

Marilyn's Hands

By Gill Arbuthnott

Julia sounded almost hysterical when she called. She often sounded hyper though; you couldn't rely on it as an indicator of her mood. I pretended to shuffle my non-existent plans for the day so I could meet her for lunch. Maybe she'd found me some voice-over work, or an audition. If nothing else, it meant I'd get a decent meal.

I didn't have enough money in my purse to buy a drink, so I waited for Julia outside the restaurant. She was twenty minutes late when she stepped from her car wearing a suit of yellow shot silk that clung to her artificially tautened arse as though her body had been vacuum packed. Some of her clients must be bringing in good money. We air kissed and she led the way in.

As we waited to be seated, I found her staring at me intently.

'What?' I asked, assuming her scrutiny implied some sort of fault. 'Did I smudge my eyeliner?'

She laughed. 'Of course not darling. Just reacquainting myself with your lovely face.'

We spent the time before our oysters arrived discussing the parlous state of the performing arts: in other words, why I wasn't getting more parts. The subject should have made Julia frown at the very least – it certainly depressed the hell out of me – but she dismissed it airily. She gave the impression of having some terrific secret that she could barely contain, but when I asked her directly, she just said, 'Let's eat first.'

It was the best – and the biggest – meal I'd had for weeks. When the coffee came Julia pushed it to one side and folded her hands on the table in front of her as though she was about to pray.

'I want you to promise you'll hear me out before you say anything, and that you'll take some time to think it through properly, whatever your initial response is.'

It was a pretty weird speech, even for Julia, and I was immediately suspicious, thinking of porn and other sordid possibilities.

'OK,' I said cautiously.

'It's an amazing opportunity.'

I took a sip of coffee, watched her watching my face.

'Marilyn,' she said.

The coffee spilled a little as I set the cup down.

'Marilyn?' I must have looked incredulous.

'You do know what I'm talking about?'

Of course I knew. Everyone knew. Marilyn. An icon: the coveted body, the gorgeous face, the magnetic presence. Cameras focused on her alone. Anyone who shared a stage or screen with her ran the risk of becoming no more than a sentient garnish.

Until the drugs caught up with her suddenly and unexpectedly (though everyone knew she did them) and devastated her brain; finished her, mid-film.

Since then, they'd been looking for the next person to step in, take over, play the part. Play *both* parts: Marilyn and the role. Meanwhile the current Marilyn lay in some clinic, pierced by tubes, wrapped in sterile air, quiescent. Waiting to pass on her identity. Waiting to pass on her face.

'You're joking.'

I didn't realise I'd spoken, but the words vibrated in the air.

Julia smiled. 'I knew you'd say that, darling. Just listen and think, that's all I ask.'

'You're a blank canvas; exactly what's needed. Your own face isn't well-known to the public – after all, most of what you do is small theatre stuff.'

She puckered her mouth in distaste until it looked like a cat's backside. No pretence from dear Julia that artistic integrity was more important than money.

'But I don't even look like her.'

She fiddled with her untouched coffee. 'I ran a check on the physical specs they're after, and your bone structure is a ninety three percent match. You sound like her anyway, and voice training would emphasise the likeness.'

'Think of it darling, think of the future you'd have...'

'I'm not doing it.'

Julia held up her hand. 'I'm not listening to you just now. Go home and sleep on it. This is a chance in a million. I've got clients who would kill, literally kill, to be Marilyn. Think of the money, the adulation...'

'*You're* thinking of the money, aren't you?'

Her face closed down, and I knew I'd gone too far.

'Of course I am,' she said crisply. 'I'm your agent; that's what I do. I find you parts, they pay you, I take my percentage. That's how it works. Occasionally.'

I tried to look contrite. 'I'm sorry Julia. I'm just... the idea is a shock, that's all.'

The smile returned. She'd bought it. At least I could still act.

'I understand. Don't say any more about it now. Go home, think things through properly and I'll call you tomorrow.' She looked at me intently. 'You'd be

mad to let this chance slip through your fingers. I'll set up a preliminary meeting as soon as I get the go ahead from you.'

I nodded. 'OK. I'll think about it.'

When I got home I levered my feet out of their elegant shoes, peeled off the smart clothes and, dressed like a slob, took off my makeup. My face in the mirror suddenly looked as though it belonged to a stranger. I gazed at it, trying to see beneath the surface to the ninety three percent congruence that Julia claimed. It wasn't easy to believe it was true.

