



THE BIOGRAPHY

LEONARDO

DiCAPRIO

DOUGLAS WIGHT

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JOHN BLAKE

For Lorna

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# PROLOGUE

Leonardo DiCaprio remembers the exact moment when *Titanic* transformed his life.

It came at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. James Cameron's disaster epic was on its way to becoming the biggest movie in history and DiCaprio, then 23, had a young girl stuck to his leg. The delusional fan, overcome with emotion at finally being able to clap not just eyes on the heartthrob she had only dreamt about, rugby-tackled the actor and clung on for dear life.

Amid the chaos and the throng, Leonardo had a moment of clarity and the absurdity of the situation struck home.

'I looked her in the eye,' he would later recall, 'and said, "Whatever illusions of grandeur you have about me, they're not true. I will sit here and I will talk to you. You don't need to cling; you don't need to dig your nails into my leg. It doesn't need to be *this!*"'

But the girl, who was no more than 14, had other ideas. It was as if she believed that by hanging on there, he somehow wouldn't notice – and she wasn't about to give up such an opportunity without a fight.

DiCaprio said: 'She just pressed her head against my leg. I said, "What are you doing, sweetheart?" And she kept clutching. There was just a sort of obsessed look in her eye. She wasn't looking at me, though, just my leg. I looked at her and I sort of grabbed her face and said, "Hi, it's OK, no, you can... you can get off my leg. It's fine." She kept saying, "No, no, no, no!" and I had to gently pry her hands off.'

If Leonardo had been in any doubt up until that point that 'Leo-Mania' had gripped the world – the most hysterical fan reaction since the Beatles – it was truly confirmed at that moment. Until *Titanic* became the highest-grossing film in Hollywood history, he was pretty much able to live in blissful obscurity. Quietly, he'd acquired a reputation for risky, challenging roles and already had an Oscar

nomination under his belt for his performance in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, but neither of these factors had sent the girls screaming to his feet. Yet within months of the movie hitting the big screen his life was changed forever.

He topped a list of the 50 Most Beautiful People in the World – an accolade that made him groan: ‘You want to be remembered for your work rather than being hunk of the month.’

Soon it became clear there was nowhere in the world he could go without someone knowing his name. On an environmental pilgrimage in December 2003 to the deepest Amazonian rainforest to meet the Alto Xingu Indians of Brazil, with his then-girlfriend, the supermodel Gisele Bündchen, he was astounded when a tribesman instantly recognised him and began chattering excitedly about the ‘man from *Titanic*’.

‘It certainly follows me,’ he admitted after that encounter. ‘I’m not exaggerating. I’ve been to the Amazon, and people with no clothes on know about that film.’ Indeed, a few years later he was spotted in a dusty provincial village in Mozambique while filming *Blood Diamond*.

Leonardo has been a tabloid editor’s dream celebrity. After *Titanic* it was widely accepted he had gone off the rails somewhat, and in June 1998, *New York* magazine ran a highly damaging expose on Leo’s partying, which didn’t put him in a good light. For the first time he started attracting attention for womanising and drinking. He made odd movie choices, industry experts insisted, when he might have been making millions, filling multiplexes as the romantic lead. Instead films like *The Man In The Iron Mask* and *The Beach* only made just over \$150 million each – respectable hits by any other actor’s standards but flops when judged next to the \$1.8 billion raked in by James Cameron’s epic.

At the same time as his fee per movie jumped from \$2 million to \$20 million, he was scorned for dating some of the world’s most glamorous women. Even the ones he wasn’t romantically involved with made for explosive headlines. Over the years he’s been linked to some of Hollywood’s hottest leading ladies: Demi Moore, Alicia Silverstone, Claire Danes, Liv Tyler, Sara Gilbert, Natasha

Henstridge and Juliette Lewis, not to mention models like Bridget Hall, Kristen Zang, Bijou Phillips, Naomi Campbell, Amber Valletta, Helena Christensen, Kate Moss and Eva Herzigova.

Yes, after the success of *Titanic* life was tough for Leonardo DiCaprio! His exploits prompt a comparison with the English football legend George Best and the famous story of the hotel bellboy who, on entering the notorious womaniser's room and finding him sprawled on the bed, with his winnings from the casino and the current Miss World laid out next to him, was moved to remark: 'George, where did it all go wrong?'

