

Introduction

Max, this is Warren Beatty.”
I recognized the voice on the phone from countless dark cinemas, and made a mental note to store the conversation in the part of my brain reserved for name dropping at dinner parties.

“Hi, Warren.” We had never met or spoken before, but years working as an entertainment journalist in New York and Los Angeles had taught me the protocol. In Hollywood, where phony familiarity is so normal as to be genuine, everyone is first-name.

“Loved the movie, Warren.”

For once this was the truth. It was 1998; Beatty’s new film, *Bulworth*, was a flawed but stinging satire of contemporary American politics that took a broad swipe at media cynicism for good measure. In the film, Senator Bulworth attacks mass media companies that create all the magazines and newspapers and movies and TV shows and books and music. Beatty wasn’t just biting the hand that fed him—he was gnawing on it. The Hollywood grapevine said 20th-Century Fox, a division of Rupert Murdoch’s giant News Corp, wasn’t exactly pulling out the stops to market the film. So Beatty was stumping hard to get free publicity, which is why he called me. As the editor at *People* magazine in charge of movie

coverage, I was the gatekeeper for cover stories on big stars. Decisions made by myself and my boss determined whose face would stare out from the checkout racks at every grocery shopper in America.

“You *really* liked it?” Beatty asked, knowing that praise for a film is one of the more common Hollywood lies. “Well, what do I have to do for the cover?”

He was getting right to the point, which was the hard part. Expecting his call, I already had marching orders from my boss Carol Wallace, the managing editor of the magazine—and Beatty wasn’t going to like them. Wallace, who had come up from tabloid dailies, rarely went to movies and had no interest in movie studio machinations. Her reaction was knee-jerk: “Our readers don’t like him,” she snapped. (Magazine editors always ascribe their personal opinions to readers they’ve never met.) “They think he’s a womanizer. But they’d be interested to see him as a family man. Tell him we need a hometake with Annette and the kids, or no deal.”

I gulped. Shooting stars at home—wackily tossing pasta or rough-housing on the couch—was a *People* trademark but an increasingly tough sell; high-profile stalking cases made celebrities more guarded about their private space. And photographing their children was the request from hell. “Can we protect the kids?” I asked Wallace.

“Tell Beatty we can shoot the kids from behind, no faces. But we need to see him doing something with them—reading or playing ball or . . . whatever he does,” she blurted, waving her arm dismissively. “You’re a dad, figure it out.”

“Here’s the deal,” I told Beatty, forcing the words as I

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gazed out my three picture windows, thirty-one floors above Sixth Avenue. In the rigid hierarchy of the Time Life Building, I was sitting pretty. Mere writers had to settle for one or maybe two windows. I had a good office, extensive benefits, and an annual bonus, and I could casually mention to my wife after dinner: “Talked to Warren Beatty today.”

Of course, that would presume I arrived home before Sarah was already sound asleep—a rare occurrence for an editor at *People*. I swiveled my chair and gave Beatty a list of the magazine’s conditions. When I got to the part about the kids, I heard a weary sigh through the receiver, but I plowed ahead: “If you’re concerned about security for your children,” I added quickly, “don’t worry. We won’t show their faces.”

“Max,” Beatty replied calmly after another long sigh. “I’m not worried about kidnapers. I can assure you my family has plenty of security. The issue is much more basic. I simply won’t make my children part of the marketing campaign of a movie—any movie. I don’t take them to premieres; I don’t even let them watch me on the Oscars.” He paused to allow the full weight of that statement to sink in. “This may seem hard to believe, but I really don’t want my kids to grow up thinking movies are important. I want them to have a childhood that has nothing to do with this business.”

“I understand, Warren.”

Again it was the truth. I thought about my own two kids, and the efforts of myself and Sarah (a former actress turned schoolteacher) to give them a life of genuine experience over the virtual kids’ world created by the experts in Hollywood.

I didn’t always feel that way. When I first started covering

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showbiz as a freelance writer for the *New York Times* in 1987, I thought it was the assignment to die for. Most of my journalism friends were covering town council meetings, or writing about personal finance; I got to interview Martin Scorsese and go to Manhattan premieres. Soon I was hired at *Variety*, the showbiz trade paper, where I rose to executive editor. I bought a tuxedo. I voted for the Tony Awards, and lunched at the Russian Tea Room. Sometimes I even yelled at waiters, and not just in France. I was apprenticing to be an asshole.

To further my studies, there was only one place to go.

When *Variety* moved to Hollywood in 1994, I moved my family too, buying a house in the soon-to-be trendy Los Feliz district of Hollywood. Liz Smith lamented our move in her column, saying how much New Yorkers would miss “the Alexander family.” (I had met her once, at a party where I saw Mike Wallace goose Beverly Sills, and when Liz realized I wasn’t someone important she walked away. She never met my family.)

