

3 RUE BÉNOUVILLE
75116 PARIS
FRANCE

The



Rue Benouville Diaries

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

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Bonjour!

It's the question I'm most often asked: *How did you become Olivia de Havilland's personal assistant?*

Last month, I shared the answer. After a lifetime of studying French—and moving to France in my late twenties—I found myself unexpectedly unemployed in Paris after resigning from a toxic work situation.

My roommate Sarah was preparing to return to the U.S. and vacate her role as Olivia's assistant. She asked if I might be interested in taking over. Was I up for it? I didn't hesitate. *Oui!*

So what was it like meeting a two-time Academy Award-winning actress in the boudoir of her Parisian home?

Here is an excerpt from *My Year with Dame Olivia*:

"It was May 2004 when I rang the doorbell outside the black iron gate at 3 Rue Benouville. Moments later, the front door slowly swung open, and my friend Sarah appeared.



She led me up the crimson-carpeted staircase to the second floor, down the hallway, and then tapped gently on the boudoir door.

'Miss de Havilland, I'd like to introduce you to my friend, Laura.'

I stepped inside, and time seemed to pause. It was my first time setting foot in a true French boudoir—or any boudoir for that matter—and it was like entering another world.



And there she was, perched on the edge of a divan in an ivory silk blouse and navy skirt (though the photograph here captures her in black on another occasion) with pearls around her neck, dark Ferragamo ballet flats on her feet, and her white hair swept up in a chignon. What presence she had. She was poised, self-assured, refined, regal.

*In a nearby cream cabinet, its lower panels softly ruched in fabric, awards lined the shelves alongside two Oscars—both for Best Actress for *To Each His Own* (1946) and *The Heiress* (1949). On the countertop were framed photographs as a single ivory candle flickered in a short silver candle holder.*

Forcing myself to focus, I stepped towards her. She clasped my hands in hers and looked up at me with the warmest smile I'd ever known.

'So good to see you, Laura,' she said in her deep, reassuring voice.

Her big, bright brown eyes smiled at me, too. In that moment, any nerves I had melted away."

Dame Olivia went on to offer me the position. There was no application, no multi-stage interview. Simply a gracious invitation and a mutual sense of respect and possibility.

Although we exchanged few words, looking back, I think she sensed a kindred spirit in me. I was someone who valued beauty and kindness. Someone who would treat her work and her life with great care.

And somehow, even then, I think I knew my life would never be the same.

My Year with Dame Olivia Book Update

I've spent these past weeks waiting. (There is *so much* waiting in publishing!) Earlier this year, I submitted my manuscript to two of the Big Five publishing houses. One appears to be a "pass," and the other remains under consideration.

It's rare to be invited to submit your work to the big publishers without a literary agent, but I am grateful to have had the opportunity. Still, I've come to realize I need someone in my corner. Someone who believes in the work, who can champion it, who can place it thoughtfully, and negotiate what comes next. I need an agent.

And I am making great strides in finding just the right person. So, stay tuned!

In my next letter, I'll share what compelled me to write this book—and why now, after all these years.

I look forward to being with you again on June 1st.

À la prochaine,

Ganna

P.S. Feel free to pass this issue along to Francophile friends, fans of Golden Age Hollywood, or those who are interested in stories about Americans living abroad. They can subscribe by clicking the blue button below.

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