

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# American Prince

Tony Curtis with Peter Golenbock

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## About the Book

Elvis copied his looks. The Beatles put him on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*. Tony Curtis is without question a Hollywood legend and part of its Golden Age.

Now, in *American Prince*, Curtis tells the story of his hard-knock childhood, his immigrant background, his wild days as a Hollywood playboy, his destructive drug addiction and his life today as an artist in his eighties. He talks frankly about the people he has known during his illustrious career, from his co-star Jack Lemmon in the unforgettable *Some Like It Hot*, to Frank Sinatra, Cary Grant and James Dean, and the screen sirens he has romanced, such as Marilyn Monroe, Janet Leigh and Natalie Wood.

Forthright and enthralling, and sparing no detail and no ego, *American Prince* is the true record of a life lived to the full.

## About the Author

**Tony Curtis** is a screen legend. In his 60-year career he has appeared in over 100 films, including such classics as *Spartacus*, *The Defiant Ones* and *Some Like It Hot*. His numerous TV appearances include co-starring with Roger Moore in *The Persuaders*. He lives in Las Vegas with his fifth wife, Jill.

**Peter Golenbock** has written six *New York Times* bestsellers over a 33-year career.

AMERICAN  
PRINCE



TONY CURTIS

with Peter Golenbock



To my wife, Jill Ann Vandenberg Curtis

*Bring your visions to me clearly  
Let me hear the sight of you  
Reach out and know the wind is trembling,  
Sighing silently your shade of blue.*



# Preface



TRULY, TONY CURTIS has led an extraordinary life. He and I have been together for almost fifteen years now, and even for me it has been an amazing experience to read these pages. Of course we've always shared the most intimate stories of our lives, and yet Tony never talked much about the tragic deaths of his siblings, or what it truly was like to grow up in poverty, or in fear of being beaten up for being Jewish. I see more clearly now how Tony became such a fighter—there was no other way to survive, much less to make his amazing journey from living in an abandoned tenement building to becoming one of Hollywood's biggest stars, a member of America's royalty. And now I know that so much of what is special about Tony—his generosity, his grace, his charm, his kindness, his enthusiasm for life, and his instinct for making every moment somehow grand—he taught himself by going to the movies and immersing himself in the cinematic lives of actors like Gene Kelly and Cary Grant, whom he so admired. I have never known anyone more romantic, more poetic, or more *alive* than Tony.

Tony may not have dwelled on the hardships he faced growing up, but he certainly never lost sight of what it's like to have to work hard just to get by. From time to time we travel to New York City, where we sometimes stay at the St. Regis Hotel. When Tony was a boy, he shined shoes outside this very hotel, wistfully watching all the rich and famous people coming and going. Nowadays, when Tony pulls up in a chauffeured sedan and is warmly greeted by the doorman, he greets him graciously in return before pausing and looking at the spot near the sidewalk grate where he stood as a little boy, shoeshine box in hand. I have

always loved that about Tony, his appreciation for just how far he has come.

Tony Curtis loves people, whether they are doormen or billionaires, and he is supremely comfortable in his own skin, which inspires me to live the same way. Shortly after he and I started dating, he said, "Come on, we are going to my friend Frank's house for dinner." Starting to learn that I always needed to be on my toes with Tony, I asked him the usual barrage of questions, so at least I would have some sense of what to wear. Tony's response was simple, "It's just my friend, Frank Sinatra." Just like that. For Tony, the most important word in that sentence was "friend." Not long after that dinner, Frank's health declined, and Tony and I would go over to visit and play poker so that Frank could have a little company and remember the good times. At some point in the evening Tony would always sneak off to Frank's bedroom, just to sit and be with his friend. From the living room Barbara and I could hear laughing, and sometimes a few tears. Tony and Frank were like brothers, and I think a little piece of Tony died the day Frank passed away.

After Tony and I were married in 1998, we moved to Las Vegas, where we live now. Vegas is a wonderful town. We have some great friends here and Tony really enjoys his life. People who live here somehow seem less judgmental than anywhere else I've ever lived. I guess you have to have a sense of humor to live in a city with an Egyptian pyramid that shoots the most powerful light in the world out its top.

One day after we moved to Vegas the telephone rang, and Tony was offered a job performing in the stage musical of *Some Like It Hot*. He had not done theater work since he was very young, and he thought it would be an interesting challenge. Little did he know! For months, he trained, practiced lines, and rehearsed; there was Tony, seventy-seven years old, tap dancing and singing with his coach out in his art studio overlooking the Vegas strip. I was amazed

at how hard Tony worked. After months of lessons at home, it was off to New York for rehearsals, and then to a year of touring and living out of suitcases. At age seventy-eight, Tony performed in all 237 shows in thirty-seven cities across the United States. People loved the show, and he was hilarious in it. What an experience!

