

Cal R. Barnes

PROLOGUE

— THE LAST TRUE ARTIST —

Growing up, my father always told me, “Conrad, the time will come when you want to gain something from the world, and just know that you’ve been given more intellect and ability than any person could ever need to acquire it.” Looking back, I can believe that the statement was true, for the Arlingtons have always been a very proud family, and a certain expectation of greatness is something I came to accept at a very young age. In fact, if there was ever a sole, singular thing that led me to California, that would undoubtedly be it — a need for some kind of greatness — and I’ve never claimed to be any better because of it.

The Arlington family has always been a youthful one, and my own physicality bared no exception. Combine the lean, stringy build from my father’s side with the softer, lighter features from my mother’s, and I basically held the resemblance of an adolescent boy damned to some kind of eternal youth. I’d heard it had its advantages though, and for most of my life I’d been trying to figure out what those were, for with any kind of greater beauty comes greater problems, and I haven’t attempted to list them here, for this glorious and terrible pride which runs deep within me is a curious thing — something dark, wicked, and as fascinating as the morning sun — and I’ve given great care in my attempts to master it, for as undesirable as it may be it always comes from a place of truth, a place where the creative forces lie, and as an artist I’m likely destined to always be there, caught up in this place of great strength and weakness, and it’s within these dualities that my life exists.

Everyone in my family was predominantly middle class — upper to lower — so anyone that felt that they had something important to say, whether it actually was or not, was absolutely

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going to say it. I never judged this too harshly, for family was family at the end of the day, and I was in some way eternally tied to these people. It was always the uneventfulness of it all that got me, that made me cringe, that kept me up into the early hours of the morning. I'd always considered myself the exception to the Arlington lot, not so much in personality but in scope, with a different attitude towards life, for I had done my fair share of trying to be different, and amongst the sifting, and the searching, and the countless summer evenings spent alone, real truth was the only thing that ever interested me. I didn't know what that was of course, but it had always been important to me that I stand for something. I had always been an extremely honest person — ever since I was young — I had never been one to hide in the shadows of my soul, and unfortunately, against my better of intentions, that always made me odd man out in the Arlington family.

Tired of the general restraints pressed upon me in my teenage years, I found myself alive in a new way as I made the choice to move to Los Angeles. I felt new, fresh, and vital with eyes wide open, for existence to me then was a strange thing, this idea of being a person, of observing and being observed, of romance and elegance, true love and social class — these things had always fascinated me — I was constantly fighting the push-pull battle of where I stood with the world, but at least here, in the heart of Hollywood, I had a chance. Here I could make something out of what was raw, and it was up to me to let that be enough to justify my actuality. It was a curious thing to be so young. With the presence of a few years one at least knows some things about the world — or so one hopes to know — the kind of things that lend direction to a life, for being aimlessness was a beautiful thing if it wasn't terrible, and that could change on any given day.

So there I was — all young and ready for the world — all bright and beaming as I sat in the driver's seat, making my grand entrance over the 101 into Hollywood and what would become the pinnacle of my moral acquisition. I was not completely naive, for I was fully aware that the small cluster of buildings that stood gleaming just off Vine Street was as much then my friend as it was my enemy, and it was up to me to decide which one of the two it would become. I was aware of the chances beforehand. I had weighed the odds, and knew the challenge of the task ahead. I had read the stories about the great writers and filmmakers and artists who found solace in the nooks of this town, whose haunts had lent the inspiration necessary to achieve greatness, then, in a single stroke of betrayal, brought the whole machine crashing down to its knees, laying waste to the best of them — laying waste to the greats — I had somewhat of an education and I was capable, but I was young, and the depth of hard-learning that spanned before me was as vast as some endless sea, but at the time I remained invincible.

I landed in a brassy apartment off Hollywood Boulevard and Wilcox Avenue, and it felt great to be in that apartment — to be surrounded by it — the cracks in the plaster wall, they spread across the room like splintering glass, and then split again with some sort of strange verity. I wondered how many great people had lived there before me, creating true art, writing great novels, and crafting great stories. I used that inspiration and began to familiarize myself with critically acclaimed scripts, classical plays, and literature, taking a liking to what some referred to as the 'Great American Novels,' although to me that was just a stamp of good writing, of good art, and of something relevant. Write something relevant and true and about America, and if enough people liked it then I guess that was that. The job of the artist has always been to create what is true, and I saw no reason for that to ever change. I got a lot out of some of those novels, though, and through them I believe my soul came a long way.

