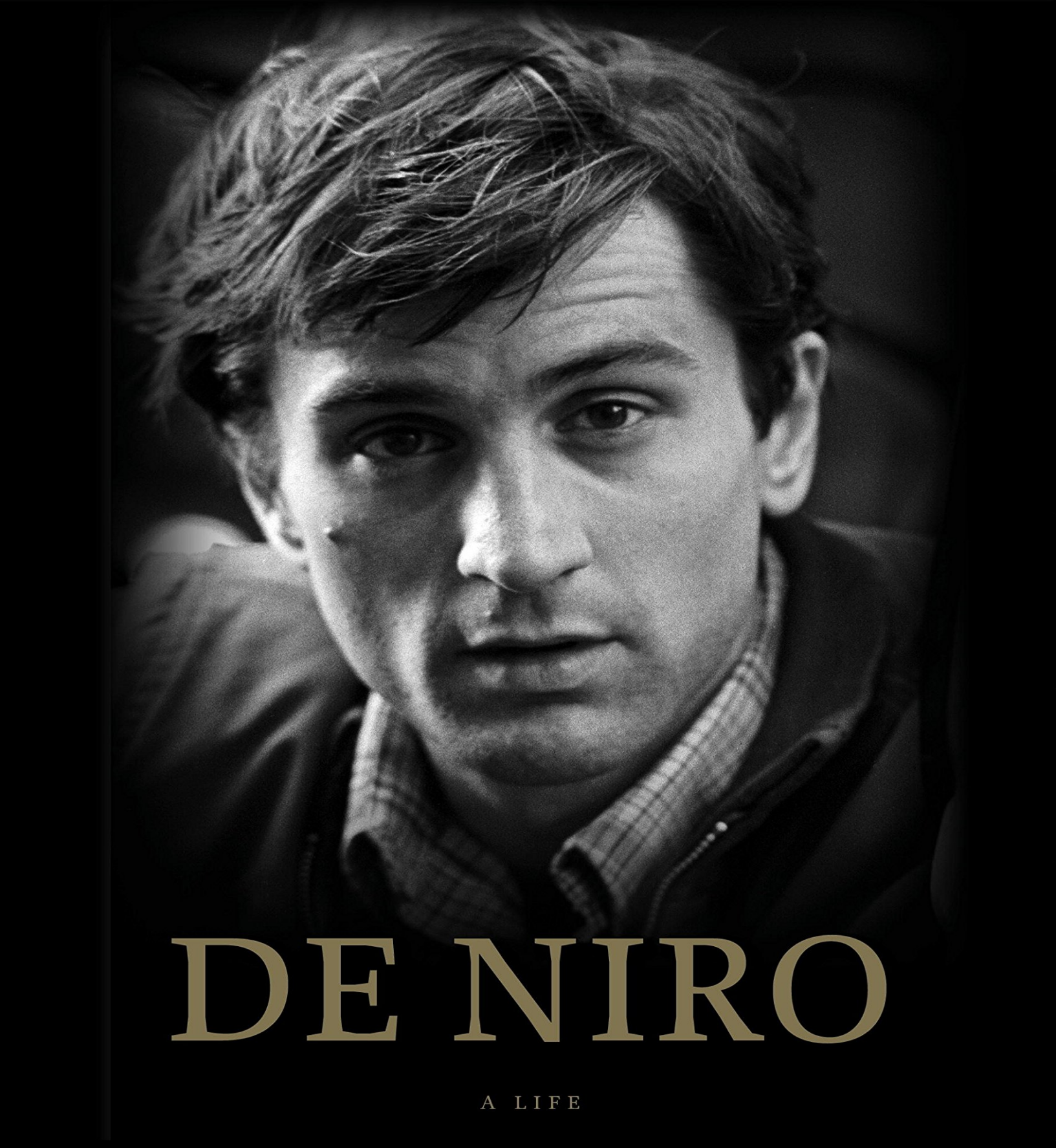

DE NIRO

A LIFE

SHAWN LEVY

Author of *New York Times* Bestseller
Paul Newman: A Life

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For my sister, Jennifer, and her beautiful family

Contents

INTRODUCTION

SPRING 2012, AND, AS FOR DECADES, THE ATTENTION OF THE world's film lovers is focused on the onetime fishing village of Cannes, France, and its annual film festival, one of the most prestigious and celebrated cultural events of the year.

On a muggy Friday evening, the air outside the famed Palais des Festivals is plangent with the hum of music written nearly thirty years prior for a movie about hunger, yearning, innocence, violence, crime, betrayal, and memory.

Once Upon a Time in America was an epic both in its creation (a dozen years of writing, eleven months of shooting) and in the vision of its director, Sergio Leone, whose preferred cut ran almost four and a half hours. The film premiered, slightly shorter than that, at Cannes in 1984 to a rapturous reception—a fifteen-minute standing ovation, one observer recalled. But its post-festival fate was a legendary catastrophe. Distributors hacked it almost in half and restructured the narrative, virtually ensuring negative reviews, tepid box office, and a kind of professional oblivion for Leone, who died five years later without directing another film. Over time, though, the movie grew in reputation—in part because of the posthumous stature of its director, in part because increasingly faithful versions of the original cut were released—and it came to be considered by some of its champions as the acme of its genre, the American gangster movie.

And so on this May evening twenty-eight years after its debut, a restored *Once Upon a Time in America*, twenty-five minutes longer than the version that first premiered at Cannes, will be shown in the very same theater where the original screened—as good an occasion as any for a typically deluxe Cannes gala.

In the dying daylight, with Ennio Morricone's luxurious and ghostly score on the PA system, the movie's star, Robert De Niro, climbs the legendary red carpet of the Palais to present the film.

De Niro has ample reason to feel nostalgic. Eight times previously he has visited Cannes in support of a film in which he appeared; twice his work garnered the festival's top prize, and just the previous year he served as president of the festival's jury. It has been, in many ways, a lifelong haunt.

And haunting too, surely, would be the absence of Leone, the reunions with his co-stars, some of whom he hadn't seen since they'd made the film together, and, of course, the spectacle of his younger self on-screen.

But De Niro has experienced all of that many times before, and he has accrued a reputation for stoicism and inscrutability, as well as a detached, even disinterested air about such proceedings.

Something pricks at him on this evening, though, unloosing feelings of the sort he usually reveals only within the strict confines of a movie role or in the hidden chambers of his private life. As he mounts the stairs, he has tears in his eyes, and photos will circulate of him standing in a tuxedo beside his wife with his face clenched in an effort to control his emotions.

Maybe it's the music, Gheorghe Zamfir's pan flute soaring sweetly and sadly over a mournful bed of strings.

Maybe it's the weather: stuffy, wet, thick.

Or maybe it's the knowledge that the chance to make a film like *Once Upon a Time in America* is exceedingly rare and impossible to duplicate once it is gone, the knowledge that movies, like life, can pass us by.

