

Wasted Cherries



david zane

“Regret is the most real thing in this life because it always has a price... a price that never leaves you once that decision has been set in stone.”

“I’ll stop talking to you like that when you stop snaking around all night!”

“Snaking around?!”... with a returning smirk to that *what me?* expression, “I wouldn’t be out all night if you didn’t have the most amazing ability to make me not want to be home.”

“Harold F. Dylan you don’t have a snaking problem, you have an integrity problem!”

“Says you.”

“Says your four ex-wives... you selfish jackass!”

“Harry? Are you ok Harry?”

“Huh”... breaking a deep concentration at the window, “oh Olivia I didn’t hear you.”

“I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything?”

“No no no, I was just thinking of something.”

Amazing the ability to stare out into nothing that comes with age.

“Well let’s get you some lunch, because I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Harry gives Olivia a half-hearted smile... and then his mind goes right back to that window... right back to a forty-year-old conversation that he wishes he could take back.

“Did you sleep well last night”, the pretty nurse with lots of straight teeth asks while unlocking his wheelchair.

“A good night’s sleep doesn’t happen at my age.”

“Why not... what do you have to worry about Harry?” The pretty nurse who always greets him at exactly the same time and exactly the same way from Monday to Friday smiles back.

“Regret.”

“Is it that bad?”, the dedicated nurse from the Palliative Ward at the Cedar Sinai location in Brooklyn responds.

“Some days it can be.”

Olivia Hardy is a beautiful blonde hazel-eyed soul who Harry made a habit of obsessively chasing... forty years ago.

“I see.”

There’s been carnage.

“Here we go”, wheeling Harry away from his usual spot by the window.

“You are not old enough my friend of the beautiful persuasion to understand what the deep gnawing of regret is like.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you need time to really do stupid things in your life is why.”

“How much time?”

Continuing to pass room after room of a stark-white hospital hallway.

“I think by fifty you’ve lived long enough to do some really stupid things.”

“Not sooner?”

“Not according to what I’ve seen.”

“What’s your biggest regret Harry?”

Immediately Harry’s face changes - looking like it’s been overwhelmed by that kind of honesty. His eyes did not own that type of look in the slightest before Olivia asked such a prying question.

“My fifth wife”, rubbing his upper lip, “I should have learned my lesson.”
“Your table is ready Monsieur”, sliding him in.

Nobody knows the who what where and why of how one’s final years are going to be played out... but having Ms. Olivia Hardy as your primary caregiver is a stroke of luck under any circumstances. Charm to spare plus the beauty of five Pageant Winners... which keeps Harry interested absolutely; twenty-nine-year-old new Mom Miss Olivia Hardy keeps Harry on his toes. She can pry unlike anyone in Harry’s life past or present – who by the way worked only for himself and took no guff from anybody, just ask any of his five wives!
But Olivia is different.

“Five wives Harry... and you still couldn’t get it right?”

“It’s not so easy when the drinking starts at noon and ends in some place you’ve never been before... always watching the sun come up... always watching that damn sun come up.”

“Somebody needed to sit you down and tell you that there is no chemical solution to a spiritual problem.”

“Ya right”, slumping in his chair.

Harry was a Millionaire by thirty... and a Multi-Millionaire with his own TV commercials by thirty-five.

“Don’t tell me you had no one that could tell you the truth! No one who could get your attention! Come on Harry.”

A further slump.

“That’s not the Harry I know... no sir it is not the man I have lunch with every day of the week.”

“The longer you live Miss Olivia... the longer you live.”

“Fifty right?”

“Ya fifty... but in my case it was closer to seventy.”

“Oh my!”

“I’m not proud of it... I’m not proud of it at all.”

“Were you an Alcoholic?”

“Yes I was”, looking away.

“How long were you an Alcoholic for?”

“Maybe the better question you should ask is how long wasn’t I an Alcoholic for?”

“Oh Harry.”

“It took me a long time to admit that to myself, truth be told.”

