

"SOME WORDS WITH WARREN BEATTY"

(with apologies to Edgar Allan Poe)

The rain tumbled down cold and crisp, like little lost slivers of some delicate elsewhere. Charles stood on one foot, then the other, then that first foot again, in the small loading dock to the rear of stage B. All of his peers had headed back into the soundstage to eat roast beef sandwiches and ginger ale as soon as the first drops had fallen. None of them, Charles included, had ever been on a real studio lot before, and for awhile the novelty was catching. Just an hour ago, seventeen girls that Charles had been, would be, or currently was in love with stood with him staring out at the expanse of the Culver Motion Picture Studios. But when the umpteenth anonymous technician drove by ("Isn't that an actor?", "No, I don't think so.") in his little motorized cart, Charles had sensed a fading, a mass shrug, and the seventeen girls had gone back into the soundstage where Sony had set up so many picnic tables.

At some point in the day, Charles and the other juniors and seniors in his advanced Drama class would be called to a different stage to appear in the background of a film. It was all very exciting, sure, but the waiting was not for most. Charles, though, was soaking in the ambience alone on that loading dock. Trying to appear as if he belonged. His foot itched inside his shoe. The rain made the blacktop and cement smell clean, like fresh dirt.

Charles heard neat footsteps, drawing near. They were sharp clacks, assured. They seemed to follow rigorously, one after the other. But more so than is normal, more like the syncopated marching of a great, trained many. Strangely, Charles began to imagine solidly colored billiard balls clacking into a huge heap somewhere. Clacking, but not rolling down. Holding steady. An image called in from somewhere

else.

A figure in grey drew near. In a moment, Charles realized that the approaching face looked familiar. A strange kind of familiar, like seeing the beach for the first time after a lifetime of nature photographs. Like a perfect unicorn drinking from the L.A. river. Like seeing his own skull looking back at him from a shiny cherried dish.

The man, this stranger, looked right back at Charles, only with no recognition whatsoever. Charles thought two things: One, that it was odd that it was raining here where they make the movies, and shouldn't they have figured a way out of that by now, and: Two, that the way the man looked back at him reminded him of the way the sick husband looked at his wife when he couldn't remember her in those old 40's amnesia movies.

The man, who had now passed in front of Charles, was an actor: Warren Beatty. His gaze had fallen across Charles like a scythe reaping corn, finding nothing at all to catch it's clean slice.

The rain continued, tapping on everything hollow and slapping into everything not. From Charles' diminishing vantage point, it seemed that Mr. Beatty had avoided most of the chilly droplets, surely by way of cool dancing beneath and betwixt some lovely and ornate studio awnings. The actor was passing now, heading in the direction of a much larger soundstage that loomed in the near distance. Charles noticed that Beatty's head continued to turn, slightly scanning the immediate area he had in front of him. A slow, steady scan, not like a machine but rather some elegantly smooth turtle.

"Bonnie & Clyde." "Shampoo." "McCabe and Mr.s Miller." Good movies. Charles lifted his leg and began to step down from the loading dock.

Warren Beatty hurried past B stage on the way to A stage. The movie was going badly. He felt it. He hadn't felt so at sea since "Ishtar" bombed in the late '80s.

The rain kept landing on his eyelids, goddamit. To his right, he could see the Hollywood Hills in the distance. He could feel them like Bimam Wood approaching in "Macbeth". He felt he was perhaps one of the three witches, or all of them. To his right,

on the loading dock of Stage B, some kid stood staring at him like he was turning steady cartwheels and screaming instead of just walking by between the puddles.

The movie was not going well. Beatty had originally optioned the book with the intent to direct it himself, like he had with "Reds" and "Dick Tracy". He had been anxious to shake the title "actor-director", and the condescension it brought. He would be one or the other, or both, when he pleased. But at the last minute, his wife Annette had suggested that they film large portions of the movie on the island of Hawaii, and that maybe the film itself could be a kind of second honeymoon for them. In any case, Beatty and Sony Pictures had decided to hand the reigns over to some MTV kid who couldn't direct a quarter into a Coke machine.

