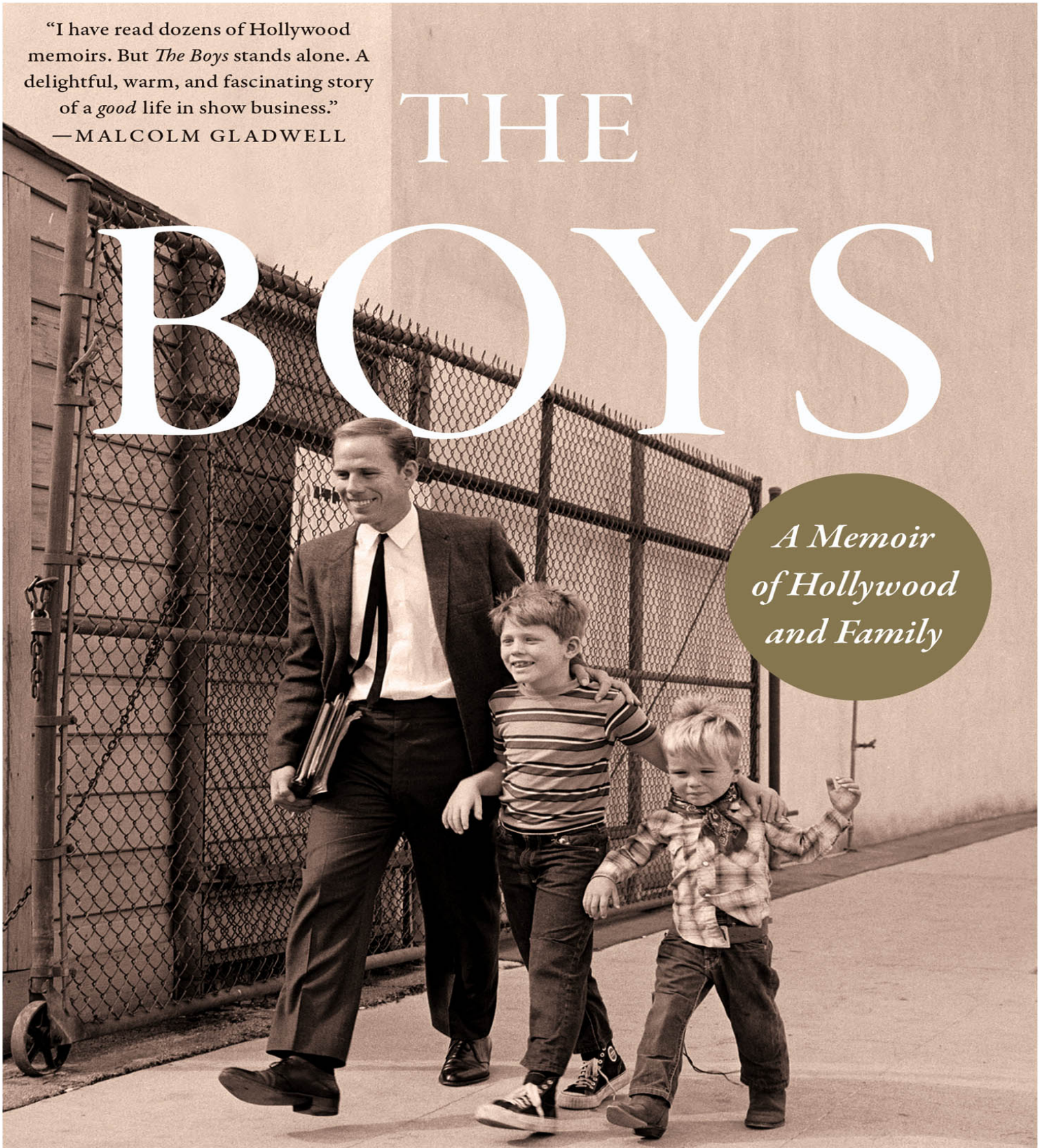
"I have read dozens of Hollywood memoirs. But *The Boys* stands alone. A delightful, warm, and fascinating story of a *good* life in show business."
—MALCOLM GLADWELL

THE BOYS

A Memoir of Hollywood and Family



RON HOWARD &
CLINT HOWARD

FOREWORD BY BRYCE DALLAS HOWARD

THE BOYS

A Memoir of Hollywood and Family

RON HOWARD &
CLINT HOWARD

WILLIAM MORROW
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Dedication

To Rance and Jean Howard

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Foreword

BRYCE DALLAS HOWARD

I've always been confused by how fathers are portrayed in American popular culture as out-of-touch bumbling idiots. Because my only experience of male parenting is that of an incredibly engaged father.

