

David Lynch's mother was a city person and his father was from the country. That's a good place to begin this story, because this is a story of dualities. "It's all in such a tender state, all this flesh, and it's an imperfect world," Lynch has observed, and that understanding is central to everything he's made.<sup>1</sup> We live in a realm of opposites, a place where good and evil, spirit and matter, faith and reason, innocent love and carnal lust, exist side by side in an uneasy truce; Lynch's work resides in the complicated zone where the beautiful and the damned collide.

Lynch's mother, Edwina Sundholm, was the descendant of Finnish immigrants and grew up in Brooklyn. She was bred on the smoke and soot of cities, the smell of oil and gasoline, artifice and the eradication of nature; these things are an integral part of Lynch and his worldview. His paternal great-grandfather homesteaded land in the wheat country near Colfax, Washington, where his son, Austin Lynch, was born in 1884. Lumber mills and soaring trees, the scent of freshly mowed lawns, starry nighttime skies that only exist far from the cities—these things are part of Lynch, too.

David Lynch's grandfather became a homesteading wheat farmer like his father, and after meeting at a funeral, Austin and Maude Sullivan, a girl from St. Maries, Idaho, were married. "Maude was educated and raised our father to be really motivated," said Lynch's sister, Martha Levacy, of her grandmother, who was the teacher in the one-room schoolhouse on the land she and her husband owned near Highwood, Montana.<sup>2</sup>

Austin and Maude Lynch had three children: David Lynch's father, Donald, was the second, and he was born on December 4th, 1915, in a house without running water or electricity. "He lived in a desolate place and he loved trees because there were no trees on the prairie," said David's brother, John. "He

was determined not to be a farmer and live on the prairie, so he went into forestry.”<sup>3</sup>

Donald Lynch was doing graduate work in entomology at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina, when he met Edwina Sundholm in 1939. She was there doing undergraduate work with a double major in German and English, and they crossed paths during a walk in the woods; she was impressed by his courtesy when he held back a low-hanging branch to allow her to pass. Both of them served in the navy during World War II, then on January 16th, 1945, they married in a navy chapel on Mare Island, California, twenty-three miles northeast of San Francisco. A short time later, Donald landed a job as a research scientist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Missoula, Montana. It was there that he and his wife began building a family.

David Keith Lynch was their first child. Born in Missoula on January 20th, 1946, he was two months old when the family moved to Sandpoint, Idaho, where they spent two years while Donald worked for the Department of Agriculture there. They were living in Sandpoint in 1948 when David’s younger brother, John, was born, but he, too, came into the world in Missoula: Edwina Lynch—known as Sunny—returned to Missoula to deliver her second child. Later that year the family moved to Spokane, Washington, where Martha was born in 1949. The family spent 1954 in Durham while Donald completed his studies at Duke, returned to Spokane briefly, then settled in Boise, Idaho, in 1955, where they remained until 1960. It was there that David Lynch spent the most significant years of his childhood.

The period following World War II was the perfect time to be a child in the United States. The Korean War ended in 1953, blandly reassuring two-term President Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House from 1953 through 1961, the natural world was still flourishing, and it seemed as if there just wasn’t a lot to worry about. Although Boise is Idaho’s state capital, it had the character of a small town at the time, and middle-class children there grew up with a degree of freedom that’s unimaginable today. Playdates had yet to be invented, and kids simply roamed their neighborhood streets with their friends, figuring things out for themselves; this was the childhood Lynch experienced.

“Childhood was really magical for us, especially in the summertime, and my best memories of David took place in the summer,” recalled Mark Smith,

who was one of Lynch's closest friends in Boise. "My back door and David's back door were maybe thirty feet apart, and our parents would give us breakfast, then we'd run out the door and play the whole day long. There were vacant lots in our neighborhood and we'd take our dads' shovels and build big subterranean forts and just kind of lay in there. We were at the age when boys really get into playing army."<sup>4</sup>

