

To Olive, With Love

By Randall J. Petrides

“Raise your right hand, Ms. Sanders.”

The young woman stood at the lectern and looked back at the smiling judge. His rimless glasses hung low on his nose, and his head, nearly empty of hair, glistened in the light of the courtroom.

“Repeat after me. I, Olive Sanders . . .”

Olive could barely concentrate. The judge’s words seemed to float up and around the courtroom and settle on the mural covering the wall behind him. A river. A bearded man at a dock, about to cross, talking to Native Americans on shore. A hut. Trees flanking the river. “Jacob Smith—founder of Flint,” the judge had explained earlier.

“Are you with us, Ms. Sanders?” The judge chuckled. Olive’s grandma nudged her in the ribs.

“Oh. I’m so sorry, your Honor.”

Olive smiled and nervously brushed her skirt and prepared to take the oath of a new attorney. She took a deep breath, but could not shake the memory.

“Take your time, young lady.”

Olive savored the sympathy she saw in the judge’s smile. But the memory. It grew until it overwhelmed her like water crushing a dam. Olive fought it, but the memory burst in—of the last time she was in this courtroom. Why, oh why did it have to be the same courtroom?

“I – I Olive . . .” she stammered. The words trickled out, but her mind filled with the memory of that day 15 years ago. She had sat in the back of this same courtroom. Twelve years old. Waiting. Waiting. Oh, the nerves. The same mural, but different people. Silence but for the

door opening behind her. The pudgy little law clerk leading the jury past her, up the aisle to the jury box. The rustle of their clothing as they passed, inches away from her. The eyes of one juror lady meeting hers. Those eyes seemed to say, "I'm so sorry."

She remembered the soft caress of her grandma's sweaty hand on hers as she craned her head toward the jury box. And the stillness. It seemed to grab her by the throat and throttle her. Ms. Parsons, the prosecutor lady, stood, her eyes shifting as she scanned the jurors. That nasty, mean defense lawyer, the one who yelled at her when she had testified, stood like a statue across from Ms. Parsons, head down, not looking so evil now.

The judge shattered the silence. "Will the clerk please take the verdict." Olive held her breath.

A lady stood up and said, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict and, if so, who will speak for you?"

"I – I will," said a young lady in the front row of the jury box, holding a white piece of paper. She looked down at the paper and read without looking up. "Uh, count one, first-degree felony murder. W-we, the jury, find the defendant . . . not guilty."

Not guilty? No! Olive felt her throat dry up and her skin tighten.

Olive's grandma swooned. Her hand slipped out of Olive's. Four more "not guilty's" poured out of the forelady's mouth, pummeling Olive, one by one. Not guilty? How can it be? How? But that man did it! He killed my mama!

Olive began to whimper. In a moment the jury filed past her again. Olive could not look. The courtroom broke into a bustle of muffled sounds and jerky movements. Olive did not breathe. She felt like the unmoving center of a slowly rotating wheel. The big defense lawyer came down the aisle near her. His dark eyes locked in on her. Olive cowered. She peeked and saw him pass by her with a slight grin and shuffle out of the courtroom. Oh, how she wanted to hit him.

Olive looked up to see Ms. Parsons, the prosecutor lady, come toward her with arms open. They hugged. Neither spoke for a long time. “Mama, Mama!” Olive whimpered. Never had she felt so alone. Not even the day a year ago when it happened.

“Hey, Olive,” Desmond taunted as they scrambled off the school bus. “You get all A’s again? Suck-up!” Olive just smiled and skipped toward home a block away. As she got in sight of home, she came to a sudden stop. A man came running from the front yard of her house. Tall. Blue hoodie pulled up tight. Something in his hand. Their eyes met as he ran by her. Dark, young eyes, wide open, alert. Probing. Darting. She would never forget them. Ever. He pushed past her and was gone. Olive froze, then ran home and into the front door.

“Mama, I’m home!”

Silence. The living room was empty. She dropped her backpack on the floor.

“Mama?”

Olive peeked into the kitchen. Still no sound.

“Mama? You here?”

Something was spilled on the floor. Red. What’s mama doing? Is that tomato sauce? That’s strange. Olive crept into the kitchen. There was mama—on the floor. Why is mama on the floor? Olive stepped around the spilled sauce and went to her mama. Funny. More sauce—all over mamma. Olive frowned and stared. Mama did not move.

At last, the truth jolted her like a bolt of lightning. “Mama!” she screamed. “Mama! Mama! Mama!”

Olive pushed her mama over, bloodying her hands, and gagged. Her heaving sobs, now imprisoned in her throat, could no longer make any sound. The sight of the dark eyes of that man who ran past her came rushing back.

Behind her, she heard a sound. Mrs. Garland from next door came up to her side. “Olive? What’s the mat—” Mrs. Garland screamed when she saw mama on the floor. The rest was a blur. Sirens. Police. Motions. Sounds. Lights. Her grandma holding her tight.