My grandfather Rance Howard came from a generation of men who were not traditionally involved with their kids' lives in any meaningful way. That didn't prevent him from accompanying his boys on set, not just as their guardian-manager but as their ever-present moral and ethical compass. He was a modern, progressive, dedicated dad, and that intentionality and legacy, along with my grandma Jean Howard's smarts and leadership, laid a multigenerational foundation for my family.

All families have extraordinary stories. As my dad says in these pages, the success our family has achieved is something none of us takes for granted. It wasn't destined, and we could've just as easily ended up Oklahoma farmers as Hollywood creators. As is so often the way, a few breaks in a different direction, and what might feel like fate would have unfolded along a now-unrecognizable path. How our family differs is that our twists and turns have played out more publicly than usual.

While the relationship between my dad and my uncle Clint marks an unbreakable bond between two wildly different people—one that I marvel at—it's a sibling story that so many of us can relate to. My dad and uncle are bonded by the love of their parents. Through all the ups and downs, they have remained close, far beyond the obligatory birthday and holiday phone calls. They hang out, talk baseball and movies, watch games, shoot hoops, golf, walk, and laugh a lot. No one makes my dad laugh harder than my uncle Clint. Classic big-brother/little-brother stuff. Yes, blood and genetics

connect us, but as we so often witness, that connection isn't guaranteed. It takes a commitment to nurture family relationships over years and decades: work and a grounding force. My grandparents were that force.

Granddad and Grandma Jean established a very specific Howard family culture, one of warmth, encouragement, and gratitude. Being decent to your fellow humans has always been our driving principle. They taught us to take responsibility for our actions and support one another unconditionally, even when we disagree, not by preaching but by modeling. We were constantly reminded that we're a family of equals, a collective in which pretense is frowned upon. We were taught that fame is never a substitute for family.

Storytelling as a craft is taken seriously in our family, and a committed work ethic was modeled for us. As my uncle Clint says, we are "grinders and scrappers." Hollywood is as brutal as it is glamorous, and the only way to survive is through discipline and sticking together. That's something my grandmother and ultimate role model instilled in all of us. My grandmother's vision and belief in what was possible for our family—as well as her joie de vivre—are what made it all possible. I never once heard her complain, despite enduring many real ailments and challenges that would have warranted more than a little griping on her part. Her relationship with my grandfather was the picture of partnership and teamwork, setting an example for the kind of symbiotic relationship I wanted in my own life.

Like my father, uncle, and grandparents, I, too, am a storyteller—a privilege I also never take for granted. And while much of my family is connected to Hollywood, we are fortified by the grounded, down-to-earth "midwestern Zen" values and life habits my grandparents set for us.

As I read through the pages of this book, I expected familiar stories, but before long I found myself on a surprising adventure. To hear the tale of my grandparents through the words of their two boys and get a peek into their spectacular and unique childhoods, navigating the wilds of the film and TV industry in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, transported me. These pages capture a turning point in the entertainment industry, as told through the personal lens of one family.

If I were to tell the story of my life, it wouldn't start with me. My story and identity are the culmination of several generations, starting with my grandparents. They continue to inspire me and inform my own path. My

siblings and I want to be better people, not to course correct the legacy but to live up to it. The bar is high, and we don't want to fall short.

When I was six, we were living in England as my young father prepared to shoot *Willow* and my mom prepared to give birth to my brother, Reed. We have a home video that shows my dad expressing concern that these two momentous events were happening simultaneously: "Movies! Babies! *MOVIES! BABIES!*" He then asked me to predict the day Reed would be born (which I did, with eerie accuracy). This dynamic of a concerned, involved father including his children in these family discussions was similar to how his parents brought their boys into the fold. Granddad and Grandma Jean showed him it was possible to grow up on a movie set *and* have a childhood. They even put my dad in a crib while they were performing summer stock, attending to him between scenes. Unconventional? Sure. But inclusive and family-centric nonetheless. Like his own parents, my dad protected us from the craziness while still giving us a firsthand look at the circus.

In my documentary feature directorial debut, *Dads,* I, too, was drawn to the subject of family. I hoped to interview an expecting father, and as luck would have it, my brother and his wife were about to have their first baby. I remembered Dad expressing to me several times over the years that his greatest fear was not measuring up to his own father as a parent. I shared this memory with Reed while filming and, surprised, he replied, "He said that? That's *my* biggest worry—not living up to Dad." And so, the tradition continues . . .

Introduction

RON

As I write this, I am sitting in a car in Queensland, Australia, getting driven to the set to begin the second week of shooting on my twenty-sixth feature film as a director. I am multitasking, jotting down notes for this book while framing shots in my head and glancing at the call sheet to remind myself of the work that's scheduled for today. Now, I have been looking at call sheets in the back seat of a car since the 1980s. But this time, I really *look*. My name appears in three different places. Director, producer, cofounder of Imagine Entertainment . . . Ron Howard. That's *me*.