“Well that’s good because I only accept the truth... I will not accept anything less from you Mr. Harold Dylan.” “Don’t forget the F.”

“Excuse me?” “Harold F. Dylan... don’t forget the F.”

“What’s the F stand for?” “Freedom... my Mother loved that word, said without freedom there is no life.” “I like her already.” “She was everything to me”, wiping away a tear, “I failed her so badly”, reaching for a napkin.

Harry blows his nose... wipes his face... and crumples the napkin in his hand... and then reaches for a drink of his soda water. And then looks right at Olivia.

One minute goes by.

Then another.

Olivia is frozen.

“That screaming, that loud screaming would always wake me up, never once did I sleep well after that, my bed was soaked in the morning.”

“Soaked?”

“My heart was pounding waiting for the other shoe to drop, violence as a kid between your Parents never leaves your soul.”

“I’m so sorry Harry”, putting more food onto Harry’s plate.

“Don’t be sorry... it’s my damn fault. I wasn’t man enough to see the problem and overcome it. I chose anger... I chose to mask my problem with that damn bullshit water! That bullshit water will lie to you from the very first sip.”

Taking a deep swallow from the chair across from Harry... her youthful appearance is getting a lesson in senior honesty.

“This is not self-pity Olivia... I’m well past that. Sitting in this chair with only your thoughts day after day takes care of that!”

The creases in his face are in just the right places, the slicked-back receding hairline shows real type-a masculinity.

“But Harry you’re so smart... so accomplished. All I see in your room are books.”

“Amazing how that works.” But his eyes look tired.

“I don’t understand Harry... I just don’t understand??”

“My Dad drank, and when he did there was no talking to him. I’m not that smart Olivia... trust me I’m not that smart.”

Olivia is glued to her patient... glued to the honest catharsis of a man she truly enjoys spending his lunch hour with. “Why do you say that Harry?”

“Anybody can read Olivia... anybody can read a lot of books.”

Olivia’s phone vibrates.

“Take it... I’m fine.” “You sure?” “I’m sure.”

Olivia Hardy starts every day at noon and works until midnight – twelve hour shifts are what the schedule say... but a raging Pandemic the world has never seen in over a hundred years means she has worked eighteen hours for days on end. Personal Protection Equipment is at a premium and so are family visits – which breaks every Staff member’s heart.

“You’re looking like a million bucks Olivia... and that’s U.S. dollars my dear, none of that monopoly money that is floating around these days. Good old God Bless America greenbacks.”

“Why thank you Sidney... I know that is a real compliment from where you come from.”

“You bet it is.”

“Did you have a good lunch?”

“Foie Gras and the best Chablis... the only thing missing was some Chopin in the background.”

A friendly chuckle... Olivia’s used to Sidney’s bourgeoisie illusions.

“Oh and the company of a beautiful lady of course.”

“I’m sure you never had that problem in your life?”

“Funny you should mention that... because I was trying to figure out which woman I would want to have my last meal with?”

“Sidney don’t talk like that.”

“No I’m serious.”

Olivia brings out the espresso carafe from the tray she has wheeled to Sidney Starling’s table... which is at the other side of the room. Aging egos do not want to share the company of a woman... “Narcissists ‘til the end”, Freud used to remark often in his notes.

“When I was working in Washington for President Clinton there was this fascinating woman that had me wrapped around her finger. I mean she called and I ran... and I did even more than that I got to tell you.”

Olivia rolls her eyes.

“She was the only one that could get me away from work.”

“Weren’t you married Sidney?”

“I was.”

“Explain please?”, with a teacherly tone.

Sidney reaches for his cup... and takes a sip of experience... his face shows contentment with the flavor escaping the dark bean.

“I remember the day I got hooked, I was twenty-six and fresh out of school. Lyndon Baines Johnson was the President and Mr. William McChesney Martin Jr. was the Federal Reserve Chair - these two men did not like each other, not one bit. President Johnson was trying to pay for an unpopular war so he needed to keep interest rates down. The Fed Chair could have cared less... he saw storm clouds forming on the horizon and he needed to raise rates. These two did not see eye to eye on this situation... but I was the only one who knew that, that saw that. Can you imagine... a twenty-six-year-old Pisher was the only person in the world that knew this?”

