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# He Honored Death, Too: The Subterranean Life of Jack Kerouac

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He Honored Death, Too: The Subterranean Life of Jack Kerouac

by

Christopher Wayne

An Abstract of a Thesis  
in  
History

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

December 2012

State University of New York  
College at Buffalo  
Department of History and Social Studies Education

## Abstract of Thesis

Regarded as the founder of the Beat Generation, Jack Kerouac is upheld as a symbol of post-war freedom and opportunity in America, a precursor of the cultural shift of the 1960s. This paper is an exploration of the lesser known traits of Kerouac: qualities that are in conflict with the persona that is most closely associated with the author. The thesis begins with an examination of Kerouac's childhood in Lowell, Massachusetts, and his exposure to those traits he adopted in adulthood, and chronicles events in his life that display his subversive character. The main argument of the thesis is that Jack Kerouac is not the embodiment of independence and post-war freedom with which he is often associated. He is, rather, a reflection of his small-town, rural upbringing in Lowell, as opposed to the emblem of carefree youth and counterculture he projected in his prose and poetry.

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## Prologue: The Dharma Bums

It was an unassuming conversation between friends in a bar that labeled a generation of those who felt used and worn down. In post-World War II America, there was a new optimism and rejuvenated spirit that had not been experienced since before the Great Depression. A belief that good had triumphed evil presided over the country, and many people who had spent the majority of the past two decades fearful about the future now relished the new optimism that presented itself in the mid-1940's.

What about those who survived through those tumultuous years only to feel fatigued, rather than rejuvenated? What about those who saw friends and family leave for overseas, never to return home, or those who experienced the depravity of economic hardship, but had not been rewarded for their consummate hard work? In an era that had, arguably, seen the greatest hardship of any American generation, the greatest sacrifice of any American generation - there was an absence felt; perhaps it was a loss of innocence.<sup>1</sup>

This was the topic on the minds of John Clellon Holmes and Jack Kerouac as they reminisced about their own generation over pints of beer in Greenwich Village in 1948. They spoke about Ernest Hemingway's *Lost Generation* as a

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Morgan, *The Typewriter Is Holy: The Complete Uncensored History of the Beat Generation* (New York: Free Press), 37.

comparison to their own times, but felt that that title was not accurate enough to describe their own lives. They spoke of the Red Scare, censorship, and the pressure to conform to the stereotypical model of post-war America. Kerouac exclaimed that a more accurate title would be the *Beat Generation*, and Holmes agreed.

If these youths were worn down and repressed by their surroundings, what did they identify themselves with, and how did they rebel? For Allen Ginsberg, rebellion came with wild, raw, and vulgar poetry that challenged censorship in America. In his magnum opus *Howl for Carl Solomon*, Ginsberg drew inspiration from his time spent in a mental institution to create poetry that discussed taboo issues of drug use and homosexuality.<sup>2</sup> Ginsberg responded to a cultural repression with unique prose and candid language, while pursuing unconventional topics.

While poets like Ginsberg used their words to rebel against what they deemed an oppressive government and conformist society, William Burroughs used his actions to speak for him. A Harvard educated man from St. Louis, Burroughs did not face the economic struggles and hardship that many of his contemporaries encountered growing up. Best known for his novels *Junkie* and *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs spent much of his life addicted to drugs, and detailed his experimentation and the subculture of an addict, in the two novels. By

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Morgan, *The Typewriter Is Holy: The Complete Uncensored History of the Beat Generation* (New York: Free Press), 47.

detailing his own adventures as a heroin addict and a subterranean life that was seldom recognized by the average American, his drug use raised suspicion by the government. In rebellion, Burroughs spent the next twenty five years globetrotting while waiting for the statute of limitations to run out on his various drug-related offenses. In 1951, he was arrested for the murder of his wife, Jane Vollmer, but spent only thirteen days in jail after the crime was ruled accidental because the murder was committed in a “William Tell” stunt that both Burroughs and his wife willingly participated in.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the least recognized, but most influential member of the Beat Generation was Neal Cassady. Spending much of his youth in reform schools for petty crimes, Cassady is unique in that he did not contribute any literature to the Beat Generation. What Cassady served as, however, was the archetype model that became the quintessential character associated with Beat writings. His mischievous and brash youth continued to adulthood when Cassady served as a transporter for Burroughs’ marijuana crops in Mexico to eagerly waiting recipients in San Francisco. The epitome of reckless behavior and the essence of adventure, Cassady experimented with drugs, homosexuality and bigamy.<sup>4</sup>

Cassady also represented the impermanence and spontaneity that that are so closely associated with the Beat Generation. He married and divorced

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<sup>3</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 355.

<sup>4</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 120-121.

repeatedly, held a multitude of jobs, and crisscrossed the country seeking thrills that were so inspiring to his contemporaries, that he influenced the greatest works of the era.

Despite getting relatively no artistic accolades or recognition for his role among the Beats, Cassady is acknowledged in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and John Clellon Holmes' pioneering novel *Go*. Allen Ginsberg acknowledges him in *Howl* by saying "N.C., secret hero of these poems...". Cassady also served as the main character in Kerouac's most acclaimed work, *On The Road*. Trans-generational, Cassady adapted to the hippie lifestyle and California counter-culture in the 1960's; he was mentioned in Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels* as a "worldly inspiration".<sup>5</sup>

What is distinctive about Jack Kerouac? What is uniquely *Beat* about the man who *created* the concept of *Beat* for his social circle (although Holmes was the first to ever use it in print). What uniqueness and nonconformity did Kerouac possess that highlighted his individuality? He is regularly given titles such as "Father of the Beats", or "King of the Beats". These are latter-day tags, however. They belong to book titles and retrospective articles.<sup>6</sup>

While living, Kerouac sold the rights to publish *On The Road* for \$1000 and, in the mid-1960s, was earning sixty five dollars a week in residuals from all

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<sup>5</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 423.

of his works combined. By the time of his death in 1969, most of his writings were out of print.<sup>7</sup>

Despite Kerouac's works being autobiographical, they fall under the category of "fiction" primarily because he switched publishers so often that he could not transfer names from one book to another. At other times, he feared lawsuits for unflattering portrayals of his friends.<sup>8</sup>

As an adult, he experimented with drugs; but they were mostly over-the-counter pharmaceuticals that didn't consume his work and life, the way it had Burroughs'.

Sporadically, Kerouac would publish his poetry and show a personal, softer side to the lonely wanderer most readers felt they knew best. At the time of his death, he left unpublished books, poetry, stories of adventure, and correspondence that help us better recognize the makeup of a man who epitomized post-World War Americana and youth. However, these contributions were infrequent, and Kerouac never considered himself a poet like Ginsberg. For a period of time in adulthood, he spent time travelling, but often did so to visit friends like William Burroughs in Mexico City, and Neal Cassady in Denver and San Francisco.

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Buccaneer Books, 1958), iv.

<sup>8</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 6.

Yet, over time, Jack Kerouac was posthumously given an identity. His seminal novel, *On The Road*, started to gain favor among youth in the 1960s - - a time when Kerouac rarely wrote, and disassociated himself with a counterculture he didn't want compared to his own. Mixing free-spirited exploration with romanticism and spirituality, *On The Road* inspired scores of young Americans to begin their own journey and self-discovery. The re-popularization of the novel also brought attention to, and breathed new life into, Kerouac's then out-of-print works.

Similar to *On The Road*, *The Subterraneans* highlights the youthful impulsiveness, living for the moment, and a rebellion to cultural norms, by narrating the story of an interracial relationship. Kerouac's reputation is built, not only on the subjects his novels address, but also the characters he represents in each of his works.

Sensitivity and romanticism radiate off the pages of such works as *The Town and The City* and *Book of Dreams*. His identity as a voyager is repeated throughout *The Sea Is My Brother*, *Lonesome Traveler*, and *The Dharma Bums*, while his spiritual, compassionate personality is displayed in *Visions of Gerard*, *Big Sur*, and *Doctor Sax*.

In his writings, Kerouac portrayed himself as a courageous, free-wheeling romantic - an identity that had been shaped from his first novel, *The Town and The City*, a romanticized work that is based on his childhood in rural New England. This work stands out from Kerouac's other novels, particularly because

it is one of the few that address his youth and upbringing, and doesn't follow the spontaneous-prose style of writing for which he is known. *The Town and The City* also recreates Kerouac's transformation to a roaming gadabout, seeking new adventures in the seedy underbelly of city life, coupled with the unpredictability of a nomadic lifestyle that Kerouac is most closely associated with.

Is Kerouac's reputation accurate, or is the public perception of this "rucksack wanderer" mistakenly assumed through the identities of the contemporaries he wrote about in his works?<sup>9</sup> Is he an open-minded, independent, antihero as he portrays himself repeatedly throughout his literary career, or has history upheld an inaccurate depiction of the author, rather than cast a pall on the actual life of a revered literary figure?

Previous biographies have detailed the lesser-known aspects of Kerouac's life, but fail to focus on the dichotomy of Kerouac's public persona and his contrasting private one. In *Jack's Book*, Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee tell the story of Jack through the words of those who were closest to him. The biography is a compilation of stories that ask friends and family to remember events and conversations that happened years, sometimes decades prior, without pressing for intimate details. The book gives a general history of Kerouac, but fails to

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<sup>9</sup> Edie Parker-Kerouac, *You'll Be Okay* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2007), 105.

detail any one aspect of his life; as the authors write “The idea of this book is to provide framework for a first or fresh reading of Kerouac...”<sup>10</sup>

In *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America*, author Dennis McNally examines the life of Kerouac and his association with the Beat Generation as it fits into American history. He writes of the Beats, “Their art and their lives are dramatic reflections of the historical changes of the United States in the period following World War II, and it is to that end that I undertook this labor, working more as an historian than as a literary critic.”<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats, A Portrait*, author Barry Miles examines “Kerouac as an icon, to find what it was that caused this shy, nervous, troubled young man, who could not even drive a car, to become a cultural icon, the epitome of fifties cool...”<sup>12</sup> This thesis differs from both McNally and Miles is that the two authors examine Kerouac’s life in the context of American history and pop culture, rather than comparing the different identities of Jack’s personal and private life.

Ann Charters initially began gathering information for a comprehensive bibliography on Kerouac’s works while the author was still alive. Charters had a working relationship with Jack, as well as access to his personal

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<sup>10</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack’s Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), iv.

<sup>11</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), i.