I've never been one to take for granted the eventful life I have led. Still, seeing my name in print triggers something in me—a feeling of stepping outside of myself. It could all have been so different. My name could easily have been Ronny Beckenholdt, had my Oklahoman parents not made the brave, crazy decision as young lovers to move to New York to become actors. Dad wouldn't have changed his name from Harold Beckenholdt to Rance Howard. Mom, the former Jean Speegle, would have become Jean Beckenholdt. And today, I would be . . . what? Wait, I know! How about a farmer in north-central Oklahoma, where my dad's folks were from?

As Farmer Ronny, I grow corn and soybeans on the forty acres that my family didn't have to sell to a conglomerate to keep the lights on. I use some of this yield to fatten up the few pigs I still raise. It's long hours and hard work, but fortunately I have the company of my brother, Clint, five years my junior. Clint and I also have a side business cleaning out and repairing independent oil wells in the area—anything to squeeze a buck out of the land. When commodity prices are up, we do okay. Every day at dusk,

we wearily call it a day, taking off the ballcaps that protect our bald Beckenholdt heads.

I'VE ARRIVED ON set and it's time to start setting up the day's first shot. But another what-if strikes me before filming gets underway. Suppose my folks *did* stick with show business? Suppose they followed their dream to California, driving cross-country in 1958 with all their earthly belongings packed into a '52 Plymouth, including four-year-old me? In this scenario, some things turn out the same as they did in real life. I become a successful juvenile actor, playing Opie Taylor on *The Andy Griffith Show* and Richie Cunningham on *Happy Days*. I am a household name in the 1960s and 1970s.

But here's the twist: those roles are what I am best remembered for. I never pursue my teenage ambition to become a director. I simply keep on acting into adulthood, with mixed success—though I do enjoy the warm notices I've been receiving lately for playing "the grandpa" in various Christmas movies on the Disney Channel.

NEITHER OF THESE scenarios is a bleak one; I would have considered them positive outcomes. As a matter of fact, the Beckenholdt farm is still in the family, run by my cousins, and I have plenty of actor friends my age who, though they've had their ups and downs, wouldn't trade their experiences for anything. But I have been fortunate to see my life turn out incredibly well—to not only realize but surpass my dreams of making a living as a storyteller.

Until recently, I was not particularly inclined to contemplate the "why" of this. But when my father died over Thanksgiving weekend in 2017, at the age of eighty-nine, his passing kicked off a round of introspection on my part. Clint and I were now orphans; our mother had died in 2000. It was a sad time but also, in the big picture, a time when we found ourselves counting our blessings. For both of us, life was good and fulfilling in all the ways that mattered most.

Clint and I made a pilgrimage to Dad and Mom's now-unoccupied house—our old house—in search of photos and home movies to use in Dad's memorial service, which was held two months after his death. As we

went through Dad's personal effects, Clint and I shared family stories in a verbal shorthand unintelligible to outsiders: "Mom and the paint cans." "The bathroom graffiti at Desilu." "Bicycle-pump blood."

Our parents' story had come to an end, a lot for us to process. As we contemplated this reality, we experienced a shock of recognition. Their journeys were rich and strange, in ways we hadn't realized until that point. That made our journeys rich and strange, too.

I had never before viewed my life this way. For years, my stock answer, when people asked me "What was it like to grow up on TV?," was that it seemed utterly normal, because it was the only childhood that I ever had. Clint, who was still a grade-schooler when he starred in *Gentle Ben,* another hit television series, would tell you the same.

My answer was too pat, though. To us, our childhoods *seemed* normal, but they were really anything but. We grew up in circumstances that were profoundly unusual, dividing our time between attending public schools, being tutored on set, and working in an industry fraught with way more snares and traps than we were aware of in our innocence.

Our parents' own show-business aspirations were never realized as fully as ours, yet neither of them ever articulated or even telegraphed any bitterness or resentment toward us. They were show people but they weren't narcissists. They were stage parents but they weren't monsters. And Clint and I, even though we were as familiar with soundstages and makeup artists as we were with playgrounds and Wiffle Ball, grew up in their down-to-earth image.

Mom and Dad managed this feat with remarkable grace, navigating their boys through terrain that, by all rights, should have left us psychologically damaged. And make no mistake, Clint and I didn't get through our childhoods unscathed. We both have our share of emotional scar tissue. But like Indiana Jones in that famous scene where he narrowly escapes getting crushed by a giant rolling boulder, we somehow made it through intact, ready for the next adventure.

As the parent of four children (now thankfully all grown), I wonder: How the hell did Mom and Dad pull this off? How did *we*?