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There was a specific statement I never much liked when I first arrived in Hollywood, in fact, the Arlington in me downright detested it — ‘paying your dues’ — a bunch of people said that to me in that first year, but I always found that statement to be completely false and lacking in a very basic way. I remember a certain instance where a young actor came up to me after drama class. He was bright eyed, hopeful, and I knew he’d be gone in a month.

“Good scene, Conrad,” he said. “Damn, you nearly made me cry up there. You had the whole class on edge.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it. Despite my lesser qualities I was still very much human in that way, and I always appreciated a good compliment.

“How do you do it?” He asked eagerly. “Tap into emotion like that?”

“Fruits and vegetables,” I said. “And being off book.”

“Alright, then,” he replied, trying to keep it friendly. “Well keep payin’ your dues, and you’ll be on the silver screen in no time.”

I laughed out loud in his face.

“I know, it’s funny,” he continued. “But that’s the way things are out here.”

“I wasn’t laughing at the statement,” I said flatly. “I was laughing at you.”

That shut him up. I didn’t see him around much more after that — and I sure didn’t get any more compliments — but I didn’t need them. I had made it a point in life to stay light about things if at all possible, but this took up a great deal of my energy and efforts, and when I missed a beat I could be prone to moodiness of the darkest kind. I had a certain coldness streaking through my veins that I inherited from my mother’s side that could make life a real drag sometimes, but one could argue that it equally served its purposes for survival. I was a hard worker by nature, and I’d get to wherever it was I was going whenever it was that I got there. I’d

go as long and as hard as I needed to in order to make it, but put it in front of me, and I'd grab it, quick as that. I considered this to be a lesser aspect of innate talent — knowing when to grab — now of course there was raw talent, and raw talent could not be taught, it simply was. I had always believed true art to be the greatest possible expression of oneself, that is, inspiration laid out and then refined, but without raw talent that expression would never transcend with the higher things of the world, and I, Conrad Arlington, The Last True Artist had both these qualities — drive and talent — and I had a greater amount of both than I could ever need. Yes, I absolutely believed in my abilities and myself whole-heartedly... my father and the great Arlingtons before him made sure of that.

It wasn't long before I developed my first romance away from home. She was a singer — a southern bell — with natural beauty laid over a petite structure, followed by flowing blonde hair that fell perfect and stringy across her delicate features, and I fell for her immediately. I met her at some grandiose party on the thirty-first of October, and she had doe eyes — the kind of eyes I could just lose myself in — so when she tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned around, and she introduced herself, my body was completely taken by her, and I fell into those eyes like a child falls into the shallows of a tide pool, and I didn't come out for a while. It destroyed me, sitting at home in my apartment, not being with her. I thought about her constantly, of how she was making her way in Hollywood, of how she had a career and I didn't, of how she was out there, moving and shaking and stirring things up, and how I, Conrad Arlington, The Last True Artist, was a complete and wretched mess. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. There was indeed nothing left of me, nothing but pure inspiration bottled up and ready to explode, inspiration without an outlet, and it was agony. Express! Express! Expression is what I needed! Day and night I found myself in torment by this girl — her blonde hair, her dark chocolaty eyes, her slim

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hips — God the agony! My franticness knew no end, for there was so much in there, and it would be let out or indeed it would destroy me from within, so I searched my apartment with the utmost urgency. I searched, and I searched, and then I finally found it — I found the one thing in the world that could make sense out of an existence like mine — and so begins the immortal charge of Conrad Arlington, *The Last True Artist*, and his feeling will justify his existence in the end.