In California, showbiz came to define not just my professional life but our family life as well. Our four-year-old boy had an agent *and* a manager, who took him around to auditions for primetime TV shows. (His full-page fashion ads in the *New York Times* were larger than any story I’d ever written for that paper.) All our friends and neighbors were in some way involved in creating mass entertainment—producers, sound men, actors, agents, writers. Sarah and I went to the Emmys, the Grammys, the Oscars. I flew to our offices in London and Paris twice a year, curled up in seat 1-A, dining

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on foie gras and \$100 bottles of Nuits St. Georges. The trips blend together in my brain, but surreal moments stand out: escorting Kate Winslet around the Piazza San Marco during the Venice Film Festival; sitting next to Jack Nicholson during lunch at the island palazzo of an Italian count, while the star loudly pretended our host was performing fellatio on him; scooping up ladlefuls of triple-0 beluga caviar from a mound the size of a Thanksgiving turkey, on a Mediterranean yacht owned by a Russian film tycoon.

Back home I cut the grass, took out the trash, left for work before my kids woke up and drove in traffic jams down Sunset Boulevard. By the time I dragged myself home from the office, everyone was asleep as usual. It was a Cinderella life familiar to any showbiz journalist, and the frayed excess was starting to bother me. Meanwhile, Sarah was becoming attracted to Waldorf education, a private-school movement founded in Germany after World War I by the philosopher Rudolf Steiner. Like many new parents, Sarah and I had started to wonder if the public schools were teaching our kids how to think for themselves, or just teaching them how to pass tests. We weren't alone; by the time Waldorf caught up with us, it had become the largest non-parochial private-school movement in the world. Among Steiner's many perceptions was that children in the industrial age were being denied an education rooted in natural observation. It was deeply spiritual without being dogmatic, and its rejection of unfettered materialism in favor of a more thoughtful path seemed ahead of its time.

Sarah longed to teach at a Waldorf school, but where?

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There were plenty of Waldorf schools in Southern California, but we were already thinking of Maine, where Sarah's parents live and where we had been married in 1986. We loved the state's rugged coast, rolling farms, and relative isolation from the mainstream. One night we went to see Garrison Keillor at the Hollywood Bowl, and in the midst of one of his Lake Wobegon reveries he gently reminded us: "Warm weather makes people dumb." That was the moment. Within a month we had a plan to return to New York, where Sarah could get her Master's degree at a small Waldorf teaching school. From there we could more easily strike out for Maine, in search of a new life.

Meanwhile, I was flunking my studies as a Hollywood jerk, despite having some masterful professors. Stranded at Venice's Marco Polo airport as Alitalia pilots went on strike one year, I heard a Hollywood executive screaming at an Italian ticket clerk: "Do you know who I *am*? I'm *Mel Gibson's agent!*" (The pilots stayed on strike.) During a black-tie AIDS benefit in the South of France at the famed Moulin des Mougins, I watched Elizabeth Taylor casually feed the restaurant's three-star Michelin morsels to her lapdog.

Soon we were back in New York and I was working at *People*, where stars and their dogs weren't so much celebrated as fetishized. Even celebrity pets had to reveal their age, which was then earnestly fact-checked with a publicist.

Warren Beatty promised to call back but didn't. The cover story never happened. *Bulworth* flopped. Only our closest friends knew it, but the Alexander family was already planning to exit, stage north.

Author's Note

The chapters in this book—journal entries, in a sense—were written approximately once a month over the course of five years beginning in 1999. Most appeared, in different form, in the *Portland Phoenix*, an offshoot of the venerable Boston alternative weekly. I have revised and updated all the stories, but in general retained the present tense of the original writings.

I've come to notice that summer people shop differently than locals. For one thing, people from away actually buy stuff. Locals never buy anything that isn't a necessity. They might sit around the store all day, talking about buying something, but as the actual act of purchasing requires money, not much else happens. It's amazing how many tourists will fly in and out of a store here, dipping enthusiastically into their wallets, while the same old-timer is still sitting there, just getting warmed up to begin talking about buying something that you know he won't buy all summer. He's in no hurry.

Not like the summer folk, who are always in a hurry even when they're on vacation. They do, however, take time to lock their shiny cars and turn on the alarms. Car theft is nonexistent in these parts—if you wanted to steal a valuable vehicle you'd take a tractor, most of which have keys rusted into the ignition, and no alarms of any kind—but the tourists aren't taking any chances.

Tourists also seem to know exactly what they want to buy—and they must have it. Some of them actually say “I must have that!,” which is probably how they got so much stuff, and why they have to work so hard and always be in a hurry. They also take the customer/merchant roles seriously;

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they expect deference from shopkeepers, which they don't get from Elmer.

Elmer's Barn is a local institution and a junk store of national renown, if such a thing is possible. I've met people in New York who swoon over the mention of this rickety Route 17 emporium and its welcoming signpost:

KEEP DOGS IN CAR
NO SHIT

The message works on just about every level you can think of, and while I doubt Elmer was personally inspired by haiku, I often reflect on the peculiar Zen of my purchases there. I've been buying dusty stuff from Elmer since I lived in several big cities. I carted chairs from Elmer down to an apartment in Brooklyn, moved them to Los Angeles and back to New York. Now they are in my farmhouse, eight miles from where I bought them 15 years ago, which is the Maine version of karma, I suppose. Among the hundreds of things I have bought from Elmer are an antique copper sink now in my pantry (sixty dollars) and a gasoline-powered blueberry winnower (one hundred twenty-five dollars).