Lynch's mother and father each had two siblings, all but one of whom married and had children, so theirs was a big family with lots of aunts, uncles, and cousins, and everybody occasionally gathered at the home of Lynch's maternal grandparents in Brooklyn. "Aunt Lily and Uncle Ed were warm, welcoming people, and their house on Fourteenth Street was like a haven—Lily had a huge table that took up most of the kitchen and everyone would get together there," recalled Lynch's cousin Elena Zegarelli. "When Edwina and Don and their children came it was a big deal, and Lily would make a big dinner and everyone would come."<sup>5</sup>

By all accounts, Lynch's parents were exceptional people. "Our parents let us do things that were kind of crazy and you wouldn't do today," said John Lynch. "They were very open and never tried to force us to go one way or another." David Lynch's first wife, Peggy Reavey, said, "Something David told me about his parents that was extraordinary was that if any of their kids had an idea for something they wanted to make or learn about, it was taken absolutely seriously. They had a workshop where they did all kinds of things, and the question immediately became: How do we make this work? It moved from being something in your head to something out in the world real fast, and that was a powerful thing.

"David's parents supported their kids in being who they were," Reavey continued, "but David's father had definite standards of behavior. You didn't treat people crappy, and when you did something you did it well—he was strict about that. David has impeccable standards when it comes to craft, and I'm sure his father had something to do with that."<sup>6</sup>

Lynch's childhood friend Gordon Templeton remembered Lynch's mother as "a great homemaker. She made clothes for her kids and was quite a seamstress."<sup>7</sup> Lynch's parents were romantic with each other, too—"they'd hold hands and kiss each other goodbye," said Martha Levacy—and in signing correspondence Lynch's mother sometimes wrote "Sunny," and drew a sun next to her name, and "Don," with a drawing of a tree next to his. They were devout

Presbyterians. “That was an important part of our upbringing,” said John Lynch, “and we went to Sunday school. The Smiths next door were a real contrast to our family. On Sundays the Smiths would get in their Thunderbird convertible and head up to ski, and Mr. Smith would be smoking a cigarette. Our family got in the Pontiac and went to church. David thought the Smiths were cool and that our family was stodgy.”

David’s daughter Jennifer Lynch remembers her grandmother as “prim and proper and very active in her church. Sunny had a great sense of humor, too, and she loved her children. I never got the sense that David was favored, but he was definitely the one she worried about the most. My father deeply loved both of his parents, but he also despised all that goodness, the white picket fence and all that. He has a romantic idea of that stuff, but he also hated it because he wanted to smoke cigarettes and live the art life, and they went to church and everything was perfect and quiet and good. It made him a little nutty.”<sup>8</sup>

The Lynches lived on a cul-de-sac with several boys of approximately the same age within a few houses of one another, and they all became friends. “There were around eight of us,” said Templeton. “There was Willard ‘Winks’ Burns, Gary Gans, Riley ‘Riles’ Cutler, myself, Mark and Randy Smith, and David and John Lynch, and we were like brothers. We were all into *Mad* magazine, we rode bikes a lot, hung out at the swimming pool in the summer, and went to our gal friends’ houses and listened to music. We had a lot of freedom—we’d be out riding our bikes until ten at night, take the bus downtown by ourselves, and we all looked out for each other. And everybody liked David. He was friendly, gregarious, unpretentious, loyal, and helpful.”

Lynch seems to have been a savvy kid who hungered for a kind of sophistication that was hard to come by in Boise in the 1950s, and he’s spoken of “longing for something out of the ordinary to happen” when he was a child. Television was bringing alternate realities into American homes for the first time and beginning to chip away at the unique regional character of towns and cities throughout the country. One imagines that an intuitive child like Lynch might’ve sensed the profound change that was beginning to transform the country. At the same time, he was very much of his time and place and was a committed member of the Boy Scouts; as an adult he’s occasionally touted his status as an Eagle Scout, the highest rank a Scout can achieve.

“We were in Troop 99 together,” said Mark Smith. “We had all these

activities—swimming, knot tying—and one of them was a one-night survival camp where some guy taught us what you could eat in the forest to survive, how to catch a squirrel and cook it, and so forth. We had a few sessions learning this stuff, then we went into the mountains to survive. Before we left we bought all the candy we could, and after the first hour we'd eaten it all. So we get to this lake and we're told to catch a fish—which none of us could do—and by nightfall we thought we were going to die of starvation. Then we noticed a plane circling overhead, and out came a box on a parachute. It was really dramatic. The box was full of things like powdered eggs and we all survived."