Yet, joking aside, the attention heaped on Leonardo after 1997 often made him wonder if perhaps he'd made the right move in turning down the lead role in *Boogie Nights* – a part that eventually went to Mark Wahlberg – in favour of *Titanic*. Bathing in his post-*Titanic* success, DiCaprio soon became a night-life junkie.

'Everything happened so quickly, I began to feel engulfed by it,' he explained, and indeed, it took him practically a decade to recover and find himself again. As Leonardo himself remarked: 'I was 22 or 23 years old, and it was completely surreal. It was insane. Nobody could have predicted it, or the effect it would have in so many countries. I shudder when I hear myself complain about it and so many people have so many more real and monumental problems but it was a bizarre, bizarre scenario.'

'After *Titanic* I was focusing on things that had nothing to do with the art. All the business with agents and publicists and managers, that can be extremely frustrating and ultimately a waste of time. There's no real control over how the media or the public perceives you – I know who I am, my friends know who I am. And, hey, I'm not complaining about my life: I'm doing something that I love and that's a precious gift.'

After encounters like the one in Paris with the young fan, Leonardo has grown to accept the level of superstardom that one movie has bestowed him but it wasn't always that way. Initially he'd turned down the role that would make him a star and was apprehensive about the marketing machine behind such mammoth productions. He even shunned the Oscar ceremony where director



Cameron and crew cleaned up. Since then, he's grown to love it, however.

'I have always been nervous of big-budget studio films,' said Leo. 'The hype and the marketing frighten me. Overall, though, I was glad to be part of *Titanic*. As an actor I look at movies as a relevant art form, like a painting or sculpture. A hundred years from now, people will still be watching that movie.'

It's just as well his attitude changed. In 2012, the movie was revamped for the digital age and released in a stunning new 3D format – just in time for the centenary of the ship's disaster. Once more, Leo's fresh-faced Jack Dawson will light up the world's cinema screens, sparking a new wave of 'Leo-Mania' and potentially introducing the heartthrob to thousands of new fans.

Leonardo DiCaprio might be the most powerful movie star in Hollywood right now, but it could have been so different. In fact, if it hadn't been for the stubbornness of a German mother nearly 70 years ago, there might not have been a Leonardo DiCaprio at all...

## CHAPTER 1

# SCUMSVILLE

Life for Leo really began not on the mean streets of Los Angeles where, famously, he was raised, but back in semi-rural Germany during the Second World War. For an episode then was to have a massive bearing on whether the world would ever be blessed with his talents at all.

Helene Indenbirken was a young mother whose daughter Irmelin was just two when she suffered a broken leg and had to be admitted to hospital. The local infirmary near their home in Oer-Erkenschwick, in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, was understaffed and overstretched. As little Irmelin lay in bed supposedly recuperating, as the nurses believed, no one took the time to notice that she was actually, silently, wasting away.

As the wards became flooded with more refugees and war-wounded, the nurses on duty had less time to deal with the apparently non-life-threatening cases. Only Helene, who'd arrived in Germany as a Russian immigrant called Yelena Smirnova, recognised something was gravely wrong with her infant child. Seeing that resources were stretched to breaking point and realising if something wasn't done quickly then her daughter could die, Helene took it upon herself to diagnose and administer the care Irmelin so desperately needed.

What should have been a routine recuperation turned into an agonising ordeal for Helene as Irmelin developed infection after infection and spent a staggering two-and-a-half years in hospital, fighting for her life. Emaciated and malnourished, her stomach became distended and at times, Helene feared she would not make it. But, thanks to her dedication and determination, the youngster

gradually recovered and eventually was strong enough to leave hospital while the war raged on.

When Helene's sole concern was her daughter's life she could never have believed that the outcome of those crucial first few months in hospital would have had such a bearing on the family's fortunes but it is something Leonardo has never failed to appreciate.

Speaking of his mother's battle for life, he said: 'She ended up contracting five or six major illnesses and stayed for two-and-a-half, three years [in hospital]. My grandmother basically came every day and nursed her back to health because the nurses didn't have time; they basically left her for dead. When you see a picture of my mother, it's heartbreaking. It brings tears to my eyes, knowing what she's been through in her life. I have a picture of her – her first photograph, with this tiny little skirt – and she's emaciated, with a belly like this,' he adds, gesturing to indicate the size of a beach ball. 'She had a belly full of worms.'

