MY
NAME



USE MY NAME:

*Jack Kerouac's
Forgotten Families*

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Jack Kerouac's
Forgotten Families

J I M J O N E S



E C W P R E S S

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*To Tamara Goodrum, for love and
support throughout the 1990s*

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A stone called asbestos is not more unquenchable than the thirst of my paternity.

— Jack Kerouac in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, July 14, 1955

The judge promised that if Jack acknowledged her, he would only have to pay \$52 a month, the minimum amount of child support. Jack accepted the deal though he futilely tried to get into the record the fact that he was recognizing *her name* rather than her.

— Gerald Nicosia in *Memory Babe*

“Yes, man,” he said, washing his hands at the sink, “it’s a very good trick but awful on your kidneys and because you’re getting a little older now every time you do this eventually years of misery in your old age, awful kidney miseries for the days when you sit in parks.”

— Dean Moriarty to Sal Paradise in *On the Road*

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Despite the illusion that the author has created it, every book results from collaboration. In the case of the book that follows, this collaboration has been a source of great pleasure, at least for the author. I would like to acknowledge the following people, among many others, as collaborators:

For encouragement, Judith Moore, author of *Never Eat Your Heart Out*.

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Front cover and photo of Jan Kerouac on page 165, courtesy Jack Newsom; photos on pages 19, 22, 83, and 97, courtesy Jim Jones; photos on pages 25, 115, and 201, courtesy Sam Lines; photos on pages 58 and 187, courtesy Anne Rearick; photo on page 173, reprinted by permission of Sterling Lord Literistic, Inc., Copyright 1998, John Sampas, Literary Representative, The Estate of Jack and Stella Kerouac; photos on pages 64, 72, 95, and 104 were given to the author by Jan Kerouac, and the photographers are unknown.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In addition to the interviews, articles, and books cited in the text, I have relied heavily on personal correspondence and phone conversations with the people I write about in *Use My Name*. Ann Charters told me the story about her dog destroying the plants during her 1966 visit to Hyannis, and various and sundry members of the Kerouac network contributed other tidbits orally. I have freely used eight of the nine biographies of Jack Kerouac (Barry Miles's came out too recently for me to use) and *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940–1956* to cross-check facts and to try to keep the time line straight. Following the precedent of these biographies, I have also compared fact with fiction, as presented by Jack Kerouac in *The Town and the City* and *Vanity of Duluoz*. I prepared for and supplemented my interviews with Jan Kerouac by consulting articles on her in *Moody Street Irregulars* (6/7), *Kerouac and the Beats: A Primary Sourcebook*, and *The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America*, as well as newspaper articles and reviews of her novels too numerous to mention. Jan submitted only one author's questionnaire, under the name Jan Michele Hackett, which was published in *Contemporary Authors*. In preparing the chapter on Edie Parker, I consulted bits of her memoir published in *Kerouac and the Beats* and *To William S. Burroughs* (Ridgeway Press), as well as Shari Ballard-Krishnan's 1996 master's thesis at Central Michigan University, *Frankie Edith Parker: The First Beat Woman, A Call for Recognition*. I have a draft of Joan Haverty's unpublished memoir in my possession. Two anthologies of writing by Beat women have also appeared since I began work on this book.

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ONE

THE END OF THE LINE

On the first weekend of June 1996 I found myself thumbing through the section marked “legal documents” in my black box, the portable file in which I had kept information relating to Jan Kerouac for about a year and a half, ever since I began work on a biography of the only child of America’s most famous road novelist, about six months after she filed suit to gain a share of her father’s estate by questioning the validity of his mother’s will. Jan met Jack only twice, and when he died in 1969 at age forty-seven of the effects of alcoholism, he left everything to his mother, who survived him by just four years. After that, Jack Kerouac’s estate, valued at the time at about \$35,000, passed into the hands of his third wife, the former Stella Sampas. After Stella’s death in 1990 her share of the royalties from Jack’s novels, most of which have now come back into print, went to her surviving brothers and sisters, who elected one of their number to administer Jack’s estate, now reputedly worth some \$10 million. It was John Sampas, the youngest brother and administrator, who prompted my search for a copy of Jan’s will by informing me of her death.

The death itself came as only a mild surprise, because Jan had suffered end-stage renal failure in the summer of 1991, and the doctors told her then she had ten years at most to live. Still, I was shocked when the event made her prognosis a reality, saddened that I had not been able to reconcile with her after our falling-out, and struck by the irony that I had to learn the news from the man Jan had come to consider her mortal enemy. The obituary in the *Lowell Sun*, Jack’s hometown newspaper, said that Jan spent most of her last month alive in an Albuquerque hospital, and that doctors had removed her spleen the day before she died on

Wednesday, June 5, a painful end to a debilitating five years of semi-invalidism. I tried to remind myself that for all but those last five years, however, Jan had lived a full and carefree life, in many ways the mirror of her father's, as Dave Perry pointed out in the *Sun* obit.