“How did you get so lucky?”

“I was assigned to the President’s Ranch to do some work with a close friend to the President, one of his old buddies from Texas. The President was a real Texas boy... cowboy boots and horses and all the rest, which included screaming... always lots of screaming.”

Olivia settles in with her espresso.

“Which can be scary when you’re six foot four.”

Her eyes widen.

“The President figured if he invited Martin down to his Ranch he could convince him. The President was very confident with people during his alone time... and his Ranch was, well let’s just call it home field advantage.”

On the balls of her feet thanks to this trip back in time - Sidney tells a great story.

“So the President got into his Lincoln and drove to the airport to pick up the Fed Chair himself... a full-on-press from the second this Guy landed.”

“The President could do that?”

“Back then the President, at least President Johnson, could do anything he wanted. I saw it with my own two eyes, trust me.”

“What about the Press?”

“Ha... the Press had rules back then, not like today. Geez Louise Marilyn Monroe used to sneak into the White House looking for President Kennedy and no one knew a thing.”

On the edge of her seat... Sidney is the one that needs to fill up both their cups.

“President Johnson is really shmoozing up this Martin fellow on the drive back to the Ranch... a real *good old Texas boy* is laying it on thick. Hunting this. Cattle that. Big Sky every darn day. And of course American Exceptionalism both this and that and every darn day.”

Sidney takes a sip... longer than usual this time, as if he is preparing for something big. His look is one of a career Bureaucrat... skinny and non-threatening physically... but with a forceful tone.

“After walking around the Ranch a bit they got closer to the big house... the window was open where I was working, I was on the second floor with that guy, the President’s buddy, Barret

Handler, a real Chuck Wagon kind of Guy. Always quick with a smart answer he was, even though he did not look the part. I'll never forget that interruption while I was working away... never... that warm breeze on that blue sky day."

"My boys are dying in Vietnam and you won't print me the money I need!"

"Next thing I see is the President shoving this fragile character with the awful suit up against the storage shed... damn near had him three feet off the ground."

"No?"

"Oh yes my blonde beauty... no cell phones back then, remember that."

"My God."

"God has nothing to do with anything on Lyndon Baines Johnson's Ranch!", Sidney reaches for his cup. "That day forward the President made sure Sidney Starling got any job he wanted... and made sure the big American bureaucracy complied with that request for many decades to come. Real man that President Johnson was, he made things happen even from the grave."

Olivia sits back in her chair.

"And I've been a well-paid workaholic ever since - which means every job imaginable in the Federal Reserve over a forty-two-year period."

"You know everything about money and interest rates I imagine."

"Oversaw the printing of hundreds of billions... just art on paper from my point of view."

Olivia chuckles. Her eyes are big. Sidney has seduced her with his brush with power... and of course his storytelling.

"Olivia we need you stat!"

"Go... my boring story can wait."

Olivia gives Sidney one last look of appreciation... Sidney is not boring in any way shape or form to these grateful eyes. She then takes off in the other direction. The nurse who interrupted her with a serious look is way ahead by now. The back of this sprawling facility is where the patients who have been stricken with this dreaded virus are 'housed'... an awful word any time it's used, but now it really is about housing and survival... survival for patients who are on their last draw of palliative reality.

"Everything ok Eli?"

"Everything is fine... don't you worry."

"Thank God. How's Emma?"

"She's beautiful."

There is baby noise coming through the phone.

"Oh good... you had me worried for a second."

"I just wanted to ask you where the extra baby formula is... this one is hungry today."

Olivia keeps moving fast, "In the pantry, top shelf... behind the chick peas." Overwhelmed is an understatement for every Doctor, Nurse, Security Guard, Orderly and Administrator.

"Oh... ok... I see it." They might not be bullets. "Good." But this is war. "You busy?" A real fighting war. "Like I've never been in my life."

