

## Vita and Honoré

By Darcy Alvey

Vita and Honoré were seated on the couch watching football when Astrid walked in. Their daughter brought their weekly bottle of white wine and a little treat, homemade cookies, two each. She pecked them on the cheek and pulled up the straight-backed chair that went with their small writing desk. Honoré sniffed annoyance when Vita turned the sound down on the television. It was close to halftime and the Raiders were making a big push.

“Almond cookies?” Vita said. “My favorite.” She reached over and patted Astrid’s knee.

“So, how was your week?” Astrid said. “All settled in?”

Vita and Honoré had moved into Moonbow Senior Living a month earlier, soon after celebrating their seventieth wedding anniversary. The decision to transition to assisted care had been a hard one. It felt to Vita like stepping to the front of the line, beyond which there be dragons. Still, Moonbow made sense. She and Honoré were ninety-two years old and things had been going downhill of late. Vita was getting forgetful. She forgot to turn off the burner on the stove and burned the rice down to black char. Honoré clipped the garage door when parking their boat of a car. They both had trouble remembering the day of the week or if they had taken their pills. Neither noticed dirt accumulating in the corners of the rooms. Ants had become a problem. It wasn’t fair to Astrid.

Life at Moonbow took some getting used to, as it turned out. Not all bad. Their meals were prepared, which was nice for Vita. Their linens were changed regularly, and their clothes washed and returned folded, so long as they wrote their names in bold black felt pen on each

garment. The main change in moving from a three-bedroom home to a one-room apartment was that they had no way to escape each other. Usually after dinner Honoré retired to his den to watch television and Vita headed to bed to read. Now they were together twenty-four-seven.

Astrid stayed for thirty minutes, catching them up on their grandkids and all the duties of modern-day parenting. "Soccer this afternoon. Girl scouts tomorrow. Piano on Thursday." When it came time to haul Sherm to soccer, she rose, kissed her parents again and made her escape. "Got to keep the little buggers busy and out of trouble," she laughed as she walked out the door.

"Turn the sound back up," Honoré said after she left, like he had a broken arm.

Vita made tea in the microwave to go with the cookies. She set a TV tray between them with paper napkins. Honoré ate his cookies in big bites, washed down with gulps of tea. He made chewing noises all the while, every swallow heard and accounted for. He smacked his lips, tasted his tongue. Sucking on the tip of a finger, he wiped the corners of his mouth. Bubbling noises erupted from his intestines, like a concert. The rumblings started small and grew louder. The final crescendo was a range of sounds, a three-tiered clearing of the throat before a final smacking of the lips. Vita attributed the noise to his declining hearing. She could understand the sounds if he were all alone, reassuring himself he was still alive or something. But he wasn't alone. She was right there, never more than ten feet away.

"You've started making noises when you eat." She tried to keep her tone neutral.

He ignored her so she wasn't sure if he heard her or not.

After finishing one cookie Vita decided to take a walk around the grounds. She put her second cookie on the desktop to enjoy later and pushed her walker to the door.

“I’ll be back in a while,” she said.

Honoré waved a beefy hand without looking at her. A beer commercial on television seemed to have his attention.

Vita walked the grounds, past the seldom-used swimming pool and the dining room, followed the sidewalk around their wing of apartments and back to the front of the building. She parked her walker and sat to rest on the bench that faced the driveway entrance to the facility. Her friend Coral emerged through the automatic door. She locked down her walker and sat next to Vita.

They chatted about the weather, partly cloudy with rain possible by nightfall. They agreed rain would be nice for the plants. They moved on to their husbands. Coral’s husband passed before she moved into Moonbow, but she still had lots to say about his plusses and minuses.

“I thought I would miss Charlie more,” she said. “Funny the things you remember. Just yesterday I was thinking about the time he bought a big can of salted peanuts at the 7/11. He was supposed to watch his salt intake, and peanuts went right through him, if you know what I mean. I warned him, but do you think he listened to anything I said? That afternoon I left to do errands. When I came home, he was in the back bedroom cramming down those peanuts.

“I thought it was funny to see a seventy-five-year-old man sneaking peanuts from his wife.”

“‘I knew you’d yell at me,’ he said when I walked into the room.”

“Honoré wouldn’t care a fig what I thought about peanuts or anything else. If he wants peanuts, he eats peanuts. We went to visit a friend once who had a little garden with a strawberry plant. She gave me a strawberry for my morning cereal. I held the strawberry in my hand for the drive home. Wouldn’t you know, Honoré reached over, grabbed the strawberry and popped it in his mouth. Ate the damn thing. There was a smirk on his face like he had got one over on me.

“‘There was a bug on the strawberry,’ I said. ‘I was waiting until I got out of the car to get rid of it.’ Well, that made him mad. I’m not sure if he was madder that I spoiled his fun or that he’d eaten a bug. I didn’t say anything more, but I felt like he deserved what he got.”

“Men can be such jackasses,” Coral said. “You know, you are always welcome to live with me. I’m only a few doors down.”

“I’ve stuck it out this long,” Vita said. “I guess I’ve passed the point of no return.”

“No such thing. You’re still alive, aren’t you?” Coral closed her eyes and lifted her chin to the breeze.

Vita stood. “I should be heading back. Almost time for dinner. Pork chop and apple sauce if I remember. Honoré’s favorite. He won’t go to the dining room without me. Says he wouldn’t be able to find his way.”

Back in their room Vita deposited the walker next to the desk. She started to say something to Honoré when she noticed her cookie was gone.

“Honoré, where is my cookie? I was saving that.”

He patted his stomach. “You snooze, you lose.” There was a smirk on his face.

Vita sat on the edge of the bed. She remembered the strawberry. She remembered years of pouring over recipes to make something he would like for dinner. She remembered raising Astrid all by herself, organizing parties, buying presents, making holidays, planning vacations, writing thank-you notes. She remembered it all.

“I’m hungry,” Honoré said. He pulled himself off the couch. “It must be time for dinner.”

“You go without me,” Vita said. “You might want to get used to that.”

End