

“An Oscar for Emily”

By Dave McClain

An esteemed aging actress has one last chance to reach her goal of winning an Oscar, but it's not that simple. Nothing for Emily has ever been simple.

A pretty young woman, soaking wet from the rain, stepped onto the large porch and stood in front of the white door with stained-glass panels, on the small patch of relatively dry brick. She opened her coat enough to reach in and take out a notepad that had stayed dry inside the waistband of her dark blue skirt. She knocked. Almost immediately, a middle-aged woman wearing a cream-colored pantsuit opened the door a few inches.

“Miss Fielding?” the older woman asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Right here,” the young woman answered, waving her notepad in the air.

“You’re late. The Oscars started half an hour ago.”

“I’m very sorry about that. L.A. traffic on steroids. It’s this crazy storm.”

A loud crack of thunder reinforced the point and made the young woman jump.

The older woman nodded toward the inside of the house, opening the door wider. “Follow me.”

Miss Fielding tentatively crossed the threshold and closed the door quietly behind her. She paused in the foyer to look around at the ornate ceilings, the expensive and tasteful décor and the shelves of awards over the fireplace. She noticed a couple Screen Actors Guild Awards, a People’s Choice Award, several other older awards which she didn’t recognize... and a prominent gap in the center of the top shelf.

“Are you coming?” said the older woman, standing in the middle of the room, looking annoyed.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve never been in a real movie star’s home before!”

“Been in many fake movie star’s homes, have you?”

“Huh?”

“Oh, never mind. How long have you been with the university newspaper, Miss Fielding?”

“Two years. Since my sophomore year.”

“Lucky you. Listen, my mother is not well... sicker than most people know. She’s turned down all interview requests this awards season, but when her alma mater called, well, she insisted on seeing you... against my advice.”

“I appreciate the opportunity. Very much. Please call me Angela.”

“Well, Angela, just be respectful. She will probably be fading in and out during the show. If she needs to nap, let her nap. I’ll come in to make sure she’s awake for the big announcement.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Call me Scarlett. I have the TV on mute. I’ll turn the sound on in time for the Best Actress announcement. The Dolby Theater is only a couple miles from here and, even as sick as she is, mother still wanted to attend the ceremony. Somehow I managed to talk her out of it.”

Scarlett paused.

“She may be too ill to be there,” Scarlett continued, “but she’s sure as shit watching. ‘Third time’s the charm’, she says. I say she always put too much stock in those damned awards.”

“I understand.”

“I doubt it.”

Scarlett turned and finished walking to a door elegantly painted in metallic gold paint. Angela followed. As Scarlett knocked lightly, Angela admired the framed photos surrounding the door.

“Wow!” marveled Angela. “Emily O’Hara with every president in my lifetime. Even before.”

“Yes. Roosevelt to Reagan. She’s met them all. Wait. You don’t have a camera, do you?”

“No, Miss Scarlett.”

Scarlett paused. Her eyes squinted slightly.

“Just Scarlett. Please. Just Scarlett. And, good, because she hasn’t had her picture taken since she got sick. Prepare yourself.”

Scarlett opened the door and Angela followed her into the makeshift bedroom, lit only by the television screen in the floor console near the hospital bed where the old woman lay.

When Angela’s eyes adjusted to the low light, in the bed she saw the legendary and glamorous Emily O’Hara wearing a faded pink night gown. She was gaunt and frail. The actress’ left arm had a plastic tube coming out of it, running to an IV on the far side of the bed. Wires led to some sort of monitor which beeped quietly, but regularly. The scene caused Angela to gasp, but she was able to partially muffle the sound.

The old woman was covered up to her chest by a thick blanket and the head of the bed was slightly raised. She turned toward the doorway.

“Where’s the nurse?” said the old woman weakly.

“I sent her home, mother,” replied Scarlett. “I’m going to take care of you tonight. I want this place as quiet and calm as possible... under the circumstances.”

Scarlett’s eyes shifted in the young reporter’s direction.

“Here’s Angela Fielding.”

The old woman looked at the young woman. Her face lit up a bit. She smiled.

“Welcome, Angela. It’s so nice to meet you!” said the actress.

“It’s wonderful for me to be able to meet YOU, Mrs. O’Hara!” replied Angela.

“You may call me Emily,” offered the woman.