Such a sentiment would certainly mesh with the rueful themes and star-crossed history of Leone's film.

And it would serve, too, as an apt starting point for any discussion of the life and work of Robert De Niro.

WHEN HE BEGAN shooting *Once Upon a Time in America*, Robert De Niro was, almost without question, the most powerful and compelling actor in world cinema. This is an enormous claim, considering that such titans of screen acting as Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, Jack Nicholson, Jon Voight, Robert Duvall, and Gérard Depardieu were still ascendant at the time, and such older masters as Jack Lemmon, Paul Newman, Max von Sydow, Peter

O'Toole, Michael Caine, Marcello Mastroianni, and even Laurence Olivier and (when he could be bothered) Marlon Brando were still in the game.

But the Robert De Niro of 1982 stood apart even amid such auspicious and accomplished company.

In the spring of 1981, he had won his second Oscar in six years for his role in *Raging Bull*, a performance that was immediately recognized as one of the greatest ever captured on film, built of astonishing physical transformations and raw, wrenching emotions. The previous decade had seen him rise quickly from career in shaggy independent films to the center of such landmark movies as *Mean Streets*, *The Godfather: Part II* (his first Oscar-winning role, in which he spoke almost entirely in a Sicilian dialect that he learned for the film), *Taxi Driver*, *1900*, and *The Deer Hunter.* He worked with the cream of Hollywood's cohort of young Turk directors—Brian De Palma, Francis Ford Coppola, Michael Cimino, and especially Martin Scorsese, with whom he made five films in ten years—as well as with Bernardo Bertolucci and Elia Kazan. His pair of Academy Awards had been accompanied by two additional Oscar nominations, four BAFTA nominations, and a combined seven prizes from the top critics groups across the nation.

He was a master chameleon and an astonishing risk taker, diving as deeply into his roles as any Method actor ever had and coming through them stronger, bolder, better. He had a supernatural, mysterious air and conveyed danger, poetry, sex, loneliness, daring, intensity, surprise, and thrills. He was as exciting a screen actor as had been seen since the heydays of Brando and James Dean. His name on a movie marquee was a galvanizing draw. And at age thirty-eight, he was just getting started.

But thirty years later it could be hard sometimes to see De Niro's early glories through what had become the muddle of his later career.

The shift was gradual. For more than a decade after *Once Upon a Time* he continued to appear in high-quality projects with notable collaborators: *Brazil*, *The Mission*, *Angel Heart*, *The Untouchables*, *Midnight Run*, *We're No Angels*, *Mad Dog and Glory*, *Heat*, *Wag the Dog*, *Jackie Brown*, *Ronin.* He made three more movies with Martin Scorsese—*Goodfellas*, *Cape Fear*, *Casino*—and made his directorial debut with the tender and substantial *A Bronx Tale.* Over time, he gravitated toward smaller roles, working in ensembles or in cameos rather than carrying whole films, but he continued

to be recognized by his peers, receiving Oscar nominations for *Awakenings* and *Cape Fear*. And he continued to be one of American cinema's most watched, imitated, and respected actors.

He didn't, however, have a real blockbuster hit until 1999, when the outright comedy *Analyze This* became the first film of his career to gross more than $100 million (by comparison, Arnold Schwarzenegger and John Travolta—and, more to the point, Dustin Hoffman and Jack Nicholson—had each reaped that sum at least five times by then). It was a clever movie, making comic hay of De Niro's tough-guy aura and giving him the chance to demonstrate a funny bone that he'd shown as far back as the 1960s but had long suppressed under his serious Method-actor veneer. The following year, De Niro appeared in *Meet the Parents*, a comedy that was neither as clever as *Analyze This* nor as carefully built around his on-screen persona; naturally, it was an even bigger box office hit. And it presented De Niro anew—for audiences and moviemakers—in a way that would muddy his public image and threaten the impact of his legacy.

Two *Parents* sequels would follow, culminating in a trilogy that took in more than $1.2 billion at the box office globally and accounted for three of the four highest-grossing films De Niro ever made. And they were, relatively, the highlights of his career in the 2000s and 2010s. In that era, he shared billing with the likes of Eddie Murphy, Edward Burns, Cuba Gooding Jr., and Dakota Fanning, as well as James Franco and Bradley Cooper before either of the latter two proved a solid talent. He appeared in action movies that the distributors hid from the critical press until opening day (one such, *Righteous Kill*, co-starred Al Pacino), and he worked with directors of finite gifts and dubious reputation.

He'd had misfires in the 1970s and '80s—*New York, New York*, *Falling in Love*, *Stanley and Iris*—but it had always been clear that they'd been made with superior collaborators and with an idea, perhaps unrealized, of quality at their heart. But the films he made after the first *Parents* and *Analyze* films were of another breed: make-work, work-for-hire, paycheck jobs, call them what you will. He was capable of moments of inspiration, but by and large, the De Niro of the twenty-first century erased much of the goodwill—and, indeed, awe—accrued by the younger De Niro. "How does he do it?" was the most common question asked about his gifts early in his career: later it would be replaced with "What happened?"

In 2012 there was a brief upswing—a grounded and unflattering performance as a self-styled literary genius (and sometime taxi driver) hobbled by mental illness in *Being Flynn* and, miracle of miracles, a wrenching and savvy turn as a neurotic gambler trying to connect with his troubled adult son in *Silver Linings Playbook*, which earned him his first Oscar nomination in twenty-one years. But he quickly followed those up with the sort of wheel-spinning and money-grabbing stuff that had marked his work of the previous decade. If the old De Niro had reemerged, he hadn't, seemingly, decided to stick around.

And yet in other ways, the qualities of application, focus, and doggedness that marked the work of his younger days were still salient as De Niro turned seventy. While his choice of acting roles in the 2000s and '10s may have seemed dubious, his working life *away* from the movie set had expanded in scope and had come to define him in dimensions having nothing to do with acting. He regularly produced films and TV shows and even theatrical works; some of them, such as *We Will Rock You*, a stage celebration of the music of Queen, turned out to be enormously profitable. He continued to pursue directing, spending years to make the quietly tense and credible 2006 spy saga *The Good Shepherd.* He amassed a real estate and restaurant empire, starting in New York and spreading around the world, by 2014 elevating his net worth to an estimated $310 million. And he raised second and third sets of kids following up on the pair of children he'd sired and adopted in the 1970s.

Most visible, and perhaps most significant, was his investment since the early 1990s in the economic and cultural renaissance of lower Manhattan, his birthplace and the site of so much of his most memorable screen work. He was one of the first high-profile residents of the community known as Tribeca (for "Triangle below Canal") and came to be a significant investor in the infrastructure of the neighborhood, which once was filled with small industries and warehouses but, after De Niro committed himself to its development, became an enclave of pricey apartments, chic restaurants, trendy boutiques and night spots, and cultural and tourist activity. He built a film center in the neighborhood, a block of offices suited to production companies and their ancillaries; he opened restaurants; and he provided

Tribeca with a draw and an identity, even if the community was not always entirely willing. After the devastation of the 9/11 attacks on the nearby World Trade Center, De Niro and his associates created the Tribeca Film Festival, an event specifically geared toward celebrating independent film in a way that would bring vitality and attention to the neighborhood. He was a bona fide New York icon, both on and off the screen.