The worst day of my life came in December 2006. That morning started much like any other. I woke early, spent some time with Tony, and left the house to tend to the horses at our ranch. A few hours later, I received a call that Tony had been taken by ambulance to the emergency room at St. Rose Hospital in Henderson, Nevada. Our housekeeper, Luz, had been at the grocery store, and Tony's assistant had not yet arrived at work, so to this day none of us knows exactly what happened. We do know that Tony called 911 and told the dispatcher he was having difficulty breathing. Paramedics arrived within minutes, and placed a breathing tube down his throat, which is standard procedure. It was all downhill from there.

By the time I arrived at the E.R., Tony was already on a ventilator. The situation got worse when fluid began to accumulate in his lungs and he developed pneumonia. It was truly a horrific cycle: as Tony's lungs filled with fluid they grew weaker, so the doctors couldn't take out the breathing tube that was causing the fluid buildup. Worst of all, Tony was so confused that he fought the tube down his throat, forcing the doctors to keep him heavily sedated, and then to put him into a drug-induced coma. He stayed that way in the intensive care unit for thirty days.

It was the longest month of my life. Family and close friends came to town to help me with my bedside vigil, but all of us felt terribly helpless. Finally, the doctors came to me and said, "We've done everything we can. He's either going to turn the corner or he's not. Now it's up to Tony."

Christmas and the New Year came and went, and still Tony showed no signs of coming out of his coma. Finally,

two weeks later, the clouds parted: he regained consciousness and came off the ventilator. But our happiness was short-lived. Now that Tony was conscious, we discovered that he was almost completely unable to move. All he could do was blink. It took everything I had not to break down completely when the doctors told me they didn't know if his condition would ever improve.

But in a manner nothing short of miraculous, Tony slowly began to grow stronger. There have been poems written about the beauty of a nightingale's song, or the joy in a baby's laugh. I will tell you, though, that the sweetest sound I have ever heard was in a Nevada hospital room. I was sitting by Tony's bed, passing the time watching a movie on my DVD player, when all of a sudden I heard that unmistakable gravelly voice: "What movie are you watching?" I turned to Tony, hugged him, and wept for joy.

After that, Tony underwent months of intensive rehabilitative therapy, learning to walk and talk again—all the things we take for granted. The amazing staff at HealthSouth in Henderson, Nevada, even taught him how to write his name, which may give you some sense of how far he had to come back. This was a man who had signed millions of autographs all around the world!

It has been a long and difficult fight for Tony, but the man is nothing if not a fighter, and he is doing wonderfully now. He is still in a wheelchair sometimes, but only when he gets tired. Not long after Tony finished his last rehab session, he was offered a role in the movie *David & Fatima*, and off we went to L.A. At one point between takes, he wheeled past me and my mom at high speed, shouting, "I am having the time of my life, girls!" Tony Curtis was back.

These days Tony is dedicating himself to painting, something he has enjoyed doing all his life. In April 2008, he had a sold-out art show in London, and another very successful art show in Paris. He also takes great pleasure in meeting people who have followed his movie career.

There is nothing in the world like his laughter when he's chatting with a fan that has waited a lifetime to meet Tony Curtis.

When Tony is not busy in the art studio, writing his poetry, or traveling the world, he's actively involved in our ranch, a nonprofit foundation that he and I set up in 2003 called Shiloh Horse Rescue ([www.shilohhorsesrescue.com](http://www.shilohhorsesrescue.com)). *Shiloh* is a Hebrew word meaning "a place of peace," and on our forty-acre ranch in Sandy Valley, thirty miles outside Las Vegas, we take care of horses rescued from slaughter or from abuse or neglect. Tony and I have been very active in our support of the American Horse Slaughter Prevention Act and we have traveled to Washington, D.C., many times to walk the halls of Congress and the Senate trying to gain support for this worthy cause. Tony, my mom Sally, and I work hard to make Shiloh a place of peace for horses and other animals in need. Little did Tony know when he married me that one day he would have so many animals in his life; in addition to our many dogs and cats we usually have nearly two hundred horses at Shiloh at any given time. Our life is fulfilling and very busy.