<sup>12</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), xvi.

documents. Despite the two being acquaintances, Charters did not get the inspiration to write a biography until 1971- two years after Kerouac's death. Her seminal work on the Beat icon, *Kerouac*, mostly details the adult life of Jack, lending only a dozen pages to the time of Jack's birth to his college years, and is instead a traditional biographical narrative rather than having a specific focus.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, in *Memory Babe*, author Gerald Nicosia writes a comprehensive biography on Kerouac with the benefit of historical context, as well as newly discovered sources in the decade after Charters released *Kerouac*. Despite a broad narrative of Kerouac's life, including his childhood and adolescence, Nicosia writes *Memory Babe* as a tribute, rather than a critical assessment, and claims that there is a "false cleanness" to any biography.<sup>14</sup>

Most critically assessing the life of Kerouac is Ellis Amburn. His book, *Subterranean Kerouac* examines his relationship with Jack from 1964-1969, and details the lesser-known traits of the Beat author. Specifically, *Subterranean Kerouac* divulges information of Jack's life directly affected by alcoholism and its impact on his novels. While the topics of homosexuality, homophobia, and racism are discussed in Amburn's biography, his attention is given to Jack's battle with alcohol with the intent of showing "The devastating effect of alcoholic insanity."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), i.

My intent with this thesis is to examine the private life of Jack Kerouac and the disparities to the characteristics that are closely associated with his public persona by examining his novels, autobiographical works, personal correspondences, and biographies. I also explore the foundations of his sometimes deplorable, often offensive behavior, to lend context and possible understanding of the sources of his actual life and behavior.

## Chapter One: The Town

He was baptized Jean Louis Kirouac, but the author better known as “Jack” claims to remember with great vividness the day of his birth. As an adult, he would go on telling friends, and new acquaintances alike, about March 12, 1922. He told how the Merrimack River glistened by the light that entered the Pawtucketville bedroom where his mother gave birth at their family home at precisely five-thirty in the afternoon. He would wax poetic about the ice melting off the rocks in the springtime air and the ornate lace that decorated his bedroom as he was welcomed by the gathered family that day.<sup>16 17</sup>

The sense of pride that Jack lived with being a Kerouac didn't extend to everyone. The priest who baptized him spelled his name incorrectly on his birth certificate.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his life, however, Jack's ancestral imagination ran wild. He would regale people with stories about how his family was related to Napoleon Bonaparte, or how he had direct lineage to Pope Pius VI. In his later

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<sup>16</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 21.

years, he would claim that he had traced his lineage far enough back that he knew his ancestors had lived in Persia in the same clan as the Buddha!<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps he used his vivid imagination to escape the actual life he was born into - devoid of royalty or spiritual leaders. Jack was born to French-Canadian immigrants, Joseph Leon Kirouack (Leo, as he was known to his family) and Gabrielle Ange Lévesque, in the sleepy, working-class mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts.<sup>20</sup>

Proud of their Québécois heritage, French was the primary language spoken in the Kerouac household and was, in fact, Jack's first language. Even at age 18, Jack's comprehension of the English language has been described as "haltingly, not fluently". However, the Québécois Jack grew up with didn't hinder the young writer's confidence or ability to form prose. Instead, it distinguished his writing from his peers because he modified the English language to suit the "French images" in his head. He wrote, later in his life, to literary comrade William S. Burroughs that, by the age of eighteen, he had written more than one million words.

The patriarch of the Kerouac home and a printer by trade, Leo Kerouac was a very popular man in the community.<sup>21</sup> He was easily identified around

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<sup>19</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 22.

<sup>20</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 23.

<sup>21</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 7.

town because of his short, overweight frame, and verbose and zealous personality. Leo had colorful side jobs - everything from reviewing local theatre productions in the town newspaper, *Spotlight*, to occasionally managing and promoting local wrestling and boxing matches.<sup>22</sup> For a time he sold insurance, a job Gabrielle hoped Jack would have when he later moved to New York.<sup>23</sup> Leo's constant profession, however, remained in the printing business. The shop he owned was, in fact, the busiest one in Lowell but, because of his love of horse racing and poker games, Leo often came home with barely enough money to pay the bills.

He was also a man who was typically ensconced by a cloud of cigar smoke wherever he went, and often liked to drink to excess,<sup>24</sup> a trait he inherited from his father (who would make "whiskey blanc" [vodka] out of potato peels from the family farm), and one he would undoubtedly pass on to Jack.<sup>25</sup> Leo's relative, Cecile Plaud, would recall that once Leo started drinking, it would often escalate his emotions enough to where he would end up "breaking the furniture, in uncontrollable fury."<sup>26</sup> Jack would highlight some of his father's drunken combativeness in his writings: *Visions of Gerard*, where the character "Emil

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<sup>22</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>24</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 8.

Duluoz”, modeled after his father, engages in a verbal confrontation with “Ange Duluoz”, the character that represents Jack’s mother. Ange begins:

“They always told me not to marry you, you were a drunkard at sixteen----- sixteen?!! I bet you was drunk as a hoot-owl at 15, 14-----You’re not the man I married but dammit the reason for that is because you were puttin up a front when I married you, crook-----“. Emil responds with equal hostility saying: “Aw shut ya big ga dam mouth, it’s only good for blagues-----I gave you your money, I’m goin to work, I’ll be gone all night, you oughta be satisfied, ya cow-----”.<sup>27</sup>

Gabrielle Ange Kerouac, or as Jack referred to her throughout his life- *memere*<sup>\*</sup>, lived a life of simplicity and religious devotion that reflected the Lowell community more so than that of her husband. Made an orphan in her early teens by the death of her parents (sources differ whether Gabrielle was 14 or 16)<sup>28</sup>, memere soon found work in a shoe factory, spending her days behind a skiving machine which permanently dyed her fingers black from handling the warm shoe leather. Shortly after she and Leo met in 1915, they married. Memere wasn’t struck by any sort of romanticism but, rather, she thought that with Leo’s successful printing business, she would be saved from a lifetime of working in factories.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1960), 81.

<sup>28</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 8.

A devout Roman Catholic, memere wasn't atypical from the average American. She did, however, become increasingly devout during the contraction of an inflammatory disease, leading subsequent death of her first-born son, Gerard. Soon, memere was praying and lighting candles at the neighborhood church on a daily basis, and chastising others, including Leo, for sinful behavior. She looked forward to the day when she would meet her cherished Gerard in the afterlife. Her faith wasn't, however, shared by all members of the Kerouac family. Leo regarded the church as a money making institution- one that he wouldn't be contributing to. He was also irritated that the priest would lecture the mill-working parishioners on how they were better served by the more hours they worked, leaving them less time to sin. Leo would tell friends and neighbors, "That son of a bitch is not working two hours a week- the hell with him!", referring to the priest. Even when Gabrielle tried to get a priest to visit the Kerouac home and counsel Leo on his relationship with the Lord, Leo told the priest to "Get lost!" in front of the neighbors.<sup>30</sup>

Sharing the shabby Centralville duplex with Jack and his parents was older brother Gerard. A source of both adoration and detestation for Jack, Gerard was likened to a religious figure within the Kerouac household. In adulthood, Jack recalls memories of his older brother and the presence he had to friend Ron Lowe: "I swear to God, small birds would even land on Gerard's

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<sup>30</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 24-25.

outstretched hands as he stood at the window.”<sup>31</sup> Stricken with rheumatic fever, Gerard received much more of memere’s attention than Jack. Jack’s views of Gerard, however, vary greatly. Jack recounts stories of lying in his crib during the night (being able to recall such unusual events earned him the nickname “memory babe” from childhood friend, Scotty Beaulieu) as Gerard came up to him looking “implacable”. He later wrote to friend Neal Cassady that he was positive that Gerard was “intent on me with hate”.

In 1926, Jack was four and Gerard had turned nine. The already-frail Gerard had taken a turn for the worse, and the usual paleness and rail-like figure that he represented had now been reduced to a purple-skinned bedridden disarray of a child thrashing in pain, screaming in agony before ultimately choking to death on his own blood.<sup>32</sup> The doctor diagnosed the specific cause of death as “Purpua Hemorragica”. The untimely tragedy of an already admired Catholic school boy had been elevated, not only by a premature death, but by the circumstances surrounding Gerard in his final days. According to Jack, on the last day Gerard was healthy enough to attend school, he had unexpectedly fallen asleep at his desk. When he awoke to priests and nuns surrounding him, he had claimed to see a vision of the Virgin Mary appear before him, held afloat by thousands of bluebirds, and being led away into the heavens in a little wagon pulled by two lambs. He purportedly claimed to the clergy that none of them

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<sup>31</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>32</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 13.

should be afraid of anything, because we are all already in heaven. "All is well, practice kindness. Heaven is nigh.", he reportedly concluded.<sup>33</sup>

This significant loss in the Kerouac family had several impacts. For young Jack (or *TiJean*\* as he was regularly referred to by memere), a mentor, a confidante, and someone Jack cherished, was now gone. At the age of four, Jack lost someone who he sought to replace, time and time again, with other males throughout his life, never quite finding the uniqueness a relationship with a brother carried. Of all his writings, *Visions of Gerard*, an autobiographical memoir of the two young boys, would be the author's personal favorite.

For memere, the tragedy of losing a son brought on tremendous sorrow and grieving, and with it, a struggle to cope with seeing one less family member - a daily recurrence that didn't help a woman who already had a predisposed family history of alcoholism. With the loss of a son, the pampering and coddling of Ti Jean began. In a household where Jack and Gerard once competed for the attention of memere, Jack now relished the constant attention he was receiving.

Strangely enigmatic about the Kerouac brothers' short-lived relationship, is the way in which Jack so fondly describes his brother - even with incestual overtones. In Jack's novel, *Visions of Gerard*, in which the two boys spend much time together, the elder brother teaches the younger the importance of caring for all creatures, he writes that Gerard's breath had the scent of "crushed flowers",

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<sup>33</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 13.  
\*Québécois, meaning "Little Jack".

“His lips tsk tsk and pout-----Kissable Gerard, to kiss him and that pout of pain must have been as soft a sin as kissing a lamb in the belly or an angel in her wing.”<sup>3435</sup> An eerie comparison, not unlike Gerard’s pre-death vision.

Gerard taught Jack to be compassionate to weaker creatures, Jack recalls. The two would spend time together feeding birds and rabbits, saving a mouse from a trap (only to see it eaten by the family cat), and watching kittens sip milk from saucers.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the economic depression in America during that time, the Kerouac family lived relatively well by the economic standards of the time. Leo’s printing business survived through the Depression and he brought home an adequate income for the family (not withstanding his gambling losses). While countless American families were relying on bread and soup for supper, memere would prepare hamburgers, porkchops, or porkball stew, followed regularly by peach cake or date pie topped with whipped cream for dessert.