And *icon* is an entirely fitting term for a man of such secret depths. From virtually the first time reporters came to him to ask questions, De Niro scurried away like a wild animal. Though toward those who asked, he was respectful and apologetic through his clumsiness, he was determined to share, reveal, or explain next to nothing about his private life or his working methods. At first it was a seemingly playful thing—the new Brando acting much like the old one with the press. And when he did talk, the content was generally so bland and nonspecific that there was almost a comic air to it. In time, though, his reticence was discussed in darker tones as a pathology, a form of control, even a lack of professionalism, and by the 1980s, his stardom cemented, it became a theme in discussions of the man and his work. Whole articles were written in major magazines about the very subject of De Niro's reluctance to be interviewed, about journalists' courtships of and rejections by the star, and about the lengths to which shopkeepers and restaurateurs in Tribeca were willing to go to help their neighbor protect his privacy. Whenever he finally did emerge—to discuss a new business venture or a charitable venture—he lacked the ease and depth that marked the talk of, say, his famously garrulous chum Martin Scorsese. And when in 2012 he dove into the rigors of his first modern Oscar campaign, there was an air of unreality about the whole thing: when had Robert De Niro become the sort of movie star who would appear on daytime TV and choke back tears while discussing his family life?

Or was it just who he was—a man of unusual emotional capacity who had learned almost from childhood to be self-contained, guarded, and chary, even as he made tremendous strides in the most public of all occupations, acting? In many regards, De Niro's early life and the strong identities of his parents marked him in ways that he never escaped and maybe never even tried to.

His father, also named Robert De Niro, was a highly respected but somewhat neglected painter of the post–World War II New York School; his

mother, born Virginia Admiral and known by that name after the brief two-year marriage that produced her only child, was an independent businesswoman in the midst of bohemian Greenwich Village, active in progressive arts and political scenes but savvy, wary, and tough with a dollar.

From his father, with whom he never lived after about 1945 but with whom he was always close, De Niro learned the virtues of dogged work, self-criticism, and creative integrity; the elder De Niro's career was at its brightest in the 1950s, and as his commercial luster faded he held ferociously to his artistic vision and ideals, sometimes taking menial work to keep a meager roof over his head, but always maintaining a strong sense of purpose in pursuit of his aesthetic standards. From his mother, who possessed a firm ethic of Yankee thrift and caution and who built a one-woman typing service into a full printing business and, years before her son, a small real estate empire in lower Manhattan, De Niro learned financial acumen and strong senses of loyalty and territoriality. Both parents were creatures of powerful will: the senior De Niro was brutally hard on his own work, abandoning version after version of paintings until they met his criteria of worthiness, and Admiral was, in her son's formative years, a tireless worker and networker, connected to theatrical, literary, and artistic lights and sufficiently intent on carving her own way in life that she never remarried.

Together not even long enough to see their son out of diapers, De Niro's parents maintained separate households (such as households were in their circles), and the boy not infrequently bounced between the two, often on his own, a silent observer of grown-up life with his nose in books, bereft of siblings and cousins and, often, playmates. It can't be any sort of surprise that a child raised among adults—and adults who were swimming determinedly against the current of mainstream postwar American ideas of normalcy—should turn out to be guarded, suspicious, leery.

And yet, for all his vaunted privacy and secrecy, De Niro would spend most of his adult life in the most public of professions, pursuing it at first with his parents' sense of zeal and toil, then with a ferocious thirst for work that outweighed even that of his coevals and peers Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, and Jack Nicholson. Only four of the years after 1968 failed to see a new film featuring De Niro, often in the lead, and often, especially in those

first decades, revealing startling depths, abilities, and personality. In his performances—and in the frequently arduous effort he put into creating his performances—he opened himself up in ways that he was almost never willing to when in the presence of a journalist with a microphone. He never, as he once suggested he might, wrote a memoir, but his work—and the work that went into his work—stands as his autobiography.

And who was he, this inscrutable, talented, and elusive man? What did he bring to the screen, and what did audiences take from him?

Start with the looks. He was always handsome, with the aspect of a slightly more rugged Alain Delon. But with just a little tweak of lighting he could be either appealing or ugly.

There was that mole, perched on the corner of his right cheekbone like an asterisk, a mark of jauntiness or irony, or even, when he was roused to anger, the sight on the end of a rifle barrel: unblinking, accusatory, immutable. When his face was lean, as it was generally, the mole was accentuated and defined, almost like a third eye; when he was heavy, it could seem like a scrap left on his cheek after a messy meal. It was so clearly visible that it almost threatened his handsomeness, which bordered on prettiness when he was young and developed into ruggedness as he aged. But he carried it so unconsciously that you felt as guilty noting it as if you were staring at someone's lazy eye.

A lot of actresses sported such moles—beauty marks—almost as if defying the audience to see them as faults: Marilyn Monroe, Marion Cotillard, Angelina Jolie, Madonna. And, too, there might have been a time, perhaps when he was a young actor, when De Niro was tempted to have the thing removed. (Actors have done far more to themselves in their struggles toward careers.) Fortunately, he never succumbed to such a vain impulse, and the mole became as much a part of his persona as his smile, in which his whole face seems to pucker in delight (he can grin and grimace at once, show delight and menace at the same time, offer a smile that's a threat or a scowl that embraces), or his enviable, ever-changing hair, always thick and pliant and wavy even as it turned gray, often long enough to make him look like a rocker, sometimes cut short for the sake of accuracy or even to shock.

His body, too, was a malleable thing, at times chiseled and fit, at times soft and homey, now and then genuinely rotund. Lots of actors changed their looks for parts with makeup, hairpieces, prosthetics; De Niro, more than once, changed his entire shape, his commitment to his roles so thoroughgoing as to make his journey *beneath* the skin immediately apparent, like a tattoo, *upon* the skin.

And that's just what could be *seen* of his actorly craft. His work, from his earliest days as a student actor to very near the present, was actually far deeper, more technical, and more immersive than was generally acknowledged or understood. For the first forty years of his acting career, De Niro dove into almost every role he took with fervent research on the page and, when possible, in person: brutally paring away at dialogue (his preference was always for showing rather than telling), having long colloquies with screenwriters, directors, and fellow actors, and being meticulous in the preparation of props and costumes.

From his earliest days, he was prone to keeping lists of questions to ask, items to acquire, skills to master—always with an eye toward presenting a character as realistically as possible. He learned to speak Neapolitan and Sicilian dialects, drive a cab, play the saxophone, box, customize a military uniform like an Army Ranger in Vietnam, toss a catcher's mask aside like a major league ballplayer, and speak like a native of the American South, Northeast, and Northwest.

