PART I

BEGINNINGS

1

A Boy at Play

Hugh Hefner grew up in a repressive, "Puritan" atmosphere in which his family discouraged shows of affection. The strict religious code of his parents forbade emotional displays, drinking, swearing, or sexual candor, and he yearned to break free and find love, romance, and emotional connection. This desire finally drove him to outright dissent in young adulthood and he founded *Playboy* as a proclamation of freedom and sexual liberation. In Hefner's words, "In many ways it was my parents who, unintentionally, developed the iconoclastic rebellion in me." This personal struggle not only provided the seedbed for his later career, Hefner argues, but framed larger issues in modern America that explained the enormous appeal of *Playboy*. "Puritan repression is really the key that unlocks the mystery of my life," he wrote. "It is the 'Rosebud' that explains what my life is really all about."[1]

Such is the story that Hefner has told interviewers countless times over the last forty years, and it provides an unshakable foundation for his own understanding of his life. He has constructed a kind of personal mythology. Like all of us, only more self-consciously and publicly, he has constructed a view of his past that explains and justifies

his present. But Hefner's rendering of his youth simplifies a complex situation. Like all myths, it strikes a chord with its dramatic narrative of a young hero overcoming obstacles and triumphing. Also like all myths, it is only partially true. As D. H. Lawrence once warned, "Don't trust the teller. Trust the tale." And the real tale of Hefner's youth suggests a somewhat different story that is compelling in its own way.

In fact, Hefner was the product of a moderately progressive family where traditional, Victorian reticence about emotional display and sexuality, while certainly present, was rapidly giving way to a more modern notion of juvenile self-fulfillment. Only recently removed from the rural culture of the Great Plains, his college-educated parents had adapted themselves to the bustling urban life of Chicago. Growing up in the 1930s, Hefner was doted on by his mother while an emotionally absent father deprived the boy of a male authority figure. Left to his own devices, the imaginative child immersed himself in the popular culture of the era—movies, music, radio, and cartoons—and created a rich fantasy life that gradually took on a reality more vibrant than his actual, lived experiences. The product of indulgence as much as restraint, the boy's fantasies mirrored larger patterns in America's emerging culture of self-fulfillment and its desire for leisure, entertainment, and emotional satisfaction. They made him a creature of modern values in ways that he never fully appreciated.

But the origins of Hefner's early life were found far from the city lights and urban crowds of Chicago and Los Angeles where he would spend most of his days. The family into which he was born, and the values that he found so stifling, were shaped on the distant, windswept prairies of turn-of-the-century Nebraska.

I

At the conclusion of a young people's party at the Methodist church in Holdrege, Nebraska, in 1911, Glenn Hefner asked Grace Swanson if he could walk home with her. She agreed, and thus began a long courtship between the two rural teenagers. This small town of some thirty-five hundred people sat in the south-central part of the state, about 120 miles from Omaha. Born in a sod house, Glenn had been shaped by a father who flitted from job to job—barber, insurance

agent, real estate salesman—in a vain attempt to keep his family out of poverty. Grace enjoyed more prosperous circumstances. She had been born in 1895 to a farm family and experienced a typical rural childhood punctuated by chores, animals, and domestic dramas. Her mother was a religious woman, while her father, although a good provider, was a man of harsh temperament and an authoritarian bent. This stern disciplinarian rarely concerned himself with the progress or well-being of his children. Once as she came home from grade school, Grace recalled, "he passed me in the yard and hit me with a black snake whip . . . because he thought I hadn't come right home from school." She confessed, "I did not think I loved my father, just feared him." Moreover, he refused to attend church like his pious wife, drank at local taverns, and swore vigorously.[2]

Grace, who would be an important influence on her eldest son in subsequent years, imbibed the religious values of her mother. When an older brother tormented her, she would shout, "Sinner, you are a sinner," which was the worst epithet she knew. She sang in the church choir, won a public speaking contest sponsored by the anti-liquor Women's Christian Temperance Union, and socialized with other young people at the local church. Glenn displayed a somber temperament as a young man—"Life was a serious business for him," Grace explained—but moderated it with a tonic of jovial good humor. His parents were respectable churchgoers, and he followed their example.[3]

Glenn and Grace first became acquainted through basketball in high school. They both played avidly, and one day the school principal, as he observed the boys' and girls' teams practicing, remarked, "I think Glenn Hefner and Grace would make a good couple. They ought to get together." And indeed, after their encounter at the church party, the two young people dated steadily throughout high school. They were serious students who appeared comfortable in each other's company. Grace was particularly scholarly, serving as editor of the school yearbook and becoming class valedictorian. After graduation, Glenn went on to Nebraska Wesleyan University in Lincoln, while Grace taught at a country school for two years before joining him there. She studied chemistry and math at Wesleyan while Glenn took business and accounting courses. The young couple socialized by going to movies, fraternity parties, and football games. Upon graduating from college in 1918, Glenn joined the navy to serve in World

War I while Grace remained to finish her degree while working as a part-time schoolteacher. He returned to Nebraska after the cessation of hostilities and taught in high school and worked at a small-town bank before moving to Chicago to join some friends. He found a job with a railroad company and then in an accounting office. Grace soon joined him and they were married at a Methodist church in 1921.[4]

The newlyweds took up lodgings on the West Side near the Austin district, where several friends and relatives already lived. Glenn worked as an accountant while Grace took jobs as a telephone operator and bookkeeper before joining the World Service Commission of the Methodist Church, where she dealt with young people working as prospective ministers or in the Home Missionary Society, the Women's Home Missionary Society, and the Deaconess Society. In the spring of 1926, however, Grace quit her job because she was expecting her first child.[5]

