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Rebel Without a Cause

On four actors, dying young

I WAS TWELVE when I first saw *Rebel Without a Cause*. I was a dutiful child with pigtails, the daughter of a minister—how far out of what's shaking can one get? I loved *Rebel*. It was mean and morose and pretty, filmed in a shiny, beckoning darkness shot through with red—the potent, perilous red of James Dean's windbreaker. All those guns and hot rods. I loved it! My friends loved it. It was our picture. James Dean was twenty-four, Natalie Wood was seventeen, Sal Mineo was sixteen. It was 1955. Today nothing is so horrible that it can't be told. But then we had tasteful concerns. We had alienation, unspecific sorrows, unmentionable longings.

Nineteen fifty-five was a long time ago. I can hear the alert among you saying, "Very good, Retardina." But twenty-seven years only *sounds* like a long time. It was before we realized that Time was our Enemy, before it became apparent that we weren't going to die so young and so fine. It wasn't really so long ago.

In 1979 Nicholas Ray, the director of *Rebel Without a Cause*, died horribly of cancer. Just before, he directed, with Wim Wenders, a startling film about his dying, called *Lightning over Water*, the title coming from an I-ching reading meaning "the condition before transition." It's a ghastly film. Ray is dying, dying, dying before our eyes. Then he snarls, "Cut." The screen goes black, and he dies on without us. Ray wished to bring himself together before he died, but all the camera shows is his disintegration, and that there is no hope. "At what early age did I want to die?" Ray asks, and then confesses, "To experience death with-

out dying, it seemed a natural goal for me."

Rebel has a very peculiar quality, a romantic pall, a whiff of death, myth, serious matters. Even then, of course, there was that. In 1955 we, the young, watched it with shivery awe. We weren't absorbing the movie as much as we were absorbing James Dean. Dean was magnetic, vivid, beautiful, young, sullen, sensitive, brilliant, uncompromising, and Dead. He had been killed in a car crash on September 30, 1955, only one week after finishing *Giant* and less than a month before *Rebel* was released. *Rebel's* appeal was obvious, if unmentionable in healthy circles. We were watching the intense, doomed performance of a dead youth, a myth, the myth of those who would wish to see themselves dead without dying. Dean was dead, pre-dead, dead upon our discovery of him. His vivid presence projected a fathomless absence. It was thrilling.

We loved *Rebel* because it had character and threat. The preposterous plot and execrable dialogue didn't bother us. We were Fifties kids. Only a Fifties kid could love a swift exchange like: "You live around here?" "Who lives?" We loved *Rebel* because it showed adolescents at their finest, fiercest, most irrationally pure: Jim (James Dean) is bad because he drinks and gets in fights. He drinks because his father (Jim Backus) is an unmanly fool who sometimes wears an apron and in times of crisis wants to sit down and make lists. Things might be better, Jim muses, if only his dad "had the guts to knock Mom cold once." Judy (Natalie Wood) is bad because her father doesn't kiss her anymore and hasn't since she turned sixteen. Plato (Sal Mineo) is bad because his wealthy parents abandoned him to the care of the maid, which is why he shoots puppies on his birthday. The hoods (Corey Allen, Dennis Hopper,

Nick Adams, among others) are bad because hoods are bad. Plato grows to love Jim because Jim is nice to him. Plato has big, red lips and eyes like Bambi. He has a picture of Alan Ladd in his school locker. Alan Ladd! Plato is all mixed up.