"The news looks bad."

"It's worse than that... the refrigerated trailers won't stop."

"I'm getting scared."

"Please give my baby a big kiss for me... please", with a crackling voice.

"I will."

"Gotta go."

Click.

Entering a room with twenty beds on either side... beeping machines standing over patients that are barely conscious... oxygen masks covering their mouths... some are out cold due to an induced coma.

“I need you here Olivia!”

Tubes are everywhere.

“Now!”

Olivia runs to the Doctor with the widest eyes; she hasn't seen her baby in over three months... and has no idea when she will. “Is this ok Doctor?” We are not all in this together. “Keep that air hose on her nose... make sure it doesn't move!” No way no how. “Yes Doctor.”

Next on the list is Sylvia Spielman.

“You ready for some sustenance, Madame?”

“I was worried you weren't going to show.”

“No Madame, I always show for the most beautiful woman in here.”

All the Staff have been ordered to stay quiet about what is going on in the back area of the Hospital – nobody wants these Patients to die of terminal hopelessness.

“I was just talking to my daughter... or at least trying.”

“How old is little Emma now?”

“She turned fourteen months yesterday.”

“I remember when I used to count the months with little Chloe.”

“You see her”, after scrolling her phone.

“Oh what a beauty. Where does the blond hair come from?”

“My Dad's side is Scandinavian.”

“And so striking, she is tall for her age.”

“She's in the top 10% of her age group. I want her to be taller than me that's for sure.”

Sylvia chuckles.

Olivia has politely put a fork and knife on either side... and then presents Sylvia's aging face with a plate of beef roast strips, just a few, plus a small mound of potatoes and gravy and some peas.

“Here you are Madame”, resting it on the table.

Sylvia's face does not respond like she usually does when she sees her food being put in front of her. Her face was once too beautiful for description... a classic brunette with high-cheekbones who always wore her hair pulled backed tight in a bun. “Not hungry today Miss Sylvia?”

Add a black pant suit with heels and she looked powerful... a new breed of confident businesswoman taking The Corporate World by storm. “You sure you're not hungry?”, Olivia leans in.

Then she sits down slowly, reading Sylvia's new expression as she does.

Sylvia's posture comes from pain only.

And it takes awhile.

As long as it wants, truth be told.

Olivia takes glances into the window just like Sylvia... only her glances go back towards her patient.

Sylvia's don't.

Working in a place where time means nothing... except if they are going backwards in it through the most amazing stories... harbingers in the past that cut like a blade.

“Regret is the only thing in this world that is real.”

“I’ve been told that before.”

“Well it’s the damn truth... one should understand that with every fiber of their being.”

Olivia takes a sip of her bottled water.

“I should have been more honest with him... I should have... I should have talked... I should have told him how I felt.”

Olivia does not dare say a word.

“I still remember that phone call.” Sylvia gazes at Olivia. “I was working on a big meeting the next morning... and I mean big. Coca-Cola was my world and they were paying the firm a barrel-full of money for their newest ad campaign. But the Nanny kept calling and calling.”

Olivia and Sylvia are sitting like two old friends staring out the window.

“Finally I answered the phone because it wouldn’t stop... it just wouldn’t stop!”

Olivia is on her third mystery from her first three regulars.

“She said Chloe’s fever was getting really high. I told her to keep a close eye on it and keep reporting back.” Sylvia’s eyes change... Olivia takes a sip from her water bottle - she keeps it close throughout her shift. “This meeting was worth twelve million dollars to the firm over twenty-four months, but most importantly it was going to put me in a corner office. You know how hard it was for a woman to get a corner office back then? I wanted that damn corner office!”, gazing back at her defenseless caregiver. Sylvia then moves in slowly... and takes a sip of her Coca-Cola... the irony of such a choice during such a story. “I had no idea you had a daughter?” “Chloe Grace Spielman... the light of my life. Phil and I were so happy when she was born. I don’t think another mother was as happy as I was in the history of New York General Hospital... I really don’t.” “The pain is worth it that’s for sure.” “So true Olivia... so true.”

