

Make Nice (excerpt)

a novel by Mark Pritchard

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Chapter 10

It's a funny thing pulling up to the gate at MGM and giving my name. They look at a list, wave me and Tragge in, and we find our way to Stage 14. So simple. Like I told Philly, I've never worked at MGM. Now I am -- in a manner of speaking.

We climb out of the car. It's a pleasant April morning, with the sun already poking through. Ever since the day I rescued Peter from the Democrats and he said he wanted to go to Santa Monica, then changed his mind, I've been wanting to go out there. This would be a good time. The fog burning off, the cool sea air. A nice little walk along the palisades -- if that's what they call them.

Long after there's any reason to, I stand next to the car still touching the door handle. The last, tenuous link to my nice, safe house. "So how *do* you interview somebody for an article,

Don?" I say.

He's already shambling up to the sound stage. "Come on, Bobby, coffee's gettin' cold."

We go through an opening in the huge doors, leaving the morning behind. Inside we ask around and find an assistant director. The A.D. goes to find the publicist. The publicist is a gray little froglike guy, part department store floorwalker, part Peter Lorre. "Don," says the man, exuding annoyance. "Didn't you get my message?"

Tragge completely ignores his question. "Bobby, this is Pierce Hawkins, unit publicist. You know what a unit publicist is, don't you?"

"I'm terribly sorry but we must reschedule," Hawkins says. "Today will not do."

"A unit publicist," Tragge continues, "is just like one of those guys you meet if you go to Russia. They say they're assigning you a personal tour guide, but he's really in the secret police. Ostensibly the idea is that the tour guide's going to help you see things. In fact, it's the opposite -- his job is to make sure you *don't* see things. Hawkins is supposed to be a publicist, but he's really here to prevent us from seeing anything or talking to anybody he doesn't approve."

"Today," Hawkins says, more loudly, "will be impossible."

"What's the matter, Hawkins, didn't they give you the good kibble today? We just want to talk to the director, the actors, and the writer. That won't be too much trouble, will it?"

This argument is ended only by the passing of George Cukor, the director. Tragge's seen him coming and is suddenly shaking Cukor's hand and pulling me over.

"Mr. Cukor! Don Tragge of *Look* magazine! And Bobby Blaine -- you know Bobby."

Cukor, dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt and khaki trousers, is in his 60s, and is small but trim, like a retired tennis star. His balding head is cut just right, suggesting he is professional but not too square, and his manner is polite but businesslike. "I know you fellows are here for an interview," he says, taking off at a fast clip. We follow in his wake like tin cans tied behind a car,

leaving Hawkins in the dust. “And ordinarily I’d give you five minutes and kick you out. But it seems we’re due to fall behind schedule today -- again -- so I have the feeling we’ve got plenty of time.”

Tragge jerks his head at me as if to say *Take him up on it, and fast.*

“Well,” I croak, “if you’ve got a few minutes to tell us about the picture you’re making, we’d really appreciate it.”

“I think the readers of *Look* are in for a real treat -- just like the moviegoers of America are with this movie.” A glint in his eye betrays this seeming bullshit as pointed sarcasm. Tragge is already furiously taking notes.

Cukor starts in by telling us about the story. The plot of *Let’s Make Love* concerns a famous playboy billionaire, played by Montand. About to become the subject of a satirical Off-Broadway play, he goes down to the theater himself to protest. But before he can get a word in edgewise, he meets a cast member, Monroe, and is smitten. A moment later he is mistaken for an auditioning actor who is there to try out for the part of the billionaire -- in other words, to play himself, even though they don’t recognize him. He gets the part and proceeds to woo Monroe. Once she starts returning his affections, he gets scared and thinks she’s really after his money -- and then it runs out of gas. I wonder how they’re going to pump some life into the story to keep it from dying before the third act. That’s a question for Arthur Miller, though -- he’s the one doctoring the script. I decide to get to the point.

“You’ve worked with the greatest actresses,” I say. “Judy Garland. Bette Davis. Ava Gardner. Katherine Hepburn. Now Marilyn Monroe is the greatest star of our age. How does she stack up -- er, let me rephrase that -- how does she compare to them?”

