

## Jack Kerouac

Jack Kerouac (1922–1969), novelist and poet, was a pioneer in the Beat movement, a group of young writers whose post-war sensibilities led them to question authority, tradition, and the cultural norms. Instead, the Beats embraced new forms of expression, including improvisational jazz. Kerouac was born in Massachusetts, and his novel, *On the Road*, is the story of his journey west to find new experience and a new spirituality.

Kerouac wrote essays and produced 10 novels in draft. *On the Road's* experimental autobiographical style influenced many writers in the sixties.

## From *On the Road*

I first met Neal not long after my father died . . . I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about except that it really had something to do with my father's death and my awful feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Neal there really began for me that part of my life that you could call my life on the road. Prior to that I'd always dreamed of going west, seeing the country, always vaguely planning and never specifically taking off and so on. Neal is the perfect guy for the road because he actually was born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles. First reports of Neal came to me through Hal Chase, who'd shown me a few letters from him written in Colorado reform school. I was tremendously interested in these letters because they so naively and sweetly asked for Hal to teach him all about Nietzsche° and all the wonderful intellectual things that Hal was so justly famous for. At one point Allen Ginsberg and I talked about these letters and wondered if we would ever meet the strange Neal Cassady. This is all far back, when Neal was not the way he is today, when he was a young jailkid shrouded in mystery. Then news came that Neal was out of reform school and was coming to New York for the first time; also there was talk that he had just married a 16 year old girl called Louanne. One day I was hanging around the Columbia campus and Hal and Ed White told me Neal had just arrived and was living in a guy called Bob Malkin's cold water pad in East Harlem, the Spanish Harlem. Neal had arrived the night before, the first time in NY, with his beautiful little sharp chick Louanne; they got off the Greyhound bus at 50 St. and cut around the corner looking for a place to eat and went right in Hector's, and since then Hector's cafeteria has always been a big symbol of NY for Neal. They spent money on beautiful big glazed cakes and cream puffs. All this time Neal was telling Louanne things like this, "Now darling here we are in Ny and although I haven't quite told you everything that I was thinking about when we crossed Missouri and especially at the point when we passed the Bonneville reformatory which reminded me of my jail problem it is absolutely necessary now to postpone all those leftover things concerning our personal lovethings and at once begin thinking of specific worklife plans . . ." and so on in the way that he had in his early days. I went to the coldwater flat° with the boys and Neal came to the door in his shorts. Louanne was jumping off quickly from the bed; apparently he was fucking with her. He always was doing so. This other guy who

owned the place Bob Malkin was there but Neal had apparently dispatched him to the kitchen, probably to make coffee while he proceeded with his loveproblems. . . . for to him sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life, although he had to sweat and curse to make a living, and so on. My first impression of Neal was of a young Gene Autry°—trim, thin-hipped, blue eyes, with a real Oklahoma accent. In fact he'd just been working on a ranch, Ed Uhl's in Sterling Colo. before marrying L. and coming East. Louanne was a pretty, sweet little thing, but awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things, as she proved a while later. I only mention this first meeting of Neal because of what he did. That night we all drank beer and I got drunk and blah-blahed somewhat, slept on the other couch, and in the morning, while we sat around dumbly smoking butts from ashtrays in the gray light of a gloomy day Neal got up nervously, paced around thinking, and decided the thing to do was have Louanne making breakfast and sweeping the floor. Then I went away. That was all I knew of Neal at the outset. During the following week however he confided in Hal Chase that he absolutely had to learn how to write from him; Hal said I was a writer and he should come to me for advice. Meanwhile Neal had gotten a job in a parking lot, had a fight with Louanne in their Hoboken° apartment God knows why they went there and she was so mad and so vindictive down deep that she reported him to the police, some false trumped up hysterical crazy charge, and Neal had to lam from Hoboken. So he had no place to live. Neal came right out to Ozone Park where I was living with my mother, and one night while I was working on my book or my painting or whatever you want to call it there was a knock on the door and there was Neal, bowing, shuffling obsequiously° in the dark of the hall, and saying "Hello, you remember me, Neal Cassady? I've come to ask you to show me how to write." "And where's Louanne?" I asked, and Neal said she'd apparently whored a few dollars together or something of that nature and gone back to Denver . . . "the whore!" So we went out to have a few beers because we couldn't talk like we wanted to in front of my mother, who sat in the livingroom reading her paper. She took one look at Neal and decided from the very beginning that he was a madman. She never dreamed she too'd be driving across the mad American night with him more than once. In the bar I told Neal, "For krissakes man I know very well you didn't come to me only to want to become a writer and after all what do I really know about it except you've got to stick to it with the energy of a benny° addict," and he said, "Yes of course, I