Olivia catches activity at the far end of this cavernous hall... the main area for all the Palliative Patients... there must be sixty of them out today. Every day is different... but yet the same.

“Forty-five goddamn minutes! The meeting was only forty-five goddamn minutes!”

Olivia feels the emotion but keeps looking at the far end of the hall.

“She kept trying to contact me but gave up. Chloe’s mother was more interested in stature... in achievement! I let my little girl down.”

Olivia’s heart beats faster.

“By the time they got a hold of me Chloe was in a coma.”

“My God.”

“Septic shock.” Sylvia remains fixed on that window. “When I got to the hospital Phil was already there... we just looked into each others eyes. I’ve never seen fear like that before”, wiping away a tear, “but Phil probably would say the same thing.” Lifting the glass of Coca-Cola up to her mouth. “I went into a shell... buried myself in my work.” Sylvia turns towards Olivia... “But I got my damn corner office!” Stunned... Olivia can’t imagine the loss of her Emma.

“I didn’t have the guts to open up my heart, to open up all that pain to my best friend. It ate me alive. You know workaholics end up with lots of money... but not any meaningful relationships. Every damn day I regret my behaviour... every damn day.”

Olivia sees a fellow Nurse walking towards her with a face.

“Takes courage to open up to your significant other”, wiping away another tear, “otherwise you just grow apart.”

“They need you Olivia.”

“Ok Sylvia... James here is going to sit with you. I’ll be back later”, kissing her on her forehead. Sylvia doesn’t respond. “Can I pour you some Coca-Cola?”, James leans in with a smile that does not fit the mood. Sylvia grabs her cup without any expression. “I love cold Coca-Cola”, James keeps trying to uplift. Sylvia takes her sip... and then puts down the glass. “You have any kids James?” “Jimmy please Miss Sylvia... and I have two... and I miss them terribly.”

Sylvia wipes away another tear.

“I don’t know how much longer I can handle this pandemic?”

“Just be grateful Jimmy”, looking back at the window, “just be grateful you can still speak with them anytime you like.”

Jimmy Gentile... an Italian import from the ruins of Rome always leads with a smile - it’s what every nurse should be bringing to their patients... pandemic or not.

“Oh I am Miss Sylvia... I am very much.”

Jimmy has a head full of black hair and a sweet smile framed by heavy-lidded puppy dog eyes.

“Good, because being ungrateful burns me up. I’d give every last dollar of my very sizeable fortune to have one day with my Chloe Grace”, directed at Jimmy, “just one day.”

These two make a heck of a sympathetic team.

Jack Coltan is next on Olivia’s rounds... which is now Jimmy and his infectious smile’s responsibility – an infectious and empathetic smile that works closely with Olivia. They fill in seamlessly for each other... knowing each others regulars and hearing their stories. They both cry a lot these days, in private of course; eighty-six days they have not seen their families - this Pandemic is not the same for everyone.

“So Mr. Coltan, which movie are we going to talk about today?”

A strikingly handsome senior with slicked-back salt and pepper hair lifts up from the book he is reading. “The Bad and the Wicked.”

His teeth are sparkling like the stars in a night sky.

“What year?”

His white-collared shirt is open and rolled up at the sleeves.

“1958.”

“Co-star?”

Movie Stars are Movie Stars until the end, Jimmy has come to realize.

“Jayne Mansfield.”

“Where did you film it?”

Especially from back in those *Glory Days*.

“Berlin... and I mean as close to the east Berlin side as you can get without getting shot.”

Today everything is CGI this or film editing that.

“You get along with the Director?”

“Not if you want to make a good film you don’t. Those Barbarians!”

“I see.”

“Real Storytelling Jimmy-my-boy, these were real story-telling-days-Jimmy-my-boy. The audience invested time in watching characters develop... it takes time to unravel a good story.”

“Get the audience invested emotionally.”

“That’s right! Not like the b.s. they pass off as feature films today.”

