

Marilyn

The bus ride from Inglewood all the way to Sherman Oaks on that hot July morning was almost unbearable. The streets in 1954 were bumpy, and the buses were stiff, like submarines with wheels, catapulting us into the unconditioned air every time we hit a pothole.

I wouldn't have been on that stuffy bus if it weren't for my friend, Margaret Taylor, who was dead set on dancing on television. We had been studying dance together at my Uncle Bob's studio since we were five years old, and when she found out there was an open audition for dancers on the Horace Heidt television show, she was going to get there come hell or high water. Her parents wouldn't let her go alone, however, so you guessed it. She made me come along.

Nearly three excruciating hours later, around 10 A.M., we finally passed over the Hollywood Hills and made our way down to the Horace



Heidt compound in Sherman Oaks. We found where we were supposed to go and we changed into our leotards in a bathroom. Finally we walked into the studio to find all kinds of gorgeous dancers, all seeming to be about 25 years old, stretching, talking and smoking like crazy. As we walked into the plume of smoke, they looked at us like we were from outer space. We were



both 16-year-old, fresh-faced kids standing next to these beautiful women who looked seven feet tall. Margaret was in orange and I was in Easter yellow. We stuck out like sore thumbs.

“Hi,” I said tentatively, to no one in particular.

No one said a word back.

The man running the audition, a tall handsome guy with slicked back hair, and black and white top shoes, invited us in groups onto the floor to learn the combinations, and I don’t think Margaret realized she was holding my hand when we went out there. I had told her on the bus that she would be doing a lot of auditioning before she would get her first job, to take the pressure off. But she wouldn’t hear of it. She had to get *this* job.

As for me, just a junior at Inglewood High, I didn’t even want the job, so I felt no pressure. I think that is why I picked up the combination rather quickly, even as Margaret looked as though she was struggling. Still, when it counted, Margaret seemed to be doing really well, and her

beautiful blonde hair, good looks, long limbs and years of training at Uncle Bob's studio alongside great dancers like Russ Tamblyn, who went on to star in *West Side Story*, seemed to make her one of the favorites—as least far as I could tell. I felt very good about her chances.

For our final pass—four grueling hours later, we had to perform a string of pique turns moving diagonally across the floor. All the women glided like lovely, winged fairies, followed by Margaret who was as light and agile as the rest. I was the final dancer and as I made my way across the floor, I slipped and fell right on my rear. K'plop! Embarrassed, I jumped up and kept going, but I knew it didn't really matter. I just couldn't wait to get out of there and go get something to eat.

When we finished, they made us stand together as a group. While we were panting and barely able to stand, one of the Horace Heidt executives thanked us, then said, "Number 47, the way you popped right up and kept going was outstanding. This is live television, ladies. That's what we're looking for."

Margaret she shot me a horrified look. I spent our dinner and the entire ride back trying to convince her that what he said didn't mean anything, and that he was just trying to make me feel better after looking so stupid.

But I was wrong.



A week later, I got a call from Horace Heidt offering me a job on the show. And Margaret didn't. She was devastated, poor thing, and could barely talk to me.

After a lot of soul searching, I took the job. And so there I was, making money, living in Hollywood, dancing on television, receiving fan mail and meeting lots of nice people, like Elvis Presley, who was really just a sweet kid trying to make it, like everybody else. And while it might have looked like I had hit the big time, I really hadn't.

The worst time in my life was about to begin.