Hugh Marston Hefner was born on April 9, 1926, and enjoyed a healthy infancy. His parents socialized with other young couples, playing pinochle and checkers, sharing potluck suppers, and occasionally going to the movies. On rare occasions they would return to Nebraska to visit farm relatives. In 1929 a brother, Keith, arrived, and the following year the family moved to a new house at 1922 North New England Avenue in Austin, which would remain the family home for many decades. The Hefners soon acquired a new Model A Ford, and within a few years Hugh and Keith possessed the accoutrements of a typical middle-class childhood—bicycles, a sandbox in the backyard, and a dog named Wags.[6]

Hugh's boyhood unfolded happily. His neighborhood offered nearby fields and streams, and the Hefner house became a gathering place for boys such as Harold and Russell Saewert, Don Harper, Jimmy Bachman, Warren Tellefson, and Hugh's best friend, Jimmy's brother Curtis Bachman. They would play in the backyard, ride their bicycles, or roam their rustic surroundings conducting war games and encountering snakes, birds, and crawdads. "Mine was the house where they came to play, and she made us all welcome," Hefner noted of his mother. In the early 1930s Grace took her sons and their pals to see the Field Museum, the Aquarium, and the Chicago World's Fair with its proud slogan, "The Century of Progress." Hugh and Keith had a close boyhood relationship, playing constantly and sharing a bedroom. "We did everything together as kids. I worshipped

him," Keith recalled later. The boys felt quite grown up when given their own bedrooms, only to discover that they had been separated because their nightly talking and giggling was keeping their parents awake.[7]

Hugh developed a special love for animals. "When he was a kid," remembers Keith, "he wanted to be a veterinarian, [it] was the first job that he ever thought of, I think." At age eleven, Hugh received a prize from the Illinois Humane Society for his poem "Be Kind to Dumb Animals," which included these stanzas: "To all animals please be kind / Then faithfulness you will find / Feed cat and dog when they need to be fed / Then them to happiness you have led." An interesting animal-related incident occurred around age six. Throughout his childhood, Hugh had treasured a special blue-and-white security blanket featuring a bunny pattern. When he came down with a mastoid infection, he received a present from his parents to speed his recovery—a wire-haired fox terrier that he named Brows. A little box was set up in the basement, and the boy donated his "bunny blanket" for the dog to sleep on. Unfortunately, Brows died about a week later and the blanket had to be burned. Hugh was heartbroken, but the imagery seems to have stuck with him at some level. Later he would note the "*Citizen Kane* kind of connection here of the burned blanket" as he went on to create the bunny empire.[8]

In physical terms, Hugh developed slowly. While active and boisterous with his friends, he was not athletic and shied away from organized sports. He tended to be reserved in formal situations at school or home and hated to answer the telephone. A close childhood friend recalled an incident from the second grade when the shy boy was called upon to read aloud. "He stood up to read and lost his place. I can still see him standing there looking confused and embarrassed. From then on, all the way through high school, he read line-by-line, using his finger."[9]

Even as a boy, however, Hefner displayed an unusual creativity. Fascinated with drawing, he spent countless hours sketching crude cartoon strips such as *Cranet,* an adventurer who flew from Earth to Mars; *Jigs and Spike,* cowboy outlaws; *Jim Malt,* a youthful detective; and adventure characters named "Marvel Man," "the Mystic," and "Metallic Man." He wrote fantasy stories such as "The Haunted Castle" and "Ratty," the "story of a big rat who couldn't be caught until nature took a hand," based on a real rodent who roamed the

neighborhood. At age nine he published a one-page neighborhood newspaper called the *Bi-Weekly News,* which he sold for a few cents to the parents of his pals. In grammar school, he created two unofficial class newspapers that sold for a penny each, before moving on to create a school-sanctioned newspaper called the *Pepper,* which proudly announced his role as "Editor and Tiper." Recalled a childhood friend, "From the sixth through the eighth grades, I have a mind's eye view of Hef at his desk, dashing off drawings and circulating them to me and other classmates for our amusement. He was always inventing comic strips."[10]

In fact, throughout grammar school Hefner's preoccupation with drawing and story-writing exasperated his teachers. Absorbed in his imagination, he often neglected his studies. "He doesn't do his arithmetic, geography, or spelling unless I stand right at his elbow. He constantly draws," his fourth-grade teacher wrote to Grace Hefner. "I've about reached the end of my patience with him. . . . Perhaps you can help. He will not pass if he doesn't do his work." After being called to task, the boy tried to buckle down to the academic duties at hand and composed two contrite poems, complete with imaginative spelling:

Why I Waist Time
I think I get to dreaming
Of something I might do.
And I forget my studies,
And what I'm supost to do.

What I'm Going To Make of Myself Next Semester
I will not make my teacher mad,
Because that would make me sad.
I will not draw at all in school,
And I won't brake a single rule.