Incredibly, given her tender years, that episode wasn't the first brush with death Irmelin had experienced. Born in an air-raid shelter, she might not have survived beyond her first few breaths had the aim of Allied fighter pilots been off. That innate sense of survival may have fostered in Irmelin a desire to make the most of the chance her mother had given her. When she was 11, her family left Oer-Erkenschwick and moved to the United States to start a new life in New York. She enrolled at City College and in 1963 it was there that she met and fell in love with an enigmatic young beatnik called George DiCaprio. Born in 1943, George was an American hippie whose ancestors hailed from Naples, in Italy, and Bavaria in southern Germany. He had long, straggly hair and a bohemian air about him.

George's grandfather had made the perilous journey from Italy to America in a wooden boat and the young DiCaprio was to inherit much of that pioneering free spirit. George was emerging as a leading light in the alternative literature scene and would go on to count Beat poet Allen Ginsberg and novelist William S. Burroughs as friends, as well as fellow cartoonist Robert Crumb and the writer Hubert Selby Jr. He was rooming with Sterling Morrison, the guitarist

from The Velvet Underground and had already published a comic of his own – *Baloney Moccasins* – with Laurie Anderson, a former girlfriend of his who was also a performance artist.

Despite their initial differences in personality – George was gregarious and outgoing, while Irmelin was more reserved, yet strong-willed – the pair hit it off immediately and discovered a shared sense of adventure along with a desire to see the world. Two years later they were married and spent the remainder of the sixties immersing themselves in the underground counter-culture. It appeared to be the natural progression of things when Irmelin fell pregnant in early 1974, but cracks were already beginning to show in their relationship. Believing West was best for a young family, they moved to Los Angeles ‘in hopes of the great western ideals of a better life’, as Leo told *Vanity Fair* in 2004. Landing in Hollywood, they scraped by with enough to pay the bills but their choices were limited and so they ended up in one of Hollywood’s poorest districts. The couple had chosen Hollywood thinking it was the exciting centre of Los Angeles. Instead, their son recalled in an *LA Times* interview, ‘they wound up by Le Sex Shoppe and the Waterbed Hotel’. George earned what little cash they had by installing asbestos – still a popular component in heat insulation, fireproof roofing and flooring in the sixties and seventies. In his spare time he distributed comics and beatnik books to local bookstores and arranged public readings for the likes of Burroughs and Ginsberg. Meanwhile, Irmelin found work as a legal secretary.

As if to perhaps convince themselves that their wandering spirit could not be curtailed by diapers and feeding schedules George and Irmelin travelled to Italy on what has been described as a second honeymoon. Visiting Florence, they stopped by the Uffizi Gallery, where they took the opportunity to appreciate the Renaissance art. As Irmelin paused to admire a painting by Leonardo da Vinci she felt a strong kick inside her. Was her baby expressing its first opinion of the arts? Irmelin certainly thought so. She decided there and then that if the child were a boy she’d name him after the Italian genius. George was delighted – his father’s middle name was Leon and he loved the artistic element of the moniker.

Sadly, however, the holiday ultimately failed to save the marriage and by the time Irmelin gave birth to baby Leonardo, she and George were drifting apart. It has been well reported that Leo's parents separated before he was one, but the reality seems to be that they were apart before then, certainly on an emotional level at least.

Leonardo himself said: 'My parents were divorced before I was even born, but that's never bothered me. As far as my family is concerned, my parents were the rebellious ones – they're people who have done everything and have nothing to prove.'

Little Leo was born on 11 November 1974 and was 'the cutest kid,' according to doting grandmother Helene, who at that point remained in New York (in a quarter popular with German immigrants). Three weeks after he was born she flew to California to see the new arrival for herself. She recalled: 'Irmelin brought him to the airport in her arms. He had the roundest little face.'

Leonardo's parents might still have been living as man and wife at this stage but it was not to last. George felt stifled by domesticity and before his son's first birthday, had made plans to leave. As his parents did their best to work out how to manage things for Leonardo's sake and moved into separate households, the youngster was packed off to Russia on a cruise ship with Irmelin's parents.

By the time he was returned to his parents, George had already moved out but the solution was as unconventional as their lifestyle had been up until that point. So that they could raise their son together, George and Irmelin each moved into twin craftsman's cottages with a shared garden in the downbeat LA suburb of Echo Park. Before too long, George had met and moved in a new girlfriend called Peggy Farrar and her son Adam, who was three years older than Leo.