CLINT

Ron talks in positive terms. He's a glass-half-full guy. But if we're playing the alternative-realities game, some unsavory outcomes pop into my head.

I'm not sure I would've handled those harsh Oklahoma winters particularly well. As Granddad Beckenholdt once wrote to Dad about the local weather in a Christmas letter, "Wind blow, rain, snow." Frigid temperatures and sideways hail don't hold much appeal to me. There's a good chance I might still have become a familiar face as a young man—to the Oklahoma State Troopers. Any speculative "Clint Beckenholdt" conversation should factor in the potential for brushes with the law.

As it is, I don't know if I'd even be here right now if it weren't for Dad. Even when we were kids, the term "child actor" was shorthand for "future fucked-up adult." Then as now, Hollywood was littered with cautionary tales. Carl Switzer, who played Alfalfa in *Our Gang,* died the year I was born, shot to death at age thirty-one in a dispute over money. Bobby Driscoll, who starred in such 1940s Disney movies as *Song of the South,* fell into heroin addiction when the industry no longer had any use for him. I didn't spin out as tragically as those guys, but it wasn't for lack of trying. I put Mom and Dad through their unfair share of hell in my teens and early adulthood by getting loaded and carrying on like an idiot. Yet Dad never bailed on me. He drew me in closer, using his salt-of-the-earth sensibility to right the ship and get me on the path to sobriety.

Like Ron, I experienced a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions the day we went back to our old house after our pop died. Staring out at the lifeless backyard, I pictured Dad doing his antiquated 1940s-style calisthenics in the sun, with his loyal dog, Sheriff, waiting for him to finish so that he could curl up under his master's feet for a nap. Then my mind went further back, nearly fifty years earlier, to when Ron and I were young. Like lots of American brothers, we often spent our afternoons in the backyard shooting hoops. Unlike most brothers, we sometimes spent our afternoons in the backyard shooting movies, with Ron pointing his Super-8 camera in my face, directing me in his earliest attempts at narrative filmmaking. I sometimes demanded that he pay me, because I was used to getting paid to act. Yeah, I guess we were different.

What spared Ron and me from becoming Hollywood casualties are the values Mom and Dad instilled in us. It's true that we didn't become farmers, but we inherited the farmer's work ethic our folks brought with them from Oklahoma. We were grinders and scrappers. Showbiz may seem glamorous,

but each battle is won in the trenches with heavy doses of perspiration and preparation. We spent our nights doing two sets of homework: our assignments for school and our run-throughs of the next day's lines with Dad.

Not that he was any kind of joyless taskmaster. In our off-hours, we did fun, normal-family stuff: Little League, rassling on the living-room floor, dinners out at the Sizzler in our hometown of Burbank. My mother coined a term for herself and Dad: "sophisticated hicks." Worldly enough to broaden their horizons through travel and the performing arts, yet homespun enough to live simply and humbly—as if the next town over wasn't Hollywood but Duncan, Oklahoma.

Ron and I decided to share our story of growing up as the products of these sophisticated hicks: just your typical postwar tale of a tight nuclear family whose two kids happened to be on TV all the time . . .

1

The Accidental Actor

RON

Look him in the eyes and really listen to what he's saying, Ronny. Don't look at the bucket," my father said.

He was prepping me for my first screen test. The bucket in question had come from my sandbox. Dad had drilled a hole in the bottom of it and knotted a rope through the hole, so that he could tie the bright-red bucket to the end of a broom handle, fashioning a homemade imitation of a boom microphone of that era. He did not want me to be distracted by the movements of the mic or of its operator during the screen test. A friend of Dad's swung the "mic" around our living room to simulate what I would soon experience. Another friend sat opposite me, serving as my dialogue partner; Dad thought I should get used to reading with a stranger. For good measure, my mother pretended to be a camera operator, using one hand to shine a desk light in my face and the other to hold a large cereal box, which represented a 35 mm Mitchell Camera. Dad left nothing to chance. At my audition the following day, I would be ready to comport myself before the MGM people in a professional manner.

By the way, this was in the fall of 1957. I was three and a half years old.

MOM AND DAD, Jean and Rance Howard, never planned on being the parents of child actors. They harbored no Barrymore-like expectations of founding an acting dynasty. We lived in a modest walk-up

in Queens during the golden age of live television. Dad was struggling to make ends meet as an actor himself. Mom had a steady job working as a typist for CBS.

Dad's biggest break to date was a small part in the touring production of the Tony Award–winning play *Mister Roberts,* whose original Broadway star, Henry Fonda, still held the title role. My father gained not only the experience of working with first-rate actors but also the clout to direct summer-stock productions of the show.