“I’ll be just outside,” said Scarlett. “I’ll be back in time for Best Actress.”

Scarlett looked at Angela. She didn’t speak, but her gaze said much. Angela nodded slightly and Scarlett backed out of the room, quietly closing the door.

“Best Actress,” said Emily, staring at the blank wall in front of her. “What a crock.”

Angela slid into the chair next to the bed. Emily continued staring at the wall.

“When ‘Gone with the Wind’ came out, most of those other nominees weren’t even born. I only had a few lines in that film, but it got me great roles before they even started in the business.”

Emily paused. After a moment, she looked over at Angela and stared at her in silence.

Finally, Emily spoke. “Are you going to be a journalist?”

“Well, maybe. But what I really want to be is an actress.”

“Of course you do.”

“It’s... it’s my dream,” said Angela, as she opened her notepad and took out a pencil.

“Dreams. Dreams are like the smoke of a dying fire, my dear,” said Emily. “You can see them, but you can’t touch them. You reach out for them, but they float away. You have to...”

Emily started coughing. Angela noticed a pitcher of water on the small table next to her. She quickly poured some water into the empty glass beside the pitcher and handed it to Emily. Emily took a few sips of the water and the coughing subsided, even as thunder continued rumbling outside.

“During this interview, I’d appreciate any advice you could give me,” Angela resumed.

After another awkward pause, Angela again broke the silence.

“What’s it like to be nominated for an Oscar?”

“The first time, it was glorious. It was my breakout role. I was 22 years old and I was being treated better than I had in my entire life. The parties. The press. It was a whirlwind.”

Staring at nothing, Emily paused to smile.

“And the papers said I might actually win. Me and Marlee were the two front-runners.”

“Marlee McElhinney.”

“Yes. Terrible name. I used to tell her that she should change it, but she said that her name helped her to stand out. And I think she liked having the same initials as Marilyn Monroe.”

Emily laughed awkwardly.

“Anyway, right before the Oscars, there were rumors that Marlee’s people were trying to influence the voters. Then she won the Oscar. The allegations were never proven and Marlee swore to my face that she hadn’t done anything wrong... but I still wonder.”

“And the second time?” asked Angela tentatively.

“The what?”

“The second Oscar nomination?”

“The second time, the gal died. The gal who ended up winning. Sympathy vote. Done deal.”

“But you’re nominated again this year,” encouraged Angela.

“Yeah, and I’m up against Marlee again. Go figure. Neither one of us get a single nomination for more than 20 years and here we are again, right back where we started.”

“Well, no matter what happens, you’ve had such a great career. You’ve won so many awards.”

Emily just stared straight ahead at the wall.

“Did you know I grew up on a farm? I was quite the farmer’s daughter. I learned every job on that farm before I was eight years old. I wanted to do all the jobs and be the very best at every one. Our state fair had a competition for Best Young Farmer. All I wanted was to win that award. Just once. That would’ve been all I needed. I won all kinds of awards at the state fair and even more back home at our county fair. At the state fair, I was a BYY finalist every year. Then I turned 17. I was about to age out of the competition. This is my last... that was my last chance. Then this little 15-year-old named Marcy... something-or-other won. I just wanted to win once.”

Angela sat silently for a moment and then a smile slowly spread across her face.

“You worked hard for those other awards above your fireplace too. You’re proud you won them, but because you were good enough to be in the running for Oscars, you just want to win one. Just to see how it feels to be on top, even for a moment.”

Emily looked at Angela and Emily’s eyes started to well up.

“You understand. You really understand.”

Emily reached out her hand and Angela gave it a gentle squeeze. Both women sat in silence watching the muted television as an old man with a cane came on stage and claimed an Oscar.

As Emily resumed talking about her career and things she'd learned, Angela hung on every word, but eventually, the old woman grew sleepy.

"I need to close my eyes for a few minutes," said Emily. "My daughter will come back in time for the major awards towards the end. Stay with me, won't you?"

"Of course, ma'am. Whatever you want."

"Emily."

"Yes. Emily. I'll be here."

Angela reached out and touched Emily's hand as the old actress drifted off to sleep.

BANG! The thunder outside sounded like an explosion. Emily awoke with a start, just as Scarlett entered the room.