Clap, clap, slap. Those Italian shoes sounded so good striking that wet ground, Beatty began to feel slightly in control again. Things would be okay, they always were. The electric current that had run through his body and guided his destiny had snaked into his eyes from an electric socket in his parents' bathroom when he was six or seven, and it's lightning roamed his empty veins still.

If he wanted to, he thought, he could walk just an inch or so above the puddles. All the things that plagued him, little or small, were of his own creation. But, he reminded himself, better not to let everyone know that. Yet.

Or at least that's what Charles imagined, as he began to follow behind the actor. Following in Beatty's path, every puddle he reached had a wake cutting through it. Those shiny shoes seemed to slice the oily water like a hot knife through butter or a pig's belly.

Beatty, up ahead, disappeared around a corner. A few hundred feet ahead, Stage A cut off all paths.

As Charles reached the corner himself, he was startled by a familiar voice.

"Can I help you?", the actor said.

Beatty had stopped clean. He had been waiting for Charles just around that bend.

"Um, no. Sorry.", Charles said meekly.

"What's your business on the lot?"

"I'm an extra."

"On which stage?"

"B."

At this, Beatty lowered his head and raised it again.

"I'm sorry", he said. "I hope I didn't offend you."

With that, he continued to walk. Charles continued after him.

"Um, Mr. Beatty?", Charles asked.

"Yes?", Beatty said, stopping and turning half back towards Charles.

"I just want to tell you that I think you're a really fine film director, and that I think you're proving that a good director should always be an actor first."

Charles could hear the rain far away, hitting the roof of the small empty cafeteria. Beatty was at the food carousel, using one crisp new dollar bill after another to buy them each a particularly thick kind of ham sandwich.

"You know", Beatty said as the second sandwich was pushed from the insides of the machine, "these sandwiches are great."

He walked, placed the two sandwiches on the small yellow table that they had been sitting at, and began to sit down.

Halfway down, he stopped.

"You want a Coke?", he asked Charles.

"No, thanks."

"Okay.", he said as he settled into the chair. "You know, this is one of the things about being a movie star. They used to only stock these amazing ham sandwiches when they knew I was shooting a film here, because they knew I loved them. One time, though, I came to visit Dustin Hoffman when he was shooting here. I wanted to impress Dustin with the incredible thickness of these sandwiches, and with the amazing freshness of that French roll."

Charles teeth sunk into the roll. It certainly was soft. Fresh, probably baked that morning.

"But they didn't know I was coming, so they didn't stock the sandwich that day. I was sad," he continued. "But, you know, after that, they started stocking them all the time. Everyday, just in case I drop by. If I'm in Hawaii for a month, there's still a nice sandwich or two waiting here in this machine for me every one of those days. Just in case. And that's sort of how I feel about art."

"Huh?", Charles said.

"Movies. Eventually everyone will be eating my favorite ham sandwich. And everyone will see, as you can see, that the French roll is still so soft."

Beatty sunk his teeth through the top half of his roll, and down through thirty five or forty thin layers of honey ham. Charles continued eating, too.

"Mr. Beatty," Charles asked as they stepped back out into the drizzle.

"Yeah, kid?"

"I've always wanted to ask you this. How many beautiful women have you made love to in your life?"

Beatty smiled and looked at Charles, then away. He didn't seem embarrassed, really, just modest.

"Well, kid," he said, "how many times have you sipped milk from a coffee cup?"

Charles didn't know the answer to that one, nor did he follow the actor's thinking.

"Or rather," he continued, "how many times have you cut one of your fingers?"

Charles looked at his hand, thinking perhaps he could count scars and figure out an equation for the less serious injuries. For every cut that left a scar, how many had slithered away and been forgotten? Five to one? Fifty?

"You imagine of course that the first time you cut your hand, it was a memorable event. You probably cried a lot, not knowing what to do next", Beatty said. "And maybe the second time, you cried a little too. And then some time later, the fourth cut on your finger. And the fifth. At some point in your life, you stopped remembering that first cut. You lost track, as every cut healed or dried up. It no longer mattered how many times it happened, but rather that it happened every now and then and that it always turned out all right."