He could drive directors and acting colleagues crazy with his obsessive focus on detail, but he learned to build a character from the outside in, to allow the inner life of the men he played to emerge through a firmly established air of external realism. Even very late in his career, when critics and audiences often accused him of taking any part for a paycheck or phoning in his performances, you could see him building real men out of specifically chosen items of clothing, props, habits, turns of speech, and mannerisms. In a very real sense he saw acting as work and playing a character as a moral act, and he would almost always make an effort to live up to his own professional and ethical standards and do right by the men he portrayed.

That discipline of building from the outside in made him an actor with whom directors had to exhibit patience. Very rarely was he fully ready to play a scene at its best in the first or second take. He had to steep himself in

the emotion of the story, feel the energy of his fellow actors, mine himself for psychological and physical nuances. When he and his colleagues had sufficient bonds of trust to allow him to explore, he could create remarkable moments—real and convincing and seemingly unrehearsed. In the first decades of his movie career, working in lead roles on large films with powerful directors and the luxury of time, he was able to produce one remarkable performance after another in just this fashion. Later, when the scripts weren't as precise and the directors not so patient or capable, his performances could come to feel generic; you get the very strong sense that he was given fewer chances to play each scene in, say, *Meet the Parents* than he was in *Taxi Driver.* But by then, like so many actors with scores of memorable films behind them, he could rely on an audience's accrued trust and memory and affection to add the depth that maybe he himself couldn't bring to a character. Lots of actors, for instance, could have played the neurotic mobster in *Analyze This*; De Niro, arguably, was the only leading man in Hollywood who could bring decades of resonant performances as a hard man to the film's seriocomic psychodrama.

He has long been a figure of great contradiction in the movie business, reticent with the press but willing to go on late-night talk shows and do sketch comedy—and particularly agreeable about taking part in things that made fun of his own legend and persona. He would mock himself on *Saturday Night Live* and on TV commercials, but he was unwilling to share even with an innocent anecdote in conversation with, say, David Letterman or Jay Leno; sometimes he would speak in monosyllables or—defiantly, comically—not at all. You might wonder why he bothered, and then you realized that his show of taciturn stubbornness was in some ways more real and true and memorable than any palaver he might've offered up. It couldn't have pleased the movie studios whose pictures he was supposed to be publicizing, but it stuck with you, and when he finally did at least *appear* to be opening up, such as in the Oscar campaign for 2012's *Silver Linings Playbook*, he was all the more impressive for finally revealing himself.

And if he never truly opened up as a private man, there would still be so much of him to savor: Johnny Boy Civello riffing on various neighborhood characters in *Mean Streets*; Vito Corleone blending the ways of the Old World and the New in *The Godfather, Part II*; Travis Bickle ticking like a human time bomb in *Taxi Driver*; Michael Vronsky surviving hell and burying it within himself in *The Deer Hunter*; Jake LaMotta visiting righteous punishment on boxing foes, family members, and chiefly himself in *Raging Bull*; Rupert Pupkin wheedling his way into showbiz, legally or otherwise, in *The King of Comedy*; the gangsters and killers and bad guys of *The Untouchables*, *Goodfellas*, *Cape Fear*, *Casino*, *Heat*, and *Analyze This*; the complex but decent heroes of *Bang the Drum Slowly*, *Midnight Run*, *Awakenings*, *A Bronx Tale*, *Wag the Dog*, *Ronin*, *Being Flynn*, and *Silver Linings Playbook.*

Though movie actors may never say a single thing about themselves, may never once willingly open the door to the truth of their hearts and minds, nevertheless—if they are good enough and last long enough—they eventually spill everything about themselves out into the world.

De Niro may have tried assiduously to keep from revealing who he is, providing only hints and allusions in response to personal questions. Yet, every time he appears before us, no matter the costume, the voice, the name, the story, there he is, stark and plain before the world: a working man, a man of principle, a man of ideals—in short, a man in full, as clearly defined by the work he has done as by the life he has lived.

1

We sometimes think of the lives of celebrities in terms of how their work and their fame intersect with the chronologies of our own lives. We know, rationally, that famous people are born and grow up, find their craft and work at it just as the rest of us do. But somehow we still think of them as having begun to exist only when we first encountered them in a star-making film role, hit record, or athletic feat. In the thrall of a new star, we don't necessarily care about his or her parentage or upbringing or education. In our minds and hearts, and in the mind and heart of the larger culture, stars arrive fully formed.

But Robert De Niro's story, strictly speaking, begins well before he was introduced to the art of acting or performed his breakthrough movie roles, before his parents met or made their professional marks in the world. Indeed, it begins so far back that it seems almost impossible to connect the history of it with the familiar figure of the actor.

Only three times in his career did Robert De Niro portray a character from earlier than the twentieth century; nearly as rarely did he take on the role of a soldier, and just once that of a full-blooded nobleman. But the genealogy of this characteristically modern figure runs back through the centuries to, of all times and places, medieval France, where one of his ancestors, a cavalry officer, took part in the Roman conquests of Languedoc and Dauphine with sufficient valor to be named governor of those regions by the Roman emperor Conrad II.

Raphael del Poggio was born in Lucca, Italy, in 1011 and died, his surname recast into French as DuPuy, a general of the Roman cavalry and grand chamberlain of the Roman Empire, in 1062. He would be entombed on a marble table with his sword, spurs, and helmet, along with a copper plaque celebrating his deeds and honor.

The DuPuy family maintained noble status through centuries of governors and generals until the sixteenth century, when it turned to

Protestantism, creating a Huguenot line that would, in time, bring the family out of favor with both secular and sacred authorities. In the late seventeenth century, French persecution of Protestants climaxed with the Edict of Fontainebleau, which virtually outlawed the DuPuys' religion and forced them to flee, first to Germany and then to Virginia, to which King William III had invited Protestant settlers.

The DuPuy line thrived in the New World, merging in 1829 with the Holton family, also of old colonial stock.[*1] Fifty years later, one of the daughters of that union, Virginia Moseby Holton, would marry the Dutch immigrant Nicholas Admiraal, and their son, Donald, born in 1890, would be the maternal grandfather of the actor Robert De Niro.

If the idea of Robert De Niro descending from French courtiers and Crusaders and English colonists who fought off Native Americans sounds incongruous, perhaps it's because the other lines of his family, though less marked with incident, would shine so strongly in him, particularly the Irish-Italian blend. That nearly stereotypical alloy of immigrant stocks was produced in Syracuse, New York, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, after De Niro's paternal ancestors fled hunger and poverty in Ireland or Italy to make a new start in America.