Cukor purses his lips. “I think she is best compared to Judy Holliday,” he says in a diplomatic tone. “Judy has a wonderful comic sense, and is such a joy to work with. Marilyn...

is also an excellent comic actress and she is... also blonde.”

I say, “What struck me, when I heard about the movie, is that the unique angle is the combination of this very continental type, Montand, with a very American type, Monroe. How are they on camera together? Do the sparks fly?”

“Sparks positively fly,” he says in the same droll tone. “Just the word for it. Their romantic interest in each other -- that is to say, the characters -- is very believable.”

“And how’s the shooting going, generally? I’ve heard there is a little script rewriting going on.”

“Any picture changes in the execution of it,” he says blandly. “We have a fine script, though.” He pauses, purses his lips again, blinking. “Norman Krasna,” he remembers finally. “His work is well known.”

“Even more for the scripts that didn’t make it to the screen,” mutters Tragge.

“But to get back to Miss Monroe,” I say loudly. “Sometimes great actresses are difficult to work with. In your opinion, is it true that, the greater the actress, the more temperamental she is?”

“I don’t know what you mean. Everyone I’ve worked with has been marvelous. Including the cast of this picture,” he adds.

He is clearly determined not to rock the boat. But two can play at this game. “You’re speaking, of course, of Miss Monroe’s widely known professionalism and dependability.”

“Yes,” he says, now sounding remote. Have I pressed too hard? “Miss Monroe works very hard. I don’t think most people realize that. She’s worked very hard on her craft, and her success is a testament to it. She prepares very carefully.”

“I see.” I look around the sound stage theatrically. “Is that where she is now -- preparing?”

“Of course. And speaking of which, I have some work of my own to do. So if you will

excuse me?”

He walks a few steps toward a couple of crew members who are doing something to the lights. They confer. “Give me 2A!” one of the crew shouts, and a light comes on. “Thank you. Give me 3A.”

I turn to Tragge, who is studiously scribbling. He holds up a hand, stilling me while he writes down Cukor’s words.

Hawkins has been hovering. “Listen, Mr. Blaine, I was told to cooperate with you, and I expect the same in return.”

“What’d I do?” I shrug.

“We don’t need any rotten press about this picture,” he says. “In fact, with this cast, we don’t need any press at all about this picture. It sells itself.”

“Speak for yourself, Mac,” Tragge says, finishing his notes. “Now where’s Montand? Hey, Hawkins -- listen to this line: ‘*Monroe... Montand... mon dieu!*’”

Hawkins virtually curls his lip. “I expected such,” he hisses.

“Make way!” someone shouts. “Watch out! Coming through!”

A man in a yellow suit -- yes, a banana-yellow jacket and trousers -- topped by a yellow ten-gallon hat -- and wearing white tennis shoes -- barges through the set. He is carrying something out in front of him, arms extended stiffly as if it were a bomb. As the guy blows past, I see that he is carrying merely a big paper cup with a lid. It’s just coffee.

“Monsieur Montand’s personal assistant,” the publicist drawls. “A clown.”

“Speak for yourself,” Tragge says again. By the end of the day I’m sure it’s one of his favorite lines.

We follow the man -- his glowing suit leading us through the recesses of the sound stage -- into the makeup room. A tall man is reclining in the chair, festooned with towels, a makeup artist

hovering over his face like a hummingbird and manicurists working him over on both sides. The yellow-suited man buzzes around them crying “Coffee! Coffee!”

The man in the chair emits a groan. “Clarice,” he says. “Wait a minute.” Or actually he says *min-eeet*, in a French accent. The makeup artist pauses, and the man struggles to sit up.

“Somebody help me with thees fucking chair,” he cries. The makeup artist presses a pedal, and the chair gives a *ker-chunk!* and propels the man into a standing position in an instant. Towels drift off him as he stands there blinking. It is, of course, Yves Montand.

The yellow-suited man springs to a position in front of Montand and proffers the paper cup. “Coffee!” he proclaims.