"Wow! It's getting even worse out there!" exclaimed Scarlett, briefly looking out the window, before looking down at her mother's wide open eyes.

"Oh, good. You're awake. I was watching in the livingroom. They're in a commercial now, but they said Best Actor is next."

Emily pushed herself up slightly in the bed. "Oooh! My award should come right after that."

Scarlett reached over to the table, grabbed the remote and clicked a button. Music came from the console and faded into an announcement welcoming back the television audience.

The three women watched in silence as a man in his 30s accepted an Oscar. Thunder continued to rumble outside.

"And now for Best Actress. The nominees are..."

None of the three women moved as a distinguished-looking man in a tuxedo read off five names. The three viewers barely breathed as the man opened the envelope. Scarlett reached down and held her mother's hand. Angela placed her hand lightly on Emily's shoulder.

The man on the TV got a confused look on his face. "I think we have a mistake here," he said.

Angela's eyes grew wide. Emily's slowly closed.

"What? What's going on??" Scarlett yelled at the TV.

A female figure in a powder blue gown, holding a clipboard, appeared on the screen.

BANG! It was the loudest clap of thunder yet. The scene on the TV quickly faded into a small circle of light in the center of the screen. And then... darkness.

Scarlett flipped the light switch next to the door up and down several times. Nothing.

“I think there’s a flashlight in the drawer,” said Scarlett, tapping on the edge of the small table.

Angela felt for the drawer’s handle, pulled it towards her and fumbled through the drawer’s contents until she pulled out a flashlight. She turned it on and handed it to Scarlett.

“Stay here with mother. I’ll call the power company.”

As Scarlett left the room, Angela reached toward the bed and found Emily’s hand. It felt cold, but when Angela squeezed, Emily squeezed Angela’s hand back.

A few minutes later, Scarlett returned.

“It’s the whole street, but the power company says the lights should be back on shortly.”

Scarlett stroked her mother’s hair as the old woman lay peacefully with her eyes closed. The only sound was Emily’s shallow breathing. Suddenly, Scarlett withdrew her hand and left the room.

“I have to make another call,” she muttered as she shut the door.

Angela could hear her dialing and then heard Scarlett whispering a few short sentences with long pauses between them. Then came the sound of the receiver being placed back in its cradle.

A light suddenly appeared from underneath the door and the TV again started emitting lights, colors and sound. Scarlett quickly entered the room, went straight to the TV and clicked it off. She turned to look at her mother, who was still asleep. Angela could see tears in Scarlett’s eyes.

“Stay here... but let me know if she wakes up. I have to take care of something.”

Angela nodded and sat silently with her hand in Emily’s. Scarlett left the room and closed the door. More phone calls. Eventually, there was a knock at the front door, followed by the sound of muffled voices. Scarlett opened the bedroom door. Angela could see that Scarlett was holding a small golden statue on a heavy black base. Angela gasped and Emily began to stir at the sound.

“Wait out there,” said Scarlett.

Angela obediently stood and left the room, closing the door behind her.

She sat down on the couch across from the fireplace. Angela looked at that gap on the top shelf of awards and smiled. She sat quietly, trying to process everything that was happening.

Then she heard someone moving around in a room on the other side of the front entrance. As Angela started to get up and see who it was, the door to Emily's room slowly opened.

Scarlett emerged, holding the Oscar limply at her side and wiping her eyes with her other hand.

"She's gone," said Scarlett quietly.

"She's..." Angela began, before a sob choked off the rest of her words.

A man in a tailored suit emerged from the other room.

"I'm very sorry for your loss, Miss O'Hara," said the man.

"Thank you," said Scarlett quietly, as she walked towards the man.

She handed him the Oscar and cleared her throat.

"Mr. McElhinney, thank you so much for bringing this over. And please tell your mother I said 'congratulations'... and thank her for letting us borrow it. My mother died happy."

"You're quite welcome," the man said as he took the Oscar from Scarlett's hands.

He nodded at Scarlett, turned and walked out the door.

Scarlett turned toward Angela, who stood silently, looking back at her through glistening eyes.

"Do you want to be a journalist or an actress?" asked Scarlett.

"An actress," answered Angela, quickly, but quietly.

"Good. Then you will never write or speak about what you saw hear tonight."

The two women looked at each other and slight smiles came to both of their faces.