But the problem persisted, calling forth yet another signed promise the following year: "I will not do the things below. 1. I will not talk to my neighbor. 2. I will not play in school. 3. I will not cause my teacher any trouble and I will work my very best."[11]

Young Hefner, however, could not mend his ways. In his early teenage years he continued drawing cartoon strips—eventually they

would number about seventy different series—and to write and illustrate stories. He had begun to read fiction by Edgar Allan Poe and H. G. Wells and became a devotee of Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu tales and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. His own stories, with titles such as "The End of the World," "The Lizard Men from Under the Earth," "Dr. Claw's Invisible Hound," "The Mansion of Madness," and "Out of the Fog," increasingly focused on the macabre, the supernatural, horror, and science fiction. In 1940, Hefner formed and became president of "The Shudder Club," which, as expressed in his youthful syntax, aimed "to bring together all lovers of chills and horror and enjoying good mystery together." Like all self-respecting clubs for boys, it offered an official handshake, password, membership pin, and special "decoder circle" that permitted members to untangle secret messages. Hefner, doing all of the work, published five issues of *Shudder* magazine, which offered original mystery and horror stories. The boys were delighted when Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, and Peter Lorre replied to their solicitation and accepted honorary positions in the club.[12]

By 1940, Hefner's creations were reflecting the pressure of world events. "Photoplays" consisted of photographs of costumed characters, shot on the family Kodak, that were captioned to tell a story. While two of them were Sherlock Holmes parodies, the other pair were stories about World War II titled "Bill Dodgely and Troop 31" and "The Kid's No Coward." A 1940 comic strip told the story of three French brothers escaping from a Nazi prison in occupied Europe, while a ten-page tale imagined a German invasion of the United States that was heroically rebuffed near Chicago.[13]

Indeed, throughout childhood Hefner created vivid fantasy worlds in which he immersed himself, a trait that would prove to be lifelong. The boy who wouldn't answer the telephone or venture alone to the dentist's office a few streets away preferred to inhabit a reality he had created and to entice others to join him there. "I was a dreamer and people referred to me as a dreamer," Hefner later admitted of his childhood. "I had these flights of fantasy."[14]

This tendency had appeared in him at a very young age. Along with his brother and his pals, he organized a game he called "Clay" that they played day after day for years. Using modeling clay on a large table, they created dozens of small human figures and elaborate settings—battlefields, haunted mansions, mysterious ships—that

were like miniature movie sets. He invented stories the boys would bring to life as they would bend and twist the clay figures and speak for them. Grace later would recount how her eldest son "liked to fantasize and tell stories and play with these clay figures."[15]

In fact, Grace was repeatedly struck by Hugh's insular creativity. "As a child, he found it very difficult to make new friends. When he was in school, he was a dreamer, and sort of lived his own life in his own mind," she observed. "I would ask him who some of his classmates were, and he wouldn't know the names of very many of them." But he could relate the plots of his stories and comic strips down to the tiniest detail. "You couldn't always tell what was making Hugh feel unhappy, because he was very much a loner," a baffled Grace admitted. "He always lived in a fantasy world."[16]

Keith Hefner observed the same impulse in his older brother. Hugh preferred to spend time in his room, writing stories and drawing cartoons, when he wasn't playing. Often shy and insecure with other people, the boy did not like venturing out. "His fantasy life really began with the stories he wrote as a child in grade school and the cartoons he drew," Keith said. "He could really make his life what he wanted it to be." Even as a kid, noted the younger Hefner, Hugh wanted "his world to stay exactly as he made it, and doesn't want to go anywhere else where that isn't the reality."[17]

Hefner's fantasies did not appear sui generis, however, but were shaped by a cluster of influences. Family dynamics and religious instruction played an important role in channeling his creative instincts, as did the popular culture milieu of Depression-era America. These factors converged to prod his imagination and create a yearning that would motivate him throughout his life.

II

Like many middle-class children in the 1930s, Hugh Hefner was molded by traditional forces of family and religion. Since the early nineteenth century, respectable American families had drawn upon evangelical Protestantism and Victorian ideology to sustain them in a fluid, dynamic society of opportunity. The revivals of the Second Great Awakening had swept through the United States in the early 1800s, creating a Protestant tradition of "moral free agency" that made

the individual the arbiter of his own salvation. The crystallization of Victorian culture around the same time had enshrined a set of moral principles devoted to individual self-control. As late as the Great Depression, these traditions informed the way middle-class parents raised their children.[18]

This mind-set was changing dramatically, however, both in the larger culture and in the Hefner household. New leisure activities such as amusement parks and the movies had helped break down Victorian self-control in the early 1900s, while the explosive growth of a consumer economy gave rise to an ethos of material and emotional self-fulfillment. The Hefner family proved susceptible to such modernizing influences. To a marked degree, and contrary to Hugh's memories later in life, not just "Puritanism" but progressive notions of morality and childrearing influenced the proceedings at New England Avenue. So too did American popular culture, every variety of which colored the outlook of the eldest Hefner son. Glimpses of the man who founded *Playboy* could be seen in a youngster frustrated by the reticence and nose-to-the-grindstone ethic of his parents. They also manifested in a boy who was never disciplined without explanation, who chafed at even the mild restraints put in place by his parents, who argued with Sunday school teachers, and who whiled away countless hours in the company of cartoonists, mystery writers, and movie directors.[19]

As Hefner would recall throughout his life, restraint and repression colored the atmosphere of his family as he came of age. Orderly rules and sobriety muffled expressions of emotion. Hugh and Keith had to be at home and in bed earlier than their playmates, and they were not allowed to play with friends on Sunday, which was set aside for church and family activities. Grace and Glenn also shied away from displays of affection to each other and to their children. Little kissing and hugging occurred in this emotional climate of cool reserve. Keith remembered, "There was a period that lasted about two weeks when I was quite young, when I thought it would be nice to kiss my father on the cheek good night and that lasted about a week. I could tell how embarrassed he was by it." In fact, Grace and Glenn buried emotions so deep that feelings of any kind—anger, affection, disputes—seldom came to the surface. There was much calmness and kindness among the Hefners, but little passion. "His parents are very controlled people," Hefner's first wife reported. "In the three years we lived there, I never heard them raise their voice. Never."[20]