But if it was, what then? What if I chose to extinguish myself, and wear Marilyn's face instead of my own?

There would be wealth, and fame. How did I feel about that? I'd never expected to be famous; not properly famous. Truly, all I had ever hoped for was *recognition*, a much lower-key concept. I'd never considered true stardom as anything more than a fantasy.

Wealth, on the other hand, was something I craved. I'd never, since I was old enough to count it, spent a week free from worry about money; partly my own fault of course – I'd hardly chosen a career noted for its financial security. I hungered not to have to calculate before I dared to buy. I wanted to surrender to whim, drown in luxury. Here was my chance. As Scarlett O'Hara said, *I'll never go hungry again*.

I wouldn't make the mistakes the others had made. I wouldn't succumb to drugs or self-loathing. I could survive as the Living Goddess. I could play the part indefinitely. With stem cells and hormones and God knew whatever else they used, I could be Marilyn for decades if I wanted to.

It couldn't hurt to let Julia set up a preliminary meeting. I wouldn't be committing myself to anything. I'd listen to what they had to say, then decide.

I called Julia first thing. She didn't attempt to hide her relief.

'Well done, darling. I knew you'd see this for the fantastic opportunity it is once you'd had time to think, though I was worried yesterday that you might be a tiny bit squeamish about the whole idea.

'I'll get right on to Marilyn's people. Don't go out until I call back, OK?'

Twenty minutes later she phoned again. 'We're meeting them at three this afternoon. They're losing money every day the shoot's delayed, so they want to get things moving as fast as possible. I'll pick you up at two. Put your hair up so they can see your face properly.'

The phone went dead before I had a chance to reply.

At exactly two Julia's car howled to a halt outside my building and roared off again as soon as I had both legs inside. She was never on time. Never. Until now.

'Right,' she said. 'I'll do the talking, you concentrate on looking like Marilyn.'

'But I don't,' I protested.

'You do on the inside,' she countered. 'Remember the importance of bone structure. Anyway, just imagine you're her and it will radiate from you.' She made what was presumably a radiating-Marilyn gesture and, in spite of myself, I laughed.

Marilyn's face gazed at me from every wall, larger than life; luminous, pearly, impossibly glamorous. The whole idea seemed ridiculous beneath her multiplied smiles. How could I possibly become Her?

A secretary walked us through to a conference room, and I tried to imagine myself into Marilyn. For once, Julia stood aside and let me enter a room first.

Three women, two men, their eyes focused, as though drawn by invisible magnets, on my face. I paused just inside the door and let them look, turned my face one way, then another.

One of the women remembered her manners and got to her feet.

‘Please, sit down. I’m Charlotte Aungier,’ she said. We settled ourselves. ‘My colleagues and I have the task of finding the new Marilyn. We have to strike a balance between speed and care, as I’m sure you’ll understand.’

‘The documentation that Julia has sent looks promising and the voice tapes are most encouraging.’

‘It’s something that people have commented on all my life,’ I said in my best Marilyn voice. ‘It gets me voice-over work, but it puts casting agents off sometimes: too distracting, they say.’

She nodded, never taking her eyes off my face.

This is what it would be like, all the time.

‘We’d like to take some shots of you now. Measurements and so on, get exact comparisons.’ I nodded. ‘Roger will take you along to the studio.’

The older of the two men rose and held the door for me. He left me with a couple of techs in a studio and returned half an hour later, after they’d taken what felt like several hundred measurements and photographs.

As he escorted me back, I paused in front of a photograph in which Marilyn had apparently been caught off guard, glancing back over her right shoulder, a slight frown on her face, mesmerising.

‘You must know her quite well,’ I said to Roger.

‘I’ve met her often, naturally.’

‘What’s she *really* like?’

He gestured to the walls. 'What you see here.'

'But what's she like as a person? When she isn't in front of the camera?'

He looked puzzled. 'I'm not sure what you mean. She's always Marilyn. There *is* nothing else.'

When we got back to the conference room, it was clear that Julia had concluded her side of the meeting to her satisfaction. She beamed at me as I came back in.

'All right darling?'

'Fine.'

Charlotte Aungier said, 'I think this has been a very positive meeting. We'll have the tests we've just run analysed and be in touch with you within twenty four hours. Let me say, off the record, that I have the highest hopes that this is going to work out.'