Luigi and Rosanna Mercurio of Campobasso, in southeastern Italy, arrived in New York Harbor in 1886 with their daughter Angiolina, whose future husband, Giovanni Di Niro (as it was spelled in some documents), arrived in America the following year. Giovanni, known by the Americanized name John, was, like his father-in-law, a stonemason, and he and his bride set up their home in the Italian section of Syracuse. There they raised two boys and a girl; the middle of the three, Henry (or Enrico, as he was sometimes called on official documents), born in 1897, would be the paternal grandfather of Robert De Niro.

Henry may have been born to a lineage of stonemasons, but he found softer work as a clerk at Weeks and Anderson, a Syracuse haberdashery. He put in a spell of military service near the end of World War I, but by 1920 he was living back in his father's house in Syracuse. Not long after, he married Helen O'Reilly, the twenty-one-year-old daughter of Dennis, a bookkeeper, and Mary O'Reilly.

Like the De Niros and Mercurios, the O'Reillys were descended from immigrants who left only vaporous traces in official records. Dennis and Mary (née Burns) were both born in upstate New York, but *their* parents—Edward and Margaret O'Reilly and John and Mary Burns, respectively—were born in Ireland and arrived in America amid a flood of immigrants with similar names and similarly ordinary backgrounds, virtually unnoted by history or officialdom. In 1964, the young Robert De Niro himself, a twenty-year-old high school dropout, would travel to Ireland on a backpacking tour partly intended as a search for his roots, only to find out just how obscure they were. As his father would later recollect, "He asked about his background. He'd hitchhiked around Ireland for two weeks, trying to find relatives, and couldn't. I said, 'My father's people come from a place called Campobasso, halfway between Naples and Rome,' so Bobby went there and met them."

That trip to Europe wasn't merely a young man's lark or a genealogical quest. De Niro was inspired to go overseas in large part because his father had been living in France since the previous year, having gone there to, in a sense, reverse the trail of his immigrant grandparents and seek a new way of life and new avenues of work.

Robert Henry De Niro, to give him his full name, was the oldest of Henry and Helen's four children, born on May 3, 1922, barely a year after his parents wed. The household in which he was raised was slightly more genteel than those in which his parents lived as children: a freestanding house on Tipperary Hill, in the Irish enclave of Syracuse, valued at $9,000 and owned by Dennis O'Reilly, who lived there with them. To help pay their way, Henry and Helen both worked outside the home. After his return from military service, Henry took what might be called soft white-collar jobs as a salesman, a wholesale grocer, a general-store keeper, and eventually a government health inspector. Helen, too, brought in an income, at least in 1930, when she identified herself for the federal census as a "traveling salesman"—likely of the door-to-door sort. In the way of such things, their children (John, Joan, and Elizabeth followed Robert at two-year intervals) would have been expected to progress even further along the path of Americanization and upward mobility.

But Robert Henry wasn't the sort who did what was expected. In fact, he lived in pursuit of impulses and dreams that his father couldn't quite fathom. From a very young age—five, according to family legend—the eldest of the De Niro children displayed remarkable gifts for drawing and painting. Years later, he was unable to explain his incongruous absorption in making art—"I don't know," he said with a shrug, "I was very isolated." But his enthusiasm was encouraged by his parents and teachers, and he was allowed to take art classes at the Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts,[*2] where he demonstrated such talent that he was quickly promoted from the children's program to the adult classes and then, at age twelve, granted use of a studio space of his own, a lair to which he would repair regularly after school to draw and paint in solitude. His teachers took sufficient interest in the boy and his gifts that he was encouraged to seek more rigorous and more modern schooling in art. In 1938, he was awarded a scholarship to study with the noted etcher, critic, and teacher Ralph Pearson in Gloucester, Massachusetts. For any number of reasons his parents didn't want him to go, and quarrels resulted, but—with their blessing or without—he made his way to Gloucester.

There the teenage artist was able to immerse himself in whatever passions and interests caught his fancy. Instructed by Pearson on an anchored coal barge that served as a floating classroom, he learned of contemporary painting theories and techniques and had his eyes opened to a wider world of culture than he had experienced in Syracuse. Decades later, asked about a long-standing fascination with Greta Garbo, whose image he painted frequently over the years, he explained, "I was at an art school on a coal barge in Gloucester Harbor when I was 16, and after I read [*Anna Christie*] I made a model of the stage set."

When the summer session ended, De Niro returned to his father's house determined to go back out into the world to study, learn, experience, and, chief of all, paint. He was in Massachusetts the following summer to work with a new teacher, and it would mark the beginning of several key relationships in his young life.

His new master was Hans Hofmann, an expatriate artist and teacher from Germany who had thrived until the Nazis rose to power. He came to the States in 1932 and found work as an instructor at the famed Art Students League. Soon thereafter he opened his own school, or, rather, a pair of

programs, one held during the traditional academic year in a space on 8th Street in Manhattan, the other, run in the summers, in Provincetown, the bohemian village on the tip of Cape Cod. In these two fabled settings, Hofmann's modernist ideas were introduced to a burgeoning generation of young American artists eager for something beyond the pictorialism that still ruled their own schools and museums.

In Hofmann, Robert De Niro found a truly fatherly artistic mentor, a widely respected artist who was as renowned for his teaching as for his actual work. Hofmann preached a blend of European modernist theory with an untamed American energy. He had strong ideas, but he wasn't doctrinaire, and he was open to free and expressive work of all sorts. He emphasized the spiritual element of art making, and he favored a dynamic color palette so long as there was what he called a "push-pull" between the elements of an abstract composition. Partly because of his choice of Manhattan as a home base and partly because of his catholic tastes and ideas, he was extremely influential, with such famed painters as Helen Frankenthaler, Red Grooms, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and Larry Rivers among his pupils. (Indeed, his influence as a teacher would come to outshine his own work so completely that it would later be noted in a review of a show of his works alongside some by his students, "Sometimes he seems major *despite* his painting.")

When De Niro showed up in Provincetown, barely seventeen years old, he was introduced not only to Hofmann's modern and liberal ideas and frame of mind but also to a variety of ways of life more unconventional than anything he had ever experienced. Provincetown was nearly as old as American history, the spot at the tippy-tip of Cape Cod where the *Mayflower*'s Pilgrims had alighted before moving on to Plymouth. Since then, its natural beauty and cheap housing—and, perhaps chief of all, its isolation from the workaday world and its norms—made it a celebrated enclave of bohemians (including Eugene O'Neill, whose *Anna Christie*, so beloved by the young painter Robert De Niro, was set there). Cut off geographically from the rest of the world, it was a perfect place to experiment with sexuality, drugs and alcohol, and virtually any lifestyle variation that could be imagined.

Tennessee Williams, who lived in Provincetown during the summers as he cobbled together his playwriting career, would comment, "The whole

lunatic fringe of Manhattan is already here." Painter Larry Rivers remembered the scene, which he entered a few years after De Niro as a student of Hofmann's: "Romping and bathing in the nude was a popular activity among the young … trying to get laid was the number one preoccupation. Number two on the list was getting happy, either with alcohol or pot. Number three was making art at Hofmann's and at home, and looking forward to the weekly crit show of student painting."