Jack remembered growing up a somewhat unhappy child. He had the usual hobbies that a young boy might have - listening to music, hanging out and playing sports with neighborhood friends. Still, he was possessed by a seething undercurrent of unhappiness that he suspected came from the death of his

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<sup>34</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 107.

<sup>36</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 12.

brother. Feeling he was emerging from the gloom that shadowed him, by the time he was an adolescent Jack suddenly became more outgoing and optimistic, even in the face of the stark realization of mortality and earthly impermanence.

While walking across a bridge on a summer evening in 1934, twelve year-old Jack saw a man carrying a watermelon drop dead in front of him. This unusual occurrence conjured up memories of the untimely death of Gerard, and Jack became overwhelmed with grief as his eyes followed the man as he rolled over the bridge into the Merrimack River below. That night, a terrified Jack climbed into bed with his mother (who slept separately from Leo) and spent the first of many nights sleeping in bed with her, calmed and comforted by her presence.

The death of Gerard was emotionally taxing on the Kerouacs, and for the family who had a history of alcoholism on both sides, the disease was exacerbated. Jack had grown up around alcohol, surely much more than the average child. It wasn't uncommon for Jack to look up into the stands at one of his football games and see his mother and father cheering him on - his mother waving a flag in excitement, while Leo would be finishing off a quart of whiskey.<sup>37</sup>

Jack's first experience with alcohol came in 1938 at Thanksgiving dinner. That fall evening at the dinner table, Leo, drunk as usual, insisted that Jack, who was sixteen at the time, take a drink. Throughout the meal and the rest of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 39.

night, Leo repeatedly pushed wine on his son and, at one point, stuck his cigar into Jack's mouth and told him to start "acting like a man."<sup>38</sup>

This wouldn't be the last time that a young, teenage Jack would share alcohol with his father. As the Kerouacs became downwardly mobile, and moved repeatedly around Lowell and the New England area (a combined result of Leo squandering away family funds and the continuing depression), Jack, Leo, and memere packed up and left for New Haven, Connecticut - while riding in the moving van, they all shared a bottle of whiskey.<sup>39</sup>

Even while his father was alive, Jack seemed to be perceptively aware of the effects of alcoholism and its costs. In *Une Veille de Noel*, a short story Jack wrote while a teenager at Horace Mann Prep School, he describes a scene in a Greenwich Village bar where a group of young men are drinking alongside a middle-aged alcoholic who has wasted his life and pushed his family away because of his drinking habits. Suddenly, the door swings open and a stranger appears who depicts the earthly representation of Jesus Christ. When the bartender asks what he'll have, he replies "I don't drink." When hearing this, the young patrons put aside their beverages, pay their tab, and leave promptly, while the aging drunk's son, Joey, arrives to take him home. Even as a teenager, the essence of Kerouac is evident: alcohol and spirituality are identified, and it

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<sup>38</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 38.

<sup>39</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 88.

appears that he was astutely aware of each of their consequences.<sup>40</sup> However, there were corruptions other than alcohol that Jack carried on through his youth and into adulthood.

Jack's struggle to identify his own sexuality can be traced to when he was a child, he claims. In personal letters to his close friend and muse, Neal Cassady, Jack writes about playing with children in his neighborhood and seemingly understands sexuality at the age of five. In his letters, he writes about playing with five year old twin boys in the neighborhood, Ovilia and Robert, and their games of exposing their penises and pretending to urinate, but actually just being curious about sexuality. The voyeurism Kerouac describes in personal letters of these encounters was a "masturbatory world" leading him to a lifelong fear of being gay, he confesses.

In *Maggie Cassidy*, Kerouac writes that as a teen, he would stare in "amazement" as a childhood friend would show off his penis and proceed to "challenge any man to have a bigger one than he had and show how he could shove seven or eight or nine or ten quarters off a table with his piece."<sup>41</sup> In *Dr. Sax*, Kerouac depicts himself and his buddies and having a "homosexual ball", and describes times of hanging around a mentally handicapped 19 year-old named Zaza, who would masturbate repeatedly at the request of Kerouac and

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<sup>40</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 49.

<sup>41</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Maggie Cassidy* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1993), 133.

his friends, as well as “spermatzoing in all directions, jacking off dogs and worst of all sucking off dogs”<sup>42 43</sup>

As sexually precarious as his youth may have appeared, Jack was a well-rounded young man throughout his teenage years, excelling in academics as well as sports. He was a standout athlete in baseball, track, and football during high-school. Several possibilities lay ahead for Jack as he became conflicted with his small town roots and the lure of a big city. As recognized in his first novel *The Town and The City*, there was an internal clash between the familiarity of his Lowell community, with its family-centric lifestyle, and the wonder and endless possibilities an adventurous life a big city could provide.

During his senior year of high school at age sixteen, he fell in love with a young, stunning Irish girl named Mary Carney. Mary asked Jack to disregard college and give up his dreams of being a writer, but, despite being in love with Mary, it was a sacrifice he could not make. Years later, in a letter to John Clellon Homes, he revealed his dashed dreams of leading a simple life- making Mary his wife, settling down, and working as a brakeman for the railroad. He went on in the letter, describing friend Neal Cassady as an “asshole” for leading him to a nomadic lifestyle and encouraging “sexfiend” behavior. Jack and Mary’s

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<sup>42</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Dr. Sax* (New York: Buccaneer Books, 1959), 66-67.

<sup>43</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 20.

relationship didn't endure and, against Mary's wishes, Jack went off to school in Manhattan with aspirations of becoming a successful football player and writer.

## Chapter Two: The City

Jack's athletic skills garnered him a football scholarship to Columbia University in New York City, where he played as a halfback. While there, Kerouac became a popular underclassman and had no trouble finding women who adored him. In his freshman year, Jack had become relatively famous around campus for a big game he had against Rutgers, and an equally attention-grabbing leg injury, which he propped up like a badge of courage while resting in the student lounge. Jack's football-ending injury afforded him spare time, which allowed him to explore New York's streets, and experience the bohemian lifestyle of which he dreamt. Later that year he ran for and won vice-presidency of Columbia's student government.<sup>44</sup>

In a 1965 letter to his friend Seymour Krim, Jack boasted that, during the "war years" (which included his time at Columbia), his total amount of female conquests totaled two hundred and fifty; a seemingly insatiable appetite for women, if true. However, in a letter to friend and Columbia classmate, Cornelius Murphy, Jack refers to his female companions as mere "wenches", and says that nothing could be compared to the "glory" of male camaraderie. In the same

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<sup>44</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 54.

letter, he professes that he prefers the love of men than that of a woman's, but dismisses the notion of any physical sexual interest in males.

Kerouac spent much of his life running from the prospect of homosexuality that he encountered as a five year old. While at Columbia in the early 1940s, he and fellow football players were drinking in Greenwich Village and saw a meek man carrying a violin. Assuming he was gay, they accosted the man, who happened to be heterosexual, and proceeded to beat him brutally and bludgeon him with the violin he was carrying.<sup>45</sup>

Lending insight to such behavior, author Warren French expressed that Jack "lacked the courage to resolve his emotional problems heroically. He didn't have the guts to be gay and hated himself for it."<sup>46</sup> While French's assertions may be valid, they should be put in context for the post-war era Jack was living in. Homosexuality in Kerouac's lifetime was not only taboo, it was considered a mental illness and was treated with remedies such as psychotropic medications and electro-convulsive therapy.<sup>47</sup> The dichotomy of Kerouac's actions leaves readers and researchers perplexed. Biographers have classified Kerouac as "the least enviable of human anomalies, the homophobic homoerotic".<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 54.

<sup>46</sup> Warren French, *Jack Kerouac* (Michigan: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 125.

<sup>47</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 42.

<sup>48</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 54.

Jack had been living in New York City for a couple of years when his childhood friend from Lowell, Sebastian Sampas (Sammy, as Jack called him) came to visit him. Early in Sammy's visit, Jack took him around the city to sightsee and walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. At night, however, Sammy hardly recognized his childhood friend from Lowell. Jack spent the nights with his friend hopping from bar to bar. Sammy was appalled by the amount of alcohol Jack was drinking. Not used to this kind of lifestyle, Sammy pleaded with Jack to return home to get some sleep, but Jack insisted that a writer must "experience life in all its phases". The phases Jack was referring to reportedly included smoking marijuana and having sex with both men and women repeatedly, over the days that Sammy visited. Sammy was disgusted by all of the "kinky" things Jack was doing.<sup>49</sup>

It shouldn't have been a surprise that Sammy was appalled by Jack's behavior and didn't understand the Manhattan bohemian lifestyle that he was living. Growing up in Lowell, nobody was suspicious of Jack's bisexuality. It was known that he loved to hug other men and occasionally kiss them. The locals expected it- he was a Frenchman! He was also a star running back on his school's football team, so he looked and acted nothing like Lowell's one known homosexual, who was referred to around town as "the queer".<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 101-102.

<sup>50</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 122.

To his New York friends, Jack's behavior was less surprising. His general affection towards homosexuals (although not outright gay), led to suspicions from then-girlfriend Edie Parker, and other women he associated himself with, that he was, at the very least, bisexual.<sup>51</sup> At times, Jack would switch between lamenting the "big old fags" around New York that he found himself disgusted by and, conversely, how much he loved the attention of the gay poets and elegant "high-teacup queens" that flattered him.<sup>52</sup>

With spare time away from the football field, Jack was also able to focus on his academics and meet like-minded intellectuals, such as Allen Ginsberg, who summed up his first impression of meeting Jack as "Being awed by him and amazed by him, because I'd never met a big jock who was sensitive and intelligent about poetry".

In January of 1944, while on winter break at Columbia University, anxious to meet a "real writer", Allen was directed by friend and schoolmate Lucien Carr, to visit Jack at his home. When Allen arrived, he found Jack in his parlor, sitting in chino pants and a white t-shirt waiting for his wife Edie to make him breakfast. Allen recalls: "I was a little scared of him, he was a big strong intelligent-looking football player merchant seaman and I was kind of a ninety-pound weakling New Jersey Jewish intellectual freshman at Columbia." Jack recalls the awkwardness

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<sup>51</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 117.