This atmosphere was reinforced by the temperaments of the boys' parents. Glenn, a straitlaced, hardworking CPA, had carved out a career at the Advanced Aluminum Company and also kept the books for the Austin Methodist Church, where the Hefners attended. About five foot eight with broad shoulders and a trim waist, the former basketball player had kept himself in good shape into middle age. Although taciturn, he had more of a sense of humor than Grace and was known to joke on occasion. He found it hard to talk to his sons, but occasionally joined them in pitching horseshoes or playing ball.[21]

But Hugh and Keith seldom saw their father because he was addicted to his work. Glenn left in the morning before his sons arose and returned near midnight after they were in bed. This grinding schedule resulted partly from his fascination with bookkeeping and partly from the Depression, when working extra hours could mean the difference between keeping a job and unemployment. He left the raising of his children to his wife, which pleased none of them. The boys sensed a vacuum in their lives because their father was seldom around for bonding experiences. When Keith told his dad how much he had missed his presence in boyhood, Glenn responded, "I didn't think I had to [be present]. My father never did anything with me." Grace also felt pangs of loneliness and worry, often walking around the block near midnight when he still had not appeared at home. An industrious, remote figure who was respected, even admired, in the Hefner family, Glenn was negligible in his personal impact. He was "a very nice husband" and a hard worker, said Grace, but as a father "he wasn't there." [22]

Glenn's reserve influenced his attitudes toward physical issues and sexuality. When the family went to a local swimming pool, he carefully hid his body from his sons as he stood behind a locker door and changed into his swimming trunks. He never discussed sex in any fashion with his sons. Decades later, Keith was stunned when his father asserted that he had never masturbated in his entire life, even as a teenager. Grace shared this Victorian aversion to sexuality. Later in life she confessed that she never had much use for sex. Glenn was very shy, but "he always liked it more than I did."[23]

Grace shared her husband's religiosity, kindliness, lack of pretension, and undemonstrative nature. Of medium height and sharp-featured, with wire-rimmed glasses and a habitually serious expression,

this soft-spoken woman wore no makeup, dressed simply, and kept her long hair carefully twirled up in a bun. As a young woman she had decided that if Glenn did not come back from World War I, she was going to become a missionary or a teacher in a mission school. A deeply felt code of Protestant values caused her to endorse virtuous, plain living, to view wealth with suspicion, and to see displays of emotion as unseemly.[24]

As a mother, Grace followed the same path trod by religious middle-class women for decades. Although college-educated, she stayed at home and devoted herself to the upbringing of the children. She handled all domestic matters, kept a house that was tidy if somewhat stark, and prepared meals of common midwestern fare: fried chicken, pot roast, pork chops, and fried fish. She enforced rules of behavior, counseled restraint, and set a tone of moral uplift in her household. She tried to raise children who were, in her own words, "very moral, kind, giving, social beings, treating other folks the way they want to be treated." Religious instruction played a significant role in her childrearing efforts. As Hugh noted throughout his adult life, this "repressed Midwestern Methodist home" overseen by his mother produced a "Puritanical upbringing."[25]

Yet Grace and Glenn Hefner were not simply hidebound traditionalists. Vestiges of old-fashioned principles certainly remained, but they had drifted far away from the values of provincial Nebraska. In certain ways they had embraced modernity. Not content to be a farmer or village storekeeper, Glenn had attended college and created a career in the corporate world of Chicago. Uprooted from the countryside, the Hefners had abandoned the extended family network that supported a traditional worldview. There was little contact with family as the Hefner boys were growing up. "I always felt as if the family on both sides, there was a remoteness," Hugh recollected. "We were not close to our relatives at all." Moreover, the Hefners had surmounted their modest economic origins, remaining relatively prosperous even during the dark years of the Depression. In fact, on occasion, Grace and Glenn sent money to help relatives back in Nebraska. "I was only vaguely aware of it. I never felt in danger in terms of anything economic," Hugh recalled of the Depression.[26]

In addition, Grace displayed a modern side that was never appreciated fully by her eldest son. Although a moralist, she was a progressive, educated woman who nurtured a liberal social vision and a view

of childrearing attuned not only to religion but to the latest theories put forward by psychology. These impulses would shape young Hugh's character quite as much as, and perhaps more than, the residue of "Puritan repression."

Grace had a remarkably liberal worldview in many ways. She was a pacifist who "didn't think there should be any war, and didn't think there should be any implements of war," according to Keith. Far in advance of her time, she denounced racial prejudice and taught her sons tolerance. Once, when they were at the train station, another passenger warned them to avoid an orange juice stand because a black person was squeezing the oranges. "Some people think that black people are different from us and aren't as clean as us and so forth, and that isn't right," Grace immediately told the boys. "Don't pay any attention to that."[27]

Grace's progressive views also surfaced in her opinions on childrearing. As a young mother, she fell under the sway of *Parents* magazine. She subscribed to this journal and relied upon its expert advice on everything from what movies were acceptable for children, to sex education, emotional training, and hygiene habits. What Hugh later interpreted as the fruits of a stern, cold "Puritan" ideology—not kissing on the mouth, skimpy displays of affection, strict rules about bedtime—came, in fact, from the pages of *Parents*. There mothers were told that kissing on the lips spread germs, that sentimentalizing children undermined scientific training, and that children did most of their growing during the sleep hours. As she explained, "I was very sure that what was recommended by *Parents* magazine should be done."[28]