During one of these productions, somewhere in Maryland in the summer of '57, Dad noticed my aptitude for acting. While the actors rehearsed onstage in an outdoor theater surrounded by open fields, I sat alone in the first row of seats, observing. Rather quickly, I picked up the dialogue and started repeating it back to Dad at home, much to his amusement.

Soon, we worked out a routine. He played Lieutenant Roberts (the Fonda part, if you've seen the movie) and I played Ensign Pulver (the Jack Lemmon part):

ROBERTS/DAD: Whatever happened to those marbles you were gonna put in the captain's overhead, so they'd roll around all night and keep him awake?

PULVER/ME (*glowering*): Now you've gone too far. Now you've asked for it. (*Rattling an imaginary canister full of marbles.*) What does that look like? Five marbles. Got another one in my pocket. *Six* marbles! I'm lookin' for marbles all day *long*!

Consider the visuals: my dad, a grown man, engaged in an intense conversation with a forty-pound pipsqueak with freckles and red hair who wore a striped T-shirt, shorts, and blue Keds. We turned this scene into a little parlor trick that we performed for Mom and Dad's friends in New York, where it always brought down the house. Little did we know that my Ensign Pulver bit would serve as my first audition material.

In those days, a hustling actor like Dad had to physically make the rounds of the casting agencies, all concentrated in a cluster of buildings in Midtown Manhattan. As a matter of routine, my father went from one

casting director to the next, dropping off a résumé and a headshot, reading for whoever would hear him.

One day, Dad poked his head into the office at MGM, where he knew the casting director, only to discover a waiting room jam-packed with little kids. This gave him an idea. He said to the receptionist, "Tell them that Rance Howard stopped by, and that, by the way, I have a son who is a fine actor." He left our phone number—not with any great expectations, just as an extra flourish that would make his message stand out from the others.

But they did call the next day, asking Dad if he could bring his little boy in. Next thing I knew, I was performing my Ensign Pulver set piece for MGM's casting director. I am told that I slayed, though I honestly don't remember. They asked Dad if I was capable of doing anything else. To his credit, he confessed that he honestly didn't know. That's when they gave me a new scene to learn and scheduled me for a screen test, for a movie called *The Journey*.

I RECALL LITTLE of our time in Queens, just some sketchy details. A butcher store down the street. A neighbor kid whose house I played at when my parents needed a babysitter. A snowman that Dad built in our little patch of yard by piling snow into a yellow plastic trash container and flipping it over.

The screen-test prep is the one thing I remember vividly: Dad coaching me about working with his actor friend, saying, "Look him in the eyes, stay focused, really *listen* to what he's saying." The bucket on the broomstick, the lamplight in my face. It sounds intense, like Earl Woods trying to shake the teenage Tiger Woods's concentration by trash-talking him on his backswing. My father was gentler, though—more like Obi-Wan schooling Luke Skywalker in the ways of the Force.

In my case, the Force was a simplified, preschooler's version of the Method, the set of acting techniques developed by the Russian theater guru Konstantin Stanislavski and practiced by such actors as Marlon Brando, James Dean, and Paul Newman. Dad embraced the Method's emphasis on emotional sincerity, the idea of putting yourself in the character's shoes while channeling your own feelings. He never nudged me to do anything performative in a cute-kid way, like flash a big smile or pull a goofy

"Oops!" face. He simply told me to stay present in the scene, to take it moment by moment.

Not until I was an adult did I appreciate how radical this approach was for a child actor. Dad never once talked down to me or treated me as a performing seal. Other kids, I would discover when we moved to California, were not so lucky—they were their parents' meal tickets. But when I went out for auditions with Dad at my side, he put no pressure on me to win the part. He focused on execution, not end results.

If I just concentrated, he said as we practiced in the apartment, I would grasp the essential logic of the scene, and the performance would take care of itself. This was my first and most important acting lesson, and, in many ways, it remains the foundation of my creative process to this day.

When I walked onto a soundstage for the first time the following day to audition for *The Journey,* I saw real lights, a real boom mic, and a real camera. The assistant director instructed me to step onto a T-mark on the floor—something I hadn't practiced in Queens. But none of it threw me. I was new at this, but, honestly, I felt pretty comfortable, like I already belonged.

And my comfort and preparation paid a huge dividend: I got the part!

THE JOURNEY WAS a Cold War drama directed by Anatole Litvak. I played the son of two Americans trying to flee Communist Hungary. E. G. Marshall and Anne Jackson played my character's parents. Yul Brynner and Deborah Kerr, reunited for the first time since *The King and I,* led the cast, which also included Jason Robards in his feature-film debut. Thirty-one years later, I directed Jason in my film *Parenthood;* we kidded about how we broke into the business together.

Principal photography for *The Journey* was to take place in Vienna: a beautiful setting for a young kid's first paying job. Better still, Mom and Dad were coming with me, compliments of MGM. The studio made a family deal, casting my father in a bit part and hiring my mother as my official on-set guardian.