One of Tony's favorite poems is "Richard Cory" by Edwin Robinson, and there's a stanza in the poem that always makes me think of Tony:

*And he was always quietly arrayed,  
And he was always human when he talked;  
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,  
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.*

Tony truly does glitter among us. And it's not just for the 122 movies he's made, or for the hundreds of amazing stories you're about to read. He also has been knighted by the Hungarian Government and has received the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French Government; among his countless awards is an honorary

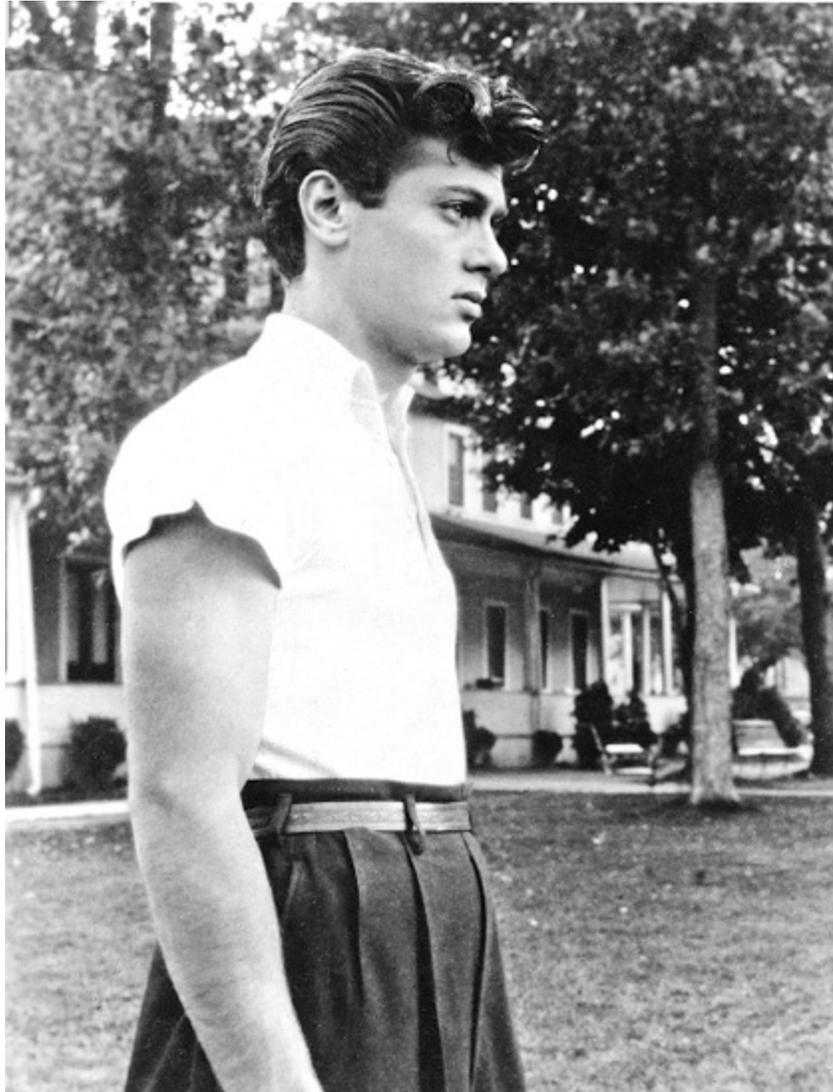
doctorate from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas; his art is in the permanent collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art and in the homes of some of the world's most influential people. Tony is a generous sponsor of the U.S. Navy Memorial in Washington, D.C. (he always refers to the Navy as his "other mother"), and he feels very strongly about supporting the men and women in our armed services. He also helped restore the Dohány Synagogue in Budapest, in honor of his family.

As you will see in the pages ahead, Tony Curtis may be a film icon, but he's no saint. He's very much flesh and blood, a human being with his share of faults and weaknesses. Yet there really is something about him that is larger than life. You can't help but smile when you hear his loud burst of laughter, see his mischievous grin, or hear that mellow, baritone voice. A bit of Tony's glitter rubs off on everyone he meets, and all our lives are richer for it.

JILL ANN CURTIS

July 2008  
*Las Vegas, Nevada*

# 1 New Kid in Town



*Working with the Stanley Wolf Players in the Catskills, 1946.*

ALL MY LIFE I had one dream, and that was to be in the movies. Maybe it was because I had a pretty rough childhood, or perhaps it was because I was always more than a little insecure, but as a kid I longed to see myself ten feet tall on the big screen. Through no fault of my teachers, I received almost no formal education, but after I spent three years in the Navy during World War II, the GI Bill allowed me to go to acting school on the government's nickel. I may not have had much schooling, but it turned out I had a gift for acting. When I walked out on that stage, it felt like a hand in a velvet glove. I wasn't scared; I wasn't even nervous. I just loved being the center of attention, just like I'd always known I would.