Grace's reliance on this publication reveals much. *Parents* had been founded in 1926, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, to promote the most recent scientific findings in the new field of child development. Within a few years it became the largest-selling educational magazine in the world. This publishing venture was part of a larger Progressive crusade in the early twentieth century to utilize modern social science in many areas of education—in schools, among parents, in social work—to create a rational, efficient social order. As the historian Ann Hulbert has written, "A contingent of professional men and progressive-minded women led the way in spreading a new gospel that the child's fate would no longer be entrusted to God or mere custom." They joined in "calling on science to come to the rescue."[29]

Psychology, particularly behaviorism, dominated research in child development in the 1920s, and its strictures filled the pages of *Parents* magazine: enhance your child's development by molding behavior at a young age, pursue strict habit formation, rely on science rather than sentiment. The crack-up of the traditional Victorian family in the decades around the turn of the century had created great emotional and social strains in the American family. Now, with its impressive battery of social science experts, this publication promised to help young, isolated mothers like Grace Hefner shape a new generation of well-adjusted, confident citizens for an efficient modern society.[30]

Thus Grace's parenting, while influenced by her own Victorian upbringing, had a strong progressive element. Her letters to Hugh's teachers adopted psychological language in addressing his difficulties with concentrating on academic subjects. A mastoid infection around age six, she explained to an instructor, had created problems with his hearing and sight but she did not discuss this "handicap" around him for fear that he would "feel inferior." "He is unusually sensitive and whether he has been ridiculed in front of other children and is fearful of its being repeated, or what, I do not know," she wrote to another teacher. "I have been greatly troubled by his lack of adjustment." When Hugh's academic problems persisted and he remained reluctant to answer the telephone or travel to the dentist, she did not react like a good Victorian mother with punishment or admonitions. Instead, Grace concluded that this behavior "was not normal" and took him to an expert for testing. The doctor decided that, again in the language of the new behavioral sciences, his IQ was quite high and "his mind was ahead of his social development."[31]

In fact, Grace's psychology-tinged approach created an atmosphere of indulgence and rationality regarding her children. They "should have their own likes and dislikes, follow their own wants, their own inclinations," she maintained. She listened carefully to Hugh and Keith and tried to discuss issues in a nonthreatening way. While stressing the need for rules, she avoided punishing her children (especially corporal punishment) and offered explanations for parental decisions rather than just imposing her authority. In Grace's words, "I always had a strong sense of duty—you know, this should be done because it was the right thing to do. But I at least tried to explain *why*."[32]

Hugh was Grace's favorite—"If we were both drowning, there was never a question in my mind who she would save, if she could only save one," Keith once said—and her indulgence shaped his character. She listened carefully to his ideas, took him seriously, and nurtured a special bond of communication between them. "I was a kid who, from very early on, was always asking 'why,' and she encouraged that," Hugh would say later. This penchant for independent thinking produced a kind of self-regard that was striking even in his childhood. From a young age, he resented doing anything that he saw as an "obligation," such as going to the neighbors for a social visit or joining parents and brother for a ride in the car. He resisted such things if he saw no purpose in them.[33]

A striking example of Grace's modern childrearing methods involved sexual education. It illustrated how her progressive attachment to psychology was undermining her old-fashioned moralism. In the best Victorian tradition, she found the topic of sexuality to be acutely embarrassing. Her parents had never discussed sex and reproduction with her, she viewed sex outside of marriage as unthinkable, and she found sensuous figures such as Mae West to be offensive. Nonetheless, her modern instincts dictated a scientific approach to the issue. So after consulting *Parents* magazine and a friend trained in child development, she steeled herself, procured an illustrated book, and explained the facts of reproduction to Hugh and Keith. She even answered a couple of questions from one of the boys' playmates, whose outraged mother subsequently telephoned and asked Grace to avoid the topic with her son. Hugh would complain later that all he learned about was the biology of reproduction, and not physical and emotional aspects of sexual intercourse, but Grace believed that she was proceeding according to the latest expert advice: "I thought I was progressive."[34]

Hugh's education in sexual matters received a jolt, however, from a family scandal that even his mother's progressive approach couldn't explain. In 1931, Glenn's father, James Hefner, was arrested in Burlington, Colorado, and tried on four counts of taking "indecent liberties" with three girls aged ten and eleven. The charges accused the sixty-one-year-old man of "willfully and feloniously placing his hands under the clothes of . . . and upon the private parts of" the girls. He was convicted and spent over a year in jail, while his wife rented a room nearby so she could visit him. Grace was so horrified by this

crime and fearful of having married into a bad family that she briefly considered taking the two boys and leaving. But Glenn, after visiting his family, came home so completely mortified by the incident that she immediately abandoned such thoughts. Hugh's reaction to this incident was tangled when he learned of it a few years later. He felt disgust at the crime and intense sympathy for his father. Yet he wondered what had caused such aberrant behavior. Somehow, emotional and sexual repression seemed to be at fault. He blamed those who "were trying to control our lives in terms of sexuality," concluding that "the real sinners were people who were trying to make the rules. They were the Puritans."[35]

Thus the family dynamic in the Hefner household—its juxtaposition of Victorian restraint and modern science, moral principles and psychological techniques—had a complex impact on Hugh during his boyhood. Naturally sweet-natured, he loved his parents. While in college, for instance, he wrote Grace and Glenn, "Had I the ability to choose two perfect people for my parents, I don't think I could have found a pair better for me than God did. I shall always love you, and more than that, respect you, for what you are and have been." But as a boy he yearned for greater displays of parental affection. Unaware of *Parents* magazine and its psychological directives, he blamed the repression of a Protestant culture. He also grew sensitive to the pain caused by his parents' emotional reticence. He listened sympathetically when his mother, complaining about Glenn's absences, said "she was very much alone, and couldn't understand why he would have to work such long hours." But he also sympathized with his father's attempts to insulate himself from an impassive wife. "Her children were her life, as in many homes," Hugh explained. "What was there for the father? What was there for the husband?" This convergence of emotional yearnings, both his own and his parents', sent the sensitive boy in search of ways to fill the void.[36]

