

Consolea

A Very Short Play by Laura Jayne Ayres

Lights up. Oliver and Fredi sit on perpendicular sides of a square table, as if squashed into a corner of a bistro. There is a red-checked tablecloth, a little vase of bright, but non-intrusive flowers. They are finishing a meal – a main course, at least.

This is their second date, and it's going well. They talk quickly over one another, and are full of encouragement and joy. It's a cheering scene, and we are joining them very much mid-flow.

OLIVER: Oh, thanks! It's my cool shirt.

FREDI: Cacti is a very on-trend motif right now.

OLIVER: Well I am a very trendy, on-trend guy.

FREDI: 'Trendy' is such a mum word.

OLIVER: True. People who say 'trendy' aren't trendy.

FREDI: 'Trendy' - it actually sounds like a Mum *name*. Like Wendy.

OLIVER: Trendy. Trenndy.

FREDI: 'And this is my mum, Trendy.'

OLIVER: Trendy. It's lost all meaning.

FREDI: Well, I like your trendy shirt. Love a nice cactus.

OLIVER: The source of tequila.

FREDI: Exactly. And very low maintenance.

I am enjoying the racing stripe.

OLIVER: The what now?

FREDI: That big great stripe? Across the sleeve?

Oliver looks at this shirt sleeve and is surprised to find a great big, grey mark across it, which is obviously not supposed to be there.

OLIVER: Oh no! *(He tries to wipe it off, to no avail)* My cool shirt!

FREDI: Did you not know? ... How?

OLIVER: It must have been... I got trapped in the train doors on the way here.

FREDI: Oh no... one of *those* guys! *(mock disapproval)* And I was just starting to like you.

OLIVER: What guys?

FREDI: The ones who jump in when the doors are closing and hold eeeeeverybody up because they Must Get On This Train -

OLIVER: It's not like that!

Although - that is what happened.

FREDI: You people have a problem.

OLIVER: Not my people! I had a reason!

FREDI: Go on.

OLIVER: Well... it's – a bit of a silly reason.

FREDI: (*with amused suspicion*) Go on...

OLIVER: Well I had a choice of trains, and... One would have made me - fashionably late, and the other one would make me eight minutes early and – and...

FREDI: And?

OLIVER: Well I didn't want to be too keen and early -

FREDI: And we know you are very fashionable -

OLIVER: Right?! But then – I panicked, you know? I didn't want you to think I'd stood you up – and I had made it in time for the first train anyway, so -

FREDI: (*With a laugh - she is finding this endearing*) So?

OLIVER: I just – I heard the beeping of the doors and suddenly I *knew*... I just knew I couldn't pull off fashionably late and my legs just took over and – yeah, I leapt onto the train. Quite a majestic leap.

FREDI: Like a salmon.

OLIVER: A bit like a salmon, yeah - in a cool shirt – trapped in the closing doors.

FREDI: Did people glare at you? When the train moved off?

OLIVER: People glared.

FREDI: I would have glared. I always glare.

OLIVER: There was a bit of tutting. And now I have the Stripe of Shame.

FREDI: Punishment enough!

This place is nice – very French.

OLIVER: The spag bol is probably technically not that French but this one is just so good.

FREDI: Are you an aficionado?

OLIVER: Yes. A sommelier of spag bol. No, a connoisseur.

FREDI: A seasoned spag-bolista.

OLIVER: Pun!

FREDI: Sort of a pun?

OLIVER: I always want to try something new but...the spag bol, it calls to me.

FREDI: (*in a Gollum voice*) My precious.

OLIVER: What?

FREDI: (*She realises explaining herself will just look weird, and brushes it off with a laugh*)

Never mind. Oooo - I'm stuffed.

OLIVER: Me too. That was great.

FREDI: So great?

It's still light outside, I think. Do you... We could go for a walk?

OLIVER: Walk it off.

Yeah – that would be nice. A *digestif*.

FREDI: Très French.

There is a little pause. Something is stopping Oliver. Does Fredi sense it?

FREDI: Shall we...

OLIVER: Can I ask you something?

FREDI: Mais oui.

OLIVER: I don't know if it's allowed

FREDI: Go for it

OLIVER: Okay, well... You're wearing a wedding ring. And an engagement ring

FREDI: *(with a little laugh, but with the weight of having been asked this before)* That's not technically a question

OLIVER: True. It's not

FREDI: But fair enough. It's a fair not-question.

I'm not married. Or engaged

OLIVER: I see. Right. Well. I don't see. But I don't mind if...

FREDI: ...If?

OLIVER: If there's something you don't want to explain. Or if there's nothing to explain.

FREDI: No, no it's okay. There is a reason. I'm not married though.

I am not currently married.

I am not now, but... - yeah I have been married.

OLIVER: Oh... right.

So

FREDI: I used to have a husband.

He gave me the rings, and... I haven't taken them off yet

OLIVER: *(Trying to understand)* Fair enough. That seems... Up to you.

FREDI: It's not like, a divorce, or anything

OLIVER: *(still confused)* Oh. Right.

FREDI: He's dead. He died.

