

# Hollywood Classics

## A Romantic Era

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Sitting in her favourite cafe, Janine flicked through the Frankston Gazette as she did every Wednesday morning, on her own. She enjoyed her local paper, paid for out of her council rates and made sure to get her money's worth by reading it in its entirety. Frank used to do that, read the paper. He'd even read articles to her.

Janine had been without Frank for ten years. If he'd been asked he'd say it was a heart attack that had taken him to the grave. And it was, but not to his grave and then it ended, like he believed. Janine knew he had moved on to his next life. Probably to learn more about managing money, he was never very good at that. He didn't value money; she could tell by the way he skipped through large chunks of their newspaper. Maybe in his next life he'd be an accountant or a child born to the horn of Africa.

She sipped her soy latté slowly, taking in its bitter sweet flavour and milky froth. She could break apart the flavours, individualising them as a prism does to white light. Similar to the way Frank smoked a cigarette. For the coffee though, Frank drank quickly, using it to wet his mouth after every deep drag of his cigarette, renewing his palate for the unsullied taste of nicotine and tar. Frank could be damned annoying but Janine missed his company.

People walked by Janine, left and right as she sat. The clanging from the kitchen and conversation in the air were filtered out by her brain as she read her weekly star sign prediction. Leo foretold the week ahead, it would be filled with socialising; friendships were highlighted. Janine shook her head, were her sixty five-year-old bones up to it? But, the prediction did remind her she needed to phone her friend Leanne, who'd probably be home from the hospital by now, being fussed over by her lovely and devoted daughter, Mariah.

Leanne and Janine shared the important experience of being widowed after a long marriage. Theirs was an enduring friendship that began when their daughters started primary school. Over the past few months Leanne had been in and out of hospital for a range of symptoms and illnesses from gallbladder trouble, and then surgery; through to the onset of diabetes, and arthritis her most recent afflictions.

Janine's coffee cooled nicely as she moved on to the classifieds, scanning the for sale section, wanted ads, jobs and wedding services. It was as she skimmed the groups and activities segment that she noticed something new. *Hollywood Classics*, a group for seniors, was to begin at her local library.

Janine wasn't much of a group person, who really was? But loneliness had come knocking at her door of late, as it had on and off over the years since Frank had passed. Her daughter, an only child, moved interstate a few years ago, following her own husband in his crusade within the world of business.

### *Hollywood Classics*

she repeated the word over in her mind. Come along if you love old movies; actresses and actors and a bygone era. Janine's heart picked up pace. She was experiencing a warm sensation across her chest. The idea of meeting new people, she discovered with surprise, inflamed her insides. Excitement brewed like good strong tea. Where was fear? Her lifelong companion was nowhere to be found at that moment.

Janine shifted in her seat allowing blood flow to her right leg. She favoured it when sitting, keeping her weight from her left hip. Leaning forward and using the table as her prop, she shifted weight and continued reading.

"Excuse me," a young lady said patted her shoulder, "this just fell from the back of your chair."

"Oh, thank you. I hadn't even noticed," Janine replied smiling, her hand to her chest. She took her jacket.

Returning to her paper she took a pen from her bag and underlined *Hollywood Classics*. The group would meet once a week on a Thursday afternoon. Firstly a film would be viewed and then a discussion over refreshments. Janine had never heard of such a group and the idea appealed to her right away.

Over the weekend she stopped in to see Leanne.

"I've joined a new group Leanne," she said, "it begins next week. I've already phoned through my interest."

"That's not at all like you Janine, what sort of group?" Leanne laid back on her lounge suite, feet up. Mariah, brought coffee for them both and puffed up a pillow to pop behind her mother's back. Frank used to do that when Janine was sick.

"I almost don't want to tell you, you'll be so jealous."

"Now I AM interested. Come on, spit it out."

Janine told Leanne about the advert she'd found last Wednesday.

"It's to be held at the Frankston Library. First the group watches a film in one of the rooms at the library, then when it finishes, we sit and chat about it over cuppa and snacks. It's really all a bit strange but I'm interested enough to go along."

"Sounds like you're replacing me already?" Leanne teased.

"No, no, it's nothing like that. See, I knew that would be the first thing you'd say."

"Well, you know I do miss our movie watching."