The Hefner family dynamic, however, also created a child who was extraordinarily self-absorbed. Doted on by his mother and lacking a firm male authority figure, he pursued his own interests with a passionate determination. "Even when Hugh was growing up, he was always so intense [and] he'd be miserable if he couldn't do the thing he wanted," Grace once noted. His parents allowed the boy to have his way with most things and seldom punished him. The only time he was ever spanked was when he once refused to leave his room

and join the family to go swimming. Because it occurred so seldom, Hugh felt even more keenly the weight of punishment or restraint when it did occur.[37]

Religion also played a crucial role in shaping the sensibility of the eldest Hefner boy. The family was steeped in traditional Protestantism, regularly attending the Austin Methodist Church while Grace reinforced its messages at home. "We didn't have family prayers, formal devotions, and all that, but . . . we judged our actions by what we thought we should do according to our religious upbringing," she explained. Hugh was a pious child, although subject to the usual juvenile confusions. At age three, he asked his mother, "What is God?" Grace explained that God was a loving father over all of us, so when Glenn came home that evening, the boy said, "Hello, God!" Once, in a moment of tension, Grace overheard Hugh reassure Keith that God would take care of them. "I was pleased to hear of his faith," she reported. Hugh occasionally composed religious poems, such as a 1937 effort titled "Easter" that described Christ's ascension to Heaven.[38]

But boyhood piety gave way to adolescent skepticism. Grace and Glenn insisted that the boys attend Sunday school, but a teenage Hugh resisted after arguing with his teacher about stories or doctrines he found to be nonsensical. He asked, for instance, where the other people came from in the Bible when it explained only Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. Once again, Grace's modernity triumphed over her traditional Protestant loyalties. She tolerated Hugh's dissent and encouraged him to think for himself. She even allowed the boys to decide whether they would be baptized when they became teenagers. Keith decided to do it, but his older brother did not. And when Hugh refused to attend church a short time later, his mother agreed, provided that he attend the Church League for teenagers on Sunday evening. Hugh admitted that "even though my parents were very religious, it wasn't dogmatic religion." Nonetheless, young Hefner was growing uncomfortable with the moral universe of the Methodist Church.[39]

As much as family and religion, American popular culture molded Hugh Hefner's boyhood character. "Pop culture was my other parent," he described later. "The movies and the music, particularly, were the alternative where I escaped into other dreams and fantasies." He went to movies as early as age five and recalled seeing in the

early 1930s *Smoky,* the story of a horse, the Flash Gordon serial with Buster Crabbe, and Mickey Mouse cartoons. Detective stories, horror fiction, comic strips, and adventure tales all inspired his juvenile imagination as images of Little Orphan Annie, Jack Armstrong, Tom Mix, Buck Rogers, and Dick Tracy danced in his head.[40]

Hugh cherished particular favorites. He idolized the cartoonist Milton Caniff, creator of the comic strip *Terry and the Pirates*. Pat Ryan, the protagonist, was a debonair adventurer whose pipe-smoking later inspired Hefner to take up the habit. The movie *Tarzan and His Mate* also left a big imprint. The boy imbibed its images of virtuous nature, rapacious white hunters, and benevolent jungle creatures. "What do you get from animals that you don't get from people all the time?" Hefner explained. "Non-judgmental love."[41]

Indeed, movies became his greatest boyhood passion. He would go to local theaters two or three times a week, sometimes seeing a double feature in the afternoon with his brother and then another with his parents in the evening. He loved mystery films, horror films, and westerns, but musicals inspired his greatest devotion. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s he sat enthralled by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald, and the Busby Berkeley films. He had boyhood crushes on stars such as Alice Faye, Betty Grable, and Deanna Durbin. The reason musicals had such a powerful impact, he later concluded, was that "you could say things in the lyrics of songs that you couldn't express any other way—to begin a romance, to express lost love, and . . . to feel the dreams and the yearnings." In musicals, he believed, "What you are trying to do is fill that yearning to be loved."[42]

Popular culture filled an emotional void in the boy's life. Craving more affection than he was receiving at home, he embraced the intensely romantic images and music found in the Hollywood musicals of the Depression era. This bright, sensitive child saw the movies as a way to connect with life. In the darkened theater, he recalled years later, "You could be transported to another world—the world of the imagination. And that, in turn was then reflected in the life that was most important to me, which was the life of my own imagination."[43]

Thoroughly caught up in America's modern culture of self-fulfillment, this midwestern youth moved toward adulthood. Entering high school, he did not yet know that it would be a golden age in his life, one he would ever after try to recapture.

III

Hugh Hefner enrolled at Steinmetz High School in January 1940. Although colored by typical adolescent angst, it unfolded as a remarkably positive period, with two events proving crucial. First, he became the leader of a social group of close friends, and second, around age seventeen, he created the persona of an imaginative, romantic figure whose fantasies dominated the endeavors of his pals. In important ways, this became a template for his life.