Montand takes the cup absently, peering at Tragge and me. “Are you from the police?” he demands. The women break into laughter.

“Relax, we’re your friends,” I say. “We’re from the press.”

He clutches his temples. “It’s still an interrogation... I’m innocent, I swear! I disown the weapon, I disavow the knowledge, I disem...” he falters. “I dis... You’re sure you’re not the police?” The women are howling.

“We just came to talk to you about *Let’s Make Love*, your role, and what it’s like working with Marilyn Monroe.” I think I’m sounding a little too much like a radio announcer.

He lifts the lid of the coffee container gingerly, as if he half expects a tarantula to jump out. Closing the lid without drinking any, he sits down on the edge of the chair with a sigh. “I play zee billionaire. Who becomes an actor to be close to the woman he is in love with. When she finds out his real *identité*, he becomes suspicious, afraid she wants only his money. After that I forget. Anyway, in the play-within-ze-play, I get to sing and dance, which I enjoy very much. And there are also the comic scenes where Bing Crosby teaches the billionaire how to sing, Gene Kelly teaches him how to dance, and another man teaches him to be funny. Who is that...

Meelton Barrel.”

He means Milton Berle. “What’s it like acting with Miss Monroe?”

“She is very sincere with the other actors,” he says thoughtfully. “Maybe that is not the right word. Now let me think. You know, before I started this picture, before I came to Hollywood in fact, I think like everybody else, that Marilyn Monroe is just a sexy broad. She is like Jayne Mansfield, very sexy, but her acting must not be good. Then to prepare for this picture, I see *Some Like It Hot*. And I realize, she is not just the sexy broad. She is a great comic actress. So I anticipate to see what she is like to work with.”

“Yes, and...?”

“I mean like this. Some actors, you see them on the screen, or on the stage, from the audience. And you think to yourself, ‘I am seeing the mask.’ You understand? What’s the English word?”

“The façade. But mask is fine. Go on.”

“Voilà, you see only the façade. And it’s fine, it’s enough, but as a professional I can see the difference. I see they are only presenting the façade. They are not giving their spirit. That’s what I mean when I say I already know, *Some Like It Hot*, she is a great actress, because she is giving her spirit. Now working with her I see it, she is giving the spirit. You know, she takes her acting very seriously.”

“Yes, Mr. Cukor said the same.”

“See, he can see it, ze great director. A great honor to work with him.”

“What is Marilyn Monroe really like as a person?”

Montand pauses, perhaps growing a little impatient with the incessant talk about Monroe and wanting a little more publicity for himself. “Sincere,” he finally says, almost in a tone of regret.

“Vulnerable. Serious. Even in the comedy. She wants so badly to be taken seriously. That’s what

people don't realize. They think she is satisfied with the façade, with the figure of the dress going *psshhh* up around her ears. She is not. And so she studies very hard. She wants to be a great actress."

We discuss acting in Hollywood versus Europe; what projects his wife, Simone Signoret, is involved in; and how he likes the weather. Behind me I hear the sound of Trage scribbling like a demon. There must be smoke rising from his pencil tip.

Somehow we get on the nature of comedy.

"And that second, that *in-stant* of recognition, where the audience suddenly realizes that the subject of your comedy -- it doesn't matter if you're doing a pratfall or singing a funny line in a song, or if you've just made a point that is at once strange and *iron-ic* -- they realize that the subject of your comedy is really yourself, and themselves, all together -- in fact, the human heart -- that is what I call the Comic Moment."

Pretentious. "Do you have some favorite comic moments?" I ask, trying to puncture his balloon.

As I hoped, he gives me a pained look. "It is not like a souvenir to put in your bag," he says. "It is an effect psychological."

Suddenly the little guy in the yellow suit, who has been sitting there on a couch the whole time, pipes up. "Freud called it the Moment of Horror! To see a man who slips on the ice is to see yourself -- not just slipping on the ice, but dying. You're confronting your own death!"

Everyone turns to look at him. His legs don't even reach the floor, and he's smiling weirdly.

"Then why laugh?" Montand asks seriously.

