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The



Rue Benouville Diaries

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

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Bonjour!

Born on July 1, 1916, in Tokyo, Japan to British parents, Olivia de Havilland would be celebrating her 110th birthday today.

In honor of this milestone, I'd like to share a remarkable chapter of her life that many people still don't know: how the two-time Academy Award winner helped change Hollywood forever.

Olivia secured a Warner Bros. contract in 1936, just after graduating from high school. At the time, actors were bound by long-term contracts and had little control over their careers. Turning down a role meant suspension without pay, with the lost time tacked onto the end of their contracts.

Although Warner Bros. made her a star, Olivia grew frustrated by the formulaic roles she was assigned. It was only when she was loaned out to other studios that she found more complex characters like Melanie in *Gone with the Wind*.



When her seven-year contract ended in 1943, the studio claimed she still owed them an additional six months because of past suspensions for roles she'd turned down. Olivia didn't accept it and sued. She argued that her contract was only enforceable for seven calendar years under California state law.

It was a risky move. She was challenging one of the most powerful studios in Hollywood, and a loss could have easily ended her career.

Her case went all the way to the California Supreme Court.

And she won.

The landmark ruling, known as the “de Havilland decision”, set an enduring precedent in labor law and changed the Hollywood studio system forever.

What strikes me most about this story isn’t the legal victory; it’s the courage behind it. When faced with a challenge that seemed impossible, she didn’t retreat. She persevered.

That same determination showed up in quieter ways during the 14 months I spent with Dame Olivia. Whenever I doubted myself or wanted to give up on something difficult, she encouraged me to keep going.

In time, as I share in the book, she gave me a nickname: her “Velvet Tiger.”

“Tenacious you are, yet as gentle as a little lamb,” she said.

Over twenty years later, her words stay with me—along with the example she set.

My Year with Dame Olivia Book Update

My agent, Mary Elizabeth, and I recently met to discuss next steps for the book. She shared that summer is a quiet season in publishing. Editors are coming and going on vacation and it's the time for summer blockbusters and beach reads. So, Mary Elizabeth advised that we use this time to strategically to strengthen the manuscript and the proposal. (The proposal is essentially the business case for the book, including its positioning, audience, and marketing plan.) Our goal is to have everything polished and to begin pitching publishers later in the year. So that’s the plan! I look forward to keeping you posted as the journey continues.



Next month: Another birthday edition: this time, my 31st in Paris. What does a Hollywood Golden Age icon give her assistant for her birthday? It’s a memory I’ll never forget. Find out on August 1st.

À la prochaine,

Gemma

P.S. The best stories are meant to be shared. If you know someone who would enjoy a monthly escape to Paris—and a glimpse into the extraordinary world of Olivia de Havilland—please forward this letter and invite them to subscribe to *The Rue Benouville Diaries* by clicking the blue button below.

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