Peggy had recently divorced from her husband – and Adam's father – Michael Farrar, who'd managed a dairy farm in northern California. She'd met George in San Francisco, where he'd been on a business trip and she was performing with a theatre company. While Peggy was arguably saddled with the same commitments as

Irmelin (though six years younger), George nevertheless must have felt his options were better with this new woman. However, so as not to deprive Leonardo of a constant father figure in his life, the compromise was to continue living next-door. Somehow, the two families managed to co-exist in relative harmony.

The only early disagreement they had to overcome was settling on a sum of maintenance for George to pay towards the upkeep of his son. Both George and Irmelin were struggling to make ends meet and she felt strongly that her estranged husband should face up to his responsibilities. When his initial offer was deemed unacceptable, Irmelin had to take her husband to court to force him to pay just \$20 a week for little Leo's upkeep – all George could afford.

Life was tough for a struggling single mother. Even things that most mums would today take for granted – such as finding a suitable day care nursery, while Irmelin juggled her legal job – turned out to be a trial, particularly when her young son proved to be a handful. The infant Leo wasn't shy about making himself heard and therefore his mother found it difficult to find a nursery that would take him. On one occasion she drove to an outer district of Los Angeles to visit his new pre-school.

Leonardo remembers starting to cry, wailing, 'Am I going to stay all the way out here all day? I wanna stay home!' In the end Irmelin had little option but to solve the problem by becoming a childminder herself, taking in local kids from the neighbourhood.

Getting his own way was something Leonardo was quickly getting used to and an early episode gave him a flavour of what it could be like to be an entertainer. He recalls: 'I was taken to a performance festival when I was two. I had my red jumpsuit on and my tackiest shirt. My father suggested, "Hey, go up on stage."

'I remember looking out at a sea of expectant faces. After a moment or two, I began to dance – tappity, tappity, tappity... the crowd loved it. And I thought, "That's me getting that attention, *me!*" There was no stopping me and my dad had to pull me off the stage.'

He was to have less success with his television debut, which came two years later on the educational favourite *Romper Room*. The show, effectively a televised nursery session, saw several

sugared-up kids bounce around with a mumsy presenter and a guy dressed as a bumblebee. It seemed an impossible gig to mess up but Leonardo's dream debut was cut short when he became too boisterous.

'It was my favourite show at the time,' he later admitted. 'I used to sing the songs at home. So I went on *Romper Room* and I got completely excited. They had a little circle and they were all singing and dancing, and stuff like that. I was too excited to be on camera. I was running up and slapping the cameras, trying to pull my mom onstage. So they kicked me off.'

Such an experience might have crushed a less-confident toddler but Leonardo said: 'I got to see myself on television. I went completely neurotic, it was beautiful.'

Although George remained close by, it fell to Irmelin to effectively raise the boy on her own. But the area they lived in – Hollywood Boulevard – was not dubbed 'Syringe Alley' for nothing. The earliest memories for most children revolve around playgrounds and parks, but for the young Leonardo those images are forever slightly tarnished.

He recalled: 'We were in the poorhouse. I would walk to the playground and see a guy open up his trench coat with a thousand syringes. It was a bit of a shock. I lived in the ghettos of Hollywood, right near the old Hollywood billiards. It was the most disgusting place to be.'

'My mom, who thought Hollywood was the place where all the great stuff was going on, took great care of me but I was able to see all sorts of stuff at an early age. It was pretty terrifying – I saw people have sex in the alleys.'

With prostitutes and junkies as neighbours, it was impossible for Irmelin to shield her son from the raw life that raged around them. When he was just five, he witnessed two men having sex outside a friend's balcony. This was an image that would have a profound effect on him, especially when it came to tackling homosexual roles later in life.

While his mother was doing her best to limit Leonardo's exposure to more adult experiences, George was doing exactly the opposite.

He continued to hang out with the likes of Charles Bukowski, Robert Crumb and The Velvet Underground. He also made an acquaintance of drugs guru Timothy Leary, then only recently released from prison on drug charges. Leary had been an early advocate of LSD and at one stage was labelled 'the most dangerous man in America' by then President Richard Nixon and facing 95 years in jail for a series of drug convictions. Despite his notoriety, he was feted by hippies and the art community, inspiring John Lennon to write 'Come Together', so it was perhaps unsurprising that George would soon be taking little Leo to meet him. Years later, in 1994, it was said Leary even officiated at a marriage ceremony for George and Peggy, but given the suggestion that Leo's parents never legally divorced, this may have only been a spiritual blessing.