For my parents, this stroke of good fortune presented itself as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. They were too poor even to contemplate a European vacation, and my paychecks would be set aside and earmarked for college.

No one in the Howard family thought of *The Journey* as anything but a one-off for me as an actor.

In the spring of 1958, we took off from Idlewild Airport for Europe, a first for all of us. We stopped at Shannon Airport in Ireland so the ground crew could refuel our propeller plane. While we bided our time in the terminal, the Irish airport workers took notice of my red hair and teased me affectionately. "Ya look like you've come home, lad," they said. "Ya shouldn't really be gettin' back on that plane, should ya?"

But get back on the plane we did. On March 3, just two days after my fourth birthday, we landed in Austria. The final descent was glorious, with Vienna resplendent in a blanket of newly fallen snow.

The Journey is a heavy picture. A bunch of international travelers, including my character, are trying to flee Budapest by bus during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, only to be detained by a fearsome Soviet commander, played by Brynner. To me, though, the whole experience was pure joy, a stress-free first job.

When I wasn't in a scene, I climbed up onto the army tanks that guarded the film's "Soviet checkpoint." The film's prop master gave me a Whee-lo, that little toy with a spoked wheel that rolls along both sides of a magnetic metal track, which kept me mesmerized for hours. The wardrobe people dressed me up in a smart plaid jacket with matching earflap cap. I loved this outfit for how cool it made me look, even though the accompanying scarf itched my neck.

When the shoot was over, my pragmatic Oklahoman parents, believing this trip to be the only chance they would ever have to visit Europe, piggybacked some vacation travel onto our stay in Europe. We toured Venice, Paris, and London.

My favorite part, though, was directly tied to the work. In a pivotal scene in *The Journey,* Yul Brynner's character, Major Surov, intimidates the hell out of his captives by taking a bite out of the shot glass from which he is drinking vodka. Yul, with his shaved head and severe features, looked convincingly fearsome in his Soviet officer's uniform. But he was a kind and gregarious man who noticed that I was fascinated by the scene and didn't want me to get any dangerous ideas. So, between takes, he invited me to sit in his lap. He held the prop glass to my face.

"Taste this, Ronny," he said. "This is *sugar,* not real glass. It's pretend, for the movie. You would never bite real glass." He encouraged me to

chomp on a little shard. It tasted just like rock candy. *Whoa,* I thought, *this is amazing*.

This marked the beginning of my fascination with the process of how stories are told on the screen. I had learned a secret of the trade. I was in on the magic trick. And wow, did I *like* being in on the magic trick.

THE JOURNEY WRAPPED in June 1958 and came out to good reviews the following year. But it wasn't a game changer for the Howard family. After we returned to New York, I settled back into my preschool routine, Mom resumed her typing duties at CBS, and Dad continued to go out on auditions, without much success. TV acting work in New York had pretty much dried up by then. As the '50s came to an end, so, too, did the golden age of live television, most of it shot on the East Coast. Dad's agent suggested that he move west, to Los Angeles, where a raft of new detective shows and westerns were in production. When your own agent tells you to move, that's a pretty good sign that it's time to get out of town.

So, in the summer of '58, we packed up the old Plymouth, bade farewell to Queens and my parents' New York friends, and pointed the car in the direction of California. *The Journey* was my breakthrough, but this cross-country drive marked the beginning of my real journey.

2

Mom and Dad: A Love Story

CLINT

Generally, there are two categories of child actors. The first is the trained animal. He is basically given his line readings by an adult and asked to copy them down to the last detail, including facial expressions. It's not really acting, more like performing a trick. If this kid has a crying scene, he is not challenged to reach within and summon real emotion. Instead, someone in the makeup department comes out with a dropper of glycerin and puts some tears on his face. The director instantly gets the result he's after and everybody's happy.

The second category is the child who is allowed to be a child. The director encourages him to behave naturally so he doesn't get stiff or self-conscious. The kid does several takes of the scene, and later on, in postproduction, the editors cut away everything but the prime sirloin.

Dad devised a third way. He taught Ron and me how to understand a scene in an emotional language we could wrap our brains around. He started out by asking us three fundamental questions: Where do you think your character just was? Why is your character entering the scene? And where is it he would like to go?

We would build a little backstory for the character and then apply it to the material. This process gave my performances an honesty that the trained-animal kid could never deliver. Was I entering the room excitedly? Hesitantly? Was I hoping that we would get to eat ice cream for dinner? The viewers were oblivious to these interior monologues, but they benefited

from a fuller, richer performance from me. You know who else benefited? The director. He didn't have to settle for Category 1, a cutesy but superficial performance, or for Category 2, trying to catch lightning in a bottle.