OLIVER: Oh

FREDI: So.

Yeah

I'm a widow.

OLIVER: Oh

Fuck.

FREDI: Yeah. Fuck.

He was really nice. He was cool.

You're not in trouble for asking.

OLIVER: I'm so sorry

FREDI: It's okay. I mean it was a very valid and definitely relevant question.

OLIVER: No I mean, I'm sorry – I'm sorry that that happened to you.

FREDI: Oh. Thank you. Thanks.

OLIVER: Wow

FREDI: Yeah.

OLIVER: When – when did...

FREDI: When did I become a widow?

OLIVER: Sorry.

FREDI: (*kindly*) Don't be.

OLIVER: Sorry.

FREDI: In 2014. I was 22. I just turned 22.

OLIVER: Christ.

FREDI: I'm 25 now.

OLIVER: Yeah.

FREDI: (*tapping her head, trying to make a joke*) Maths.

Don't worry... it still sounds baffling to me, too.

It's not to be expected.

OLIVER: I'm - sorry that bafflement is what's mainly coming across.

FREDI: Don't be! It's absolutely fair.

OLIVER: You're very – you're so young.

FREDI: I am. *Widow* is a very olden-days word.

OLIVER: Yes – yes it really is.

You don't *look* like -

FREDI: Like what?

Oliver tattles.

Like a crinkly old lady?

OLIVER: No! I mean – no. God, no - you don't but -

FREDI: I'm being silly! I just being silly.

Oliver is struggling

Widows generally don't look 25. Widows generally are not 25.

OLIVER: No.

I think that's what I meant?

FREDI: We got married quite young and he – he died very young. So.

Oliver is blank

We knew. That it was going to happen.

OLIVER: Christ. That's... I'm sorry.

FREDI: Me too. He was very cool.

And they're nice rings, so -

You're actually dealing with this quite well.

OLIVER: Really?!

FREDI: Oh yes. There have been some quite spectacular reactions.

OLIVER: Like what?

FREDI: Well nobody is ever expecting it, of course – because why would you? – *(with warmth)* '25-year-old-widow' is not a very catchy or...entrancing Tinder bio, is it?

OLIVER: *(relaxing a little)* Well, no.

FREDI: So it really catches people off guard. But you're being very chill.

OLIVER: Thank you. Likewise? But I'm not the one who should be... who -

FREDI: I am quite practised now, in fairness.

One guy just got up and left. When I told him.

OLIVER: No! Just like that?

FREDI: Yep! Opened and closed his mouth a few times, goldfish style... And then yep. Folded his napkin, weirdly neatly and then, yeah - tucked his chair in and left.

OLIVER: Without paying?!

Oh god, sorry – sorry that's so not the point at all.

FREDI: No absolutely! That was *my* first thought anyway... But actually I had a voucher – from a friend of a friend, so it was going to be on me anyway, but -

OLIVER: But still -

FREDI: Yep. Off he went. We just ordered pudding though so I got to eat his.

/Silver linings -

OLIVER: /Silver linings

FREDI: Exactly! So it was quite fun in the end?

OLIVER: Probably better off?

FREDI: Oh, for sure. And there was another guy who just burst into tears – I mean we were quite drunk by this point and I think he was just blindsided and yeah -

OLIVER: No -

FREDI: He kept calling it a tragedy? I'm not very good at crying people -

OLIVER: Me neither

FREDI: Yeah - anyone - Girls, boys... my dog when when I leave the house...

OLIVER: Oh that's a very sad sound isn't it. A real lament!

FREDI: Very lamentatious. Lamenting?

She's a Labrador.

OLIVER: The friendliest dogs!

FREDI: (*agreement*) The silliest.

OLIVER: She sounds fun.

FREDI: Because she's a Labrador?

OLIVER: Well, mainly, yeah. I like dogs.

FREDI: You'd like her then. Sally.

OLIVER: We should hang out some time.

FREDI: She would like that. I would, also.

OLIVER: (*realising he has accidentally asked her out again*) Cool. Cool.

FREDI: You are being cool about this. In your cool shirt.

OLIVER: I'm sorry that guy ran out on you.

FREDI: Oh, I'm not – it's fine.

OLIVER: And that I went a bit quiet. I'm not good at knowing what to say in... situations.

FREDI: I don't think anybody is, though. I mean - if you had told me you were a widow – a widower – I probably would have still done the same as you, just - said sorry a lot?

(Inhale. This is rehearsed -)

I know you might go home and think about this a lot and decide it's *baggage* and – that's okay -

OLIVER: I wasn't... I mean - It's not the plan -

FREDI: But I can understand. You are also 25? So – it's understandable.

OLIVER: It's not the plan...I - I like you.

FREDI: Good. Cool. Well, I like you.

I'm very glad you're not another runner.

For a moment I thought you might leg it -

OLIVER: Oh no!

FREDI: But you didn't, and... That's cool. Thanks.

OLIVER: Cool.

FREDI: Cool.

She smiles a bright, clearing smile.

I just have to go to the loo, before we go - Shall we get the bill?

OLIVER: Yes. Yeah let's get the bill. I'll get it.