"Yes, me too," Janine said, "we can still do that you know, when your home that is."

Plus you might want to come along when you're feeling a bit better."

When it was time to go, Leanne wanted to walk Janine to the door but Janine wouldn't have it.

"You need to follow doctor's orders; Mariah told me that means resting for the next week. And don't you waste all those chocolates you were given," Leanne had a few chocolate bearing friends visiting her in hospital on her last stay, "if you won't eat them then give them to someone else. You can always re-gift chocolates so long as they're in date."

"Yes, yes," Leanne's eyes were closed as she nodded her head, "I won't throw anything out Janine and if I did, I'd never tell you."

"Oh, hush. Waste not, want not. Be good for that daughter of yours."

And with that she left. But Leanne remained on Janine's mind over the next few days as Thursday drew closer. Was it guilt?

Janine dropped in daily to see Leanne in the lead up to Hollywood Classics. She even brought the 1954 Oscar winning, Calamity Jane, Leanne's favourite, along on her last visit. Wasn't Doris Day beautiful? It wasn't their usual Saturday afternoon but it still filled the spot.

Leanne had confessed to Janine that she loved having her daughter around looking after her. She wasn't as lonely these past weeks and though she was ill, she almost felt her life had improved.

"It's sad really," Janine said, "that we rely so heavily on our kids to keep away the loneliness at our age."

They both had other friends whose lives were filled with lots of friends, lots of grandchildren; and husbands to irritate them.

Thursday came round quickly; Janine had curled her hair, plucked her eyebrows to a fine line and wore a barely there lipstick, not a gloss like all these youngsters wore. It was a 'nude' lipstick that women often wore to work, lipstick without wearing lipstick. It had lived in her draw for many years and she wouldn't dare throw it out. Not until the last scrape could be sought using the lipstick brush she'd purchased in her twenties when she walked the streets with her Avon catalogues.

The drive to the Frankston library was a short one ending too soon. She saw what looked like two individual married couples speed walking, one in her street and one down Kars.

Adrenaline took hold of Janine's heart forcing her blood flow to increase. The gushing of blood through her ears even hid the manufactured sound of flocks of birds chirping and shrieking through speakers on the roof of the library. A technique employed to scare the real variety away. A waste of money, she'd thought in the past, birds still littered the area with their droppings and wasn't that alarm

unbearable?

So worked up was Janine, she could no longer feel the pain in her left hip as her usual gait disappeared behind a speed walking imposter. She scanned the faces in the library as she hurried to the desk not wanting to be late on her first day.

“May I help you?”

“I’m here for the Hollywood Classics group.”

“Oh, yes. You must be excited, this is the first day. It has attracted quite a crowd actually. The organiser might need to book the larger room next time.”

“Really!” Janine found herself suddenly wondering whether the crowd were all female or of mixed gender.

“Yes, we had no idea this would be so popular.”

She pointed to an area behind Janine’s back and said, “You’ll find the group down there. You don’t need to do anything just enter and take a seat.”

“Thank you very much.”

Janine felt a drip of sweat trickle from her temple. *Damn menopause*, she didn’t take into consideration the fact she hadn’t walked so fast in years. She patted the sweat away with a handkerchief she’d given Frank a few years before he died, and tucked it quickly into her handbag.

The library was quiet and well lit. Janine hadn’t been there in many years and thought it should be given more interest as she passed by the special attention tables and the shelf ends with their contents written on boldly. Fiction, gardening, sewing and so on.

A moment away from the door she’d been directed too. Janine felt light headed, her nerves dancing pirouettes in her stomach. She twisted the door handle, cool in her hand and opened the door. Her hand shook as she removed it and she found herself apologising to Frank inside her mind. Why? Why was she feeling guilty? Why was her heart beating so insistently? Frank had been gone now for ten years, was it wrong to be curious about the opposite sex, to wonder who she might meet?

Janine quickly located an empty seat. She was relieved to find a mixture of women, all over fifty as the article had stated, there looked to be some in their seventies even. Some were thin and elegant, some were large and smiling. All were dressed well, with a bit of makeup and some costume jewellery or understated gold.