Cough Cough.

“You ok?”

Cough Cough.

“Ya... just remnants of the virus.”

“Rough ride?”

“Was for me... I was holed up in a hotel room for 22 days, lost 15 pounds and plenty of sanity cells.” “Geez Louise.” “At this point what else could go wrong... right?”

“Reminds me of a picture I was in called *The Sands of Cairo*... was filmed with a Miss Syd Charisse. Oh what legs underneath that skin”, rolling his eyes.

Then reaching for his sparkling water... which seems to take the edge off thanks to a long sip. Jimmy gets along well with this mercurial personality and his love of long stories... told exactly how they should according to this eager audience of one. Worse thing ever would be if another nurse came by and pulled this Hollywood-phile away. Sure there is a Pandemic going on! But can’t a dedicated over-worked exhausted nurse not get twenty minutes to learn something new?

“You ever get sick from drinking water?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Well you’re lucky... but let me give you one piece of advice so you can keep that luck – don’t travel to Cairo.” “Got it.” “In fact don’t travel to any north African country.” “Got that one too... but don’t they have shots for that now?” Jack looks away... eyes in the air as if to capture the words... and ignore his audience. “Malaria is awful... but what were they going to do? I was the Executive Producer so the crew had no choice but to shut it down. My Financiers weren’t happy that’s for damn sure. As God is my witness Jimmy-my-boy I tell you Syd was with me day and night nursing me back to health... what an Angel. She kept me sequestered from all of the Press... and any of the damn crew that wanted to make a quick buck from some tasty gossip. Ya it went like that”, responding to Jimmy’s face. “You think the gossip columns are new? Vultures have been around since Aristotle... always looking for an easy pay off someone else’s misfortune.”

Jimmy moves from Jack’s face... expressive and in-command at all times... to the far-end of this cavernous hall.

Good nobody’s coming.

“Syd would sleep next me just in case I needed anything in the middle of the night.”

“Oh really?”

“Get your mind out of the gutter because it was nothing like that... this woman had too much integrity to fall for my bullshit.”

“Really... I thought everyone fell for the magnetic Jack Coltan back in those days?”

“So did I”, sheepishly, “but she slept in a big chair I got shipped-in from the finest leather store in the Middle East... everything handmade with the greatest care by meticulous generations as long as your arm. Don’t know where I’d be... don’t know where I’d have ended up without her?”, releasing a tear down an extremely saddened face. Jack reaches for his sparkling water, then looks around the cavernous hall once he lifts it towards his mouth.

Then he puts the glass bottle on the table. “You ever been really scared Jimmy? I mean scared if you were going to live or die?”

“Oh yes.”

Jack’s eyes widen to an answer he was not expecting.

“When I had my heart attack.”

“Really... but you’re so young?”

“When I was twenty-eight I passed out on the squash court... they found out I had a congenital

heart defect.” “My God.”

“Yes God did save me that day, he gave the Doctors the amazing ability to replace a valve and give me more time with my kids.” “Lucky.”

“I prefer to call it God’s will... but I know what you mean”, flashing a big grin.

“Well I was dying a slow death in that bed in Cairo... I could not keep any fluids down... and the... and the dehydration was going to kill me soon enough. Syd was phoning a different doctor everyday to get one to give me the right treatment.”

“Why didn’t you go to the hospital?”

“1962 Cairo was not a place you voluntarily went to a hospital, not if you wanted to come out, not if you wanted to come out at all. I had plenty of money... but in some places that’s just not enough, just not enough in the slightest.”

Jimmy has been leaning in for quite a while... Jack is an old-school Hollywood storyteller par excellence.

“But finally”... Jack leans in to lift his bottle, “thanks to God’s will my symptoms finally broke.”

Jimmy leans back.

“Syd had gotten this Egyptian organic tea that is suppose to kill any kind of stomach virus... sure thing took it’s time I got to say, lost close to 25 pounds and needed plenty of make-up when we finally did get back to shooting. Got nominated for an Oscar though for that picture”... leaning in for another sip... “but I still can’t see myself looking so gaunt... so Un-Jack Coltan like!”