I performed in summer stock, and I acted in Clifford Odets's play *Golden Boy* exactly twice over a single weekend, but before I knew it I had been summoned to meet a studio executive at Universal Studios. It was the spring of 1948. I was excited, but I wasn't surprised. Going to Hollywood had been my life's plan since I could remember, and I was too naive to know it almost never works out that way.

I got myself out to New York's Idlewild Airport (now JFK) and boarded a TWA Super Constellation, a four-engine prop plane bound for Los Angeles. I had never been on a Super Constellation before, but I knew all about it from movies and magazines. I was served a little lunch. The stewardesses were real nice to me. One of them was very pretty, so I had a chance to flirt. I was just a kid, but already I loved flirting. Mostly I succeeded in sparking some kind of response, which was what I lived for.

On my first flight to LA, I sat in coach. In those days the sections weren't partitioned, so I could see into first class,

where a man with a mustache and a herringbone suit was being tended to by what was clearly a personal assistant. The guy in the suit would whisper something to the other man, who would jump up and do his bidding.

To my surprise, a little while after we took off the assistant came over and asked me, "Could you join my friend in first class?"

"Sure," I said. I got up and walked forward to Herringbone Suit. I had no idea who he was, but he was cordial and expressed interest in why I was going to LA.

"I'm going to be an actor."

"I figured you might be," he said.

"I've got a meeting at Universal," I said.

"Do you know anything about the other studios?" he asked.

I had heard the same Hollywood gossip as everyone else, but I had paid special attention to it, knowing that this was where I would work one day. So I said, "Warner Brothers is a tough studio to work for. Twentieth Century Fox makes action pictures. At MGM you have to sing and dance a little bit. RKO wants actors who are stable. And Universal wants young people. So that's where I'm going."

We talked for a few moments, and then I went back to my seat and fell asleep. After we landed, I went to pick up my luggage and there was Herringbone Suit, waiting for his assistant to fetch his bags. He saw me and said, "Can I offer you a ride?"

"That would be great, thanks. I'm staying at the Hollywood Knickerbocker Hotel."

He said, "My driver will take me home first, then he'll be happy to drop you off at your hotel."

We drove through the winding streets of Beverly Hills for a while before finally pulling up to a big metal gate. Barely visible through the trees and groomed shrubbery was a tasteful mansion. After we pulled up to it and my

benefactor's bags were unloaded, he reached over and shook my hand.

I said, "Well, it was a pleasure meeting you. And thanks for the ride. My name is Bernie Schwartz. What's yours?"

"Jack Warner," he said. "Let me tell you something, kid. If Universal ever drops you, come see me. I'll change your name to Tyrone Goldfarb and make you a star all over the world!"

We both laughed. Warner got out, and his limo driver took me to the Hollywood Knickerbocker Hotel, where I slept like a baby.

The next morning I walked from the hotel to a big intersection at Highland Avenue, where a trolley took me into the San Fernando Valley, up the middle of the street, ending up at Universal Studios. After I got off, I walked under a bridge with the freeway overhead until I came to the Universal lot.

I walked right up to the gate. Now it was starting to hit me. This was an absolutely thrilling experience for a twenty-two-year-old kid fresh from the streets of New York. My whole life I had dreamed of being an actor in a movie studio, and here I was about to walk through the entrance of Universal Pictures as a prospective employee. I pinched myself, but the dream continued. The gatekeeper told me to go to a door marked CASTING. I walked through it and up to a big, gleaming desk.

"I've been invited to come to the studio for a meeting," I said.

A girl behind the desk looked up at me and said, "What's your name?"

"Bernie Schwartz." Now I had my heart in my throat. I thought, *Suppose this is a big fucking joke?* I was pretty sure it had to be more than that because the studio had sent me a plane ticket. But what was a hundred and twelve dollars to a movie studio? So I held my breath for the long moment before she said, "Yes. Here you are on the list.

Welcome to Universal Studios, Mr. Schwartz. You have an appointment this morning with Mr. Goldstein. To get to his office, turn right when you come out of the gate across from the barbershop, go up the path, and you'll see his name on the door."