With pen in hand I wrote like a madman, a madman that had found his reason to live, and I was captivated. My body wasted away around me, filling page after page, trying to capture what it was I felt on paper. It was truth — this I suspected — and my obsession was a necessary means to stability, for this girl was nothing more than inspiration for my art, and any attraction she had for me was held at bay by the stubborn insistence of my own artistic desires, and the longing to preserve that which was fueling such a guttural reaction in me. This drove me until it reached a point where it became more than unhealthy, and eventually, for the sake of my own sanity, I pushed her away. I pushed away the possibility of ever being with her, and it was terrible. I had never obsessed over a girl before, and I hoped to never again, but the process of de-etching her image from my mind was like going through the withdrawals of some devious substance, and my heart never hurt so much. It was a necessary hurt, however, for I had a purpose for being in this town, and the price of one young starlet for the art that poured from her wounds was a small sacrifice indeed for any true artist, but I could never do it again, no, I would never do it again, and the thought of never being with her is far too great to bear still, and I cannot withstand it, not ever again, and on that day when I stand face to face with the bright one to account for what I have lost, I will not be ready for it, for I was nothing in her eyes, and in that nothingness she became everything.

In hindsight, that first year in Hollywood was a lonely year, and despite the independence naturally distilled in my youth, I too succumbed to its pressures. To level my sanity I entertained myself with long walks down the Boulevard, imagining the glorious moment when my body would come in contact with that magical ether that exists within that small span of stars, that ether that gives way to inspiration, which then gives way to some kind of magical form. I studied those stars, looking down on those I did not know, for there was something beautifully sad about them — those stars — filled with the names of men and women the world once considered to be great artists, now mostly forgotten say for a name on some forlorn slab of stone. Yes, that is what they earned, a lifetime of artistic expression and this was their grand prize, a series of letters etched in marble for the world to walk over, and then look down upon from time to time if the mind was right. It was confounding to me, tumultuous as breathing itself, yet despite the absurdity of it all, and despite my quest for truth, I could not deny the degree to which I desired one, and I found myself actively seeking a way to contribute enough artistic expression to humanity that one day I too might have my name etched into that worn and tarnished Boulevard, immortalized by passerby's for generations to come. "Soon," I told myself as I planted my heel on La Brea Avenue and then turned east towards Vine, "soon." Then I walked passed all the names of the stars I never knew, and despite an endless sea of self-regard, I found something grand about them, and it was wonderful.

Time has a way of leaning towards liberation, and eventually I reached a point where I no longer cared. A year or so of fruitless auditions for stories with no soul can do a number on an artist, so I threw up my hands and stopped trying to control that which had no substance. In writing I had found a starting place for something relevant, and in the den of my lurid apartment I could see to it that my quota for expression was met. Oddly enough, that's when things

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changed. I began booking roles and bit parts, and my seemingly carefree attitude, which was a complete reversal from my usual sense of solemnity, was now my greatest strength. It was a complete turn around from the tortured artist — that is, of course, the way I preferred to view myself — but being tortured didn't pay the rent, so I pushed myself to be open, and then some kind of inner vitality flowed through me, that human vitality that says, "I don't give a damn, this is who I am," and the industry seemingly responded to it. I had access to funds I'd never had before, not a lot, but enough to move out of my swollen apartment into a place more suitable for a young man making his way in the Hollywood circle. I began frequenting new haunts during the weekdays, sipping on whiskey and entertaining thoughts of what it was to be a great man. Before, my spending money was reserved for the weekends, when I was more likely to meet a girl or make some friends — both of which were presumably scarce in my life — much scarcer than they should be for any bright young man at the age of twenty-two, for everybody needs somebody, and after a year of near solitude, I felt I was more than deserving of any pleasure that came my way in the approaching years, and I counted on it entirely.

I took up residence in a quaint village above Franklin Avenue, just due north of Hollywood between the 101 to the west and Los Feliz to the east, and here, friends, is where my tale truly begins, for many things have happened in the last few years — good things, bad things, things I wished I could forget, and things I wished I could relive forever — but none of these are now reality, so on those nights when I walk down the Boulevard, feeling the resonance of what the city once was, the lines between fantasy and reality have indeed begun to blur, for I have negated the fact that I am ever changing, I have ignored the truth of being shaped, pushed, pressed — of being constantly influenced — so as I speak of the events that occurred in the wake

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of what was my twenty-third year, it is wise to note that things are not what they are now, but what they appeared to be then — magical and truthful, full of personalities and experience.

-Conrad Arlington, The Last True Artist