Lynch was one of those children with a natural ability to draw, and his artistic talent became evident at an early age. His mother refused to give him coloring books—she felt they constricted the imagination—and his father brought loads of graph paper home from work; Lynch had all the materials he needed and was encouraged to go where his mind took him when he sat down to draw. "It was right after the war and there was a lot of army surplus stuff around, and I'd draw guns and knives," Lynch has recalled. "I got into airplanes, bombers and fighter planes, Flying Tigers, and Browning automatic water-cooled submachine guns."<sup>9</sup>

Martha Levacy remembered, "Most kids wore plain T-shirts then, and David started making customized shirts for all the neighborhood kids with Magic Markers, and everybody in the neighborhood bought one. I remember Mr. Smith next door buying one for a friend who was turning forty. David made a kind of 'Life Begins at 40' drawing of a man staring at a nice-looking woman."

A gifted, charismatic child, Lynch was "definitely somebody people were attracted to," said Smith. "He was popular and I can easily see him running a movie set—he always had lots of energy and lots of friends because he could make people laugh. I have a memory of sitting on the curb in fifth grade and reading stuff in *Mad* magazine out loud to each other and just howling, and when I saw the first episode of *Twin Peaks* I recognized that same sense of humor." Lynch's sister concurred that "a lot of the humor from that period in our lives is in David's work."

Lynch was president of his seventh-grade class and played trumpet in the school band. Like most able-bodied citizens of Boise, he skied and swam—he was good at both, said his sister—and he played first base in Little League baseball. He also liked movies. "If he went to a movie I hadn't seen, he'd come

home and tell me about it in detail,” said John Lynch. “I remember one he particularly loved called *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* that he went on and on about.” The first movie Lynch recalls seeing was *Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie*, a downbeat drama directed by Henry King in 1952, which culminates with the lead character being gunned down in a barbershop. “I saw it at a drive-in with my parents, and I remember a scene where a guy is machine-gunned in a barber’s chair and another scene of a little girl playing with a button,” Lynch has recalled. “Suddenly her parents realize she’s gotten it caught in her throat, and I remember feeling a real sense of horror.”

In light of the work Lynch went on to produce, it’s not surprising to learn that his childhood memories are a mixture of darkness and light. Perhaps his father’s work dealing with diseased trees imbued him with a heightened awareness of what he has described as “the wild pain and decay” that lurk beneath the surface of things. Whatever the reason, Lynch was unusually sensitive to the entropy that instantly begins eating away at every new thing, and he found it unsettling. Family trips to visit his grandparents in New York made Lynch anxious, too, and he has recalled being highly disturbed by things he encountered there. “The things I’d be upset by were mild compared with the feelings they’d give me,” he’s said. “I think people feel fear even when they don’t understand the reason for it. Sometimes you walk into a room and you can sense that something’s wrong, and when I’d go to New York that feeling covered me like a blanket. Being out in nature there’s a different kind of fear, but there’s fear there, too. Some very bad things can happen in the country.”

A painting Lynch made in 1988, titled *Boise, Idaho*, speaks to these sorts of memories. Positioned in the lower right quadrant of a black field is an outline of the shape of the state, surrounded by tiny collaged letters that spell out the title of the painting. Four jagged vertical lines disrupt the black field, and a menacing tornado shape in the left of the image plane seems to be advancing on the state. It’s a disturbing image.

Apparently the more turbulent currents of Lynch’s mind weren’t evident to his Boise playmates. Smith said, “When that black car is winding up the hill in *Mulholland Drive* you just know something creepy is going to happen, and that’s not the person David was as a kid. The darkness in his work surprises me and I don’t know where it came from.”