I recalled my many long phone conversations with Jan during the few months of our association, when she would sometimes startle me by excusing herself to step outside to snap a photo of a particularly sumptuous New Mexico sunset, leaving me on the line to imagine her actions until she returned. Invariably, these always amusing and sometimes disturbing conversations ended with Jan's announcement, "Well, I'd better go now. It's time for my exchange." By exchange she meant her home dialysis, which she performed every six hours, come rain or come shine, by means of a peritoneal catheter implanted in her belly. I'd bid her goodnight by suggesting a topic for our next conversation, or asking if she could try to recall some forgotten detail of an event we had just discussed. More often than not, our next phone call began with her restored memory, although each memory merely served as a springboard to some other life experience. Like Jack's novels, Jan's tales often bounced around freely in time, as though the present were little more than a prompt to her memory. She was a marvelous storyteller, and like Jack, too, she was always at the center of her own tales.

Until 1990 Jan's life revolved around her eccentric mother, Joan Haverty, Jack Kerouac's second wife. As Jan frequently reiterated, her mother and she were soul mates, partners in a hard life that began for Jan on February 16, 1952, in Albany, New York. After about five years upstate, Jan went with her mother to New York City, where she grew up in haphazard fashion on the Lower East Side of the 1960s. Jan found sex early (in the form of a hundred boys she slept with, giving each one a number in sequence), drugs in great variety (she once ingested an unidentified white powder she found wrapped in tin foil lying on the sidewalk), and rock and roll only in her aspirations (she once cut a demo with two friends in hopes of making it as a girl group).

After one stay in Bellevue and another in a Bronx reformatory, aged 15 and pregnant by her drug-dealing ex-boyfriend, Jan fled

to Mexico in the company of a caring young man named John Lash, now a New Age writer. It was as a prelude to that trip that she and John went to visit her father in Massachusetts. Their only previous encounter had come on the day Jack was forced to appear in court to submit to a blood test in Joan's paternity suit against him. That was 1961; this was 1967. But Jack was too far into the throes of alcoholism and too much in denial about his responsibility for his child (although he did pay support for those six years — about fifty dollars a month) to respond to Jan during her brief visit. The best he could do, when she told him she and John were going to Mexico to write a novel, was to offer his proudest asset: "Yeah, go to Mexico and write a book," he told her. "You can use my name." With this scant help she departed for the border, like any refugee, looking for a better life, hoping to start a family, and perhaps find a career. Jan's novel, an adaptation, she told me, of *The Alexandria Quartet*, never got finished. The baby was stillborn. Within six months John Lash was forced literally to carry Jan back across the border into California. Nevertheless her life on the road, as Sal Paradise says in her father's most famous novel, had begun.

By the time John Sampas called me with the news of Jan's death, my relationship with her, at first cordial and enthusiastic, then tense and acrimonious, had finally grown cold. Our falling-out occurred quickly in the days following a lengthy visit I made to Jan's house in March 1995, which I timed to coincide with the anniversary of her father's birthday, the 12th. During that week in Albuquerque Jan allowed me to peruse her files for information about her past and for legal details of her lawsuit against the Sampas family. That is how I came to have a copy of her will. I made it the day before our fateful interview about Jan's brief stint as a prostitute, the interview that precipitated her decision to dismiss me as her biographer.

I told John about the copy — one she had given me expressed permission to make. He asked if I could recall any of its details, especially whom Jan had named as executor. The copy was in my office, and I hadn't looked at it for a year. The only thing I recalled was that Jan's half-brother, David Bowers, Joan Haverty's fourth child, was the primary beneficiary of her estate. Beyond that, I

couldn't say much, but I promised to fish the will out of my files and call him the next day.

John expressed his thanks in advance, as he always does when he asks a favor. "If you do this for me, Jim, I'll kiss your ass," he joked. I told him that wouldn't be necessary. Then he complained that he was tired after being on the phone all day. Before he rang off, however, I wanted to know if he would allow Jan to be buried with her grandparents and uncle, whom she had never known. "Sure, why not?" he responded. As it turned out, Jan's body was cremated, and on the first anniversary of her death, her ashes were interred next to Leo, Gabrielle, and Gerard, Jack Kerouac's parents and older brother, where they will lie together in that unlovely spot on the outskirts of Nashua, New Hampshire, for all eternity. As a footnote to this sad fact, John Sampas, who in his role as manager of the Kerouac estate had to approve the changes to the family monument, told me that the mortuary had misspelled the estranged granddaughter's name. Silently, he amended the anonymous "Jane" to read correctly.

Just a few months before her death, Jan had created a minor media splash by requesting of the cemetery board in Lowell, Massachusetts, her famous father's hometown, that his body be moved to Nashua as well, so he would rest with his parents and his saintly brother, rather than with his third wife, Stella, and her younger brother, Sebastian, Jack's first literary friend in high school. Newspaper editors responded to the news of Jan's requests with the inevitable bad puns: Kerouac's daughter wants to take her father's body on the road. Lurid things like that. A friend of mine from Lowell, faxing me the story, commented: "Is this Kerouac or Poe?" As the literary types there would be quick to point out, Poe is reputed to have stayed in the Old Worthen, the oldest tavern in a town well-stocked with both old buildings and taverns. Perhaps the master of the macabre was exercising his own kind of ironic influence on his literary descendants. And perhaps, when she complained about lacking the "psychic energy" to pursue her request after it was denied by the Lowell Cemetery Board, Jan intuited her own impending demise. Perhaps she wanted to be near her father in death, as she never was in life. In any case, irony of ironies, one of her cousins, who lives

in the area, found it necessary to request permission for her burial from John Sampas, the man whom Jan had so frequently vilified, a request he granted unhesitatingly with some grace.