There were men too, again, well dressed in jumpers and jeans or corduroys. One wore a hat, a few had hair and some were bald or almost there. Janine averted her eyes to avoid direct eye contact, except to the person who appeared to be the group organiser.

A plump lady in a floral chiffon over-shirt and matching lilac undergarment stood commandingly in front of the group, eyes touching on each member.

“Hi to you all, I’m Marian Whailer, organiser for this new group.”

A few ‘hello’s’ were tossed warmly her way, some like dice on a craps table, some like butterflies in the breeze. One or two were darts on a trajectory pinpointed for target. Janine felt the personalities in the room, eager for attention, perhaps even control, but she didn’t know enough yet for that kind of judgement. She remained quiet, offering a shy smile.

The room was set up like a small theatre or maybe more of a town meeting, with hard plastic chairs all in a row. There were easily ten people maybe even fifteen and one couple had just walked in. There was a great big flat screen on the wall, what the chairs lacked in comfort the TV would make up for in size.

“You might have wondered how it came about, the idea for such a group,” Marian started, “I have a friend who works for the local council here in Frankston and she invited me to give some ideas on keeping seniors engaged within their community. There are the usual ideas,” Marian rolled her hand in front of her, her head rolling along with it, “lawn bowls, Sudoku, gardening, golf...”

“Looking after the grandkids,” interjected a spritely colourful lady to Janine’s right.

“Yes, the grandkids,” Marian repeated, her head now bobbing in agreement, “but I wanted to come up with something different. Movie watching is something most people enjoy but as with many people our age, we don’t have the money for frequent trips to the cinemas, right?” Marian’s eyes were wide with question. The group unanimously agreed.

“And the stuff you get at the video library or on TV at home are all new, new, and new. It’s all driven by the young people of today.”

Janine agreed, nodding her head, as she watched others in the group doing too.

Marian went on, “I don’t know about you lot, but I miss the classics and I miss the opportunity to be able to talk about the movies of my time or of before my time with people who share my interest. So... my council friend and I worked together to write up a submission and were successful in obtaining funding to get the movies playing. Now,” Marian said seriously, “anything to do with the council means they’ll want to get some feedback, some photo’s and other type of media on this group along with our funding source but you won’t have to do anything you don’t want to, so don’t worry.”

Janine felt the tension in the room. For her, it was embarrassment. She felt too old, too fat, too... everything. But for others, she thought, the tension might be excitement. There were definitely a few gleaming eyes.

“And now here we are. A group who will get to know each other and hopefully, who will become good friends through our enjoyment of ‘classic’ Hollywood.

A tall man, perhaps seventy, maybe older, sat forward in his chair, "Well said!" Janine liked the look of him.

Around him, nodding heads moved in unison as does, a choreographed backup crew.

The afternoon moved quickly for Janine. They'd participated in some ice breakers, getting to know each other's names and favourite movies. They'd watched a fifteen minute 1963 film called Stopover In Hollywood, which was basically a travel film that takes the audience to a range of different venues around Hollywood.

"This will set the scene a little I thought," Marian said.

Marian then directed the group to a table off to the side. There was an urn, milk; even soy milk to Janine's surprise. There was also a tray of quartered sandwiches. The cakes and slices looked delicious; Janine couldn't wait to tuck in.

The tall man with the outgoing personality moved over to stand with Janine as she put together a small plate of sandwiches.

"John, my name is," he said trapping her hand in his with confidence and a little cheek.

Embarrassment coloured Janine's face as she shook John's hand. She didn't want to look into his eyes but their cheeky twinkle caught her attention. John's hand was smooth and soft, not a workers hand, she thought; and he smelled of fresh linen with a hint of aftershave. *On second thought, I won't have the slice today,* she thought.

Marian requested the group intermingle, getting to know each other over the next thirty minutes while she prepared and activity before the close of today's group. John asked Janine about herself, what she did, what she enjoyed, her hobbies, pets and whether she was married. She noticed John wasn't wearing a wedding ring and he confirmed he wasn't married when he told her about his deceased wife. He'd been on his own for several years now.

Marian called the group back to attention. She had a trivia quiz based on Hollywood and the group played for a while. John had returned to his seat as it would have been rude to move into another's mid group, but he grabbed Janine's attention with his smiling face as his eyes remained on her for most of the remaining time.