In those crit shows, held on Friday afternoons, Hofmann assessed his pupils' most recent output with often abstruse explanations and impulsive reactions that varied from the discouragingly dismissive to the enthusiastically complimentary. He would speak of the techniques and strategies of old masters and modern heroes, pronounce theoretical precepts, and cajole and wheedle and nurture in turn, all in a soft, highly accented voice that could confound students but nevertheless transfixed them. "We couldn't understand what the fuck he was talking about," recalled another student, Nick Carone, "but you felt your life was at stake with every word he uttered. The atmosphere worked on you; it was serious, you were serious, and therefore you were an artist."

De Niro made an immediate impression on his peers upon arriving in Provincetown. Albert Kresch, who first knew him as a fellow student of Hofmann's and then throughout their parallel lives as New York painters, recalled, "He was handsome, very elegant. Better-looking than his son, a couple of inches taller and his hair was fairer. He was poetic in the Byronic sense." In a picture taken during one of Hofmann's celebrated Friday critiques, De Niro stands out prominently: tall and lean, with a wavy head of fair hair, a cocky posture, and a face that resembled, to a point nearing twinship, that of his son when the younger De Niro was a newcomer to the screen nearly thirty years later. He looks as if he's paying attention; he also looks as if he already knows everything that's being said and is contemplating something far more interesting. Despite his air of seeming detachment, though, he was an earnest pupil and something of a teacher's pet, being named Hofmann's best student of 1939—an honor that, cheesy as it sounds, was highly coveted. He was a star.

At Hofmann's suggestion, the seventeen-year-old De Niro took the next major step in his development as an artist, applying to study at Black Mountain College, the experimental arts school near Asheville, North

Carolina, where a litany of significant artists in virtually every field were attempting to change American arts and education in a single revolutionary swoop. Inspired by the pedagogical theories of John Dewey and the Bauhaus school in Germany, Black Mountain was designed to stress the centrality of arts to a fully rounded education and to the larger society. It was founded in 1933 and didn't survive a quarter century, but it had a huge impact on twentieth-century art. Buckminster Fuller built his first geodesic dome as a Black Mountain instructor, and Merce Cunningham, another faculty member, formed his first dance troupe there. Other teachers—often former students—included John Cage, Walter Gropius, Alfred Kazin, Willem de Kooning, and Charles Olson. Among the school's many celebrated alumni would be the painters Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, and Elaine de Kooning; the poets Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, and Joel Oppenheimer; and the filmmaker Arthur Penn.

Granted a full scholarship, De Niro arrived at Black Mountain in the fall of 1939 and, as in Provincetown, found himself in a miraculous kind of place. Decades later, he would still regard the physical setting of the school as a standard of visual beauty, and the atmosphere of study and work was an exhilarating boil of ideas, passions, and challenges. De Niro was studying with another German expatriate, the painter, sculptor, and theoretician Josef Albers, a key figure in the development of the Bauhaus who had emigrated to America after the Nazis shut the school down in 1933. Partly through the good offices of the young architect Philip Johnson, Albers had been named head of the art department at Black Mountain, where he and his wife, Anni, a famed textile artist, established one of the nation's finest arts education programs.

Though one of the youngest students at the school, De Niro was lauded by Albers, who compared his work to that of the Italian painter and sculptor Amedeo Modigliani and the medieval German master Matthias Grunewald. When Albers took a sabbatical partly through the academic year, leaving the school without a full-time art teacher, he was concerned that De Niro would leave, and he tried to mitigate the situation by giving his young pupil the keys to his personal studio.

Despite this preferential treatment, De Niro bridled at Albers's instruction. Contrasting with Hans Hofmann's sensual aesthetic and fatherly tenor, Albers advocated a rigorous, cool, and precise approach to art, and he

took issue with the young painter's somewhat lurid color palette, which he claimed was "too emotional." (As De Niro said years later, "A painting can't be too emotional. It can be controlled, but never too emotional.") "He found Albers to be too dogmatic and preferred Hans Hofmann," wrote a Black Mountain historian, adding the proviso that "stories of his conflicts with Albers are exaggerated." Indeed, De Niro himself declared that rather than quarrel with his teacher, he complied, at least in form, with his instruction: in school, he recalled, he "painted to please Albers, then went home and painted what I wanted." But he wasn't satisfied with the arrangement and determined to leave Black Mountain in the spring of 1939. "One day I just walked out," he remembered, "with only five dollars on me."

He didn't exactly wander the streets of North Carolina in penury. From Black Mountain he went to Hofmann's school in New York, then to the summer session in Provincetown. For the next few years he would migrate seasonally to wherever Hofmann was teaching, Provincetown or New York, maintaining his meager art student existence by doing odd jobs, including working for Hofmann as a classroom monitor and school manager. He hadn't yet celebrated his twentieth birthday, he was immersing himself not only in art but also in poetry (he was partial to the French Symbolists, a taste he would hold throughout his life), and he had a seemingly favorable future ahead of him, a star pupil who would no doubt become a well-known painter.

He was emerging as a young man, as well. From its earliest days as an arts colony, Provincetown had been a community in which homosexuality was treated with far more acceptance than in the larger American society. In the ordinary course of studying painting, working on his art, and making a living, De Niro met any number of gay men, closeted and not, and somewhere along the way he began to explore his sexuality with them. Among his acquaintances was Tennessee Williams, with whom De Niro worked as a waiter at Captain Jack's restaurant. Williams, older and far more daring than his young coworker, was gay, out, and unabashed, and De Niro surely noticed his fearlessness. Another acquaintance was Valeska Gert, an expatriate German dancer and actress who operated an illicit after-hours saloon and was, like Williams, unconcerned with hiding her sexuality.

De Niro, a teenager from a traditional working-class Catholic home, may have had a mature confidence in his artistic abilities, but he was reserved and quiet by nature. Though he may have been drawn toward men, his sexual activities, whatever they were, weren't conducted nearly as brashly and publicly as those of his friends—a lifelong habit, as it happens. He may have experimented with men and women, but he formed no acknowledged romantic attachments.

And then, like in the movies, he met a girl.

IN POINT OF fact, Virginia Holton Admiral wasn't a girl but a young woman of twenty-seven—a full seven years De Niro's senior. She had been born on February 4, 1915, to Donald Admiral, a descendant of those noble lines of French courtiers and English colonialists (with some Dutch mixed in), who had been born in Danville, Illinois, in 1890, and Alice Groman, who was born to German immigrants in Odebolt, Iowa, in 1887. The couple wed in Danville in 1913 and would have two daughters, Eleanor following Virginia by almost two years. Virginia came into the world in The Dalles, Oregon, a port town along the Columbia River, because Donald was pursuing work there as a grain dealer. By 1917, when he registered for the military draft (he never served), he had relocated his family back to the Midwest. And by the time the Admiral girls were still in their midteens, Donald and Alice had divorced and were living in separate households in Berkeley, California, where Alice worked as a public school teacher with specialties in English and Latin.

