

Lost in middle America with the 'Bookie to the Stars'

"Ya wanna make a bet?" It seemed to come from nowhere. I looked around, placing the voice with the drooling, bent old man at the end of the bar.

"Ya wanna make a bet?" he said again. The way he said it, you could tell he wasn't asking. The words came spitting out in defiance of the gnarled old body they came from. I couldn't tell if they were meant for the bartender or just the air between any of the three or four people in the bar.

At the next beer, I asked the bartender if he knew what was going on.

"Yeah," he drawled, "he comes in here all the time. Says he used to be Warren the Worm."

I must have looked confused. I

was.

"Yep, Warren the Worm," said the bartender like it meant something. "Says he used to be Bookie to the Stars."

"What the hell does that mean?" I started to laugh.

"It means just what it %&#@* says it does," yelled Warren the Worm, slamming his bony fist down on the bar with surprising force. "I was bookie to the stars, ya know what I'm sayin'?"

I looked over at Warren. Underneath his faded, rumped, cigarette-burned Hawaiian shirt was a pale, bone-thin body. Dirty green slacks hung loosely on his frame. His rheumy yellow eyes burned intensely

in their sagging hollow sockets. The once-proud jaw still jutted out defiantly, but now it was surrounded by a

Geoff McMurtry



face in decay. Too much alcohol, too many years, too many worries. The jaw was covered with a silver-white growth somewhere between beard and stubble. A battered greasy Panama hat perched atop the balding head.

"They useta all come into my joint, allavem. You name it — Gable, Brando, Monroe, Dean, Mineo, Frank; hell, Crazylegs and that &*(%#&\$@ Dutchman useta come in

an' bet on themselves! Ya know what I'm sayin'?"

Ya know what I'm sayin'? The way he said it, it wasn't really a question, but more of a warning — cryptic and mysterious — and when he said it, he'd stare straight through you with those rheumy yellow eyes.

"I was the bookie in Hollywood. Nobody else came close, ya know what I'm sayin'? Those were the days. That was the Golden Age, it was." Suddenly he turned and faced me directly. "Hell, ya want me ta show ya?"

Actually I didn't. Warren the Worm looked like he'd been spinning this little yarn since midafternoon. Just during my two beers he'd stacked up a nice pyramid of shotglasses, and the wadded up overabundance of soaking napkins in front of him hinted at several more.

There's something about that part of a hot, sticky afternoon when you

have nothing to do, but feel like you should be doing something. These are the kind of afternoons when robberies are planned, murders are contemplated, and little boys sneak off to play in muddy creek banks, knowing full well what will happen when their mothers catch them.

Without fully understanding why, I found myself in the back of a cab with Warren the Worm, former Bookie to the Stars.

After giving the driver a series of directions, Warren the Worm told me about his glory days in Hollywood, about his office in the middle of the Sunset Strip, about his heyday as Bookie to the Stars. He mentioned a lot of famous names — like Bogey, Chaney, Stewart, Coop — and had a detailed story about every one of them. Some of the stories were pretty good. After awhile I believed he really had been the Bookie to the Stars.

Still, something was wrong with Warren the Worm's stories. I couldn't place it at first, but there was always one little thing, something about the way he pointed out the window every time he mentioned some long-gone Hollywood kingpin.

When I finally figured it out, I was embarrassed at how silly it was. I also had a renewed sense of foreboding about Warren the Worm.

He'd been talking about all the sights on the corner of Hollywood and Vine. Anything from celebrities out gazing at their star in the sidewalk to drug deals and knifings.

Then suddenly, we were there. Well, not really, but the street signs said we were. And so did Warren the Worm. He was insistent. It didn't look anything like his description. The corner was bordered by immaculate, well-trimmed suburban lawns, in front of pleasant-looking suburban houses. There were no people in sight and there were no stars on the sidewalks. The only thing that looked right on the whole street was a yucca plant in the middle of someone's yard.

See WORM on 7

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