<sup>52</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 493.

of young Allen coming into his home, and his sheepish appearance: "In walks Ginsberg, sixteen years old, a freshman, with his ears sticking out at the time. The first thing he says to me was 'Discretion is the better part of valor'."<sup>53</sup>

Despite his public disapproval of homosexuality, Jack was personally enamored with Allen Ginsberg when Allen was an impressionable seventeen-year-old freshman at Columbia. Jack, the quintessential American-jock, seemed like an unlikely person to befriend the bespectacled, delicate, Jewish boy from metropolitan New Jersey.<sup>54</sup>

At the time, Jack's childhood friend, Sebastian Sampas was in combat in Europe and Africa during World War II, when in March of 1944 Jack found out that Sampas had lost his life while in a hospital in Algiers. Devastated, Jack wrote a letter to his dead friend, writing in both English and French, and mad with grief. In some ways, the timing of Allen coming into Jack's life was impeccable. The young, energetic Allen was not only a staunch supporter of Jack's writing and unusual style of prose, but he also saw Jack as a kindred spirit with like-minded views of life, death, and spirituality. Jack told friend Al Aronowitz in 1959,

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<sup>53</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 50.

<sup>54</sup> Matt Thedo, *Understanding Jack Kerouac* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 16.

that “I always had a friend like Allen. In Lowell I had a friend called Sebastian who was just like him...”<sup>55</sup>

Deciding to spend his days at home listening to Beethoven and writing poetry to his girlfriend Edie Parker, Jack neglected his academics and athletics at Columbia, eventually dropping out entirely.<sup>56</sup> On October 18<sup>th</sup>, 1944, Jack boarded the SS *Robert Treat Paine*, to be a seaman and explore the world. Jack was less focused on serving his country and more interested in travelling the world and gathering inspiration for future novels. Shortly after leaving dock, the large burly shipmates started taunting Jack with names like “Pretty Boy”, “Baby Face” and “Handsome”. Uncomfortable with the prospect of enduring this environment for months, and fearing rape, Kerouac jumped ship when the vessel first docked in Norfolk, Virginia. Escaping his nautical duties, Jack sought refuge in Allen’s Columbia dorm room where he spent the next several weeks, unbeknownst to Leo and memere<sup>57</sup>

During this time, Kerouac spent his days at the Columbia library, checking out books by Aldous Huxley and George Bernard Shaw with Allen’s library card. He would then return to the dorm to read, write, and subsequently burn what he had just expounded from the typewriter. Allen’s journal recalls, the difficult behavior of Jack during the Fall of 1944 - “Jeez, Kerouac is neurotic.” He also

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<sup>55</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 103.

<sup>57</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 52-53.

noted that they would share dinners in nearby cafes and get drunk together a couple times a week.<sup>58</sup> Disregarding his anti-Semitic views, Kerouac joined Allen for Passover Seder at Louis Ginsberg's home in New Jersey.<sup>59</sup>

An awkward, gawky teen who was still a virgin, Allen may have had a similar spirit to Jack, but their appearances, and views of themselves, differed greatly. What started as literary admiration and friendship had grown for Allen into a feeling of physical adoration.

Their earliest letters show a complimentary nature that comes with new friendship. Jack writes, "I find you in a kindred absorption with identity, dramatic meaning, classic unity, and immortality."<sup>60</sup> Allen admits to being both "awed" and "amazed" when he met Jack, mainly because of the uncommon combination of a masculine jock, coupled with an intelligent sensitivity.<sup>61</sup>

In Allen's dorm room, with Jack lying on Allen's bed and Allen sprawled out on a mattress on the floor, Allen recalls how he figured Jack would embrace the "throbbings and sweetness" if he would confess his emotions towards Jack. The night wore on, and while Allen was becoming less confident that Jack would

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<sup>58</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 91.

<sup>59</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 114.

<sup>60</sup> Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, The Letters*, ed. Bill Morgan and David Stanford (New York: Viking, 2010), 81.

<sup>61</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 34-35.

reciprocate his feelings, he assumed that revealing his homosexuality wouldn't ruin their friendship.<sup>62</sup>

Their conversations lasted all-night, and as dawn broke, Allen announced to Jack that he was in love with their mutual heterosexual friend Lucien Carr, and then added "And I'm really in love with you. And I really want to sleep with you." The idealism of Allen's "throbbings and sweetness" was squashed in defeat when the immediate response came from Jack, who bellowed: "Ooooooh no."<sup>63</sup> Allen also recalls that Jack's response wasn't that of disgust or outrage, but rather a gloomy groan because their friendship would now be complicated because of sexual awkwardness.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the initial rejection towards Allen, Jack learned to compromise with what he felt was his biggest deterrent - his Catholic upbringing. He soon found himself fanaticizing about being intimate with Allen. He was even starting to tell friends about gay crushes he had.<sup>65</sup>

In the spring of 1945, Jack was no longer living with Allen (who was now living in an apartment on 115<sup>th</sup> street), and felt most comfortable living in his

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<sup>62</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 65.

<sup>63</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 91-92.

<sup>64</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 65.

<sup>65</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 142.

parents' home in Ozone Park in Queens, New York. Jack was in regular contact with his contemporaries in Manhattan, often taking long walks through the boroughs of New York to explore the lesser-known parts of the city. As he and Allen were exploring Manhattan late in the summer of 1945, strolling through Harlem before eventually walking downtown to the city's financial district and winding through Manhattan's various neighborhoods, the two men explored each other sexually for the first time.

Allen recalled the location, on Christopher Street, on the city's West Side, under a highway overpass and between some trucks. The two men masturbated one another - an experience that didn't live up to the divine exploration of each other bodies and sexuality, as Allen had hoped. Allen later wrote to Jack: "You were right I suppose, in keeping your distance. I was too intent on self-fulfillment [sic], and rather crude about it, with all my harlequinade and conscious manipulation of your pity." What turned out to be Ginsberg's first sexual experience with Jack goes unmentioned in the personal and private writings of Kerouac.<sup>66</sup>

In the fall of 1945, a twenty-four year old Jack was living a dual life. His father, Leo, had been diagnosed with terminal cancer of the spleen. Jack spent his days in his parents' Ozone Park home, looking after Leo, as Gabrielle went back to work behind a skiving machine in a shoe factory. At night, Jack roamed the streets of Manhattan with his Beat buddies. This time in Jack's life, spent

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<sup>66</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 82.

with his father, looking after him and acting as a caretaker, had a profound effect on the rest of his life. Gone was the resentment at his father for being a simple-minded bigoted man who would come home at 10 a.m. after gambling away the family's income all night.<sup>67</sup> Leo was no longer the masculine, barrel-chested vision of virility that Jack once saw, but rather a scrawny man who lived in a bathrobe, and draped a blanket over the lower-half of his body to cover his boney legs. Jack's heart cried out for his father as he watched doctors drain Leo's stomach and listened to him wail and cry from the pain. Jack tried to remember the man his father once was as he looked into his dark and sunken eyes.

Jack became receptive to his father's lessons and societal views in his last months. During the days the two spent together, Leo would tell Jack "Beware of the niggers and the Jews", and would emphasize that they were undesirables of society that Jack should look down upon.<sup>68</sup>

The Kerouacs' rampant hatred of Jews may have been stimulated by 1930's radio. During this time, Charles Coughlin, a Roman Catholic Priest, who in 1933 was voted "The Most Useful Citizen in America", and received more letters than President Franklin Roosevelt, took credit as being viewed as the father of "hate radio". His Sunday radio sermons blamed Jewish bankers for causing the Great Depression. These "international bankers", as Coughlin

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<sup>67</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>68</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 98.

referred to them, were also the cause of the rise of Communism, and America going to war.<sup>69</sup>

The remarks of Coughlin resonated with the two elder Kerouacs, who had a hatred of Jews throughout adulthood. When Allen Ginsberg would visit the Kerouac home, Leo would refer to him as “the cockroach” and, even after his passing, Jack’s mother rarely allowed Allen into her house - something Jack complied with. Even Jack’s second wife, Joan Haverty, recalls memere shouting things about Allen being “a communist Jew” (which was, in fact, correct), and following that with allegations of Jews poisoning the water supply.

The notes of anti-Semitism that run throughout the writings of Kerouac are deeply rooted in his upbringing in Lowell. Until World War II, Lowell was resolute in its opposition to letting blacks or Jews move into the town. Jack hadn’t experienced any racism towards African-Americans, simply because there were none living near him. There were, however, Jews, and as a youngster, Kerouac was privy to the ugly remarks and actions made towards them, not only by the locals, but by his family as well.

Jack recalls during an interview later in his life: “...they wouldn’t part for this Christian man and his wife. So my father went POOM! and he knocked a

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<sup>69</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 9.

rabbi right in the gutter. Then he took my mother and walked on through. Now if you don't like that, Berrigan, that's the history of my family".<sup>70</sup>

Where Jack once saw an obstinate small town insurance salesman - The lifestyle Jack fled from - he was now contemplating his own life and those with whom he surrounded himself. After a doctor's final visit to the Kerouac home, Jack held his father's hands. Looking down, he saw his father's fingers stained with ink from a lifetime of printing. Leo spoke to him: "Take care of your mother whatever you do. Promise me." Jack made the promise. Those turned out to be Leo's last words.<sup>71</sup>

The reconciled polarities of Jack's days at home and nights on the street fed off of each other and, as a result, strengthened one another. Since he began drinking with the deliberate intent of getting drunk – which, Jack said, was when Leo forced it on him at Thanksgiving of 1938 – he had convinced himself that his intelligence, spirituality, and creativeness were feminine - Something that was strongly discouraged by his hyper-masculine father, and his deeply religious mother. He countered these emotions by surrounding himself with masculine and narrow-minded friends and teammates and accommodated these different personalities by subduing them with alcohol. Ellis Amburn may have best described this duality of Kerouac: "They typified an American era that was

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<sup>70</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 9.

<sup>71</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 163.

uncertain about sexuality, obsessed with ambition, morbid about religion, and incurably alcoholic.”<sup>72</sup>

Possibly Kerouac’s most intriguing relationship with another man was that with Neal Cassady. Cassady, a social-deviant, a philanderer, and an openly-bisexual inspiration for the Beat Movement first met Kerouac and Ginsberg while visiting a mutual friend in New York. Kerouac even acknowledges Cassady in the opening lines of *On The Road*, Neal representing the character of Dean:

I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won’t bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserable weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road.<sup>73</sup>

At the time when Neal eventually moved to New York with his teenage bride, Luanne, the emotional excesses of Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Lucien Carr were taking their toll on Jack, and he was looking for a new friend. He was searching for someone who was less emotional and liked to create mischief and find thrills without worrying about the consequences of a carefree lifestyle.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 51.

<sup>73</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), 1.

<sup>74</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 73-74.