Virginia, blond, of smallish stature, and with a spunky personality, distinguished herself as a student and especially as an artist. As a teenager she was offered a chance to study painting in Paris but passed, preferring to attend the University of California near her Berkeley home. Even in the mid-1930s, Cal was noted as much for the radicalism of the campus culture as for the quality of education it offered, and Virginia embraced the former avidly, engaging herself in the Young People's Socialist League, a Trotskyite group that was in regular conflict with the far larger Stalinist organization, the Young Communists League. Along with her political activities, she pursued an interest in avant-garde literature, which brought her into contact with a clique that included the poets Robert Duncan and

Mary and Lili Fabilli, sisters who were as ardent about politics and sexual liberty as they were about modern verse. Along with Admiral, the four formed a makeshift bohemian family, sharing housing and fostering each other's work. Various decisions that any of them made about work, art, love, and life were made in consultation with one another; for example, Duncan, an outlandish and openly gay young man, was apparently talked out of fulfilling his ROTC service by his housemates.[*3]

After graduating with a degree in English, Admiral spent a short time studying painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, only to return to California and work on the Federal Art Project, with which Duncan was also involved, in Oakland. Together, they published a literary review, *Epitaph*, which existed under that name for but a single issue, then reemerged as *Ritual* and later, under different editorship, as *The Experimental Review.* The pair dreamed bigger for themselves and schemed about ways to get to New York and the lives of personal liberation and intellectual stimulation that they imagined awaited them there. In the summer of 1940, Admiral made her way back east, putatively to study for a master's degree at Columbia University's Teachers College. Before the term began, she visited Duncan in Woodstock, in upstate New York, where he was living on a communal farm dedicated to personal liberty and artistic experimentation. Then she moved on to Maine to teach art at a summer camp before finally settling in Manhattan in the fall to begin school.

Or at least that was the idea. Admiral was living, in part, on money that her mother had borrowed from her grandfather, and she was supposed to find a room at International House, a dormitory on the Columbia campus that was considered a safe zone for unattached young women in the big, mean city. But her housing plans went the way of her academic career. Admiral began to live exactly the sort of bohemian existence that she, Duncan, the Fabillis, and their new friend Janet Thurman had dreamed of, renting a cold-water walk-up apartment facing Union Square on 14th Street, waiting tables in a Greenwich Village restaurant, visiting a psychotherapist (even among starving student artists, psychoanalysis was a fad), and focusing on her painting and writing. It was a fairy tale of the artistic life. Indeed, as Duncan would describe Admiral's flat in his journal, "This is our last nursery—this is today's, 1941's projection of a Berkeley Paradise."

A mottled account of Admiral's *vie bohème* would come courtesy of Anaïs Nin, the not-yet-famed writer who befriended Duncan in Woodstock and, in time, served as something of a mentor to him and his circle, calling them "les enfants terribles." Like so many other European leftists and aesthetes, Nin had migrated to the United States to flee the burgeoning war, bringing with her sophisticated and even radical ideas about art and life. She was an intense draw for Admiral and her friends, who had never, of course, met anyone like her, and she introduced them to a variety of new experiences and faces to which they might otherwise never have had access.

Nin taught Admiral, Duncan, and their set, particularly the young women, about writing, about nightlife, about sexual freedom, about behaving in empowered and assertive ways. But Nin was not entirely a beneficent presence in the lives of her new acolytes. For one thing, she felt wholly superior to Virginia and the other young women in her circle. As she wrote in her diary:

> *Virginia and her friends dress like schoolchildren. Baby shoes*, *little bows in their hair*, *little-girl dresses*, *little-boy clothes*, *orphan hats*, *schoolgirl short socks*, *they eat candy*, *sugar*, *ice cream. And some of the books they read are like schoolchildren's books: how to win friends*, *how to make love*, *how to do this or that.*

And when she described her visits to Admiral's loft on 14th Street, she was again condescending:

> *The place is cold*, *but the hallways and lofts are big and high-ceilinged and the only place possible and available to a painter.… There is a lavatory outside*, *running water and a washstand inside*, *and that is all. On weekends the heat is turned off. The enormous windows which give on the deafening traffic noise of Fourteenth Street have to be kept closed. There are nails on the walls for clothes*, *a Sterno burner for making coffee. We drink sour wine out of paper cups.… The setting is fit for* Crime and Punishment, *but the buoyancy of Virginia and Janet and their friends*, *lovers*, *is deceptive. It has the semblance of youth and gaiety. They are in their twenties.*

They joke, laugh, but this hides deep anxieties, deep fears, deep paralysis.

For her part, Virginia would claim, years later, that she and her friends saw Nin as more of a sugar mama than an inspiration. Duncan was the only one among them truly smitten by Nin, both erotically and intellectually. But Admiral had other ideas. "My role," she told Nin's biographer Deirdre Bair, "was to string along with Anaïs as long as Robert felt as he did about her. We were just two kids from Berkeley, and as she took us to parties and fed us, well …"

There was, in fact, a frankly financial aspect to the relationship of Nin and Admiral. One of Admiral's moneymaking enterprises was working as a typist (among her clients was the poet Kenneth Patchen). As Nin was in the process of having her journals transcribed from longhand into typescript, it was natural the two should cut a deal. As Admiral remembered,

When I first met Anaïs, she was having problems with the person typing her journals (at ten cents a page, sometimes margin-to-margin, on rice paper with a carbon in French, but not a bad price at the time). I said I would type some of them for nothing since I wanted to read them anyway. Later, when I ran out of money she paid me.… One night a week I would stay up and type one of the journals, making ten dollars, which was enough for me to live on.… The early journals were rather heartrending, but when she seduced John Erskine it seemed unduly unkind. At night, the journals that were not out being read or typed were locked in a huge safe.

In total, Admiral would type a full sixty volumes of Nin's diaries, the pages of which Nin then edited and returned to Admiral for retyping. After that they were again tucked away in a secure spot, awaiting their publication decades later.

Admiral told one of Nin's biographers that she found the material in these pages boring, but Nin claimed (in a later diary, which, like the previously quoted passages, Admiral wouldn't have seen until they appeared in a published volume),

Virginia tells me she is enriched and liberated by my writing and our talks. There is an interesting interplay between Virginia and her analyst, and his comments on my work and our talks.… Virginia suddenly realized that she had never lived, loved, suffered or enjoyed.

It was true, in fact, that Nin inspired Admiral's circle to examine themselves in new ways, to submit to sessions of psychoanalysis and write about their inner lives. But it wasn't the only thing they did, and hers wasn't the only inspiration they heeded or sought. Admiral, for one, was still painting. In the fall of 1941 she enrolled in Hans Hofmann's New York school. And there she met Robert De Niro.