I was amazed. Not only had she known my name, but she was sending me directly to the office of the man who ran things at Universal. As soon as I left her, though, I got completely lost, so I figured maybe this was an opportunity to make a spur-of-the-moment detour. In New York I had gone to see some filming of *The Naked City*, a Universal picture. Howard Duff was the star. While I stood there watching the location shoot, I struck up a conversation with the propman. We talked, and I told him I wanted to be in the movies.

He laughed, but not unkindly. "Don't break your heart," he said to me. "Just enjoy going to the pictures and don't even think about working in the business. It's just too tough. You have no chance at all."

So while I was wandering around lost on my way to see Mr. Goldstein, I decided to see if I could find my friend the propman. It turned out the props department was right nearby, and there he was.

He remembered me. "Hey, kid. How are you? How did you get in the lot?"

"I'm here to sign a contract," I said.

"No!"

"Yep."

He was genuinely happy to see me and took obvious pleasure in my good fortune. He gave me directions to Bob Goldstein's office, and not long after that I arrived at the studio's inner sanctum, where all the executives had bungalows interspersed with perfectly groomed lawns. I walked along the path to an office marked GOLDSTEIN, where a well-dressed woman looked me over coolly.

“Mr. Schwartz?” No one had *ever* called me Mr. Schwartz before.

“That’s me,” I said.

“Just a moment, please.”

The door opened. Bob Goldstein was in town for a couple of days and was using his brother Leonard’s office. Bob sat me down, and we talked. He showed me my contract and said it would be good for seven years, with options renewable every six months, at the studio’s discretion. Each time they renewed I’d get a raise. My starting salary would be seventy-five dollars a week.

“I’ll take it,” I said. He laughed. I picked up the pen to sign the last page, and he said, “Never sign anything until you read it.”

“There are a lot of pages,” I said.

“I don’t give a shit,” he said. “Sit down and read it. I’ll be back in an hour.”

I didn’t have the patience to read every page, but I flipped to the section that related to payment: if they were renewed, my six-month options would go from a starting salary of seventy-five dollars a week up to twelve hundred a week at the end of seven years. Other than that all I could make out was page after page of whereofs and wherefores. When Goldstein came back to his office I was reading magazines, having spent all of four minutes scanning the contract. I’m sure he knew that. I signed on June 2, 1948, one day before my twenty-third birthday. I was officially under contract. Bernie Schwartz was in the movies.

Now that I knew I was going to live in LA, at least for six months, the first thing I had to do was find a place to live. The studio had been picking up my tab at the Knickerbocker Hotel, but I didn’t want to overstay my welcome. I had heard about a rooming house on Sycamore Street where five or six other Universal actors lived. I could get breakfast and a room there for thirty dollars a month,

which I could swing on my seventy-five dollars a week and still have some money left over for a car.

I moved in with whatever I had in my suitcase: a toothbrush, a comb, and some clothes. My room contained just two pieces of furniture—a bed and a dresser—but the location was perfect. After a three-block walk to Highland Avenue, I could get on the trolley and ride twelve minutes into the San Fernando Valley to Universal Studios. The trolley also went to the Beverly Hills Hotel and from there to the Pacific Ocean. Along the way you could see big, beautiful homes in the pastel palette of Southern California, with their emerald expanses of manicured lawn.

I WAS REQUIRED to join the Screen Actors Guild, so Bob Goldstein made me deduct twenty dollars a week from my paycheck until I paid my union dues. Bob didn't want me to wait until I got my first movie role and then be stuck having to pay a big lump sum. He was very kind to me. He made sure I was smart about my money, and I was grateful to him for that.

I got all dressed up for my first day of work at the studio, and I was sent with a photographer to meet various executives, including Wally Westmore, the famous makeup man, and the head of the props department. When I heard that Jimmy Stewart was going to be coming onto the lot, I walked down to the front gate and waited for him to arrive.

When he drove in, the guard at the gate greeted him: "Good morning, Mr. Stewart."

"How are you, Irving?"

"There's a new kid here who just signed with the studio. Would you like to meet him?"

"Sure," Stewart said. He got out of his station wagon, walked to the little kiosk where I was standing, and greeted me graciously while the studio photographer captured the moment. Then Jimmy Stewart got back in his car and went to work. This was my first photograph with a major star—

and I had been signed with the studio for less than twenty-four hours!

I started attending acting classes provided by Universal. Richard Long, a young actor who would become a friend of mine, was in one of my classes, along with a half dozen other actors and actresses. The instructor was Abner Biberman, who had acted in a movie with Cary Grant. Abner kept making passes at all the pretty girls, but he seemed to take special pleasure in showing me up. It couldn't be that I was Jewish, because he was too; maybe it was just that I was young, good-looking, and under contract. But oh, did I catch hell from this guy! You could tell that he had it in for me, so he was doing what he could to make sure I'd get dropped by the studio.