When Ron was little, Dad was still figuring this stuff out, jerry-rigging that pretend boom mic and feeling his way through the teaching process. By the time I came along, though, Dad had a *system*. Preparation was the key. He had us so well drilled that we created none of the hassle with which child actors are associated—fits of temper, trouble reciting lines, incontinence. Ron and I rarely required retakes. No production ever slowed down on account of a Howard brother.

DAD WAS THE child whisperer, with an innate grasp of how to motivate a young actor to succeed without applying undue pressure. Mom was the child whisperer's whisperer, bucking up her husband as he weathered the ups and downs of his own show-business career. As good as they were in these roles, they did not anticipate playing them.

Both my parents graduated from high school dreaming of stardom. They met in a drama class at the University of Oklahoma. Dad, an underclassman still going by his birth name, Harold Beckenholdt, had found a mentor figure in a senior theater major named Dennis Weaver, later to become the star of the long-running NBC series *McCloud*. One day in 1947, for a two-person scene study, Dennis decided to pair Harold with another drama student: a young woman named Jean Speegle.

Harold was green and unsophisticated. He grew up enamored of Roy Rogers and Gene Autry movies, but he never saw them in a proper movie house. In Shidler, Oklahoma, the little town nearest to his family's farm, you sat on your coat and watched a picture as it was projected onto the side of a building. Dad fancied himself the heir to Rogers and Autry, the next singing-cowboy star. At one point he had a plan, and I mean a *serious* plan, to ride his horse, who was named Lucky, from Oklahoma all the way to Hollywood. He told Ron and me years later how it was supposed to work: he would camp out along the way, live off the land and by his wits, and finally arrive in Tinseltown on horseback, rugged and resplendent in his cowboy hat. The industry's grandees would be bowled over at the sight of a *real* singing cowboy and sign him up right quick!

There was one big issue that kept him from pursuing this plan: Dad couldn't sing. Could not carry a tune to save his life. This trait would not prove unique to him in our family. No one has ever mistaken the Howards for the Osmonds. Our group renditions of "Happy Birthday" were unlistenable to outsiders.

Jean Speegle was more polished, from a merchant family in the booming railroad town of Duncan, Oklahoma. She was considered by her peers to be one of the most gifted actors at OU and was nearly two years older than Harold. Dad had seen her in a campus production of Garson Kanin's *Born Yesterday* in which she knocked 'em dead as Billie Dawn, a sleazy tycoon's floozy who blossoms into a strong, independent woman. Country-boy Harold was intimidated by his scene partner's charisma and talent. He was also instantly besotted.

Nobody likes to think of their parents as passionate young lovers, but, from everything that Ron and I know, Cupid's arrow struck, and Harold and Jean quickly embarked upon a torrid romance. Dad was tall and lean, a rangy, good-looking young man who carried himself like a real-life cowboy. Mom was petite, not much over five feet in height, with a round, porcelain-doll face and wavy red hair.

Their love was too big for the college town of Norman, Oklahoma, to contain. Not long after becoming a couple, Harold and Jean ditched school to chase the dream of becoming professional actors. After a period of struggle and penury, they booked a steady gig as members of a touring children's-theater troupe, traveling from town to town in a repurposed school bus, playing venues as big as four-hundred-seat theaters and as small as rinky-dink school auditoriums.

Composed of around a dozen actors, the company included six adult little people who played the dwarves in *Snow White* and other fairy-tale characters. Mom played ingenues and princesses, including the title role in *Cinderella*. Dad played the Huntsman, the Prince, and any other role that was required of him. When they needed an extra dwarf, he would kneel behind the scenery upstage, pacing back and forth on his knees to the point that they turned black and blue. He earned an additional five bucks a week driving the prop truck, which followed behind the bus. This job granted him the extra benefit of scoring some alone time with Mom, who rode alongside him in the cab.

DAD DESPISED HIS name growing up. He hated the way "Harold" sounded and the nerdy image it projected. He would do imitations of people whining, "*Harrr*-old, *Harr*-old!" As for "Beckenholdt," it was a mouthful and an albatross—Dad lost too many hours of his precious childhood spelling it out for people. On top of that, this surname was way too German-sounding for an aspiring star of stage and screen in the post–World War II era.

Sometime after he and Mom left school, Dad became Rance Howard. He never told us exactly where his new name came from, but our aunt Glee, Dad's younger sister, says that he played a character named Rance in a play somewhere and liked how it sounded when his fellow actors addressed him by that name. And our surname? Shortly after Dad ran off with Mom, his folks, who had owned several farms over the course of his childhood, settled for good in Moline, Kansas, in Elk County, east of Wichita. Contiguous to Moline is the town of . . . Howard. In fact, Howard, Kansas, is where Dad's youngest sibling—his brother Max—still lives. "Rance" from a play plus "Howard" from Kansas equals Rance Howard. That's our best guess.