“Guess the world thought differently”, sharing a drink.

Jack looks away from his wide-eyed audience.

Jimmy catches a sudden change in Jack... a rigid posture with heavy shoulders that has another story to tell. In everything he does this man is physical... old-school rugged taming both the frontier and the ladies. “That movie was the turning point of my life... and it wasn’t good.”

Jimmy is mystified like nothing before this moment... Jack has his star-struck audience in the palm of his hand... like an Oscar-nominated Legend who has been nominated three more times and has won two of them. “Not any damn good at all”, wetting his lips with another drink.

Jimmy Gentile has paid close attention to Jack... but he’s never had this kind of private time with him.

“My Grandfather warned me too.”

“What?”

“There was a young actress on the set that had a bit part... some might even call her an extra. I just had to go and sleep with her... I just had to! Like an Ape I am”, with disgust in his voice.

“Then two days later who comes knocking on my door? Because banging is too classy for that woman! That woman would have fallen for me... she told me so. She didn’t come in like a low-class jealous tramp. She came in and simply sat down... stared right at me... and said that the young actress I romped all over the other night was her niece... plain and simple... oh and that she was seventeen.”

“Ouch.”

“I was thirty-one... not good, but it took sixteen more years to realize that. When I had my own daughter I realized that... but Syd never looked at me the same way again.”

“I promise to act my heart out in this movie with you... I swear you’ll get nominated for an Oscar for the effort I’m going to put into this character, trust me on that one. But otherwise we have nothing more to say to one another, you understand me!”

Jimmy is speechless.

“I have never stopped regretting my chance at such a woman.”

“She was the best?”

“The best of the best. I loved all my wives, really I did... but that woman was different”, Jack takes another sip with a different face. Olivia is caught walking towards Jimmy and Jack. “A man knows when he’s hurt a good woman.” Jimmy may be reeling from this three-act story... but he knows full-well that he needs to quickly shift to Florence Nightingale mode.

“Gentlemen.”

“Well if it isn’t Miss Grace Kelly, come join us for some sparkling water and grapes... just like the Ancient Romans.” Jack is always so vivid... so intellectually vivid. “I wish I could Mr. Cecil B. DeMille”, Jack has taught his young blond prodigy well, “but Jimmy and I have some chores that need to get done before dinner is finished”, staring at her watch.

“I understand, you two go do what you need to do”, staring at Jimmy one last time as he lifts.

“Great story Jack.”

“There’s a lot more where that came from”, putting on his reading glasses and lowering his head. “Enjoy your reading”, Olivia remarks. “Until the Bell tolls.” As they walk away Jack is immersed in seconds.

“I need us to give the DiMartinos a quick forty and then we’re going to need to relieve both Boris and Mercedes in Unit four... things are starting to pile up back there. Well hello Johnny and MiMi!”

Two faces immediately lift up from the tablets they’re scrolling on... seniors are some of the most open-minded consumers to today’s technology.

“Olivia and Jimmy... is it that time already?”

“Dining time it is.”

“To what do we owe the privilege of the two of you?”

During this Pandemic every Staff member has had to juggle more than ten responsibilities at a time.

“Your charm knows no bounds MiMi.”

“Absolutely”, Olivia adds to Jimmy’s enthusiasm.

Like a switch these two faces light up... they have lived quite a life.

“Salmon and broccoli for you.”

“Why thank you... such a nice presentation.”

“And a New York strip with rosemary potatoes.”

“Small and crispy, just the way I like them.”

Genovese and Maria DiMartino are one of the few couples that are living out their final days together... an extra-large room in order to hold all that incredible love these two have shared for each other. Celebrities in this town there is absolutely no doubt... they operated the Stage Deli Restaurant for fifty-two years before all those soulless franchises took over the Broadway block. The Cheesecake Factory never knows your name when you walk in the door that’s for damn sure... or put you at your favourite table by the window... or place your quick polaroid on the wall with the biggest smile... or offer you a complimentary glass of champagne or apple pie and ice cream for your birthday of course. They’re like the right hand and the left hand... or the heart and brain of a beating Soul; both Olivia and Jimmy can never forget going there so many times as little kids with their Parents.

