

FLUSHED WITH PRIDE

At last it was Oscar night. My husband Edmund's film script had been nominated in the 1956 Best Overseas category and I was so excited.

When we first received the letter, at our home in England, I'd been thrilled for him. Just being nominated by the world famous American Film Institute, would increase Edmund's potential earnings, and be a real boost to his career. As I read the invitation, I'd felt overjoyed - a chance to fly to America - to dress up and attend the Oscars ... to mingle with movie stars. What more could a girl from drab London ask for?

Here I was, thinking my break would never come and I'll never get to travel. I'm slogging away at painting, entering art exhibitions - it still hasn't happened for me. Having Edmund nominated for an American Oscar - well, that's as good as. At least I get to travel to America and shimmer in his light. You just never know what's round the corner.

Funnily enough Edmund didn't appear to be at all taken with the entire thing - not even the proceedings...his usual English 'stiff upper lip' attitude, I suppose. It took some encouragement from me for him to accept. In our hotel on the night, not at all fazed, he looked smart in a hired tuxedo.

He'd said, in a fake American voice, '*Stick with me kid. I'll show you a good time*'.

It was early evening when our studio limousine arrived at the Los Angeles venue - a star studded evening in more ways than one. Standing in the queue at the ladies restroom I pondered my luck at being in Los Angeles - *actually attending The Oscars*. In my green organza gown, borrowed from my friend Fiona, I felt great - poised and sophisticated, hopeful the colour enhanced my red

hair. Around me everyone looked like someone I knew personally. It took a great deal of self-control not to nod and smile at the faces of people I knew only from the cinema screens.

How odd. Everyone looks so familiar but we don't know one another. Gosh, I hope I don't look like a giant lettuce in this dress.

Earlier, when I twirled in it and said to Edmund 'dressed by Chanel, he smiled and twirled too, saying 'dressed by Laurel and Hardy'.

It's so easy for men. Honestly, these dresses here are to die for...that black silk looks wonderful on Lauren Bacall. I can't believe I'm standing here in the same room as all the legends I have ever known. The white beaded gown in front of me is just wonderful.

I had decided to visit the rest room before going into the auditorium for the long ceremony and joined the queue for the 'Ladies' which spilled into the foyer. Lauren Bacall swept past me, out into the foyer, and the queue moved forward a few steps.

I stared around at the throng of people - many of the faces looked like people I'd seen on film. All of a sudden, like a bolt out of the blue, came the realisation why the curvaceous woman in front of me seemed so very familiar. The swish of the heavy beads, as the ash blonde woman moved forward, seemed to open a door in my mind. It was beyond belief, but I was actually standing next to the most famous blonde in the world, Marilyn Monroe. The star turned her head and looked behind her, nodding acknowledgment to me. I nodded in return and smiled. As she met my gaze, the screen idol smiled too and spoke in her little girl's voice.

'Oh isn't this terrible. Women always have to queue but men seem to be able to just walk in and

out.'

My God...she's speaking to me. Marilyn Monroe is speaking to ME! Say something. Say something...for heavens' sake, say something!

'Um yes. They must build more toilets in the men's restrooms. It seems to be a universal problem. We have the same thing in England.'

What a stupid thing to say. Why am I talking about English toilets?

'Oh - you're from England? I'm going there in a few days.'

'Really? For a film or holiday?'

Here I am talking to a famous Hollywood actress. Get me!

'A film - with your Laurence Olivier - the working title is The Prince and The Showgirl but it could end up called anything.'

MY Laurence Olivier... like I'm part of her world... as if he'd know me if he fell over me.

My mouth felt dry but I wanted to fill in the space - *say something...anything.*

'Have you been to England before?'

The actress spoke quickly in a breathy voice.

'No this will be my first trip. I'm really looking forward to it. My husband is coming with me. I hope to see everything. He's been many times so and I should get to see the really old historical buildings. I'm looking forward to being culturally engulfed. That's what my husband Henry says will happen.'

We both laughed and I warmed to her.

Might as well introduce myself.

'My name's Norma Henderson. I'm a painter and I'm only here because my husband Edmund Henderson has been nominated for his film script'.

The gloved hand I offered was accepted by the actress's gloved hand. *I touched her. Is this really happening?*

'Really, an artist? How wonderful!'

She threw her head back and looked towards the ceiling as her eyes glazed over.

'One day I'd like to write a script and oh! - but...what a coincidence! That's my name... Norma. Well, it was... well it still is really. Marilyn Monroe is my stage name.'