Bursting with energy, the teenager plunged headlong into numerous school activities that allowed his creativity to flower. Journalism provided one outlet. As a sophomore he started a small paper called the *Hour Glass,* and the following year he began working as a reporter, cartoonist, and circulation manager for the regular school paper, the *Steinmetz Star*. Theater also attracted Hefner, and he appeared in several school plays. He also wrote, directed, and appeared in a fifteen-minute horror film titled "Return from the Dead" that was shot with a 16-millimeter camera borrowed from a neighbor and featured two of his best friends.[44]

More importantly, however, he created a gang of close friends. It began with Hefner's strong friendship with Jim Brophy. The two boys had known one another since grade school, but in high school the bond between them became unbreakable. They presented different personalities. Brophy, a whiz at science and an excellent student, pursued ham radio as a hobby and won several science awards at Steinmetz. He would graduate fourth in a class of just over two hundred and would go on to forge a career as a physics professor. Hefner, while very bright, tended to be a lackadaisical student who poured his energy into creative endeavors such as writing, acting, and cartooning. But the pair shared great intelligence along with an absurd, slapstick sense of humor. "[We] thought each other to be hysterically funny," Brophy recalled. "Our personalities were very different, but we sparked each other's imaginations." Hefner described them as the "Hope and Crosby" of Steinmetz High as they played off of one another with jokes and gags. They even dressed similarly with flannel or checkered shirts and saddle shoes.[45]

The Hefner-Brophy friendship became the focal point of a Steinmetz group who began hanging out together by 1942. Composed equally of boys and girls, the gang included Hefner and Dorothy

Novak, Jim Brophy and Janie Borson, Betty Conklin and Bob Clousten, and Dorothy Diephouse and Bob Haugland. They went to movies and dances, played jazz records, threw parties with innocent kissing games, and drove around in cars borrowed from parents, and Hefner's identity became wrapped up in what he described as "the whole beautiful gang." But little of the fun happened at the Hefner household. According to Brophy, it was "dark and dull . . . [and] there was not warmth or real interchange in that household. I think that's one reason why Hef lived so intensely in our little circle of friends."[46]

Then came a dramatic change in Hefner's life. In the summer before his junior year, he had become interested in Betty Conklin, an outgoing girl who played the drums and idolized Gene Krupa. He saw her as the ultimate coed and they learned to jitterbug together, but when school started, she invited someone else to a hayride. Hefner was crushed and carried a torch for many years. Determined to make himself more attractive and popular, he decided on a personal overhaul. He began to refer to himself as "Hef," adopted a more stylish wardrobe and suave manner, improved his dancing, began using hip expressions, and, in his words, "became the imaginary adolescent, the teenager that I wanted to be." Writing in 1942, he described this new persona as

> a lanky, Sinatra-like guy with a love for loud flannel shirts and cords in the way of garb, and jive for music. He looks and acts a lot like a High School kid you'd see in a movie. A very original fellow, he has his own style of jiving and slang expressions. . . . He calls everyone "Slug" or "Fiend" and his pet expression is "Jeeps Creeps."[47]

This personal reinvention made Hefner one of the most popular students at Steinmetz High. Teaming with Jim Brophy, he emerged as a social leader whose gang became an elite group. "To be associated with the famous team of 'Hefner-Brophy' was, for me, to be at the highest social pinnacle in the school," Janie Sellers wrote Hefner many years later. "Together, I felt that you ran the whole school." Indeed, Hefner took center stage at Steinmetz. Increasingly popular, he parlayed his energy and creativity into election as president of the Student Council at the start of his senior year. Eventually, his

classmates voted him among the top three in the categories of "Most Likely to Succeed," "Most Popular Boy," "Class Humorist," "Best Orator," "Best Dancer," and "Most Artistic."[48]

At this time, Hefner also began a project that would preoccupy him for the rest of his life. He began to chronicle his experiences in a cartoon autobiography. Inventing a character for himself called "Goo Heffer," the youth composed dozens of comic strips that followed every twist and turn in his gang's activities in funny, charming, and occasionally poignant style. Sometimes he fictionalized their encounters a bit to add drama or humor. Hefner would pass the strips around among the group, who enjoyed them immensely, before carefully pasting them into scrapbooks. The adolescent justified the project on several grounds: he liked to draw, he often found school to be boring, it would entertain his friends, and it would provide an interesting record of his teenage years to look back on in later life.[49]

But there were also deeper impulses at work. Quite self-consciously, the cartoons centered on the author, self-described variously as "our hero," a "Sinatra-type of guy," or "the type of high school kid you would see in the movies." They made Hefner the pivot around which the gang revolved, and his descriptions of their life became the prevailing ones. "Hef always had a strong interest in self," noted Brophy. "He loved living in his imagination." At some level, Hefner was aware of this self-promotion. "In the comic book, you create a world in which the hero of the story is you, and you include your friends in the story," he observed later. "And you pass it around, and you are the center of that little world that you created." Hefner's vibrant imagination also came into play. While based on real people and events, the stories offered a narrative where, in his own words, "The truth is twisted to make a better comic. . . . And with the characters the same thing is true." This blurring of fact and fantasy, he admitted, "may be confusing, especially since photographs of a lot of them [his friends] are put here. And we'll admit it is difficult to photograph a fictional character. Well, I'm confused too."[50]

Hefner's talent for imaginative recreation gained strength from his immersion in popular culture. His adolescent interests ran the gamut of pop culture venues in 1940s America: swing dancing and music, cartoons and radio plays, slick paper magazines, and Hollywood movies. The teenager loved the big band music of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Harry James and even wrote a swing tune

titled "The A-Card Blues." He became a crusader for student rights regarding music and dancing, complaining publicly about the staid school dances. "The majority of the students who dance prefer jive, but the moment you start even a simple jive break, someone steps up and stops you," he grumbled. "If the Friday night dances are for us students, why not give us the kind of music we enjoy?" As president of the Student Council, he worked unsuccessfully to have a jukebox placed in the cafeteria so students could dance during lunch hour. An article titled "A Saga in Jive" by "Hep Hef" playfully related a story in jive talk. "If you Stein studes are really hep you ought to be able to dig the jive talk," he wrote. "I say you are a bunch of squares. Well, let's see."[51]