Elmer himself (few people know that he has a last name, which is Wilson) is a mountainous man who nevertheless manages to hide in plain sight behind all the junk. He claims to be descended from horse traders, and he loves bargaining. But he also knows that his asking prices are far below what the fancier antique shops charge, even in Maine. Yes, you have to paw through lots of junk. But in the jungle world of

junk dealers, Elmer is in fact rather selective. He loves cool old farm stuff and recently bought an abandoned sawmill up the road, with the intention of renovating it. Elmer doesn't do anything fast, though, so I don't expect to see Elmer's Lumber Barn anytime soon.

He's got better things to do, like writing a brochure with tips to make your visit more enjoyable. For example, the first page says "Children Welcome! NOT LIABLE FOR ANY ACCIDENTS OR INJURIES (not a daycare center)."

Most injuries are suffered to customer's egos. One day a neatly pressed guy from Massachusetts (according to his Volvo plate) stopped in and inquired, "How much for those two carved lions in the yard?"

"Six thousand dollars," said Elmer.

"How much for one?"

"Sixty-five hundred," Elmer replied without cracking a smile.

The Volvo guy stood silently, processing, for a few minutes. He didn't get it. He didn't make the expected joking repast, like "I'd hate to hear what the head costs."

"Youse a little slow, ain't ya?" Elmer eventually said, finally cracking a smile.

That wasn't how Mr. Massachusetts was accustomed to being treated by a shop owner. He swiveled and marched out the door, ears pinned to his head. Elmer just shrugged at me, pointed to a sign on the wall and said "I guess he didn't read it."

The sign said:

ALL PRICES SUBJECT TO
CUSTOMER ATTITUDE

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Another of my favorite local shopkeepers is Ken Spahr, who runs an antique stove and lamp store down the road from Elmer. Ken is an old graybeard way beyond retirement age, but he putters around in his shop, surrounded by mountains of cast iron stove parts and vats of lye, extolling the virtues of The Good Old Days When Stuff Was Made Right to anyone who will listen.

Ken has been helping me renovate the old door hardware in my house, and I always leave his shop feeling embarrassed by my metallurgical inadequacies. He's from the *Popular Mechanics* generation, when it was assumed that all real men had metal shops in their cellar. "How anyone can *live* without a belt grinder is beyond me," he once said in total seriousness. But I also leave his shop feeling able to fix a lot more stuff around the house.

Ken loves to tell the story of how he lost his finger using a joiner, a power tool that can instantly shave layers off wood (or anything else). "I drove myself to the hospital and told them what happened. The nurse said 'Did you bring in the finger?'"

At this point in the story Ken starts laughing and shaking his head. "I told her, 'Honey, I guess you don't know what a joiner does.'" He laments the general ignorance of the populace, but if everyone knew what a joiner does, Ken would lose his purpose.

One day I told Ken how I was having a hard time getting propane delivered for my antique wood-and-gas kitchen cookstove. (There is no natural gas utility in Maine; if you want a gas appliance you're stuck with propane delivery.) My

1926 cast-iron stove features a two-burner wood compartment (also suitable for coal), next to four gas burners. It was a hybrid introduced around the time when Americans were switching to gas but didn't quite feel comfortable giving up the old reliable fuels of wood and coal. We like it because it combines the obvious convenience of gas with the ambiance of burning real wood in winter.

Wood-and-gas stoves are still technically legal here, but propane suppliers don't like them because it seems inherently dicey to have red-hot cinders glowing a few inches from a gas line—especially a “match-light” stove, which means it has no pilot lights. So it's hard to find a company that will deliver propane.

“My mother had one of those stoves,” said Ken. “It was great. Sure, every now and then she'd blow the doors off the house, but who gives a shit?” Then Ken shook his head in disgust and railed against lawyers, energy companies, and the government, concluding: “These days nobody feels comfortable unless they've got a finger up their ass.”

It's not quite how (or where) I would have put it, but I understood the sentiment. Those cranky summer visitors rushing in and out of the stores and spending too much money do seem to have misplaced a digit somewhere—which is probably why they can't just set a spell. On the other hand, I don't care to lose a finger in a joiner either. I admit there are days this summer when I walk into Elmer's in my mud-streaked Tingley boots and greasy dungarees, looking for a zinc hinge pin, and those beautiful summer people shopping for slate sinks seem like a tantalizing dream.

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Lately I spend less and less time at Elmer's. After five years in Maine I feel I've accumulated enough dusty old stuff, and I'm reluctant to spend more money. I guess in that sense I'm becoming more like the locals. Not that I'm totally in synch with them: If I ever spent a whole morning hanging around Elmer's Barn, I'd be pissed at myself for wasting so much time. So I exist in my own world, neither here nor there—disconnected from the tourists who recall my previous life, yet not really able to let go and just hang out with the locals. I stay home a lot.