Life sure does move fast; stage four cancer for the both of them.

“You know I remember when all those Friends Actors would come in and sit in the same spot.”

“By the back window facing 163rd.”

“Yes Sir you are right”, smiling at her Johnny, “it was the summer of ‘98, muggy as all get out that summer was.”

Olivia and Jimmy take a seat at the table for four.

“Wonderful People, so young and kind.”

“And beautiful”, Johnny adds.

Nobody leaves a story from these two.

“They had huge billboards in Times Square with all of them... could only imagine the money they were making.”

“That’s why they were in New York that summer, remember, they had their lawyers working out all their sponsorship deals after they signed that big contract.”

“You are right again Johnny my love.”

“I remember that show”, Jimmy adds to the conversation.

“I think I watched every episode ten times.” Johnny and Mimi chuckle at Olivia’s girlish confession. “You see Stars differently when you get to know them... especially the young ones.”

Johnny DiMartino is a large character – not as large as twenty years ago, but still a moon to Mimi’s fragile star. Every frame of vision carries Johnny and his booming voice.

“Mimi had a crush on Matt Leblanc big time.”

“Oh stop it.”

“Well you did.”

“And you didn’t go crazy every time Jennifer Aniston walked in?”

Johnny grins honestly.

“You never let anybody else deliver her Pastrami.”

These are timeless tales from a life lived at a hundred miles per hour.

The Stage Deli was open six days a week and was rammed every one of them - some years they were the most profitable restaurant per square foot in the entire city!

“Those times were great... we lived at the restaurant... every day was different. Can you believe living such a life where every day is the most exciting thing ever!”

Mimi DiMartino is a sparkling star in every way... beautiful salt & pepper hair that frames black eyes in the most feminine way... still. You can’t keep your eyes off of her if you tried.

“The problem is we never thought about slowing down... or at least I didn’t”, changing her tone instantly, “when you’re in the middle of it you think it’s going to go on forever... you think this will be my life tomorrow because it is my life today.” Reaching for her drink slowly... as if she is weighed down by something?? Olivia and Jimmy start snacking on the carrot sticks that are on the table – they took a quick stare at each other while grabbing the first one. Something’s changed??

“A woman has to always keep her feet on the ground... always. A man... a man can enjoy his work like there is no tomorrow.” “Mimi.” “Shhh Johnny... please.”

Olivia and Jimmy have become even more engaged.

“When I met Johnny it was the greatest feeling in the world... my heart was bouncing every morning because each day seemed to be better than the next. When you meet the right one, the one that finishes your sentences because he always knows what you’re thinking.”

A noticeable pause for a minute.

Then another minute.

Silence fills the table.

“The restaurant was a magic carpet ride let me tell you, building it was hard, but I really didn’t feel that way at all. Meeting such interesting People... being inside the Pulse of the City... especially on Opening night... Broadway is a magical place, nothing like it in the world.”

Olivia does not dare glance at her watch.

“Days can turn into weeks. Weeks can turn into years. And then there’s those decades.”

Jimmy keeps a secret eye on Johnny... who’s looking more withdrawn by the sentence – like he’s heard and felt these words many times over.

“Next thing you know your Doctor is telling you it’s over... your reproductive years are over.”

Johnny wipes away a tear.

“And there’s not a damn thing you can do about it no matter how much money you’ve made!”

Olivia catches a quick glance at another nurse way in the distance.

“It’s ok darling.”

Wiping away her tears... “Of course it’s ok honey”, reaching her hand over to squeeze her Johnny. She stiffens her spine and wipes away all of those quick tears... “What a ride it’s been”, staring straight at her audience, “what a ride.”

Olivia knows she has only two more minutes and then it’s back to the Covid area; she misses Emma so much it hurts.