Aunt Glee also says that our grandparents' feelings were bruised by Dad's name change.

Granddad Beckenholdt told Glee that he had spoken about the situation with a prosperous friend, a local car dealer, and the friend said that if it had been *his* son, he would have written the kid right out of his will. But Grandma understood Dad's reasoning and told anyone who asked that Harold had become Rance to better his odds in "the show bidness."

RON

I used to wonder why Dad didn't simply shorten his name to something like Hal Beck. As a kid, I sometimes wished that my name was Ronny Beck—it sounded cooler than Ronny Howard.

Dad was a quiet, low-key person. But Mom, when she met him, somehow saw in this innocent farm boy's eyes a fire to match her own. Jean Speegle was a free-spirited child of the 1940s. Much of the war effort was powered by women on the home front, which proved liberating to girls like

her. She had the brassy, bold spirit of Rosie the Riveter or the Andrews Sisters executing the intricate harmonies and tight choreography of "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy." Mom was a natural leader at Duncan High School even though she wasn't a good student. I've seen her old report cards and they're terrible—lots of D's. Still, she was voted president of her class. When I asked Mom how a D student managed to achieve this, she gave me a wry smile. "I got along with everybody," she said, eyes twinkling. I see a lot of her in my eldest daughter, Bryce: people are magnetically drawn to her, and she assumes the mantle of chief taskmaster organically.

The University of Oklahoma was not Mom's first stop after she graduated from high school. She persuaded her parents to let her apply to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York, a storied acting school whose alumni included Lauren Bacall, Hume Cronyn, Grace Kelly, and Kirk Douglas. Duncan–to–New York was not a common trajectory for a seventeen-year-old girl from the middle of the country, but Mom had drive and proved herself worthy—she aced her audition and moved east.

For the few months that Mom studied at the Academy, she thrived. She fell in love with New York City, the start of a lifelong affair. But early one morning back in Duncan, her mother, our grandma Louise, sat bolt upright in her bed and said to our grandfather, "Butch! Something has happened to Jean!" Whether this was a sign of her oracular powers or an indication that mothers are always in a panic about their teenage daughters, Louise was right. Mom had been hit by a truck while crossing the street, shattering her pelvis. She was in a coma for ten days.

Against all odds, Mom healed up, and she and her family received a sizable insurance settlement. But the accident put a temporary hold on her acting dreams. Mom came home to recuperate and attended a junior college for a year before finally attending OU.

Jean Speegle arrived at college hungry, keen to make up for lost time, yet also vulnerable; she was rusty from her time spent on the disabled list. Just as she electrified Dad with her charisma and very presence, so did the attentions of this handsome young Harold fella give her a much-needed boost. Meeting Dad rejuvenated Mom's acting ambitions and joie de vivre. She had found her partner in crime.

Dad never knew what hit him. He soon discovered that Mom was a frisky, rambunctious girl who fell in love fast and hard. She revealed to him that she'd had two or three fiancés before they met. Mom used the term

"fiancé" more loosely and impetuously than most people did. Still, these fiancés were more than just casual boyfriends. Dad actually met one of them, a fellow actor named Bill Curran, who paid them a visit at their first New York apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

CLINT

We need to come clean about our parents here. The story they told us for most of our lives was that they first went to New York together after their wedding. Nope. In the 1990s, Dad finally 'fessed up that they had moved into an apartment with a bunch of other young actors *before* they got married. Yes, these two lovebirds were messing around.

When they first ran off from college, they went to Nashville, where one of their friends had made it as an actor in that city's small theater scene. Mom and Dad struck out there. Their next stop was New York, Mom's happy place. The gig with the traveling children's-theater troupe began there, administered by a Manhattan-based outfit called Penthouse Productions. One other thing: before they set out on that tour, Dad found out that one of Mom's engagements was still semipending!

While she was back home in Duncan after her accident, she fell for an Italian American soldier stationed at Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma, about thirty miles away. This fellow, whose last name was D'Angelo, was from the New York City area. The brash young Jean Speegle, even as she was living in sin with Rance, called D'Angelo to let him know that she was in his neck of the woods. She accepted an invitation to a dinner at D'Angelo's parents' home in the outer boroughs, a subway ride away. At dinner, she noticed that her old flame wasn't saying much. Finally, D'Angelo's little sister could keep her secret pent up no more. "He's engaged to marry another girl!" she blurted out.

The table went quiet until Mom calmly replied, "Well, we'll just have to have some more potatoes on that, won't we?" Everyone laughed in relief and continued eating. But probably no one was more relieved than Dad when Mom came home and told him what had happened.