"What choice have you got?" the man cries, as if that's the punch line of a terrific joke. He actually bounces on the couch with glee.

Montand rubs his eyes. "The studio gave me this man as my valet," he says. "He's named

Freddie. Every day he has something like this to say. I ask, 'Are you sure you aren't lost? Are you positive they're not making a... a cowboy clown movie or something on another stage?' In fact he tells me he's the head of valets here. He says he's the best they've got.'

"Personal Assistant," Freddie corrects him. "It's been Personal Assistant since 1958."

Considering Montand is best known for his cabaret-type performances, I ask if he's planning on playing Vegas.

"Oh la la," he actually says. "I was taken there once. You fly over hundreds of miles of desert, zen suddenly, in the middle of *no-where* is this place. And the whole is like Montmartre, or rather, like a certain area of Marseille where you do not go. And they brought me to ze casino and -- Well, what can I say, it is not to my taste. I prefer Monte Carlo or at least Biarritz. I hope the American people will allow me this preference.

"You see, Mr. Blaine," he says, patronizing me now, "once a performer has reached a *cer-tain* level, he does not wish to play in what you call the sticks. But look, it's the same for you. Now you work for a large American magazine, whereas perhaps you started on a newspaper in a small *vill-age*. You would not wish to go back to that small newspaper. I'm sure Mr. Tragge understands," Montand adds, nodding over my shoulder. In addition to the continuous scrawling, it sounds like Tragge is trying to keep from bursting into laughter.

"Oh yeah," he allows himself.

"Don interviewed me one year ago when I first came to this country." Montand says. "So you are breaking in a new reporter, Don? He's a little serious."

"Yes, he's brand new. He's doing fine for his first day, wouldn't you say?" He finishes writing and closes his notebook with a merry expression.

We go out of the dressing room into the shadows of the sound stage. "You louse," I say. "I'll get you for this."

“Relax, Bobby,” he says. “So you’re not known on the continent. But it’ll read great in the piece. We’ll put in a zinger from you, okay? It doesn’t matter that you didn’t come up with it on the spot -- just phone it in sometime this week. We’ll make it seem funny that the guy from France didn’t recognize the Hollywood star.”

Hawkins, the publicist, looms up out of the shadows. “Hello, Hawkins,” Tragge calls. “We’re doing great, thanks to you.”

“I want you out of here.”

“So where you keeping Marilyn?”

Hawkins seems to expand defensively with this request, like one of those big lizards that flare out their side vents to seem more menacing. “She’s in conference.”

“I’ll bet she is. ‘Mirror, mirror, on the wall. Which head shrinker should I call?’ That kind of conference, Hawkins?”

“I’m calling the studio guards right now.”

“We’d settle for hubby. Arthur Miller around?”

Hawkins deflates a little. “He might be available.”

Looking ostentatiously at his watch, Tragge draws, “It might be all we have time for.”

Hawkins leads us out of the sound stage, across an alley full of ladders and lumber and discarded stage flats, and into another stage. The overhead lights are on in here, and the Klieg lights and scaffolding and cranes stand quiet. “Better get what we can,” Tragge whispers to me. “I have a feeling Madame is nowhere around.”

Arthur Miller -- of all the people on this picture, he’s the only one who actually intimidates me a little. We’re alike in some ways -- about the same age and we’re both Jews. But while I was busting my ass telling jokes to old farts in the Catskills, he was writing brilliant drama and becoming the toast of Broadway. Then to top it all off -- to show that nothing’s out of reach in

this country for a smart Jew with glasses -- he married Marilyn Monroe. As if the Pulitzer Prize and all the other awards and honors were not enough, he gets the greatest prize of all, the Queen of the Shiksas.

After crossing the sound stage, we enter a corridor and stop before an unmarked gray metal door. I can hear someone typing inside. Hawkins knocks quietly, and the typing stops. Hawkins opens the door.

“Mr. Miller,” he says unctuously, “these are the gentlemen I mentioned.”