Gene Autry: (1907–1998), singer and actor, star of many movie Westerns

Hoboken: city in northeastern New Jersey, directly across the Hudson River from lower Manhattan

know exactly what you mean and in fact those problems have occurred to me but the thing that I want is the realization of those factors that should one depend on Schopenhauer's° dichotomy° for any inwardly realized . . ." and on and on in that way, things I understood not a bit and he himself didn't, and what I mean is, in those days he really didn't know what he was talking about, that is to say, he was a young jaillid all hung up on the wonderful possibilities of becoming a real intellectual and he liked to talk in the tone and using the words but in a jumbled way that he had heard "real intellectuals" talk altho mind you he wasn't so naive as that in all other things, and it took him just a few months with Leon Levinsky to become completely in there with all the terms and the jargon and the style of intellectuality. Nonetheless I loved him for his madness and we got drunk together in the Linden bar behind my house and I agreed that he could stay at my house till he found a job and we furthermore agreed to go out west sometime. That was the winter of 1947. Shortly after meeting Neal I began writing or painting my huge Town and City, and I was about four chapters on when one night, when Neal ate supper at my house, and he already had a new parkinglot job in New York, the hotel NY-orcker lot on 34 st., he leaned over my shoulder as I typed rapidly away and said "Come on man, those girls won't wait, make it fast," and I said "Hold on just a minute, I'll be right with you soon as I finish this chapter," and I did and it was one of the best chapters in the whole book. Then I dressed and off we flew to NY to meet some girls. As you know to go from Ozone Park to New York takes an hour by elevated and subway, and as we rode in the El over the rooftops of Brooklyn we leaned on each other with fingers waving and yelled and talked excitedly and I was beginning to get the bug like Neal. In all, what Neal was, simply, was tremendously excited with life, and though he was a con-man he was only conning because he wanted so much to live and also to get involved with people that would otherwise pay no attention to him. He was conning me, so-called, and I knew it, and he knew I knew (this has been the basis of our relation) but I didn't care and we got along fine. I began to learn from him as much as he probably learned from me. As far as my work was concerned he said, "Go ahead, everything you do is great." We went to New York, I forget what the situation was, two girls—there were no girls there, they were supposed to meet him or some such thing and they weren't there. We went to his parkinglot where he had a few things to do—change his clothes in the shack in back and spruce up a bit in front of a cracked shack mirror

*Schopenhauer:* Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), German philosopher  
*dichotomy:* division into two parts, groups, or classifications

and so on, and then we took off. And that was the night Neal met Leon Levinsky. A tremendous thing happened when Neal met Leon Levinsky . . . I mean of course Allen Ginsberg. Two keen minds that they are they took to each other at the drop of a hat. Two piercing eyes glanced into two piercing eyes . . . the holy con-man and the great sorrowful poetic con-man that is Allen Ginsberg. From that moment on I saw very little of Neal and I was a little sorry too . . . Their energies met head-on. I was a lout° compared; I couldn't keep up with them. The whole mad swirl of everything that was to come then began which would mix up all my friends and all I had left of my family in a big dust cloud over the American night—they talked of Burroughs, Hunkey, Vicki, . . . Burroughs in Texas, Hunkey on Riker's Island,° Vicki hung up with Norman Schnall at the time . . . and Neal told Allen of people in the west like Jim Holmes the hunchbacked poolhall rotation shark° and cardplayer and queer saint . . . he told him of Bill Tomson, Al Hinkle, his boyhood buddies, his street buddies . . . they rushed down the street together digging everything in the early way they had which has later now become so much sadder and perceptive.. but then they danced down the street like dingedodies° and I shambled after as usual as I've been doing all my life after people that interest me, because the only people that interest me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like roman candles across the night. Allen was queer in those days, experimenting with himself to the hilt, and Neal saw that, and a former boyhood hustler himself in the Denver night, and wanting dearly to learn how to write poetry like Allen, the first thing you know he was attacking Allen with a great amorous soul such as only a con-man can have. I was in the same room, I heard them across the darkness and I mused and said to myself "Hmm, now something's started, but I don't want anything to do with it." So I didn't see them for about two weeks during which time they cemented their relationship to mad proportions. Then came the great time of traveling, Spring, and everybody in the scattered gang was getting ready to take one trip or another. I was busily at work on my novel and when I came to the halfway mark, after a trip down South with my mother to visit my sister, I got ready to travel west for the very first time. Neal had already left. Allen and I saw him off at the 34th street Greyhound station. Upstairs they

*lout:* crude person, oaf, boor

*Riker's Island:* Rikers Island, in the East River, site of New York City's main jail

*shark:* hustler

*dingedodies:* a word invented by Kerouac