Luanne eventually couldn't stand the hectic life of Neal and New York, and went back home to Denver. Neal followed shortly. The lifestyle that largely defines the character of Jack Kerouac as a wayfaring vagabond in several of his novels, began at this time. The restlessness he encountered after seeing his new, close friend move out west, the constant madness of the city, and a renewed spirit of adventure, inspired Jack to head westward, as far as Illinois, on a Greyhound bus before hitchhiking the rest of the journey to Denver to meet with Cassady.

Perhaps Kerouac was so enthralled by Cassady because he was the person Jack yearned to be - the archetype of a "rucksack wanderer", as Kerouac has referred to himself. As Kerouac had grown up in a sleepy, rural mill-town, excelled at sports and had gone to an Ivy League school, Cassady was the antithesis of the comparative life of privilege in which Jack had been raised. Shuffling around several boys' reform schools, stealing cars, hustling in billiard halls, impressing women, and crisscrossing the country was the archetype character Jack tried to grow into as an adult, but it seemed natural to Neal.<sup>75</sup>

For a time, it seemed that Jack idolized Neal. At the very least, for being able to have such gravitas with women, but quite possibly for the mysteriousness of such an unusual character - a Westerner who had arrived in New York, and had seemingly adapted immediately and made it his own. Prior to meeting Neal, Kerouac's forays into homosexual behavior were limited to erotic touching with

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<sup>75</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 104-105.

Ginsberg and William Burroughs, and occasionally flirting with artists.

Whereas Kerouac saw Allen's homosexuality as a weakness and a flaw, he never held it against Neal or put him down for it.<sup>76</sup>

The next several years for Neal were adventurous, but repetitious. A seemingly endless cycle of new jobs, new women, and new locations defined the life of Cassady, living on both coasts and everywhere in between, and barely managing to keep a job, or a steady relationship. In the summer of 1949, then married to wife Carolyn, Neal wrote Jack promising to keep Carolyn "out of the way" if he would come to San Francisco and live with them. Assuming that Jack would have Neal spiritually and perhaps physically to himself, Jack journeyed west to live with the Cassadys. Jack wrote as he was crossing Colorado, "I saw God in the sky. You're on the road to heaven."<sup>77</sup>

From the moment Jack arrived at the Cassadys' doorstep at 2 a.m., greeted by a stark naked Neal, Carolyn feared that the enticement of adventure would be too much for the married, father-to-be, Neal to resist. The two men spent every night with each other, drinking, carousing, and exploring the jazz clubs of San Francisco. Not soon after Jack arrived, Carolyn threatened Neal, "He's all you want. Leave me alone.....Go." But what was intended to be an idle threat was just enough leverage; Neal had to leave. He and Jack left Denver,

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<sup>76</sup> Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), 76.

<sup>77</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 142-143.

and a pregnant Carolyn, for New York. As the two drove away from Cassady's home, Jack wept tears of joy.<sup>78</sup>

The journey of Jack and Neal driving East from Denver is described in several of Kerouac's novels. In *On the Road*, their characters set out for New York in what the author describes as "The fag Plymouth", so-referred because Jack thought that Plymouths were girlish, without any real American muscle or horsepower behind them. Along the way, Jack writes about a gay man who was picked up on their journey, who provided fodder for Kerouac's novels, as well as insight into his relationship with Neal.<sup>79</sup>

This was the same car and cast of characters, under different aliases, that appear in Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*. In it, he wrote:

That night the gangbelly broke loose between Cody and the skinny skeleton, sick. Cody thrashed him on the rugs in the dark, monstrous huge fuck, Olympian perversities, slambanging big sodomies that made me sick, subsided with him for money; the money never came. He'd treat the boy like a girl! I sat in the castrated toilet listening and peaking, at one point it appeared Cody had thrown over his legs in the air like a dead hen...I was horrified..."<sup>80</sup>

The imagery of this description lends insight to the true makeup of each man. Neal was a true, free spirit. Seemingly unapologetic and unashamed for

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<sup>78</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 144.

<sup>79</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 144.

<sup>80</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1958), 358.

being emotionally unattached to people he was intimate with, truly living in the moment and roaming the country like a nomad. Ashamed of his reluctant sexuality, and an observer, Jack was a voyeur to the life that he literally chased after. The next day, after the “slambanging” had occurred, the exchange between Neal and Jack is recounted, coincidentally, in a public roadside bathroom. Jack blew up at Neal, telling him: “I’m no old fag like that fag”, part rage, part jealousy. Neal was dejected, but also puzzled. Neal had always known Jack’s history of homophobia and occasional downright abhorrence of homosexuals, but he felt he was doing the right thing by respecting Jack’s sexuality. He left the bathroom in tears. Jack recounts this scenario in *Visions of Cody*, written about Neal, saying “Cody is full of shit: let him go...go sleeping on the other side of the world.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 145.

## Chapter Three: Desolate Angel

While Kerouac's escapades of crisscrossing the country provided tales for future novels, he found little success as an author as America entered the 1950s. As his first published work, *The Town and The City* was failing to gain any literary recognition, Jack found himself, like many other times in his life, jobless and broke. While his friend William Burroughs and wife Joan kept busy at their home in Texas, and Beat-brother Neal Cassady was transferring marijuana harvests by driving back and forth between the Burroughs' ranch and San Francisco, Jack retreated to the place he was most comforted by, and felt the safest in - Ozone Park, Queens with memere, a place he described in *The Town and The City* as "Rooted in earth, in the ancient pulse of life and work and death".<sup>82</sup>

Memere didn't mind her Ti Jean's friends when they were over to visit, but she didn't like it when he was away from her, on vacation with them. Jack was happy to be back in a living situation reminiscent of his childhood, where memere would spend her days at the shoe factory, operating a skiving machine while he was at home in Ozone Park, free to spend his days writing. And despite memere

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<sup>82</sup> Jack Kerouac, *The Town and The City* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1950), 5.

controlling his income and allowance, for the time, they were both satisfied with their arrangement.<sup>83</sup>

As the 1950's arrived and Jack found himself separated from old friends who stayed west, he was making new acquaintances as his writing career was taking shape. Inspired by movies like Orson Welles' *The Third Man*, and spending time with visual artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Kerouac started expressing himself with film and drawings. This liberating new artistic medium also had an unleashing effect on his repressed sexuality.

Bill Cannastra, a bisexual with predominant homosexual tendencies, had woven himself into the Beat circle, and had befriended Kerouac. Young and reckless, Cannastra set himself apart from the others in the group by his penchant for self-destruction and a careless lifestyle. Jack and Allen had witnessed him drunk, teetering on top of a six-story building, as well as dancing on broken glass (as Ginsberg would write in *Howl*), and would sometimes drink to such excess, he would vomit blood.

Through his relationship with Cannastra, Jack was exposed to a new group of visual artist friends who were very comfortable with their sexuality. New

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<sup>83</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 100-101.

to Jack, these men were unapologetically homosexual, and many times he found himself in atypical situations after one of Cannastra's boozy dinner parties.<sup>84</sup>

Cannastra claims that the two men jogged around the block naked (although Kerouac insists he kept his shorts on), and spent time looking through a peephole into a male bathroom, though Kerouac later said that he "wasn't interested in that". Later in life, Kerouac did admit to *New York Post* that he had group sex with Cannastra before also admitting to *Paris Review* that he had sex "on a lot of couches with young men".<sup>85</sup>

Jack wasn't, however, always so open about his homosexuality. Carl Solomon, for whom Ginsberg dedicated *Howl*, once told Jack that he thought his first novel *The Town and The City* was filled with "a repressed homosexuality". Jack lost his temper and responded to Solomon by calling him an "incompetent lunatic", a homosexual, a "greedy Jew", and threatened to break his glasses.<sup>86</sup> His honesty about his sexuality and views toward homosexuals was also inconsistent, at times. While Jack was having sex with boys as he travelled to Mexico City, he abhorred the "fags" at the *New York Times* for their criticisms of his work.<sup>87</sup> When Jack suggested to Gore Vidal that they share a room, and spent an intimate night together, a night recounted in Vidal's *The City and the*

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<sup>84</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 220.

<sup>85</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 152.

<sup>86</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 357.

<sup>87</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 256.

*Pillar*, Jack later threatened the author with a tell-all book revealing all of the “true” homosexual authors, and subsequently referred to Vidal as a “little fag”. Jack may have felt guilt over his behavior at certain times, but he wasn’t hesitant to brag to friends about his and Vidal’s relationship. Allen Ginsberg later reported back to Vidal, “Jack was rather proud of the fact that he blew you.”<sup>88</sup>

Throughout much of the 1950s, Jack’s works had gone largely unnoticed, and as a result, he didn’t see the financial reward for his years of writing. Still living with memere, he felt the guilt of relying so much on his mother as an adult, and more importantly, he felt the pressure of keeping the promise that he had made to Leo. As he spent time writing novellas and poetry that were very uncommon for the time, addressing issues that didn’t appeal to a broad American audience, Jack started to conclude that he would never become published, thus never becoming a famous writer, and never fully achieving the fame and fortune he sought. For the working class Catholic boy, his guilt was something bigger than the situation he was in, it was sinful.<sup>89</sup>

Ironically, Jack had the most free time to write when he lived under the same roof as memere, not worrying about money, or where he would be sleeping that night. Despite ample time to write, and the comfort of home cooked meals,

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<sup>88</sup>Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 194.

<sup>89</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 139.

the relationship between the two was strained at times. The pressure of being a widow and supporting her grown son full-time, irritated memere enough to cause her to holler at Jack about being a disappointment of a son who needed to move away from the typewriter and find a job. She also disagreed with the kind of people her Ti Jean surrounded himself with.

The reverence Jack had for his mother was starting to clash with her Depression-era ideals, especially when she would criticize his friends. While sitting at the kitchen table with Jack, browsing through the newspaper, memere came across an article about an African-American who was being charged with rape. Clipping it out, she handed it to Jack and scolded him about “his niggers”, referring to Jack’s black friend, Al Sublette.<sup>90</sup>

For a short period of time, Kerouac had a relationship with an African-American girl, Alene Lee, who is portrayed as Mardou Fox in *The Subterraneans*. Lee, who ran in many hipster circles, was introduced to Kerouac by Ginsberg at a party. At the get-together in Ginsberg’s apartment, strewn with albums and Allen’s own literature, Lee recalls Kerouac as “incredibly good-looking, really handsome.....big blue eyes and black, Indian type hair.” And while usually very hubristic around contemporaries, Kerouac, standing by himself in a Hawaiian shirt, left the party alone that evening, although he had been observing Lee and fantasized about her later that night. Playing matchmaker, Ginsberg set up a

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<sup>90</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 164.

more intimate gathering with some friends. Kerouac and Lee connected and eventually ended up at her Avenue A apartment. This began a brief, but intense relationship.