After a few weeks of this, I went to Leonard Goldstein and told him what Biberman was up to. I was smart enough to know I needed the ear of somebody like Leonard, who had the clout that came from being Universal's most prolific producer. Leonard told me that he had received other complaints about what Biberman was doing and that he wasn't going to let anyone dump on me for any reason. A short time later, the studio fired Biberman and replaced him. And I stopped being singled out.

THE BEST THING about moving to California was that I was enjoying total freedom for the very first time. Though I had been on my own in the service, Uncle Sam had still kept his watchful eye on me. Out here in sunny California, I was single, young, and being paid while I was training for a movie career. There were great-looking girls everywhere, so I decided it was time to start developing my knowledge of the opposite sex.

The trolley was no way to take a girl on a date, so I went out and bought a used pale green Buick convertible, with Dynaflo Drive, from Sailor Jack's on Lancashire Boulevard in the Valley. I paid very little for it, and it wasn't long

before I discovered why. One day I pulled up the rubber mat on the driver's side and found a hole that had rusted right through the floorboard. I could see the street below, but I didn't care. I had wheels.

THE GIRLS I was meeting, actresses under contract at Universal, were completely different from the girls I had known back in New York. These girls were beautiful, outgoing, and friendly, and they weren't bashful about sex. For girls in New York, sex was a big deal, and lots of girls were waiting until they found Mr. Right. The girls I was meeting in California had often tried sex at a much younger age, so they were more comfortable with themselves, and with men.

I remember some of those girls with great affection. Debbie from Iowa had an apartment in Beverly Hills, a pretty, little place. We'd go out for dinner, she'd invite me upstairs, and then we'd spend the night together. Her boyfriend happened to be an executive at one of Universal's distribution companies, and he had brought her to LA for a six-month tryout. I found out that this wasn't uncommon. Producers would bring these beautiful girls out from their hometowns, put them under contract for six months, give them bit parts in movies, and screw them the whole time. Then bim, bam, thank you ma'am, they'd go back to wherever they'd come from.

The Universal executive never found out about Debbie and me. I was very discreet. I respected the girls, so I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to get them into any kind of trouble.

In addition to aspiring actresses, I was surrounded by girls whom the studio hired to deliver the mail, beautiful young ladies who rode bicycles from stage to stage and office to office, bringing scripts and messages. There wasn't one I didn't find attractive. If a girl gave me a look, letting me know she was interested, I'd show my interest

right back. I was still shy, but I was teaching myself to get over it.

I had lots of different experiences with these girls. Sometimes things would lead straight to sex, and other times we'd just neck. Whatever happened was fine with me. I was just happy that they seemed to like me. One of the girls lived in a house with a little porch, and we'd sit out there, kissing. We'd go to screenings at the studio and hold hands until her hands got sweaty. But that was it. If I had pushed a little harder, maybe we could have had a relationship, but I wasn't ready to do that. I didn't want to cut off the opportunity to go out with all those other girls.

I couldn't believe how much fun I was having. To make it seem a little more real I started to keep a romantic diary; when I went out with a girl I would take a Polaroid picture of her and put it in my book along with some cryptic notes that only I could decipher. This book was proof that I wasn't dreaming the whole thing up. Without it I might wake up one morning and find myself in my parents' apartment in New York!

One of the girls who came to Hollywood looking for a contract in the fall of 1948 was a very young actress who had recently changed her name to Marilyn Monroe. I first saw her at Universal just walking down the street. She was breathtakingly voluptuous in a see-through blouse that revealed her bra. Her beauty was intimidating, but there was something about her smile that made her seem approachable. She and I were about the same age.

When I walked by her I gave her my usual friendly greeting: "Hi-i-i." She smiled. I smiled back.

By this time I had more or less settled on a new name for myself. The one and only book that I had read while I was in the Navy was *Anthony Adverse*, by Hervey Allen, a historical novel set during the days of Napoleon. I had decided to call myself Anthony Adverse, but when I mentioned that one day to a casting director, he said,

“There’s already an actor in town with that name.” So I kept the Anthony, and I added Curtis; I had a relative, Janush Kertiz, whom I liked very much, so I took his last name for mine. Kertiz is actually a very common Hungarian name. What a perfect name that is, I thought to myself: Tony Curtis. I had wanted a name that was a little mysterious, and this seemed just right.