On paper they had almost nothing in common: a blue-blooded, pre-*Mayflower* Presbyterian spitfire from California and a taciturn second-generation Irish-Italian American from Syracuse. He was considerably taller than her, and she, of course, was considerably older, especially given their relative youth. But in light of his sexual mercuriality and her comfort with a variety of lifestyles, there seemed to be an ease between them. Both were reckoned physically attractive by their peers. And they were among the most accomplished and praised of Hofmann's students, which surely established a kinship or a kind of sibling rivalry—whether sexual or not. According to a fellow student, painter Nell Blaine, "Virginia and De Niro were considered among the most talented, the most gifted of Hofmann's students. We talked about them with great respect. They left an aura." That alone might have formed the basis of their bond. But a photo taken in the 1940s shows Admiral regarding De Niro with evident affection as they sit beside each other at a casual gathering. There was real love there.

During the latter months of the academic year, De Niro moved in with Admiral, and when summer arrived, they made their way to Hofmann's Provincetown school together. When Hofmann headed back to New York at season's end, Admiral and De Niro chose to stay on for a time, and he went to work at a fishery to help keep their little household afloat. But there was another moneymaking scheme in the air: Nin had been in Provincetown as well, and she enlisted the help of her clutch of young bohemian friends in writing pornography that she sold to a private collector who paid her a buck

a page, first for fully formed fictions, ultimately for juicy passages alone. Although she found the famously scandalous pages of Nin's diaries "boring," Admiral was game to try her hand at writing erotica. However, Nin deemed her initial effort "too satiric." De Niro, with his love of Verlaine and Rimbaud (as Nin remembered, he "wanted to hear all about life in Paris"), had been doing some writing of his own at the time, and he was at least willing to try to earn a dollar with a pen, even if it was smut for hire. But it wasn't his ideal medium. As he later remembered, "I was working in the fishery … and having a hard time with money. Anaïs Nin suggested I write some pornography at $1 a page. Thirty years ago that was a lot of money.… It was very hard work, so eventually I went back to the fishery." Additionally, the couple threw parties to help cover household expenses. "Every Friday night Bob and Virginia had a rent party," remembered Larry Rivers. "You danced, you drank, and you brought money."

There was some trauma between the pair that summer. One night De Niro revealed to Admiral that he'd been sexually intimate with Duncan, instigating a row loud enough to be heard in an adjacent studio. According to Nin, during a lull in their quarrel the two suddenly heard one of their neighbors addressing them through the thin wall: "I have been listening to you. I have been weighing all your arguments. I think that Virginia is absolutely fair and right and the behavior of Bob and Robert treacherous and ugly." (In another account, the unseen commentator declared that De Niro had behaved "like a real shit.") For the circumspect De Niro, this was an utter humiliation, at least as Nin imagined it in a diary:

> *Bob was completely shocked that anyone should have heard his homosexual confession and passed judgment on him. He had to know who it was*, *who now knew so much about him and had judged him. He did not recognize the voice.… He rushed out into the town. He sat at bars. If anyone looked at him too intently*, *he felt it might be the one. He wanted to talk with him*, *explain himself*, *justify himself. Every face he saw now he imagined was the face of his accuser*, *of his judge.… The idea was unbearable to him. He walked with his shoulders bowed. He was silent. He looked haunted.*

De Niro would struggle with depression and neurosis throughout his adult life, but this was the first time it became manifest to his friends.

Eventually the couple returned to New York for the winter. De Niro found work waiting tables alongside Tennessee Williams at the Beggar's Bar, a celebrated Greenwich Village watering hole that their old Provincetown acquaintance, Valeska Gert, had opened. The jobs didn't last long—Williams's lover of the moment, another painter who was also working at the bar, apparently flipped out over the policy of pooling tips, leading Gert to rid herself of the troublesome lot of them.

Nin, too, was out of the picture, weary of dealing with Admiral's provincialism. She was out one evening with Admiral and De Niro and talking about the various great artists she had encountered since arriving in New York. "Virginia stopped me with a prim tone of voice," Nin wrote. " 'I'm not interested in the unfamiliar. I like the familiar.' After this I kept away from them."

Money for such necessities as food, rent, and art materials was still scarce, but a bigger challenge faced them all that December when the United States entered the global war and the likes of nineteen-year-old Robert De Niro and twenty-two-year-old Robert Duncan would have been prime candidates for service. Duncan, the ROTC dropout, was eventually drafted and spent several weeks in boot camp before wrangling a discharge on the basis of his homosexuality. De Niro, who had begun a furtive and sporadic sexual relationship with Duncan, had another means of avoiding the war: not long after the attack on Pearl Harbor, he and Admiral were married.

THE FOLLOWING YEAR provided plenty of excitement for the newlywed couple. For one thing, they began to experience some real—if modest—success in the world beyond Hofmann's classroom. Admiral sold a canvas to the Museum of Modern Art for the princely sum of $100 (about $1,350 in 2013 dollars) and then another to Peggy Guggenheim, who had arrived in New York and begun to acquire and exhibit the work of new young artists at her 57th Street gallery, Art of This Century. De Niro would later acknowledge how impressive these sales were: the young Admiral, he recalled years later, was "a *very good* painter." As he put it, "What she was doing then wasn't

fashionable," he recalled, "and a woman painter had a harder time." Nell Blaine, another painter in Hofmann's classes, affirmed the rare stature that Admiral—and De Niro alongside her—had attained: "Virginia was the only student I knew at that time to sell a painting to the Museum of Modern Art."

The couple had another important patron in Guggenheim's uncle, Solomon Guggenheim, who had begun to amass the collection that formed the basis of the famed Fifth Avenue museum that would eventually bear his name. At the time, the nascent institution was known inelegantly as the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, and as part of its mission it had begun to offer small stipends to promising young artists, including the cream of Hans Hofmann's school. Admiral and De Niro were granted $15 per month each by a foundation run by Guggenheim's mistress, Hilla Rebay (Baroness Hildegard Rebay von Ehrenwiesen), who further aided the young couple's fortunes by hiring De Niro as an information desk clerk and night watchman at the museum, a position that found him working alongside his chum Jackson Pollock.

These windfalls allowed Admiral and De Niro to move from the 14th Street loft into a pair of adjacent studios on Bleecker Street. Likely they needed the space as much for personal as artistic reasons: before the year was over, Admiral found herself pregnant. And on August 17, 1943, the child, destined to be their only one, was born. They chose Hans Hofmann to be the baby's godfather, a purely honorary title, as no baptism was intended. They named the boy Robert Anthony De Niro, but around the house they would always call him Bobby.

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*1 The Holtons descended from the Woodson family of Virginia, among whose descendants are Dolley Madison and Jesse James.

*2 Now the Everson Museum of Art.

*3 Among the younger students who ran with the circle centered on Duncan was Pauline Kael, who looked with admiration upon Admiral and her friends. Decades later, Kael would experience a long, ambivalent relationship with Robert De Niro's film performances.