There stands Arthur Miller, wearing a modest brown suit with a white shirt and tie, the familiar black eyeglasses resting on a nose of some prominence. Curly brown hair, now receding. He smiles politely -- for all its ordinariness, the face that won Marilyn.. He shakes hands with us and motions toward a couch. Beyond the desk where Miller is working, the wall is lined with makeup mirrors. The studio has hidden him away in an empty dressing room. “I see they’ve given you the first class accommodations,” I joke.

He doesn’t even smile. “What can I do for you fellows?” he asks pleasantly enough, but he seems reserved. I explain our mission and he tells us the story of the film, the same as the others. I ask him about his wife’s singing and dancing and he says it’s fine. I ask him what kind of work he’s doing on the script, and he just says, “Officially, none. Off the record?” he raises an eyebrow at Tragege, who gives a slightly pained nod in return. “Off the record, I’ve just fiddled a little with it, to tell you the truth. It wasn’t much to start with. It’s like a poorly designed house -- you’re not going to make it a brilliant piece of architecture just by knocking out a wall or painting it blue. Mainly I’m concerned with some of the dialogue. Making it...” He almost rolls his eyes. “A little more dignified,” he finishes.

“Okay, enough of that. Now I’ll go back on the record. *Let’s Make Love* is a delightful comic fantasy which the American public is going to enjoy very much.”

“So no big changes?” I ask, so I can hear all about how he’s practically eliminating Timson’s part.

“None at all. It’s a wonderful script,” he says. “Anything else I can tell you?”

He’s hardly told us anything. “We don’t want to keep you from your work,” I say. “But to tell you the truth, it’s starting to look unlikely we’ll talk to Miss Monroe today. I’d like to ask you a little about her -- the public is of course very curious, and as her husband you know her best of all.”

He looks at me. His face is no longer pleasant. The silence grows uncomfortable. “Of course, we don’t want to intrude,” I say lamely.

“Bobby Blaine,” he says, pronouncing my name with some distaste. “You’re a talkative fellow, I hear.”

What the hell does he mean? “It’s my job,” I say.

“We all do some talking as part of our job,” he says. “Look at me, being interviewed. I’m not even on this picture, but somehow it’s part of the job description. Very well. I’m speaking of the kind of talking that is strictly extracurricular. Very much off the job, though some people think we all have a duty to talk to little men in blue suits and black shoes.”

Word must have gotten back to him that I blabbed about Timson. I sit there thunderstruck.

Tragge has stopped scribbling. He looks at me curiously.

“I don’t have much use,” Miller goes on, “for backstabbers, though I’m told it’s pretty standard for Hollywood. I wouldn’t know -- I’m used to Broadway and New York. We have it there too, of course, but not like this. But then again, we’re small potatoes -- or so they keep reminding me out here. Now I see what people mean by that.”

“I ...” is all I can say.

“I see,” he goes on, “why some people get a foothold in Hollywood when they never did on

Broadway. Backstabbing's a way of life here. And if some feds come along and give you a bigger knife to wield, so much the better. Yes, we're definitely in the minor leagues compared to the major-league finking that goes on out here. Well, what do you say, Bobby? No longer so talkative?"

I blush crimson. Talk about the hot seat -- the FBI has nothing on this guy. "I think you may have missed your calling," I manage. "You'd make a terrific district attorney."

"Oh no, no," he says, standing up. "I neither prosecute nor demand a sentence. You're on your own there."

Tragge and I have to stand up. Miller shakes Tragge's hand and says, "Drop a line if you need any more, Mr. Tragge. Some other day." Then he turns back to his desk, as if I'm not even in the room.

Tragge and I slink out of there, find my car and go to a bar, all without speaking. He's going to get an explanation but is willing to wait until I've had a chance to pull myself together. After a couple of drinks, I make up some kind of story not having to do with the FBI and definitely not mentioning Timson -- though Tragge, with his contacts, has probably already heard something. He doesn't press me, just lets me talk, doesn't make any notes. When I'm done, he shrugs and orders another round. And when the article finally comes out several months later when the film is released, the parts that quote Miller make it seem like we had a great interview. Tragge turns out to be a more decent guy, all around, than I expected.