As the months passed, Olive felt like a robot. Grandma took her in, but the sadness drained them both. When at last she returned to school, it was not the same. Everyone looked at her funny, as if she was wearing no clothes. Only Desmond seemed to understand. And the police interviews kept coming—over and over. Describe that running man, they insisted. And those dark eyes. At last, they got him, they said. There would be a trial. The trial was supposed to help. But then—not guilty. Mama’s gone. Mama’s gone. Not comin’ home. Olive blocked out all she could from that courtroom. Only the scent of Ms. Parsons’s perfume remained.

“Olive,” Mrs. Wilder said, hands on hips in her classroom. “What’s with you? You’re not doin’ your work! You were gettin’ all A’s. Now you’re flunkin’, young lady. This ain’t you.” Olive stared at her teacher. Saying nothing, she whirled around and stormed out. Not even a month after the cruel trial. Why doesn’t Mrs. Wilder understand? I hate school!

She ran home to Grandma’s, buried her head in the cushions of the couch, and cried. The doorbell rang. Oh, go away! The bell rang again. Reluctantly, she wiped her tears on the pillow, climbed off the couch, and answered the door. A man stood there, holding a package.

“Miss Olive Sanders?”

“That’s me.”

“For you.” The man handed her the package and left. Olive locked the door behind her and stared at a wrapped bouquet of flowers. For me? She searched for the tag. *To Olive, with love*, it said. But nothing saying who sent them.

Her grandma found a vase. “Oh, ain’t they pretty! Yellow daffodils, Olive. Yellow’s yo’ favorite color, now ain’t it?” Olive said nothing. “I got a call from yo’ teacher, hon,” her grandma said. “Says you ain’t doin’ yo’ schoolwork.”

“My schoolwork ain’t gonna bring mama back.” Olive turned and stomped to her room.

Olive stopped doing her schoolwork. Still, she got C’s and moved on to 7th grade. And each month, the flowers came. *To Olive, with love.* Always daffodils. Never signed. All middle school, Olive got C’s and D’s. Twice she was suspended for fighting. Twice her grandma cried. And each month, without fail, the daffodils arrived. *To Olive, with love.*

Northern High School. Olive did not want to go, but she did. On the third day, her math teacher, Mr. Jackson, asked her to stay after class.

“I’ve got something for you, Ms. Sanders. Someone asked me to give this to you. Can’t tell you who it is. Been sworn to secrecy.”

He smiled and handed her a yellow daffodil. Mr. Jackson had a big, toothy, friendly smile. A note was attached. *Try your best, Olive. You can do it. You can be a lawyer.* Olive could only stare at Mr. Jackson. He continued to smile.

Olive’s grades improved. School became fun again. Not like the old days when mama was still here, but it was better now. And the daffodils kept coming. Month after month. *To Olive, with love.*

“You are such a beautiful girl,” her grandma said. “The boys be after you. You be careful.” Olive smiled. The boys came. But she turned them away. No time for boys. Her friends were having babies. Can’t do that. But junior year, one boy would not say no. He had her pinned against the wall in an empty hallway after school, after her National Honor Society meeting. She pushed him away. He came back at her, ripping her top, forcing his foul mouth onto hers and tugging at

her jeans. He held her like a vice. She forced her face from his and yelled. He slapped her. “Shut up, bitch!” He yanked her jeans off her hips. She wanted to vomit.

“Hey!!!”

They both turned. Mr. Jackson came charging down the hallway like a cannonball. The boy ran. Mr. Jackson flew past her and tackled the boy. Later, after the police left, Mr. Jackson came to her. Without words, she hugged him. But Olive did not go back to school the next week.

“Grandma, I’m done with school,” she said. Grandma cried.

A week later she was in district court downtown, subpoenaed to testify. The hallway was packed. The noise and smell were oppressive. Worse, she thought she saw down the hall that mean defense lawyer from Mamma’s trial. Thankfully, the prosecutor’s victim advocate lady ushered her and her grandma to a quiet room beyond the hallway. There, a young prosecutor told her what might happen. “He might plead. And you might not have to testify.”

Two insufferable hours later, he told her it was over. The boy was pleading to assault with intent to have sexual contact, the young man said. “Five-year felony.” He went over their earlier discussion. The boy would go to jail, but not to prison.

“I heard you want to be a lawyer,” the prosecutor said. Olive frowned. How did he know that?

The next day the daffodils arrived—twice the normal size. *To Olive, with love. It will be okay!*
A week later, with hesitation, Olive returned to school. Mr. Jackson smiled.

A year later, Olive graduated— with honors. Grandma beamed. She went off to college to U of M Flint. They hadn’t the money for her to go away, but this was fine. The monthly daffodils still came. Five years of school and work passed quickly and Olive graduated. That day, a double-

sized bouquet of daffodils arrived. The note said, “*YES!!!*” Olive smiled. She was to start at Cooley Law School in a month.