According to Kerouac's personal "sex list", they made love forty times over the thirty day duration of their relationship. The relationship ended like most of Kerouac's, because of his selfishness and uncompromising egotism. Because of the taboo nature of this interracial relationship in the 1950s, Kerouac's unabashed racism couldn't be concealed. Jack and Alene paid a visit to Jack's friends, Lucien Carr and his wife Cessa, who had just given birth. After pleasantries, Lucien asked Alene: "And what part of India are you from?"

Alene was embarrassed that Jack had tried to pass her off as anything other than African-American, and was also fed up with Jack's relationship with memere. In *The Subterraneans*, the relationship becomes a helpless affair once Alene's character scolds Jack, telling him that he was too old to be living with his mother. The relationship came to an abrupt end when the couple spotted Gore Vidal during a night out. Jack immediately decided to leave Alene to go home with Vidal, exclaiming "I've got to see Gore Vidal! It's a historic literary occasion!" "It's him or me goddamit", Alene told Jack, though he ultimately chose Vidal that night. "We're through", she said as she walked away.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 190-193.

While collaborating on an article for *Playboy*, Kerouac was questioned by friend and poet Gregory Corso about the racial hypocrisy that he seemed to live by. As the two drank, the discussion became more heated as Corso interrogated Kerouac about his “pro-Negro” stance in *On The Road*, yet wondered how he could unleash hateful racial epithets on a daily basis. Jack justified his racial tolerance in his writings by claiming that the “poetic statements” of his artistry didn’t mean he had to commit those feelings to his personal life. The two fought over this to the point where the article was called-off, leading to questions if Jack’s relationship with Alene existed for artistic purposes.<sup>92</sup>

This wasn’t the only time memere had interfered and disrupted Jack’s romantic life. In autumn of 1958, he had taken up a relationship with New York artist Dody Muller. Muller, a widow at thirty-two was a drinker and a partier, but she was also a very cultured and stable woman for Jack. Muller recalls her memories of Jack fondly, and even mentions that there was talk of a marriage in Paris, but memere was always a strain on the couple’s relationship.<sup>93</sup>

“Despicable and obscene” were the actual words Dody used in her description of memere, recalling mornings of waking up to see the elderly French woman in a rocker, saying her rosary and sipping on whiskey and ginger ale. As Dody was exposed to the type of relationship Jack and memere had with each another, it

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<sup>92</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 326.

<sup>93</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 260.

became apparent to her that getting a commitment from Jack was out of the question because of the mother and son's closeness.<sup>94</sup>

Jack lived off monetary advances of every book he wrote, never reaping the financial success his estate would have in the following decades from his novels, and bargained with publishers for much lower than what likely could have been afforded to him, seeking an instant payoff rather than a long-term investment. *The Subterraneans* was sold for a penny a word - a payment Kerouac was content with because it would be enough to fund a trip to Tangier and, presumably, more inspiration for writing.<sup>95</sup> Jack's request for a \$25 per month stipend from his publishers at Viking Press, was thought to be a joke, but he requested the low fee because he simply wanted to spend his days in a hut in Mexico, again providing inspiration for future works. A constant pursuer of lazy days and personal fulfillment, Kerouac sought to satisfy himself, rather than find any lasting, committed relationship. He once wrote to friend and San Francisco poet, Gary Snyder: "Why on earth (outside sickness and hangovers) aren't people CONTINUALLY DRUNK? I want ecstasy of the mind all the time...if I can't have that, shit...and I only have it when I write, or when I'm hi or when I'm drunk or when I'm coming."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 261.

<sup>95</sup> Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 120.

<sup>96</sup> Joyce Johnson and Jack Kerouac, *Door Wide Open: A Beat Love Affair in Letters, 1957-1958* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2000), xx.

At an early reading of Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, people were getting the first glimpses of a new age of American poetry and thought. The old ideals of American culture that people had clung to before the Second World War, were now being discarded, replaced by conjured up images of "angelheaded hipsters" and "saintly motorcyclists". Anxious onlookers were savoring each word out of Ginsberg's mouth and anticipating the next one, and afterwards the audience was still waiting for their goose bumps to subside.<sup>97</sup>

For Jack, the night went much differently. He achieved "ecstasy of the mind" through alcohol, rather than watching Ginsberg perform his opus in-person. To him, *Howl* was "overwrought and bitter" and, according to later published letters, Jack wrote to friends that Dylan Thomas or William Faulkner couldn't possibly have drunk as much as he did that night, in attempt to escape the scene around him. By the end of the night, Jack was resorting to drinking the dregs of the bottles, and the last sips left in glasses that had been abandoned.<sup>98</sup>

Jack's disassociation from the scene that night could also be marred with jealousy. Jack's works were getting published, and he was getting paid for his writings, but nothing he had written had captivated audiences the way *Howl* had. The impact of the poem was immediate. There may have been resentment

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<sup>97</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 227.

<sup>98</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 228.

towards the younger, smaller, Jewish, homosexual poet that had mesmerized audiences with his words.

Protective of his own work, Jack was sensitive to those who were critical of his writings, or even those who didn't give it the respect he thought it deserved. He had faced this harsh criticism previously in his career when *On The Road* sat in a publisher's office and went overlooked, in a time before he knew the art of "sucking ass to get published", as Jack would later describe it.<sup>99</sup> When his opus was finally brought to print, the reviews were largely underwhelming. The press rejected *On The Road* and saw it more as pure defiance against post-war, cold-war America, and broadly painted the characters in the book as "freaks" and "perverse".

Worse for Kerouac, his literary style and personal vision of America were criticized. The *Herald Tribune* called *On The Road* "infantile, perversely negative". Jack's former Columbia classmate, Herbert Gold, who reviewed books for several publications, lambasted the author by saying "Kerouac sees himself as the Prophet and Charlie Parker as God" adding to it that *On The Road* was "proof of illness", and likened Kerouac as the mouthpiece of "male hustlers".<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 142.

<sup>100</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 281.

Even into adulthood, Jack carried his childhood biases with him and used these as an alibi for his struggles in his professional life. Nearly all of Jack's letters to Allen Ginsberg were addressed with endearment - from the simple "Dear Allen" to playful titles, such as "Mon garçon" and "Cher jeune singe". However, one particular letter stands out in which Jack begins with an unsympathetic "Allen Ginsberg". Early in the letter, Jack mentions "millionaire Jews" that had "kissed his ass in the past", but now would be reluctant to introduce him to "real poets" such as Allen, who had criticized *On The Road* for being "imperfect", and points to the reason that "I realize that I am no longer attractive to you queers", as a possible explanation. In the following pages of his letter to Allen, Jack angrily questions the reasons that his works, specifically *On The Road*, had been sitting with the publisher for over a year had not gone to print. He ends his diatribe with "so die...and die like men...and shut up...and above all...leave me alone...and don't ever darken me again."<sup>101</sup>

As Jack grew older, his heightened prejudices accompanied his increasingly self-destructive alcoholism. Entering the 1960s, his last decade on earth, Kerouac's behavior turned from loathsome to malefic as he distanced himself from those who were once close to him.

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<sup>101</sup> Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, The Letters*, ed. Bill Morgan and David Stanford (New York: Viking, 2010), 178-180.

## Chapter Four: Lonesome Traveler

The 1960s were an unparalleled time of dynamism and transformation in America. A Catholic was elected to the White House, televisions were creeping into households across America and finding a spot next to the family radio, rock and roll was replacing jazz as the sound of the youth and anti-establishment, and people were collectively becoming more cognizant of the changing world around them. What the 1960s represented to the majority of Americans was repetitive when compared to the life Jack and his Beat contemporaries had led in prior years.

Society around him was now awakening to the life he had discovered in the 1940s and 50s and now Jack was regressing into seclusion as those around him were excited to explore the world. Jack himself was aware of this change, but now as a middle-aged man still living with his mother, he was resistant to altering his Ozone Park lifestyle. In an energetic, optimistic time in America, Jack was, as Allen Ginsberg labeled him, “A shy drunken Catholic Bodhisattva”.<sup>102</sup>

In his own mind, he knew he was a changed man. By the winter of 1961, he told his friend Phil Whalen that he had become a warped and ugly demon, spending his days guzzling Tawny Port and whiskey. That February, Ginsberg

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<sup>102</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 281.

recognized the kind of person his long-time confidant had been reduced to. When Allen visited the Kerouac home, he sat and observed his hosts. There, the mother and son were, watching television, yelling at the screen before eventually turning the hate to each other.

Allen became befuddled as memere shouted at Jack, calling him a “filthy prick” and Jack snarled back at memere, calling her a “dirty old cunt”. Confrontation was nothing new to the Kerouacs, but this type of behavior seemed escalated from simple bickering. Despite coddling Jack through adulthood, memere placed guilt on him, undoubtedly exacerbating his commiseration and alcoholism by telling him things such as “It should’ve been you that died, not Gerard.”<sup>103</sup>

Jack’s close friends matured and eventually moved away and started families. By 1962, the only thing Jack’s typewriter was producing were letters to friends Carolyn and Neal Cassady, saying that negative reviews from critics were going to stop him from publishing any more works, letters to Allen Ginsberg about “Marxist” literary reviewers in New York and apparent suicidal thoughts.<sup>104</sup> Feeling distance in the lives his friends were leading compared to his own, Kerouac sought local teenagers in Northport, Long Island to party and drink with. For his thirty-ninth birthday, he invited local teens to memere’s home and partied

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<sup>103</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 551.

<sup>104</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 318.

so wildly, memere laid in bed, petrified that she would be raped or murdered by one of the wild partygoers.<sup>105</sup>

It was during this time that Jack was especially emotionally drained and mentally fatigued. Writing his novella *Visions of Gerard* certainly brought to the surface some raw emotions that had been previously buried. Memories of his older brother, and the simpler lives they lived as children in Lowell, coupled with his Benzedrine binges to help fuel his writing, left him feeling lonely and depressed. He would carry a pint of wine as he meandered across the Brooklyn Bridge. The bridge that lent inspiration for him to write a poem that included the prose “I lookt up at the deep blue perfect and askt Buddha Lord to perfect me and said ‘What are the requisites?’ and he said ‘You are perfect already’ ”, couldn’t help the authors doldrums as he would finish his days curled up on a park bench in the cool, windy evenings.<sup>106</sup> Jack would confide in friends that he felt “Old and futile among enthusiastic fools of the future.”<sup>107</sup>

Perhaps the greatest single event that signified that Kerouac’s free-spirited lifestyle had ended came when Neal Cassady showed up in New York at Jack’s home in 1964. Cassady was praised by the California counterculture as a

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<sup>105</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 318.