FREDI: Be right back.

She gets up, picks her napkin up and jokily folds it - weirdly neatly - on the table then heads off to the loo. Oliver watches her go. He signals over to a waiter and asks for the bill using the international 'can we get the bill' pretend hand signature. Deep exhale. He slowly, somewhat absent-mindedly, folds his napkin into a swan, and leaves it on the table. After a pause, he suddenly downs his drink, taps the table, and heads towards the door, quickly. Exits.

After a second, W returns. She is smiling, like she has just seen something funny she wants to share, and then sees the empty table. She goes over to it, looking at Oliver's seat, briefly looking around for him. She notices the swan napkin. She picks it up, it unravels in her hand. She stares at it, and sits down. As she sits, a waiter brings the bill.

Wa: Aaaaaand here's your bill – is there anything else I can get for you?

FREDI: No – no thanks. Did you see him leave?

Wa: Sorry?

FREDI: The guy sitting here? Is he – did he leave?

Wa: He asked for the bill, but – actually I did see him heading out of the door, yeah.

FREDI: Oh.

Wa: I assumed he's left cash, and – yeah. He looked like he was in a rush.

Sorry.

FREDI: A rush to leave. Cool.

I'll - I guess I'm paying by card.

Wa: I'll just go and grab the machine.

FREDI: Thanks.

W lets out a deep sigh. She wasn't expecting this, and it's a disappointment. She fiddles with the napkin. Gets her purse out, as the waiter comes back over.

Wa: If you just pop your card in there and check the amount?

She does so. Puts her PIN in, receipts are transferred, etc.

Wa: That's great! Thanks very much for coming, hope you enjoyed your, er... date.

FREDI: Thanks. The food was great.

Wa: *(leaving, awkward)* Thanks!

W sits a little blankly, the napkin in her lap. She picks it up, looks at it and lets out a long breath. Is she giving him a chance to return? She decides he isn't going to. Puts the napkin on the table in a crumpled heap, quite forcefully. Picks up her bag, puts jacket on. Shakes her head, perhaps a little laugh of disbelief. She is just tucking her chair in, when –

Oliver has stumbled back in. He is breathing very heavily. He is carrying a little potted cactus. He smiles with relief.

OLIVER: Oh thank god! Thank god you're still here.

FREDI: I was just leaving.

OLIVER: I'm so sorry! I'm so – *(he is very out of breath)*

FREDI: Wh?

OLIVER: *(gasping)* Flowers – I saw – flowers. A florist. On the corner.

FREDI: Now?

OLIVER: No – before... Before – *god* I am so unfit.

FREDI: *(unsure)* You are.

OLIVER: There is a florist on the corner – and – I didn't know whether to get you flowers – before this, before the date -

FREDI: And you decided not to...

OLIVER: Well, yeah – yeah – I dunno. It didn't feel – yeah I dunno. But I'm glad I didn't.

FREDI: Okay...?

OLIVER: But I wanted to get you something. Now – after- this evening, this conversation. I wanted to have got them for you. But flowers was wrong, so -

FREDI: So you've brought me a little cactus.

OLIVER: Yes – I've - bought you a little cactus.

FREDI: To match your shirt.

OLIVER: Sort of to match my shirt but it seemed like the right – idea. It's – I dunno.

FREDI: Because I am prickly?

OLIVER: No! because – no – because

You are still here.

FREDI: Well I wasn't going to do a runner on *myself*.

OLIVER: No – oh god – neither was I! That was bad timing. The card machine – I wanted to come back before you got back and it would be a - surprise

FREDI: I was quite surprised that you were *not* here

OLIVER: Sorry – yeah, god that must have looked bad

FREDI: It did look bad

OLIVER: Really bad – quite bad planning, from me

Fredi laughs. This is endearing, luckily. Oliver is still clutching onto the cactus.

OLIVER: But this is for you. Because - You are here, being – verdant, and – resilient, and

FREDI: (*nodding, gentle mock-wisdom*) It's a metaphor

OLIVER: It is, it is – verdant is maybe not right – I just... I thought it was going to be really cute but I'm quite unfit and there was a minimum card charge, and -

FREDI: I like it.

OLIVER: You do?

FREDI: I do. It's very cute. It's a cute cactus. That was cute, of you. Badly timed, but, yeah – cute.

OLIVER: Thank you. And sorry. And -thanks.

Oh, you paid!

FREDI: I did pay. Just. I've just paid.

OLIVER: God – dreadful timing.

FREDI: Dreadful timing. Now you owe me dinner.

OLIVER: I do owe you dinner. I would really like to buy another dinner for you.

FREDI: Now? I'm quite full -

OLIVER: No, no, not now, another-

FREDI: I'm joking! I'm joking. I know.

OLIVER: Another time. A further time.

FREDI: I would like that. I would really like that.

He presents the cactus to her – she happily accepts.

FREDI: Thank you.

OLIVER: Thank *you*. For – this was good.

FREDI: This *was* good.

Would you still like to go for a walk?

Oliver smiles, nods – yes, he would. They grin. Lights down.