That night I went to my office to retrieve the will, which I read carefully. As I explained to John the next day, qualifying my statements by reminding him that fifteen months had passed since I obtained the copy, Jan might have made a new will or at



Jim Jones and John Sampas at the Sampas family home, Lowell, MA, June 1995

least revised the old one. Nevertheless, I related the basics (which were subsequently confirmed as both accurate and current by an article in the *Los Angeles Times*) over the phone: David Bowers would share equally with Jan's first husband, John Lash, the substantial royalties from Jack Kerouac's many novels and books of poetry, most of which are currently in print, thanks to the most recent Kerouac and Beats revival — and to the marketing efforts of the Sampas family. Lash, who had met and befriended Jan when she was only fifteen, was named executor.

Then I read out an especially vicious paragraph pertinent to John: "I . . . particularly do not want any member of the Sampas family to inherit any of my estate or any part of it." I found this characteristic of Jan's antagonistic rhetoric: whenever she spoke of those who had legally inherited her father's estate, she lost all her native wit and charm. She began to sound like a hurt child, exactly as her father sounded when he thought his friends had betrayed him. The humanity of her antagonist was transformed into a demon. It seemed sad to me, who, like many people, have experienced this sort of thing in my own family. And I couldn't help thinking of something John Sampas told me when I first got to know him. He said that for years Jan's relationship with their family had been cordial, from the mid-1980s, when she first made her rightful legal claim to half the royalties from her father's books, many of which were just then coming up for copyright renewal, until 1993, when something — I myself am still not completely sure what — changed all that. But John still insists — and I believe him, though Jan's supporters would not, of course — that if she had asked, he would have given her a share of her father's estate, a share equal in value to his or his brothers' and sister's. He even claims to have invited her to come live with him in Lowell (an invitation which, from my experience, he's lucky she didn't accept). She might have got some relief that way from the ravages of the disease that killed her. She might have become, even at that late date, an honorary member of the large, intelligent, friendly clan of the Sampases.

Instead, Jan chose to file suit, though as Samuel Butler long ago observed, nothing is certain in the law but the expense. For Jan, however, the expense was minimized by a lawyer who agreed

to take her case on a contingency basis, apparently in prospect of winning forty percent of a third of Jack Kerouac's \$10-million estate. But she paid other costs. Some insiders, like the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, suggested that she was killing herself by fighting an unnecessary battle, that if she would simply make peace with the Sampas family, everything would be all right (to use a phrase from Kerouac's novels). Her father's meticulously kept archive — which was moved after Jack's death to a Sampas family home on Wilder Street in Lowell, where it occupied a room of its own — would find a safe haven, where fans could come worship the sacred relics and scholars could turn them into evidence for academic arguments.

But Jan chose the road of contention, struggle, and confrontation. In this she was aided and abetted by the most thorough of Kerouac's biographers, Gerry Nicosia, a small dynamo of a man with an excellent memory for facts, a strident voice, and a penchant for self-promotion and conspiracy theories. Indeed, as at least one British journalist has intuited, Jan's battle for partial control of her father's estate also became a battle between two biographers, Nicosia and Ann Charters, the first and most popular of Kerouac's nine chroniclers, who is now favored by the Sampases for such duties as the editing of Kerouac's *Selected Letters*, the first volume of which was published about the same time Jan and I had our falling-out.

Biography is crucial to the understanding of an autobiographical novelist, whether it be Jack Kerouac or Jan Kerouac — and Jack has been the subject of no less than nine biographies in less than thirty years since his death. These two biographers, I would add, also represent regions, and part of the intellectual momentum of the dispute over Jack Kerouac's estate results from the antagonism between East and West coasts, a literary version of the question of Kerouac's final resting place: should it be the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library or UC-Berkeley's Bancroft Library's rare books division? Put in these terms, Jan's lawsuit asks, "Who will own Jack Kerouac's reputation, East or West?" Clearly, Gerry (and therefore Jan), who lives in Marin County, favors the latter, while John Sampas (and therefore Ann Charters), who still lives in the old family home on Stevens Street



Gerald Nicosia at the New York University conference on the writings of Jack Kerouac, Washington Square Park, June 1995

in Lowell, favors the former. In fact, the Berg has been building its Kerouac collection for many years, and some of Kerouac's archive is already on deposit — if not display — there.

But aside from the inflated issue of whether Kerouac's papers should all be gathered in the same location, Jan's lawsuit gave her a reason to live. I don't for a minute believe that starting it was her idea, however. Her mind didn't work that way. While I was in Jan's good graces, she admitted to me that she had no comprehension of the legal matters she had involved herself in. She knew only what her lawyers explained to her and, I expect, said publicly only what Gerry coached her to say. Not that Jan

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