Hefner also began exhibiting a trait that would define much of his adult life—a powerful attraction to females. He displayed a dawning awareness of sexuality that, while steeped in innocence and romance, veered close to obsession. The introverted youngster had several schoolboy crushes on various girls before finally taking one of them to see a movie in eighth grade on his first real date. During his first two years of high school, Hefner was attracted to a pretty girl named Beverly Allen, whom he fell for when she kissed him while playing Post Office at a party. The next few years saw a parade of high school girlfriends: Betty Conklin, Edith Biowski, Dorothy Novak.[52]

As his interest in the opposite sex flowered, the adolescent Hefner bridled at social restrictions regarding the mysterious, yet compelling area of sex. A 1938 article in *Life* magazine, titled "A Tragedy of Youth," had made a deep impression. It told the sad tale of a teenage boy and girl in New York City who, after she became pregnant, made a suicide pact that produced one death and a murder trial for the survivor. The story resonated with twelve-year-old Hefner, who, while not completely understanding the issues, saw it as an example of social rules that created misery rather than happiness. The following year he saw the rerun of a pre-code film with his mother. When one of the female characters made a suggestive remark, Grace whispered, "Well, they couldn't get away with that today." Hugh thought silently, "Gee, I wish they could." In high school, he argued with his mother about the wisdom and propriety of having sex with girls. Grace insisted that "you run the risk of bringing a life into the world that you have no way of taking care of, and you don't have the right." Her eldest son contended that since pregnancy could be avoided,

sexual relations should be permitted. Even as a teenager, Hefner chafed against authority and its proscription of sex.[53]

Meanwhile, Hefner's growing interest in females and sexuality found an enticing outlet. In the eighth grade he discovered *Esquire* magazine in the basement of a girlfriend's house—her father was a subscriber—and started to read old copies of this men's magazine. He became particularly fascinated with the pinup drawings by George Petty, whose lush, idealized depictions of women in various states of undress had begun to appear in the magazine in 1933. He started collecting "Petty Girls" and hanging them on the walls of his bedroom. A bit later he discovered pinups drawn by the artist Alberto Vargas, also in *Esquire,* and began adding "Vargas Girls" to his collection. Grace disapproved, but her modern sensibility overcame her religious scruples and she did not make him take them down. Keith, interested in acting, had tacked up posters of movie stars in his bedroom, and she decided that both her boys should be allowed to pursue their own ideas. "I think for a supposedly narrow-minded person, I was rather broad minded to allow them to do those things," she observed later. One of Hefner's favorite Petty Girl drawings portended the future—an attractive young woman whimsically outfitted in a pink bunny suit complete with long ears.[54]

Hefner's actual romantic life, however, failed to meet the *Esquire* standard. Instead, it reflected a typical teenage pattern of awkward advances, flashes of euphoria, occasional rejection, recurrent confusion, and fun. It also embodied his consuming desire to be in love. As Brophy explained, "Hef was constantly falling in love. . . . If he wasn't in love, he felt incomplete and unhappy." But Hefner was no teenage lothario. Often shy and awkward with girls, he offered a bright, sweet, energetic temperament and an underwhelming physical presence. He "was unusually skinny," said Janie Borson, one of the gang. "That was his problem with the girls. We were looking for Tyrone Power." But as "Goo Heffer" philosophized in the cartoon autobiography, "If ya don't get mixed up with wimmen, ya don't have no fun. So you're miserable. If ya do, their friends get sore if ya hit the rocks. And with no friends, you're miserable. So it's evident that wimmen are gonna cause ya misery no matter what. But I love 'em anyway."[55]

By the last year of high school, Hefner had gained a little sexual experience. Going steady with a couple of girls had led to kissing and petting, and occasionally he even got into trouble with his

mild-mannered parents for going too far. Glenn became furious one evening when Hugh arrived home in the early morning hours after a late date. His father burst out, "'Where the god-damn hell have you been?' And it was the one and only time in my entire life that I ever heard him swear," Hefner recalled. Another time he cuddled with a girl in the rumble seat as he was out driving around with friends. When the father warned sternly that such behavior was not acceptable, the son observed that the edict "of course, gave the whole idea of a rumble seat a very romantic connection."[56]

Thus during childhood and adolescence Hugh Hefner immersed himself in a fantasy world that he created from available elements in his young life. A family atmosphere of emotional repression created longings for emotional connection. As Victorian tradition vied with modern social science in the Hefner household, he encountered vestiges of restraint while enjoying a general atmosphere of indulgence and encouragement. Authority appeared distant, abstract, and vaguely defined. When strictures were imposed by parents, school, or church, they seemed all the more severe because of their infrequency.

For this bright, creative child, popular culture promised happiness. Movies, cartoons, magazines, swing music, and dancing presented visions of self-fulfillment where romance, adventure, and intense personal experience were the norm. By the time he became a teenager Hefner viewed his life in terms of a movie plot and himself in terms of a cinematic character. Restless, ambitious, and increasingly committed to his own fantasies, he desperately sought emotional satisfaction. Like growing numbers in the culture of modern America, he felt entitled to it.

But the key question, of course, was how to find such gratification. As he left the warm cocoon of high school in 1944, Hugh Hefner entertained vague hopes of being a cartoonist with his own strip, or of working for a magazine as a writer. But first he was forced to confront an international crisis that had swept through the lives of all Americans, even those living sheltered lives in midwestern cities.