<sup>106</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Kerouac- Kicks, Joy, Darkness*, with Allen Ginsberg, ©2006, 1997 by Rykodisc, LC 2619, Compact disc.

<sup>107</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 513.

pioneer of the freedom movement that swept through the 1960's. Banding together with Ken Kesey, The Grateful Dead, and other Merry Pranksters, Cassady rode in the psychedelic bus *Furthur*, crossing the country, fueled by unlimited LSD and hijinks. The grand idea of the Merry Pranksters was to arrive on Jack's doorstep and have a meeting of two iconic eras of counterculture: the Beats and the Hippies.

Jack, however, was less than enthused by the raucous band of misfits who rode their Technicolor-painted bus through Manhattan before they met with him. After reminiscing, Neal excitedly told Jack: "Dig this, Jack, the tape recorders and the cameras, just like we used to do, only this time professionally." One of the onlookers that night, Robert Stone, recalls that Jack "Couldn't find solace in people like...us... He was drinking whiskey from a paper bag, and he was very pissed-off and at his most embittered... Kerouac was eloquent on what jerkabouts we were." At several points in the night, an American flag was tossed around and used as a scarf by Kesey, before Kerouac snatched the flag from the Pranksters and folded it military style.<sup>108</sup>

Despite his relative fame, Jack was unwanted by many of the old haunts he used to occupy. He was banned from most bars in Greenwich Village, his favorite neighborhood to spend his days and nights, for either inciting rowdiness or just downright stupid behavior, such as urinating in sinks or pouring beer into patron's hats. Jack became an outcast in a community of outsiders. Even those

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<sup>108</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 352-354.

who hadn't been close to Kerouac through the years noticed his behavior was becoming increasingly self-destructive.

When reminded by friends that embracing the youth counterculture of the sixties would lead to tremendous book sales, he snapped back by calling hippies "a bunch of communists" before adding "Whatever you do, don't give my address to Ginsberg, or any other communist. I don't take any credit for the hippies, don't want my name associated with them in any way."<sup>109</sup>

Unable to even enjoy motion pictures that reflected on his own adventures, Jack grouched after seeing *Easy Rider*, "Neal and I had a hell of a good time, and we didn't hurt anybody. They're trying to make heroes out of those guys, and they're not heroes. They're criminals."<sup>110</sup>

While Jack was depressed about the perception of his friends neglecting him, he still had confidence in his own literary talent and ability. Despite his disagreements with reviewers of his earlier work, Kerouac was a more polished and distinguished author by the time he wrote his book of poems, *Mexico City Blues*. Nearly a decade had passed since writing *On The Road*, and while thinking he improved as a writer, he also thought he deserved respect for his works and the acclaim he had garnered in that time. Kenneth Rexroth, critic for the *New York Times* viewed the book differently though, and likened Jack's writings about African-Americans and jazz to that of the Ku Klux Klan before

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<sup>109</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 355-356.

<sup>110</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 369.

closing by saying “I’ve always wondered what ever happened to those wax figures in the old rubberneck dives in Chinatown. Now we know, one of them at least writes books.”<sup>111</sup>

Enduring negative reviews, failed plutonic and romantic relationships, and a negative perception of a changing world passing him by, Jack sought refuge in the wilderness of Pennsylvania, when shortly thereafter his wallet was stolen. His identity was lost and all that remained were memere and alcohol.<sup>112</sup>

Negative criticisms coupled with his increasing dependency on alcohol, showed in his behavior around his friends. While out drinking with friend Kenneth Koch, Jack would take Koch’s stein of beer and pour it into his hat. Lafcadio Orlovsky, the mentally stunted brother of one of his close Beat friends whom Jack once helped care for, suddenly became a source of ridicule. Those around him were even noticing the physical toll his unhealthy lifestyle was taking. Eventually, Jack stopped eating and new wounds would appear daily. Falling down drunk at Penn Station left him with an injured elbow before later collapsing face-first on the ground at the Bowery, leaving his complexion “redder than a beet”, according to friend Peter Orlovsky.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 274.

<sup>112</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 280.

<sup>113</sup> Gerald Nicoso, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 610.

Jack's drinking at times would turn violent. When biographer Ann Charters came by the Kerouac home to start cataloguing Jack's works, memere made sure to show her the gouge in the wall left by a knife that Jack had thrown at her in a drunken fit.<sup>114</sup>

As memere and Jack continued to drink together, their relationship turned increasingly terse. The feelings that had been sheltered for one another were now being exposed, in a large part because of alcohol. Moreover, there had always been sexual undertones to Jack and memere's relationship, starting with the night Jack crawled into her bed, and continuing on through adolescence when memere bathed Jack past the age where he was capable of having an erection.<sup>115</sup>

Even friends of Jack had their concerns about the close relationship that he seemed to have with memere. When the mother and son took a bus trip to California to spend time with some of Jack's friends - a trip that included memere and Jack strolling arm and arm through Mexican villages and sharing bottles of Bourbon - friends were curious about the type of bond the two had. Friends insisted that Jack should think about finally separating from memere, but he was persistent in his fondness for his mother, who just happened to be his roommate. "Perfect friends" were the exact words Jack used to describe their relationship,

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<sup>114</sup> Dennis McNally, *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Random House, 1979), 322.

<sup>115</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 27.

and that he not only loved her as a mother, but liked her just as much as a friend. There was also the looming obligation he made to his father, and the penance he owed her because she supported him as a struggling writer.<sup>116</sup>

As the decade wore on, the relationship between mother and son became more tenuous, and Jack became more defensive about taking care of memere. In a letter to friend Phil Whalen, Jack seems confrontational when speaking about his mother, and burdened by his father's dying wish; when addressing his finances, he writes that his only monetary issue was "The promise I made in my dying father's house, to take care of his wife, his wife not mine. HIS wife, not MINE, to take care of her for HIM, my father in Heaven."<sup>117</sup>

By this time, Jack's constant state of inebriation turned his once flowery prose into diluted and blunt language. Moreover, the language he used in daily conversation was becoming increasingly sloppy. He began finding himself too intoxicated to write, but kept drinking - especially wine, with the justification that he was drinking the blood of Christ, or a "divine cocktail".<sup>118</sup> When acquaintances like Steve Allen, host of a prime time variety television show invited Jack over for dinner, he noticed behavior similar to that of comedian Lenny Bruce, referring to Jack's conduct around others as "a pity". Allen also witnessed Jack drink an entire bottle of sherry at the same party when he asked

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<sup>116</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 549.

<sup>117</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 279.

<sup>118</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 319.

his guests if anyone would like a pre-dinner cocktail.<sup>119</sup> As lifelong friend Lucien Carr observed:

Jack's language tended to get cheaper as it went on, and by "cheap", I mean easily come by. It became cheaper and cheaper, which is a shame. I mean, to a man who loved each word in the English language more than I love my father...it became, plastic blither-blather.<sup>120</sup>

The deterioration of Jack's mind and spirit was not entirely surprising to friends during this time in his life. Former girlfriend Joyce Johnson recalls getting a phone call from Jack one autumn evening after she had gotten married:

...he was in town and really wanted to see me. Could I come over and see him? And I said, "Well, you know I'm married now. Can I bring my husband?" And he said "Oh, sure. Bring your little husband." ...we went over and it was a horrible scene. His friend was drunk in this very mean way. Jack was drunk. This guy was burning Jack with cigarettes. It was really horrible, a very depressing scene.<sup>121</sup>

The rest of the 1960s were dreary for Jack. Using liquor to cope with his minor celebrity status, his alcoholism was intensified by the lack of responsibility he took as the caretaker of memere. Day after day was squandered by his

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<sup>119</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 301.

<sup>120</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 262-263.

<sup>121</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 299.

alcoholism. He and memere were again living in Lowell, and despite his unhealthy lifestyle, he was secure in the familiarity of his old town. Jack would routinely stagger back home in the early morning hours, reeking of booze and would knock on memere's door to let her know he had gotten home safely. On a particular heavy night of drinking, Jack reached his doorstep at 6 a.m. and uncharacteristically swung open his mother's bedroom door to find her standing naked. Memere shrieked and collapsed to the floor, foaming at the mouth.

Jack waited in anguish for over a week to finally find out his mother had suffered a stroke. Healthy enough to return home but too weak to take care of herself, Jack enlisted the help of the sister of his childhood friend Sebastian, Stella Sampas, to help look after memere. Jack couldn't stay in Lowell to care for memere very long, however. He had already postponed publicity tours in Europe; he couldn't disregard his obligations any longer.

By the time he got off the plane in London - his first stop - he was so drunk he had to be carried off the airliner. The flight was indicative of how the rest of the trip was to go. In Italy, Jack had drunk so much that doctors had to physically restrain him and sedate him with morphine injections. He was eventually locked in his hotel room by publicists and screamed for alcohol. Eventually being given champagne (thought to do the least harm), he quickly finished his glass before

drinking several bottles. Later, at a party held in his honor, Jack would be found face-down in his plate at the dinner table.<sup>122</sup>

Customarily, his thoughts were often focused on home and more specifically, memere. He had been reflecting on his life and responsibilities to his mother while in Europe and knew that as he was selfishly spending his days in a drunken stupor, he was failing to keep the promise he made to Leo. He quickly became intent on finding a wife who could not only support him, but also could be a caretaker for memere.<sup>123</sup>

Unbeknownst to him, back in Lowell, memere was enjoying the company of Stella and even admired her efficiency around the house. Stella had been in love with Jack ever since meeting him as a child and didn't hesitate to marry him when he proposed to her shortly after returning home to America.<sup>124</sup>

Still angered from constant negative reviews of his writings, Jack focused his works on distasteful writings that were starting to mirror his own thoughts and lifestyle. In his writings, Kerouac began referencing "millionaire Jews" and the control Jack thought they held over his lack of success, and eventually resorted to writing about the physical characteristics of Jews. In his novella, *Satori in Paris*, Kerouac writes himself as the character "Jack Duluoz". The premise of his

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<sup>122</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 669-670.

<sup>123</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 670.