Julia drove me home at what was, for her, a moderate speed. Perhaps she was looking after her assets now that I had suddenly gained worth.

'My God, darling, that was marvellous. I just know they're going to go for you. God, isn't life incredible.'

As for me, it was beginning to sink in properly that this was really happening. I was elated, terrified, caught up in dreams of what my future could be.

I barely slept that night, and went to the gym first thing to run myself properly awake. By the time I finished, I'd reached a decision. When I got back, the answerphone light was blinking.

'It's Julia. Call me.'

I didn't even have to go through her secretary. She must have been perched by the phone, waiting.

'They want you, darling. You've got it!' She warbled on happily, but none of what she said penetrated my brain. I waited for a pause in the monologue.

'Julia, tell them I want to see her.'

'What?'

'I want to see Marilyn before I decide.'

'But darling, that's not really a...'

'I won't do it otherwise.'

Julia sighed. 'OK. I'll call you when it's arranged.'

Everyone tried to persuade me not to go but, for once in my too compliant life, opposition only increased my determination.

It was Charlotte Aungier who took me, that afternoon, to the discreet clinic in the suburbs where Marilyn waited.

It wasn't such a shock to see her; I'd seen film of people in that state before. There was a tube down her throat and her eyelids were taped shut. Her hair lay flat and dead on the pillow around her. Wires led to the pads of the heart monitor, rising and falling gently with each artificial breath, and liquid flowed from a plastic pack along a snake of tubing and into a vein in her arm. I suppose I looked at her for ten minutes before I touched her. Her skin was warm and smooth and I noticed for the first time what beautiful hands she had – her own, of course.

Charlotte stood, obviously uncomfortable, near the door.

'I can't remember,' I said. 'How long did she do it?'

‘Almost five years,’ she replied. Her voice sounded strained, and I guessed she didn’t like any reminder that she bore some of the responsibility for the ruin we were looking at.

‘And she was... what... the third?’

‘The fourth.’ Charlotte moved uneasily towards the window.

And I could be the fifth.

‘What was her name before?’

‘Hilary Tyler. Her boyfriend nominated her. She was a nobody, really. She’d won a couple of beauty pageants, had a few small parts, but she wasn’t really prepared for the fame.’

She had come to stand beside me, and now gave me what was meant to be a reassuring smile. ‘That’s where you have a huge advantage. You’re already a proper actress. You know exactly what you’re getting into.’

Maybe, after all, she was right. Unexpectedly, I felt more at ease about the whole thing now I’d seen her lying there.

‘We’ll send Julia the full contract for you to look at with your lawyers first thing tomorrow.’

‘Fine. I’m sure there won’t be any problems with it.’

The relief was visible on Charlotte’s face when I said that. It was clear she’d expected the visit to Marilyn to send me into a spin.

I asked my final question as we crawled back through rush-hour traffic. ‘I’m curious. What will happen to her after the... reconstruction?’

She frowned. ‘I’ve no idea. I suppose they just switch everything off. There’s no point afterwards.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

As I got out of the car, Charlotte leaned out of her window and said, 'You're going to be a great Marilyn. One of the best.'

I kept thinking about her hands. All through that final night, I saw them over and over again. Those beautiful hands, now owned by Marilyn. I found a channel showing one of her recent films, recorded it, and watched it repeatedly, looking for shots that showed them.

This would be my reality if I went ahead. I would cease to have any point, except to be a simulacrum of Marilyn. No one would care about my hands.

It was such a long night, with no one to share it but the ghosts of women I didn't know.

And she was... what... the third?

The fourth.

And I would be the fifth.

Julia beamed at me, a champagne glass in one hand. Although Charlotte Aungier was perfectly groomed and made up, the strain of the past weeks showed in the thin skin around her eyes.

I finished painting the last nail and looked at my hands. I wanted them to be perfect, like the rest of me.

There was a knock at the door.

'That's it,' said Charlotte. 'Ready?'

There was silence as we walked on stage in semi-darkness, then the lights came up and the shouting began.

'Marilyn!'

‘Marilyn – over here!’

‘This way, Marilyn!’

A thousand flashbulbs went off at once.

I held my hand, my beautiful hand, in front of Marilyn’s face to shield our eyes from the glare, parted her lips in that iconic smile and gave a little wave.

I am Marilyn, your Goddess. Worship me.

‘Put your hand down, darling,’ Julia whispered. ‘They want to see your face. No one’s interested in your hands.’

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