At this point, Charles wondered if Beatty was hoping that the original question might be forgotten all together.

"Now imagine if you really LIKED cutting your finger", Beatty continued.

"Imagine that, every time you saw a nice sharp knife, you ran it across the top of your finger. Let's say you did it, oh, nine or ten times a week. With different knives. On different parts of your finger."

"The knives are women," I said, "and the finger is your-"

"The finger is your metaphor, son."

Charles couldn't remember who had first brought up that finger.

"Son, I have made love to so many beautiful women that I sometimes forget their lovely names. I'll see a woman on television or in a film, and I'll feel some lust, and then I'll realize that I've already had her. The lust goes away."

"Wow", Charles said.

"Once I made love to eight different women on one weekend. And not just women, but movie stars and pop singers," the actor said, and snapped his fingers. "I lost count long ago."

"Natalie Wood?", I asked.

"Yep."

"Sophia Loren?"

"Yep."

"Liza Minnelli? Carrie Fisher? Goldie Hawn? Julie Christie?"

"All of them. All of them."

Charles' mind reeled.

"How many women have you been with, kid?", Beatty asked.

"Two", Charles lied.

Somewhere inside, Beatty tried to imagine or remember what it must have been like to only have been with two women. The kid was probably lying and doubling his figure. So, one then. The actor-director tried to remember his first warm woman, Betty, behind the cyclorama, before the final dress rehearsal for "Death Of A Salesman". Maybe that was it. How, he wondered, did it feel to only know the geography of one woman, to think the breast felt only like this, and that thighs were only so smooth. How did it feel to only have made love to a blonde, and not a red head? How, he thought, did it feel to long for another lover instead of expect it?

How many had it been? Thirty five hundred? Four thousand? And that was only counting Earth women, and not even the many tentacled lovers he had been with on his home planet of Neptune. Oh, how those clawed suction cups had delighted his young green buttocks.

Or so Charles imagined Beatty might be thinking. It was as hard for Charles to

see things from the movie star's perspective as it might be to see from the eyes of a lonely giant squid that had never seen the sun or a human being. He noticed that Beatty's skin was tight and leathery, and that his teeth were blindingly white. When he spoke, when his lips parted, it was like one camera flash after another.

"Mr. Beatty?" Charles asked.

"Call me Warren, kid."

"Isn't your sister Shirley Maclaine?"

"Yes," he said. "Yes, she is."

"It's funny how not many people know that.."

"It's a strange thing, I agree."

"I don't think I've ever seen the two of you together on television or at the movies."

"No. We rarely see each other."

"She was very beautiful when she was younger."

"Yes, she was," he said.

"Being that the whole thing is kept so quiet, I wonder if you've ever made love to Shirley Maclaine on accident?", Charles asked.

"No, I don't think so," he laughed. "You would be surprised how often I get asked that question."

"It's funny," Charles thought, "if you and I were in a room with a twenty-five year old Shirley Maclaine, I would have a better shot at making love with her."

"Well," Beatty smiled, "I'm not so sure about that!"

He laughed more than I did at that one, but we both thought it was funny.

Later on, we were standing around, and Charles noticed that his shoe was untied. And then Beatty noticed that he noticed, and they both seemed to wonder: how could this have happened?

"I must have caught it somewhere", Beatty said. "I wonder if you wouldn't mind"

And with that, Charles had already sunk to his knees and begun tying the actor's shoelace. The shoes themselves were incredible. Looking at the right one, Charles was mesmerized by the layers of sculpted leather, the ivory shoelace tips. The shoe seemed one of a kind. But sure enough, just six inches to the left, there was another one.

As he tied, though, Charles began to doubt. Who was this man, to ask me to tie his shoes? We are both men, he thought, now that we are standing here together. Charles began to feel uneasy. When he finished tying Beatty's right shoe, and while Beatty was scanning the dark clouds for something and not looking down, Charles released his own two shoelaces. He stood up.

"What do you see, Mr. Beatty?", Charles asked.

"Dark clouds coming. We'd better get to where we're going."