In 1960, when Lynch was fourteen years old, his father was transferred to Alexandria, Virginia, and the family moved again. Smith recalled that “when

David's family moved it was like somebody unscrewed the bulb in the street-light. David's family had a 1950 Pontiac and the Pontiac symbol was the head of an Indian, so there was an ornament of an Indian head on the hood of the car. The nose on their Indian was broken, so we called the car Chief Broken Nose, and they sold the car to my mom and dad before they moved." Gordon Templeton remembers the day the Lynches moved, too. "They left on the train and a bunch of us rode our bikes to the station to see them off. It was a sad day."

Though Lynch flourished as a high school student in Alexandria, the years he spent in Boise have always held a special place in his heart. "When I picture Boise in my mind, I see euphoric 1950s chrome optimism," he's said. When the Lynch family left Boise, a few other neighbors moved, too, and John Lynch recalled David saying, "That's when the music stopped."

Lynch had begun edging out of childhood prior to leaving Boise. He's recalled the dismay he felt as a young boy when he learned he'd missed Elvis Presley's debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and he'd become seriously interested in girls by the time the family moved. "David started going steady with a really cute girl," said Smith. "They were so in love." Lynch's sister recalled that "David always had a girlfriend, starting when he was pretty young. When he was in junior high I remember him telling me he kissed every single girl on a hayride his seventh-grade class went on."

Lynch returned to Boise the summer after he completed ninth grade in Virginia and spent several weeks staying with different friends. "When he came back he was different," Smith remembered. "He'd matured and was dressing differently—he came back with a unique style and had black pants and a black shirt, which was unusual in our group. He was really self-confident, and when he told stories about experiences in Washington, D.C., we were impressed. He had a sophistication that made me think, My friend has gone somewhere beyond me."

"After high school David stopped coming back to Boise and we lost touch," Smith continued. "My youngest daughter is a photographer who lives in L.A., and one day in 2010 she was assisting a photographer who told her, 'We're shooting David Lynch today.' When they took a break during the shoot she approached him and said, 'Mr. Lynch, I think you might know my dad, Mark Smith, from Boise.' David said, 'You're shitting me,' and the next time I visited my daughter I got together with David at his house. I hadn't seen him since

high school and he gave me a big hug, and when he introduced me to people at his office, he said, 'I want you to meet Mark, my brother.' David's very loyal, and he stays in touch with my daughter—as her dad, I'm glad David's there. I wish he still lived next door to me."

The 1950s have never really gone away for Lynch. Moms in cotton shirtwaist dresses smiling as they pull freshly baked pies out of ovens; broad-chested dads in sport shirts cooking meat on a barbecue or heading off to work in suits; the ubiquitous cigarettes—everybody smoked in the 1950s; classic rock 'n' roll; diner waitresses wearing cute little caps; girls in bobby sox and saddle shoes, sweaters and pleated plaid skirts—these are all elements of Lynch's aesthetic vocabulary. The most significant aspect of the decade that stayed with him, however, is the mood of the time: The gleaming veneer of innocence and goodness, the dark forces pulsing beneath it, and the covert sexiness that pervaded those years are a kind of cornerstone of his art.

"The neighborhood where *Blue Velvet* was shot looks very much like our neighborhood in Boise, and half a block from our house was a creepy apartment building like the one in the movie," said John Lynch. *Blue Velvet*'s opening sequence of idyllic American vignettes was drawn from *Good Times on Our Street*, a children's book that permanently lodged itself in David's mind. "The joyride in *Blue Velvet* came from an experience in Boise, too. David and a few of his buddies once wound up in a car with an older kid who claimed he was going a hundred miles an hour down Capitol Boulevard. I think it was frightening, this crazy older kid with a hot car driving dangerously, and that memory stuck with David. He draws on his childhood a lot in his work."

Lynch does reference his childhood in his work, but his creative drive and the things he's produced can't be explained with a simple equation. You can dissect someone's childhood searching for clues that explain the person the child grew up to be, but more often than not there is no inciting incident, no Rosebud. We simply come in with some of who we are. Lynch came in with an unusually intense capacity for joy and a desire to be enchanted, and he was confident and creative from the start. He wasn't one of the boys buying a T-shirt with an irreverent drawing on it. He was the boy who was making them. "David was a born leader," said his brother, John.