I said to this beautiful girl, “My name is Tony.”

“My name is Marilyn,” she said.

“I’m driving into town,” I said. “Can I give you a lift somewhere?”

She paused, looked at me for a moment, and then said, “Okay.”

We walked together to my car, and I held the door open for her. I got behind the wheel, drove out the gate at Universal, turned left, and then we were on the Hollywood Freeway, heading into the city.

I twisted the rearview mirror a little to the right so I could see a bit of Marilyn’s face, and I caught her looking in the mirror at me. We both laughed. Nice. She had red hair then, pulled back in a ponytail. As we chatted I got a strong feeling of, well, *heat*. She gave off an extraordinary aura of warmth and kindness, of generosity and sexuality. I’d never experienced anything like it.

Both of us were aspiring to be famous, to be in the movies. I had gotten my first break, and this girl was still looking for hers. She was wearing a summer dress, and I could see her shape, her thighs, and her back. She didn’t wear much makeup, just a little lipstick and mascara maybe. I know it sounds crazy, but I noticed she had beautiful arms.

We hardly spoke, but I was keenly aware of her. I drove down Highland to Sunset Boulevard and asked Marilyn where I could drop her off. She mentioned a street, and I drove to this little hotel where she was staying. The whole trip took maybe twenty-five minutes.

I said, "Here we are."

"Thanks," she said.

"Can I call you?"

"If you like."

She took a minute to write out a number. I wasn't sure whether the number was for the hotel or directly to her room. She left, and for two or three days I couldn't think of anything else. But I didn't dare call her. It was too soon. I figured a girl who looked like that had to be in a serious relationship. She may have been married, for all I knew, although she wasn't wearing a band. After a week, I figured enough time had passed, so I called her.

"Would you like to go out for dinner?"

She said that would be fine. A few nights later I picked her up in my car, and we drove to a popular restaurant on the Sunset Strip. The food was good and we talked, but not about anything serious. We laughed a lot and had a good time. We went for a drive down Sunset going toward Beverly Hills before I took her home.

On our next date we went to a club called the Mocambo. I picked Marilyn up at her hotel, but I never asked her any questions about her living there, which I think she appreciated. During the ride we talked about the movie business. She wanted to know everything about it—the people I'd met, the structure of my contract, my acting classes.

"Any good?" she asked about my class.

"My first teacher wasn't great, but he left and the class got better after that," I told her.

I could see how much she was interested in movies. She didn't talk much, but she listened closely. I told her a little about myself, but when I asked about her life she didn't offer much, so I didn't press her. I figured the way she looked, she must have had an interesting history.

It was more interesting than I could have ever imagined, as it turned out. If anyone had had a worse childhood than

mine, it was Marilyn. She had been in foster care until the age of seven, and not long after her mother took her back, her mom ended up in a mental hospital. Marilyn spent the rest of her childhood bouncing from foster home to foster home until she got married at age sixteen just to get away.

That marriage had ended about two years before I met Marilyn. She had been discovered by a photographer who had seen her working in an airplane factory. Twentieth Century Fox signed her but let her contract expire. Then Harry Cohn signed Marilyn to a six-month contract at Columbia, and she had appeared in a movie called *Ladies of the Chorus*, which went nowhere. Harry had the reputation of demanding sex with his starlets before signing them, and I doubted that Marilyn escaped his clutches. But Columbia hadn't re-signed Marilyn, either. When I met her, Marilyn Monroe was unemployed and still looking for her first real break.

We went into the Mocambo, which had one wall lined with canaries in cages. When the two of us walked in, heads turned. Marilyn was wearing a flowered dress, nothing fancy, but she still looked fabulous. It was a weeknight, so the place wasn't crowded. I had the feeling that Marilyn was uncomfortable being seen in public, as if she didn't want to run into somebody who might see she was out on a date. What I didn't know was that Joe Schenck, the head of Twentieth Century Fox, had a place in LA where Marilyn stayed with him on weekends. Twentieth Century Fox hadn't picked up her option, but Schenck sure had.

Schenck was married, so during the week he'd go home and Marilyn would stay at her hotel. At this point I didn't know about her arrangement with Schenck; I only pieced it together later.

There was a live band at the Mocambo playing great music. Marilyn and I were sitting there talking, teasing, and enjoying the eye contact. I was falling in love with her.