Unwilling to modify his hippy tendencies, George would take Leo to new-age parades, the two of them dressed in their underwear, covered in mud and carrying sticks.

Although Leonardo was used to the alternative lifestyle from an early age, one experience when he was six was something he felt was a step too far.

'We were sitting in a car,' he recalled. 'Dad suddenly announced, "The first time I had sex, I was your age. You should try it." But I wasn't interested. I told Dad, "Shut up, Dad, I don't want to try it. I'm gonna do all my homework instead."'

George later explained himself by saying: 'Leonardo was never excluded from conversations about sex or drugs. He's still on a quest to find out how many things he can do in life and not do them straight.'

It might seem the unlikely ingredients for a successful life but Leo's parents found an educational blend from the anti-establishment scene and the mainstream. By this time, young Leo was attending Corinne A. Seeds Elementary School, an innovative teaching establishment at UCLA, but Irmelin was committed to getting her son the best education and two years later she enrolled the budding star into the specialised magnet school called the Center for Enriched Studies.



The school attracted kids from all over Los Angeles and boasted one of the top performance records in California.

‘She drove 45 minutes there every day and back,’ Leo recalled. ‘So she spent every day, every weekday of her life, three hours a day, to make sure that I didn’t go to just any normal school.’

Cocksure and confident the youngster may have been, but those attributes often made things worse in the rough neighbourhood he grew up in. He might have been attending one of the area’s top schools but he was still the victim of beatings by thugs on the estate.

‘I was small, and I was a smart-ass – that’s a deadly combination,’ said Leonardo, who by this time was developing his own style, which in the mid-1980s was a punky haircut teamed with leather gloves and silver trousers. He was developing into quite the cute little boy.

His stepbrother Adam shared Leo’s contempt for the neighbourhood and its inhabitants. ‘East Hollywood was the most disgusting place to live in,’ he said. ‘We called it Scumsville.’

Adam and Leonardo got into several scrapes together. And DiCaprio needed his older stepbrother to come to his aid during one particularly gruesome episode that would live with him for many years to come.

He explains: ‘I remember vividly – for some reason this has been in my thoughts – killing a pigeon. The pigeon was limping and my friend had a gun, so we decided to shoot it and put it out of its misery. And it wouldn’t die, so we had to shoot it at least ten or fifteen more times, and it was this gruelling torture of the goddamned pigeon. And I was sitting there, and I was crying, looking at this pigeon who just kept getting shot in the head and the back, and who just kept wobbling. And finally my stepbrother just took a board and went “crkkkk!” and killed it.’

Living in such straightened times meant that Leonardo grew to love any opportunity to get out of Los Angeles and he spent all his holidays with his mother’s parents in Germany: Grandpa Wilhelm – Leo’s middle name – and his wife Helene, or ‘Oma’ as he affectionately called her. They had moved back to Germany in the early 1980s after growing weary of the American way of life.

Back in Germany, his grandfather's strong work ethic – contrasting somewhat with the hippy ways of his father – ensured at least that Leonardo could enjoy the sort of holidays that the economic reality of his parents' economic situation would otherwise have denied him. Helene remembers her grandson's visits to Dusseldorf as happy times. 'From the age of about eight, Leonardo spent all his vacations with us here in Germany,' she said. 'He even got his first taste for the sea when his grandfather and I took him on a cruise. We went all over – to the Bahamas and Canada. We also took him skiing in Austria. He was a very happy child, always ready for fun – and food.'

'He loved German dishes. A favourite was pig's trotters with sauerkraut. But his real loves are homemade potato pancakes and German cold cuts and rolls.'

Despite his many visits, Leonardo never really got to grips with the German language. 'The best he could manage was a few sentences,' Helene adds.

Then, from out of the blue, something happened that would change young Leonardo's life forever.

His brother Adam had been sent to audition for a cornflakes advert (his parents hoped it might earn a little spending money). That one advert led to a series – 20 in all – and Adam soon found himself at 12-years-old with a cheque for \$50,000.

Leo was amazed. How could so much money be earned from doing what looked like so little?

From that moment on, his mind was made up – he was going to escape his dirt-poor background and become an actor, just like his big brother.