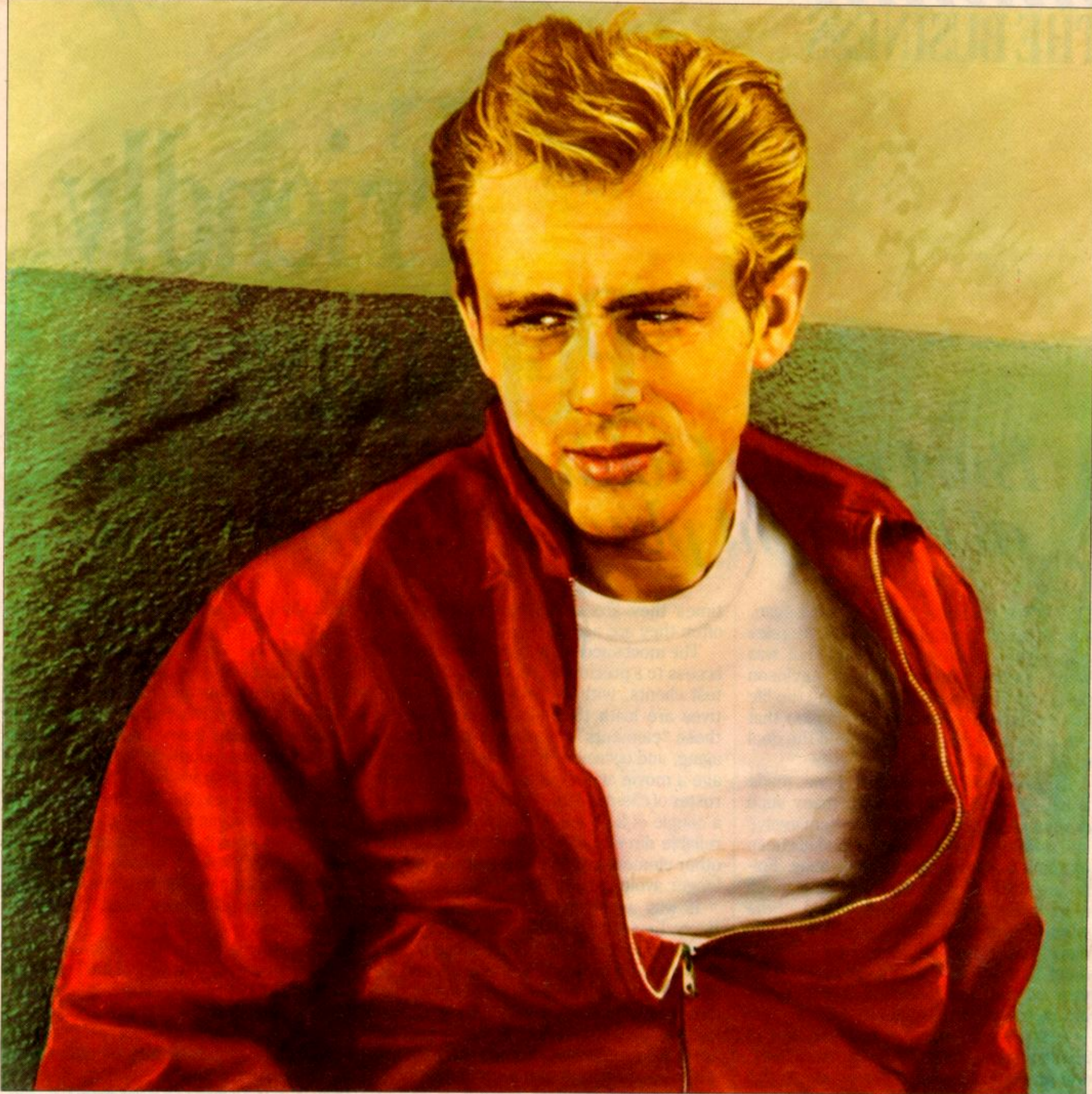
Judy grows to love Jim because he is tender and brave. Before Jim, she'd loved the pack leader, Buzz, but that was just peer pressure; besides, after the fateful "chickie-run" toward the sea cliff's edge, Buzz was no more than pudding on the surf-racked rocks below. Who can be loyal to pudding?

Fleeing from the gang, Plato and Jim and Judy hide in a deserted mansion, the same mansion used in *Sunset Boulevard*, owned by J. Paul Getty (talk about offensive, indifferent dads) and rented to Warners. Inside the house, Judy and Jim play Mommy and Daddy; Plato, a gun in his pocket and mismatched socks on his feet, plays the Baby Boy. The three create a fragile little family, based for an instant on love, honor, and sincerity, but the idyll is brief. When the hoods break in, Plato shoots one of them and runs back to the planetarium. Later, the police shoot him down.

Scooting around the fallen Plato on all fours, Jim howls and weeps. *Rebel* begins with Jim tenderly covering up a wind-up monkey toy in the gutter. It ends with him tenderly zipping up Plato in the red windbreaker he had given him to keep warm. Dean was extravagant. He didn't waste a single suffering. He smoked, he cried, he giggled, he touched a girl's fingers as though they were crystal that might shatter, he prattled like Mr. Magoo, he punched a detective's desk with his fists, he pummeled his father, he kicked his mother's portrait, he rolled a cold bottle of milk across his face. In life, this magical creature was five foot eight and round-

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DEAN HAD BAD EYES AND ROUND SHOULDERS, BUT ON FILM HE BECAME AN ANGEL OF DARKNESS.

shouldered; he had poor eyes and a high hairline. But on film he became an angel chosen by darkness. A man named Donald Gene Turnupseed, doodling along a California highway in a tub of a Ford, had extinguished James Byron Dean in his speeding silver Porsche. Death, fast and fabulous, had done it again. Secretly, we were very, very impressed. We knew he could never grow old; we imagined that we would never grow old either.

Well, time passes, and Time has shown us that *Rebel Without a Cause* was as marbled with Fate as a Texas steer. James Dean's presence, ranting at us, even as it did then, out of some fourth dimension,

remains nerve-racking, while the others...the others grew up and then died, that's what they did. It appears that for the moment, we're here and they're not. They died as grown-ups, as grown-ups do, by accident or choice or bad luck; they did not serve the fantasies we had about ourselves at all. Nick Adams committed suicide by a drug overdose in 1968. Sal Mineo developed certain unwise penchants and was stabbed to death in a Sunset Strip parking area in 1976. And on a November midnight in 1981, Natalie Wood, wearing a nightie, a down jacket, and woolen socks, slipped off a yacht and drowned in a cold lagoon. Adams, Mineo, Wood—all gone now.

Their deaths seemed like bad movies that lacked timing and a good script. CHAMPAGNE, THEN DEATH, the *Enquirer* might scream about Wood's drowning, but we knew it had all been done better before. Dean knew how to do death right.

Nicholas Ray originally wanted to call his glum classic *The Blind Run*—a nice metaphor for the rush from youth to ending. Seeing *Rebel* today is like looking at an object as mournful and secretive and slick as a bone. It has become a genuine Cult Curse production. But it remains, too, what it always was—a romantic fantasy about youth and death, with real death its bright-red heart.