The queue of women moved again and actress Doris Day walked out into the foyer. As she passed by, she noticed Marilyn and nodded and smiled. Marilyn said 'Hi' as the star in blue satin moved away. The shimmering beads on Marilyn's dress jiggled as she stepped into the powder room and the inner sanctum of the rest rooms.

Marilyn turned again and whispered 'God, she's wonderful. I love her singing voice. I have all her records.'

'Really?' I said in surprise. It had never occurred to me that a star would have records, like ordinary people. I searched for something to say and replied 'I love her films.'

'Yes, I enjoy her film work too and she's been lucky that her films suite her style. My husband Henry says I'm still trying to develop mine and this next film will help me become a more classic actress.'

She's talking about Henry Miller. My God I can't believe this is happening!

The queue moved again as another gowned woman rustled past into the foyer. By now we were well inside the powder room with only two women before us. The lights were brighter in there and we saw our reflections in the mirror. The famous woman before me, looked like an angel, all white make-up and shimmer but sexually provocative at the same time. I checked out Marilyn's white satin dress, scattered with long strings of shiny beads that swayed when she moved. The entire dress seemed to gyrate with every movement. The top showed an ample cleavage and the dress fitted snugly, displaying the famous curves to advantage. Marilyn checked her made-up reflection, patted her coifed blonde hairdo and pursed her mouth towards the mirror to ensure her scarlet lipstick looked intact. Her eyes, heavily out-lined, scanned the restroom and she turned to me, whispering.

'Gosh, I just remembered. They usually employ a woman to help with the dresses but there's no one around. Norma, would you mind helping me with this zip. It's not easy to undo.'

I smiled and nodded thinking the dress was indeed extremely snug. I slowly pulled off my long white silk gloves to free my hands. With a little tugging, I was able to unhook the fitting and move the zip down the close-fitting satin material, past her waist. Being so near I caught the aroma of heavy perfume. I couldn't wait to tell them back home that I had not only had an intimate conversation but actually touched this celebrated star. I could also disclose that the magazine stories were true. Marilyn wasn't wearing underwear.

'It's a beautiful dress. You look fabulous.'

Marilyn smiled and murmured her thanks. Holding her dress, now opened at the back, close to her body by her arms, she opened her white satin purse. She drew out two small blue pills and casually swallowed them, before continuing.

'Edith Head from the studio made it for me. It belongs to the film company of course. Actually it's real heavy with all this beading - it's awful to sit in...so uncomfortable. I can't wait to take it off and give it back.'

The line moved again and Marilyn sashayed forward out of sight.

Later, when I returned to the powder room, Marilyn was nowhere to be seen. *She must have had someone else help her zip up*, I thought as I topped up my lipstick. I looked around for Marilyn when I rejoined Edmund in the auditorium but didn't see her.

Earlier, I had asked about all these well dressed people, standing around the theater walls. It appeared that the Academy didn't want the television cameras to show Americans the empty seats, so they employed people as 'fillers', to jump into openings whilst invitees were out of the auditorium. The dinner jacketed man who had filled my seat, rose to leave and I sat down, and was about to gush about my meeting, when proceedings began. I promptly forgot about my restroom encounter, in the excitement of the Awards...Edmond had won an Oscar!

Later that evening, clutching his golden Oscar, Edmund and I joined others waiting in line for our limousines. Everyone on the red carpet smiled wearily at the bank of photographers before them; they frantically called out for attention and flashbulbs popped. Ahead of us in the queue, I saw Marilyn again, wrapped in a long white mink coat, on the arm of husband Henry Miller, the famous writer. I caught Marilyn's eye as she

turned slightly, not expecting her to acknowledge me or, even see me, in the crowd.

But the famous star turned to look at me, full in the face, and waved a gloved hand, calling a loud farewell in her girly voice.

'Bye Norma, maybe we'll meet again in England. Thanks again honey,' as she was swept away in a cloud of white fur, ushered into the waiting limousine. A rush of photographers, bulbs flashing, followed them as the car doors closed.

Beside me, Edmund turned to look at me in astonishment.

'How ... did she know you? She knew your name! What was that all about?' I don't remember...'

He stood still, mouth open, gazing down at me.

'I'll tell you about it later darling. Smile for the cameras and keep moving. Here's our car.'

Edmund persisted; 'first name terms with Marilyn Monroe, for God Sake?'

'Oh', I replied with a shrug as a busboy opened our car door, 'Stick with me kid. I know the right people. I can show you a good time.'