<sup>124</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 671.

tale follows the main character's journey to Paris to research his family's genealogy, but the story shifts to Duluoz' interaction with the French residents. At one point, Duluoz wonders whether the man he is speaking to is French, or perhaps someone else:

At first I wonder "Is he Jewish? pretending to be to be a French aristocrat?" because something about him looks Jewish at first, I mean the particular racial type you sometimes see, pure *skinny* Semitic, the serpentine forehead, or shall we say, *aquiline*, and that long nose, and funny hidden Devil's Horns where his baldness starts at the sides, and surely under that blanket he must have long thin feet (unlike my thick short at peasant's feet) that he must waddle aside to aside *gazotsky* style, i.e., stuck out and walking on heels instead of front soles...<sup>125</sup>

There were several defining moments in Kerouac's life that superseded that of the casual racism in America during the post-war years. While visiting Jack and memere in his Northport home, Allen Ginsberg sat with the two near a television set while the news aired a retrospective piece about World War II and the Holocaust. Mother and son sat in their chairs drinking, staring at the television as Ginsberg recalls: "And then some German refugee came on the screen and talked about the holocaust and Kerouac's mother said in front of me,

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<sup>125</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Satori in Paris* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), 96.

'They're still complaining about Hitler, it's too bad he didn't finish them off.'

Kerouac agreed with her."<sup>126</sup>

Similar sentiments were conveyed to former *Newsweek* reporter, Ellis Amburn, who recalls a telephone conversation between himself and Kerouac:

I received a call I wish Kerouac had never made, one that forever altered our relationship. We had survived the end of the "honeymoon" period between author and editor, those first days when both of us had dreamed of success. We had survived the commercial and critical failure of two of his novels. And we had even survived his obscene phone calls. But now he said something I found it impossible to forget, though it was not personal. He said he was going to Germany "to see the concentration camps, and dance on Jews' graves." The worst part of it was that he didn't even sound drunk. That cold, homicidal voice was crisp and chilling.<sup>127</sup>

Jack's abject racism wasn't limited to only Jews, however. The free spirited, live-and-let-live character Kerouac is depicted as in his novels are in stark contrast to the actual life he led.

As Jack's drinking increased and he became more reclusive in his home with his mother, he began to adopt more of her racist opinions. Soon, he would refuse to attend parties "if negroes were going to be there", and his behavior was

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<sup>126</sup> Paul Maher, *Kerouac: The Definitive Biography* (Maryland: First Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004), 376

<sup>127</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 363.

becoming increasingly repugnant.<sup>128</sup> While in Orlando, Florida, with his fourteen year old cousin, Jack suggested they build a large, wooden cross using 2x4 wooden posts. Once constructed, the two drove to the section of town that loosely divided the white and black neighborhoods, soaked the wooden cross in kerosene and set it ablaze, while Jack danced around the fire screaming racist obscenities.<sup>129</sup>

Despite being in his forties and in a committed marriage with Stella, the drunken buffoonery that Jack facilitated in New York City bars, coupled with his seething bigotry, continued in Lowell. It wasn't uncommon for locals to find Jack slumped against a building, drunk and drooling. He couldn't even help his behavior when he agreed to do his drinking exclusively at Nicky's, a bar owned and operated by his brother-in-law. At Nicky's, Jack would approach women with distain and called them "old bags", which is a better alternative than telling them that he wanted to "eat their cunts", which was a routine line he would use on an attractive girl at the bar. Other times, he could be found at the local pool hall, fencing with cues and occasionally throwing chairs through windows. "Shut up ya fucking niggers!" Jack would holler if he were reprimanded by any black patrons or workers, all while spitting at them.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 278.

<sup>129</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 278.

<sup>130</sup> Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 672.

Kerouac's demonstrative behavior continued to partition the author from an increasingly progressive society - ironically, the one he inspired - and carried on in his final years as his mental and physical health continued to deteriorate.

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## Epilogue: End of the Road

The last few years of Jack Kerouac's life were as arid as they were routine. His literary fame and big-city popularity didn't translate to Lowell, where he enjoyed living in relative anonymity. Memere was relegated to a corner room of the Kerouac home, largely immobile due to her failing health. Stella and Jack remained married, though she nurtured and took care of Jack more as a mother than a wife. The arrangement worked well with Jack, who was craving the kind of support memere was once able to give him.

Friends like Neal Cassady and Allen Ginsberg were still roaming the world, crisscrossing the country, and participating in the 1960s counterculture, much as they had in prior decades. Jack, instead, became better acquainted with locals who had known him before his fame at local bars in Lowell. In late 1967, friend Charles Jarvis, commented to Jack about Ginsberg's continued fame and remarked about his recent television appearances, to which Kerouac snapped back: "Look you meatball! I'm a writer, not a public exhibit!" There must have been a fine line of distinction about public exhibition in Jack's mind, because he had been interviewed on William Buckley Jr.'s television show *Firing Line* just weeks prior to his comment about Ginsberg.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Charles Jarvis, *Visions of Kerouac* (Lowell: Ithaca Press, 1974), 201.

Soon, the cold climate of Lowell in the winter months agitated memere enough that she pestered Jack to move the family to the more comfortable Florida climate. The bills for memere's caretaking, his current mortgage, and funds to support his alcoholism, left Jack no money. He collected just \$1,770 in income during the first half of 1969.<sup>132</sup> Agreeing to receive a financial advance from a publisher for a book he hadn't even dreamt of yet, Jack still struggled to get enough money for a down payment on a Ft. Lauderdale home, before Allen Ginsberg helped him sell some of his personal manuscripts to universities.<sup>133</sup>

The comfort of the familiar neighborhoods and faces of Lowell were nonexistent in Florida, leading Jack to feel isolated. He struggled with loneliness in his last year on Earth. Jack first started by calling his Beat friends on the telephone and talking for hours. John Clellon Holmes remembers:

He called about five people. He called Carolyn (Cassady) - he called Allen (Ginsberg) - he called Lucien (Carr), he called me. When he felt lonely, he'd talk forever. He would literally talk for two hours on the phone. He was alone. He was sitting there. I can imagine the very room, because I've seen the living rooms in Long Island, at least. His mother had gone to bed, the big television set was turned on, and there he was. What to do? Drunk. [*sic*]<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 369.

<sup>133</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 312.

<sup>134</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 311.

In his final weeks, he had been assaulted after shouting racial epithets at patrons of a black bar in town, and had a Kennedy half-dollar taped to his bellybutton to hold in his hernia. Eventually the phone calls subsided, and Jack spent his days inside his house with the shades drawn, watching television with the sound off, and listening to Mandel's *Messiah* as loud as his phonograph would allow.<sup>135</sup> Jack's wife, Stella, remembers her final day with him:

We'd been up all night before the day he died. We were watching television, *The Galloping Gourmet*, about ten-thirty in the morning. I had just finished attending to memere and I was going to get Jack something to eat, but he wouldn't let me. He made me sit while he went and opened a can of tuna fish. He ate the whole can. Then he went into the bathroom. I heard some noise and I went to see about it. Jack was there, the toilet was filled with blood. "I'm hemorrhaging", he said. "I'm hemorrhaging".

After initially denying medical care, Kerouac was unable to survive despite twenty-six blood transfusions.<sup>136</sup>

Before Jack's body was buried in Lowell at the Sampas family plot, beside his childhood best-friend, Sebastian, a wake was held, open to the public. There was a cavalcade of family, friends, and curious spectators who came to see Kerouac's body, resting in a casket with theatrical-style lighting, as if he were spotlighted for one final performance. The reaction was divided.

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<sup>135</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 313.

<sup>136</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 313.

Ginsberg, who had known him best, stood at the casket, noticing the soft grey skin that the coroner's makeup couldn't cover. He had to touch Kerouac - as though he just couldn't believe he was gone, and stroked back his thinning black hair. Other mourners reacted differently to the sight of Jack on display. Longtime friend Gregory Corso remembers:

When I saw Jack in the funeral parlor, where everybody was paying a last visit to him, I had this idea of picking up the body and throwing it across the room. I thought it might have been a Zen thing that he would have dug. Because he wasn't there, this was the body. So: *plunk!* I don't know what they would have done to me, maybe put me in the looney bin or something, 'cause you just don't do things like that. You *don't*.

The general reaction, however, fell in between these two extremes. By friends, the wake was generally referred to as "a big mess", filled with strangers and hippies who spent their time at the funeral home laughing and talking with each other. Others remember not being able to get close enough to the coffin to quietly pay their respects, because of the crowd that showed up that day.<sup>137</sup>

In his last years, Jack Kerouac may have had the realization of his long-gone youth, and had a cynical view of the future. Jack was never comfortable to be as unashamed as Ginsberg, or free-spirited as Cassady. His experimentation with those lifestyles were far in the past and perhaps he knew that those

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<sup>137</sup> Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), 314-316.

characteristics were beyond his character. The freedom behind the notion of buying a station wagon and “disappearing with my rucksack into the West this spring” seemed to be less possible as his responsibilities increased. His aging mother, a neglected child, neglected friends and lovers, and ignored publishers, all demanded time from Jack that he didn’t care to give them. While a generation of youths were reading *On The Road* and reaching their own self-discovery, Jack assumed an identity to those around him as an absentee father, an absentee husband, and a man uncomfortable with his own fame, who died penniless.<sup>138</sup>

For someone who once cherished the boundless opportunity that life had presented him, Kerouac had recoiled to a xenophobic, morose character, nearly incomparable to the life he once led. Stella chose the epitaph on Jack’s gravestone. It read: “He Honored Life”. Allen Ginsberg thought the message was incomplete, adding: “He Honored Death, too”.<sup>139</sup>

Posthumously, the legend of Jack Kerouac grew. Over time, certain works of Kerouac rose to prominence, studied and analyzed for artistic merit. However, this pop culture evaluation of Kerouac has transformed him into a caricature of his actual self; his most noteworthy aspects were embellished and quickly overshadowed the less familiar parts. He is a man who deserves to be

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<sup>138</sup> Joyce Johnson, *Minor Characters* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 105.

<sup>139</sup> Ellis Amburn, *Subterranean Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 377.

humanized, someone unenthusiastic about his fame while he was living who would undoubtedly be alarmed by the fame he has garnered since his death.

Jack Kerouac never asked to be crowned the leader of a counter-culture, but rather intended to write novels about his family, friends, and upbringing, and was reluctant to be acknowledged as anything but a writer. "What do I think of myself?" said Kerouac responding to a question. "I'm sick of myself. Well, I know I'm a good writer, a great writer. I'm not a man of courage. But there's one thing I know how to do, and that's write stories. That's all!"<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Barry Miles, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats: A Portrait* (London: Virgin Publishing Ltd., 1998), 300.