STREET OF DREAMS: PART I
By Michael Ventura
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In the summer of 1960 Dave had just turned 15, I'd make 15 that fall, two adolescent boys, ripe, impressionable, and seeking (unconsciously) for any possible clue, any sign, any example of what it might mean to be a "man" -- as long as it didn't look like our fathers and the other somewhat frantic, usually disappointed, sometimes bitter, and inevitably hemmed-in males who were our elders. Ten years later what I found hardest to take about "women's lib," as it was then called, was its vision of dominant males in command of society ... because, without exception, the working-stiff men of my childhood were in command of virtually nothing, neither on their jobs (where they feared their bosses) or in their homes (where, one way or another, they were usually out of control). A few doctors, teachers, and clergy were the only white collars we knew. With the exception of one uncle (a mathematical savant), the men of my childhood were house painters, cab- and truck drivers, bricklayers, garage mechanics, "pressers" (in laundries), cooks, factory workers, typists, barbers, the occasional fireman, the occasional cop. Many were veterans of World War II and Korea, but I never heard a single one speak of that; perhaps their spirits had been too wounded, or perhaps the contrast between the young soldier and the middle-aged laborer was too diminishing to explain to a boy. Maybe they'd dreamed big once, but they didn't anymore. What dreams they had left were so humble as to be humiliating: a new used car, possibly a house in the still exotic (to city people) suburbs -- and that maybe one of the kids would go to college. Fifteen-year-old boys are hungry for adventure, and it was difficult to imagine any grown man in our lives capable of adventure. If men were dominating society, it wasn't these guys.

The movies ... that's where we saw men we admired. Knight-errant gunfighters walking tall. Streetwise noir anti-heroes. And James Dean/Marlon Brando/Elvis Presley rebels, who seemed as confused as us; they just had a more stylish way of going about it. The gunfighters taught us their walk and their code, but in our clothes and our manners we imitated the rebels -- which gave us a sense of being cool but not manly. We were reading the Beat writers, Kerouac and Ginsberg especially; they had a wild spirit we also craved and emulated, but they too seemed more like kids than men. A 15-year-old boy is looking for a style through which he can at least appear to be in charge of himself and take his place as a man among men. Someone not to be fucked with. Someone who commands respect without having to demand or even ask for it -- respect will be his by right, just for the way he occupies a room. We could imitate the cowboys only so far, because they didn't have the 20th century to deal with. We could absorb the rebels only so deeply -- for we didn't want to be entirely shut off from society, however cool that seemed. Neither communicated how to be a man in the world we faced.

Of course the subtleties of being "a man" were lost on us. The price of experience ... how terribly difficult it is for anyone, man or woman, truly to hold his or her own ... what it takes to face down your fears, to be your own person, to answer only to your own spirit, and how few actually achieve this ... we had no idea. How could we? And yet there is a meaning to the words "man" and "manhood," or there'd better be, if any boy is to find his way. The same, of course, is true of a girl's relation to "woman," if she's to survive the onslaught of pernicious definitions supplied by men. Strange, isn't it, how difficult these

qualities "man" and "woman" are to define? Strange how much and how little they have in common. Strange that any such definition, spelled out, seems inadequate and banal, and yet, for instance: at the end of *Touch of Evil*, when Marlene Dietrich's gypsy says of the fallen Orson Welles, "He was some kind of a man," we know what she means, we know what he once was and what he'd lost.

You may measure the absence of manhood in a society by the desperation inherent in the images that seek to fill the void. ("Womanhood" is too awkward a usage, but the same thing goes.)

The World War II generation looked to male images like Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Cary Grant, Humphrey Bogart, Henry Fonda, James Cagney, Spencer Tracy, and John Wayne; and to female images like Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn, Jean Harlow, Barbara Stanwyck ... actors, presences, of considerable substance and range, far more centered and less self-centered than the generation that followed them. James Stewart, Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, and Frank Sinatra might be more vulnerable, more sensitive too, but they were also a lot more itchy, unstable, self-referential, each expressing a strength that was palpable without ever being quite sure of itself; while Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn signified powerful aspects of "woman" without ever giving the impression of a complete, many-faceted psyche that, say, Barbara Stanwyck embodied just by showing up. (Stanwyck could make movies as different as *The Lady Eve* and *Double Indemnity* with equal conviction, based on her centered and many-layered sense of womanhood; who has been capable of that since?)

The next great star-generation -- Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Jack Nicholson, Jane Fonda, Vanessa Redgrave, Gena Rowlands, and their ilk -- were excellent actors with all the old qualities, but those qualities were now in the service of a paradox, an unanswered question, an incomplete sense of identity, which is the nerve center of their best performances. Their signature portrayals are of characters who are trying (unsuccessfully) to be two or three people at once. Even Clint Eastwood, who has the most fixed persona of that generation, is most effective playing characters for whom good and evil are slippery, almost interchangeable, and he's always dependent on an almost supernatural capacity for violence. (By contrast, the physical action of Bogart, Cagney, and even John Wayne, was human -- ideal but not impossible.) As for today's George Clooney and Julia Roberts, and the interchangeable parts of the Brad Pitts and Ben Afflecks and Keanu Reeveses and Matt Damons (and the many look-alike starlets whose names I can't keep track of anymore) ... they're the same age as the stars of those long-gone eras, but they seem so much younger, less experienced, less complex. (The only exception is Nicole Kidman, whose ghostly sensuality is a startlingly new image. Even Denzel Washington, the best American actor of his generation to become a star, cannot match the gravitas of Sidney Poitier, the only male star from the 1950s whose work wasn't based on a sense of self-contradiction.)

All of which charts ... what? An erosion of identity. A cinema iconography that displays, over time, an ever more vague, uncertain, frightened sense of what it means to be "man" or "woman." It's not that the actors of each successive generation are worse than the last, but that they have less sense of who or even what they are. Also, a society with far fewer shared cultural assumptions limits the behavior that an actor can draw upon and still be widely understood. Tom Cruise tries (as in *Vanilla Sky*), but when he stretches his audience leaves him alone -- he's exploring behaviors that most simply don't recognize and can't identify with. Compare any contemporary star to Burt Lancaster and

Robert Mitchum, who became stars in the late Forties and worked all their lives: However opaque their psyches might seem, however indecipherable their depths, their sense that to be a man is to be a stranger, and their ease with the role of stranger, was communicable across generations precisely because their sense of their own manhood was unassailable.

So ... Dave and me, 15 years old in 1960, our dreams and our hormones in a constant state of ricochet, were looking (unconsciously) for examples of manhood ... working-class kids who loved our fathers but were determined not to be like them, because to be like them was to be defeated ... we saw hopelessness in the faces of our fathers, men who had given up on dreams ... we had no desire to emulate *that* ... our faith (and faith it was) was in the possibility of adventure ... it was also faith (conceit?) that we were fit for adventure, and that we'd find it or it would find us.

One summer day in 1960 Dave and I went to the movies. (In those days you usually just "went to the movies" and saw whatever was playing on the single big screen of whatever theatre.) It's a little embarrassing and maybe a little sad to report that the movie we saw, and that made such a lasting impression in terms of manhood, was *Ocean's Eleven*. It's a little shocking for me to realize how much it changed our lives, down to this day. Everything you love, everything you even like, and certainly everything you emulate, has consequences all out of proportion to its source.

to be continued ...