Beatty looked down at Charles' shoes.

"Oh", he said, "look what's happened. There must be fairies flying low around here, untying all the best shoes."

Charles took this with a grain of salt, as his own shoes were far from the best. And then, as if he had never done it before, the actor knelt down and reached for Charles' right shoelace. Ha, Charles, thought: this man probably doesn't even know how to tie a shoelace anymore, if he ever did.

To Charles' amazement, Beatty tied the right shoelace with one hand and a snap of the fingers. Even more incredibly, the actor began to pass his leathery hand over the left shoe. And when that left shoe became visible again, it's lace was tied.

"Still got it", Betty said, and creaked to his feet.

A raindrop hit him in the eyelid and he barely blinked. Just closed his eyes slowly and spread the water into and around his tear duct for later use. I like this kid,

Beatty thought. He reminded him of the kind of jerk they might have cast as his sidekick if he had gone into the Westerns early on like everybody predicted. But, instead, he had taken the League Of A Thousand's advice and gone to that midnight meeting of the Trilateral Commission, behind the second "L" in the Hollywood sign. It was there that he had been fitted with the retro-bolting and the mechanical hand. And the microchip that enabled him to read men's pasts.

Or, of course, that's what Charles thought Warren Beatty might have been thinking at that moment.

"I should get to where I'm going, kid", Beatty said. "They're all set up for me."

"Yeah", said Charles, "We're all waiting for our go ahead on Stage B."

"Yeah", said Beatty, "Doing a little extra work?"

Charles ~~he~~ didn't have to say anything. ^{They} ~~we~~ both knew where ^{they} ~~we~~ stood.

Beatty stuck out his hand and patted Charles once, firmly, on the back.

"Good luck in all things, son."

"Thanks," Charles said.

"Anytime."

"Maybe I'll see you sometime around, maybe at the Beverly Center."

"Oh, I don't think so", Beatty said. He turned on one of his fantastic shoes and headed towards the enormous open door to stage A. The tapping of his shoes began again, never having lost a beat. The inside of the stage was inky black, soundless. There didn't seem to be any kind of activity inside, but what did Charles know about what they did in there anyway?

Beatty continued to walk, past the threshold, into the blackness. The sound of those shoes tapping began to gather an echo. The heap of billiard balls began to crumble away. As Beatty receded into the dark, Charles stepped closer, with no intention to follow him in. Just maybe to get a sense of where the actor was going.

Charles stood right on the lip of the threshold. The metallic blue of Beatty's suit fizzled out in the dark like the last dot of reception after you've turned an old t.v. off.

And he was gone. A cold wind seemed to gather inside the soundstage and howl around like mad, bouncing off corners and whipping out into the daylight. Charles could just make out little sparkling dots, like stars. And a sound, a deep rumbling. Charles imagined some tentacled Stygian thing, one of the old ones that had always been here, lurking just beyond the spot where the drab daylight could no longer penetrate. Just beyond the spot that Warren Beatty had disappeared into, like a shiny penny floating to the bottom of the sea.

Back inside stage B, ennui had ravaged those seventeen girls. Every available head was resting on one of it's owners hands, every mouth was slanted downwards into a lazy droop. If this was Hollywood, it appeared that Charles' friends could do without it.

Charles approached his old girlfriend Angela, to tell her of his strange experience.

"Angela, I just saw Warren Beatty, I talked to him! He tied my shoes with a wave of his hand!"

"You mean the guy from 'Dick Tracy'?", Angela said.

"Yeah, him", Charles replied after a sad pause. Across the stage, hovering over a clipboard, was Mrs. Silvey, their beloved drama teacher. A woman of at least thirty five.

"Mrs. Silvey?", Charles said. "I just saw Warren Beatty, I talked to him! He tied my shoes with a wave of his hand!" Surprise registered on Mrs. Silvey's face, then an old lust, then disappointment.

"You did not!", she said, jealous.

"Yes I did. Yes I did," Charles replied and smiled.

"How did he look? Is he still handsome?"

"I guess so," Charles finally said, "And his teeth are as white as stars."