“Grandma, tell me now, once and for all. Who sends these flowers?” As always, Grandma just smiled. “It’s you, right?”

“No, honey. It is not me. You know I don’t have that kind of money!”

“Pastor Jones?”

“No, honey. Not Pastor Jones. But he does love you.”

“Are you ever gonna tell me?”

“No. Of course not! You know I can’t. It’s not for me to say.”

Olive smiled. “How many times have we had this conversation, Grandma?” They both laughed.

Law school flew by. Still, the daffodils kept coming—each month, without fail. *To Olive, with love.* Four years of school and work and she was done. “I’m a lawyer, Grandma!” she said after graduation. “I made it!”

“My little Olive, I am so proud of you!” That night, a double-sized bouquet arrived. *To Olive, with love. I am very proud of you!*

“Ms. Sanders?”

The judge’s voice scattered her memories. Olive opened her eyes, squeezed the lectern, and stumbled through the rest of her oath.

“Thought we lost you there for a minute, young lady!” She blushed. Friends and family burst into applause. She signed the book of new lawyers—old, musty, and distinguished looking—and she posed for pictures. The courtroom gallery, she noticed, was nearly filled. So many special people. Mr. Jackson. Her childhood friend, Desmond. Pastor Jones. And Grandma, smiling like she would burst.

“Ms. Sanders, there are some folks in the back who would like to speak to you,” the judge said. “Come on up, Ms. Parsons.”

Olive turned. A sixtyish woman with graying blonde hair, dressed in a dark business suit stepped through the gate, smiling. She looked familiar, but Olive could not place her.

“I don’t think you remember me, Olive,” the woman said. “And I don’t think you want to, actually.” The lady hesitated, took a breath, and continued. “I’m Vikki Parsons.”

Olive probed her memory.

“I was the prosecutor in the trial over your mother’s death—what was it—15 years ago?” Olive breathed in and caught the scent of Ms. Parsons’ perfume.

“Yes! Now I remember. Prosecutor Parsons. Oh my gosh!”

“I’m retired now. But I heard that you were being sworn in and . . . remember how we talked about you wanting to be a lawyer? You did it, girl! And you look fantastic. So grown up! I am so, so proud of you.” Olive opened her arms and they locked into a hug.

A moment later, the judge interrupted. “Ladies, I’d like to say something.” Olive and Ms. Parsons turned toward the judge. “I was instructed not to do this, but I’m going to use my judicial prerogative. I think it must be done. Carol.”

The door to the judge’s chambers opened and a lady carried out a bouquet of flowers—yellow daffodils. Olive’s eyes widened.

“Ms. Sanders,” the judge said. “These are from me. But don’t think I’m the one who gave you those flowers over the years. I am not. This is the only time I’ve done so. But I’ve heard the story and I think it’s time you know who sent you those flowers for all these years.”

Olive whirled around. She looked at her grandma, at a blur of people around her, and finally to Ms. Parsons, who stood next to her, face red, eyes watering.

“Ms. Parsons, it—it was you!”

Vikki Parsons smiled through her tears. She bent over to Olive and whispered. “No, Olive, it wasn’t me. Oh, I did join in sending you the very first bouquet, but it was someone else who sent you those flowers month after month.”

Olive frowned, not believing her. Vikki Parsons rose, turned around toward the back of the gallery, and said, “Mike! Mike, it’s time you spoke to Olive.”

A large, burly man in a frumpy sport coat slowly, reluctantly edged forward. His hair was in disarray and his graying beard was poorly trimmed. He stopped next to Vikki Parsons, his hands twitching in front of him.

“Olive, this is Mr. Mike Morrison. He doesn’t really want me to do this, but the dear judge insisted. I’m here to tell you that this is the man who sent you those daffodils every month.”

Olive stared, uncomprehending. Who is he?

Ms. Parsons shot a teasing glance at Mike Morrison and said, “Remember, Olive, that big, bad, mean defense lawyer in your mama’s trial who you didn’t like? Well, here he is!”

Olive’s mouth dropped open and she just stared. Mike Morrison, hands now in his pockets, blushed. The memory of this man trickled back. That booming voice—challenging her testimony in the trial, yelling to the jury that the man didn’t do it. Those surly eyes. That nasty grin as he had walked by her. And then the memory of an unflinching flow of flowers over the years. Olive looked into those eyes. They were no longer surly. They glistened with tears. This can’t possibly be the same man, can it?

Speechless, Olive continued to stare. Mike Morrison stood there like a nervous hulk, wearing the same slight grin Olive remembered from after the verdict 12 years ago. But it looked different now. Or did it?

“Oh my gosh!” Olive said at last, shaking her head. “Mr. Morrison, I . . . I don’t know what to say.”

His grin turned into a chuckle. “Please, call me Mike,” he said. “And, Ms. Sanders, if you’re going to be a good lawyer, being speechless just won’t do, now, will it?”