

3 RUE BENOUVILLE
75116 PARIS
FRANCE

The



Rue Benouville Diaries

PARIS. OLIVIA DE HAVILLAND & THE ART OF AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE

ISSUE N° 05
AOÛT 2026

Bonjour!

Last month, we celebrated Dame Olivia de Havilland's 110th birthday. This month, I'd like to tell you how she celebrated my 31st.

I wasn't supposed to hear the whispers.

It was August 2004, and I was four months into my tenure with Dame Olivia. Through the slightly ajar boudoir door, I could hear her and her household helper, Fidel, in hushed conversation across the hall.

"Please find some ribbon, Fidel," she said.

Then the shuffle of hurried footsteps, the crinkle of tissue paper, a paper bag's slight buckle.

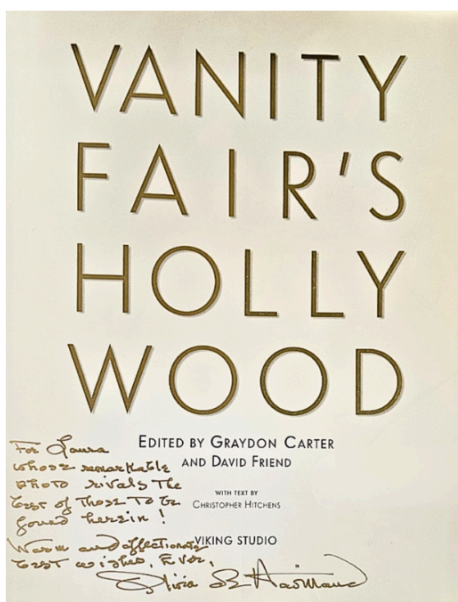
I struggled to keep a smile from my face as I tried to focus on the letter I was typing.

At precisely 6 p.m., the end of my work day, Olivia appeared in the office doorway, her brown eyes sparkling with mischief. "It's that time!" she announced. "I have a little something for you."



Toasting my 31st birthday with Dame Olivia's gifts

What she had in store for me: a bottle of Moët & Chandon, canapés from Lenôtre, two champagne flutes accented with golden-yellow satin ribbon tied at the stems—one for me and one for my French beau—and *Vanity Fair's Hollywood*, an oversized coffee-table book filled with breathtaking portraits of film icons.



Olivia's handwritten birthday inscription

Inside the book cover, in gold-leaf pen, her dedication began: "For Laura, whose remarkable photo rivals the best of those to be found herein!"

She was referring to a black-and-white photograph I had given her for her birthday of a woman in traditional African dress waiting at a Parisian bus stop—an image she'd praised for its composition and light.

I knew my amateur work didn't compare to the photos in the book, but I also knew that Olivia's inscription was heart-felt: a tender, generous encouragement.

She never missed an opportunity to celebrate another person.

Looking back, I think that was one of the secrets of her extraordinary life. She paid attention. She knew what would bring joy to someone else—to make them feel seen and known. It's one of her life lessons that's stayed with me: an extraordinary life isn't measured in what we accomplish; it's about how we love others well.

Before moving to Paris, I hadn't given a lot of thought about how to celebrate others. But Olivia showed me that love is often expressed through intentional acts of recognition and kindness: carefully chosen gifts, a thoughtful, handwritten inscription. Over the years, I've adopted many of her gift-giving practices. And the more I've focused on others, the more joyful my own life has become.

My Year with Dame Olivia Book Update

As I mentioned last month, I'm taking advantage of this quiet season in the publishing industry to polish my manuscript and book proposal before submitting them to publishers later in the year. In many ways, this stage reminds me of Dame Olivia's unwavering commitment to excellence over efficiency. Life isn't about racing to the finish line; it's about doing things well. Rather than rushing the process, I'm giving this book my utmost care. I can't think of a better way to honor Olivia than to approach this project with the same thoughtfulness and pursuit of excellence she brought to everything she did.



Thank you for your continued words of encouragement. Like so many things in life that are worthwhile, this journey takes time. I'm grateful to have you alongside me, and I look forward to sharing the next milestone with you!

À la prochaine,

Gemma

P.S. Share the word! If you enjoyed today's *The Rue Benouville Diaries*, I'd be so grateful if you forwarded this edition to friends and family you think would enjoy learning life lessons from a Hollywood legend—and how one extraordinary year with her forever changed an ordinary young woman's life. They can subscribe by clicking the blue button below.

Subscribe to The Rue Benouville Diaries



3002 Bienville Drive | Smyrna, TN 37167 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email & social marketing for free!