

Olive

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An elegant elderly lady sits at the breakfast nook, sips her black coffee and delicately spoons oatmeal into her mouth. Her thin arthritic hands take extra care not to spill. Her housecoat has stains on it suggesting she is not always successful, but her manners are still impeccable. She looks out the window onto another perfect winter day in west Los Angeles – sunny and about 20C. She opens the LA Times and systematically reads the news section.

Her daughter winters with her each year to keep her company and oversee her care. She bends over to lovingly kiss her mother's cheek. Her son-in-law who is making his winter visit, hugs her and asks: "What will you want for dinner tonight Olive – how about a little fish and salad?" "Sounds wonderful honey" she says with a smile. He loves doing for her. This past winter Olive was able to go out to dinner, read the LA Times every day, and converse vivaciously on various topics. Her youngest granddaughter just left and her oldest granddaughter is arriving shortly. Her middle granddaughter works overseas and saw her in the fall.

On the last day of the oldest granddaughter's visit she lies with her grandmother and they talk. The next day Olive takes to her bed and tells her daughter: "I don't think I'll eat much today". "OK mom". Her daughter discharges the day help - she wishes to be alone to nurse her mother in her final days. Olive has made a choice that they have discussed and that will be honoured. She did a great job and can now rest and join her husband. Her daughter, my wife, nurses her with love and care around the clock. A few days into it, Olive's family physician kindly makes a house call to make sure that everything is being done properly. A few days later, after conversations, hugs, kisses, and tears, Olive passes gently.

Ninety-seven years earlier she was born in New York City. After a troubled and challenged childhood in which her father was ruined by the depression and entered into an unusual marriage after the death of Olive's mother, she emerged after the war and married a gentle man from Boston. They packed their car with their few possessions and headed for sunny Los Angeles. In 1947 their only child was born and after years of financial struggle they got a break and made a good life. Olive went back to school in her 50's and became a school psychologist to help the inner LA city school kids. For the last 30 years her daughter has been happily married to a Canadian neurosurgeon and she has been graced with three granddaughters.

In 1997 her beloved husband passed. After that, Olive's book and movie clubs, business affairs, her daughter and grandchildren filled her life. All the while she clung to the independence of living in that charming little west LA bungalow in spite of repeated entreaties to join her daughter's family in Toronto. For the last five years her daughter spent the entire

winter with her mom – late November to early April. She gave her companionship, helped her manage her affairs, and lovingly blended tender care with enabling her mom to retain control and independence. Over the last few years Olive had several small heart attacks and strokes which rendered her less mobile. And this was her last winter.

At the simple graveside ceremony a few days later on a sunny afternoon in the Hollywood Hills, her son-in-law spoke these comments to the assembled faithful.

"Olive was the most elegant lady I've ever met. She was the fountainhead of unconditional love. Her every pore exuded positivity, her every smile spoke of support, and her every act showed kindness, generosity, and goodwill. She was an incredible wife, mother, grandmother, mother-in-law, and friend. She was as smart as she was funny, as beautiful as she was unassuming, as complicated as she was simple. She was comfortable with who she was and did not need to prove herself to others. Fortunately for the world she lives on mainly within her daughter who inherited all her good qualities, within her three granddaughters who inherited many, and in all others she touched.

The meaning of life is a puzzle to all of us – why are we here, why do we need to die, what does it all mean? My mother-in-law could teach many what life is about – simplicity, being a good person, not doing wrong to others, giving more than receiving, being happy for what you have and trying to be the best you can be, loving those close to you without asking why, leaving the planet better than you found it, always being unselfish. She lived with consummate, quiet dignity and she died the same way, largely thanks to the wonderful efforts of her daughter. If one believes in God, then she was precisely what God had in mind when he created the perfect human being. Olive's stunning spirit will not be sorely missed, because she will live on, along with her beloved husband, in all of our memories and in all our hearts and in our day to day lives."

Olive lived and died with simple dignity. How lucky she was. And how lucky we are.

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