I could tell she liked me too. It was really special getting to know her then, before the fame and craziness ruined her life. I wasn't thinking about bedding her, or perhaps I should say it wasn't foremost on my mind. I was just enjoying getting to know her and taking pleasure in how much fun it was spending time with her.

While we were talking, I looked at one of the canaries in its cage. It was sitting on this little perch, and while I was watching it just keeled over, fell to the bottom of the cage, and died. The place was heavy with smoke, and the poor canary must have suffocated. I looked over at Marilyn, but she hadn't noticed. I was about to tell her what had happened when a waiter came over, pulled out a fishnet from his pocket, opened the cage, scooped up the dead bird, put it under his coat, and walked past us. Another waiter came over, opened the cage, and put in a new bird. It fluttered around for a moment before settling on the empty perch.

That scene had a profound effect on me. I couldn't help but think about how tragically brief life can be. You're here and then you're gone, and is anyone really going to know the difference? I looked over at Marilyn. She was so—open. And I felt the same way with her. That evening I had a strong intuitive moment: *We're going to do really well in this town, you and I.* I didn't dare say that to her, though; you can't tell anybody you think you're going to be successful, but somehow I knew that given an equal chance, no one was going to stop me. And this amazing woman next to me was destined for great things as well.

Sure, some people in my acting classes had made some negative comments about my New York accent, but I knew how quickly I could learn things. I could fix my speech if I had to. And I loved the social side of this business, going to parties where you could meet the right people, which I knew would prove important. I was street-smart enough to

know that the way to get ahead was to keep my mouth shut and my eyes and ears open.

We finished our dinner, and then we drove to the beach, where we watched the waves break over the shore. We necked a little, and then I dropped Marilyn off at her hotel.

One day I went to the gym to work out, and there was Burt Lancaster. Someone said, "Burt, this is Tony Curtis."

He said, "Where are you from?"

"New York," I said.

"Where?"

"Manhattan."

He said, "I'm from Manhattan. East Side or West?"

That did it. I knew we'd be friends.

"East," I said.

"West," he responded.

Burt and I hit it off from the moment we met. He told me where the parties were going to be held, and he introduced me to his agent, Mike Meshekoff, who agreed to take me on as a client too. Mike in turn introduced me to Howard Duff, an actor who had begun his career on radio in *The Adventures of Sam Spade*. Howard was starting to switch over to the movies when I arrived in town, and we became fast friends.

Howard had a house down the beach just outside of Malibu. He said to me, "Use the house whenever you want. I'm only down there on the weekends." I called Marilyn, and we agreed to go to the beach. I picked her up, and we had a nice dinner at a popular drive-in restaurant that served steaks and hamburgers. The sun was setting, and I was feeling a bit nervous; I thought it would look too obvious to her that I was taking her down to the beach to lie with her, and I didn't want to offend this girl. We put our blankets down, and we lay on the beach and talked. Again she asked about my life, so I told her more about myself.

I told Marilyn that a friend had lent us his house, so we went over to Howard's place, which was a wonderful little

bungalow with a cozy fireplace. He had a little bar set up with whiskey, vodka, and scotch. I offered her a drink, and seeing my awkwardness, she helped me make us scotch and sodas. Then she began to tell me a little about herself.

She told me her mother had been sick when Marilyn was a child. I didn't find out until later that her mother was mentally ill and living in an institution. Marilyn didn't mention her father. She had a friend, Jeannie Carmen, a showgirl, who was very important to her, but on the whole Marilyn made it sound like she was very isolated. She lived in that hotel, and it didn't sound like she had much of a life. We started to kiss and fondle each other, but that was the extent of it that evening. About eleven o'clock I drove her back and then on to my place on Sycamore.

I liked Marilyn *very* much. I really enjoyed her company. She was a little odd, but I knew I was a little odd too. We both acted like we were outgoing, but down deep we weren't really at ease with ourselves. I didn't have self-confidence, or peace of mind, and neither did she. Her reluctance to open up about her own life just made me that much more interested in her. But the next few times I called to make a date, she told me she was busy.

Marilyn had been spending time at the Twentieth Century Fox studio. She was changing her style, her look, even her persona. When we first started going out, she spoke in a normal voice, plainly and directly. But she was learning what the public wanted, so by the end of our relationship she was beginning to talk with that breathy, sexy affectation that became her trademark. She had also changed her hair color from red to platinum blond. Her clothing had become, if not more revealing, a little more stylish.

On our next date we went for lunch at the Twentieth Century Fox commissary. If you were under contract at one studio, you were granted access to all the movie studio commissaries in town. I'd go to Twentieth Century, to