As the afternoon finished up Marian asked the group to provide names of movies they all enjoyed. This would help her to compile a list for next twelve months. She assured the group she'd mix genre so each week was different. She also asked the group to bring a plate of food for now on, if they were able, as the small amount of funds received would not cater for ongoing food. However, coffee and tea would continue to be supplied.

Marian also suggested that participants bring pillows or even bean bags if they so

wished as the following get-togethers would mean sitting for up to two hours in the chairs provided, although she assured, there would be an intermission for leg stretching half way through.

“Casablanca will be the movie on show next week. Its popularity can't be disputed and I think it will be a wonderful starter.” Janine was happy with this choice; it was one of her favourites too. Leanne was going to be so jealous. Janine would make sure to fill her in on every detail. She felt sure Leanne would come along with her in no time.

On her way out to her car John caught up to her tapping her on the shoulder.

“Will you accompany me for dinner Janine, during the week? I go to *The Grande* on a Friday night. It's actually quite cheap but the meals are great.”

Janine was taken aback. Even after ten years she still felt she was cheating on Frank.

“I won't bite,” John said.

“Um... Okay, that would be nice.”

John wanted to pick Janine up so she gave him her details. He provided his too. He didn't live far from her at all she noted; in fact it'd probably be no more than a five minute walk.

Janine made her way home. That evening when she prepared herself for bed she found she couldn't tear her eyes from the bathroom mirror. What she saw was alien to her. She was all wrinkles, puffiness and sun spots. She saw lank curls, some were stuck to her forehead with sweat, her eyeliner had stretched and some had disappeared into creased depths. Her eyebrows, nicely shaped now, were a mixture of dark and grey, some of the hairs had been long and curled. Who was this woman staring back at her?

She pictured herself in the old days, if she could choose she'd be Katherine Hepburn in her 1935 Oscar winning role as Alice Adams. Her straight nose, her smooth skin and her curls pulled back with pins. She was so beautiful in her sun hat sitting opposite Fred MacMurray, stars in her eyes as she leant in breathlessly. Those days, those movies, they were so romantic.

Janine looked nothing like herself as a young woman and nothing like Katherine Hepburn. She couldn't possibly fathom the interest John had expressed in taking her for dinner. She already worried about what she'd wear; nothing hid her size eighteen frame. Not even the tents they called ladies fashion at Target.

Between now and Friday, twenty four hours, she would not lose any weight but she'd curl her hair again tomorrow and hunt through her age old wardrobe. She wasn't about to spend money she didn't have to pretty herself up.

Suddenly she felt annoyed at John. If he expected her to be beautiful well he could

go and stick it! She was who she was. Frank had never complained, he'd loved her anyway. If this cheeky skirt chaser wanted Katherine Hepburn then he could join her at Cedar Hill Cemetery in Hartford County, Connecticut.

The following evening John arrived at precisely six-thirty. Janine liked punctuality. She'd taken on an air of annoyance. It helped her nerves if she saw John as a womaniser; it gave her pride and lessened the blow she expected from him by the end of the night. John smelled of woods and citrus.

"Your cologne is very nice."

"Thank you Madame. I bought it especially for tonight."

"You didn't I hope," Janine said. His comment put her to shame, she hadn't bought something new in as long a time as she could remember.

"You look beautiful Janine. And I love your name if I might add. I've been all nerves and knots thinking about our dinner tonight."

Janine blushed again. She was ashamed of herself. John was lovely, kind and polite, "Thank you John. I barely know what to say, it's been such a long time since I've been on a date."

"It's been a long time for me too. We'll make it through tonight together, now shall we?" John opened the space between his elbow and side allowing Janine to take his arm.

The evening went well. Too well really, Janine felt she'd only sat down and already it was time to go. They talked nonstop on all manner of topics but their favourite was on Hollywood Classics and their new group.

Janine invited John to go with her to Leanne's house on Saturday afternoon to watch another classic. Leanne had purchased a favourite, another Katherine Hepburn film, the 1951 film, African Queen. John accepted with the understanding that Janine needed to first speak with Leanne about it.

Time flew by for Janine that year. Leanne's health had improved and she joined Hollywood Classics too. They both made firm friends among the group, some even joining in Leanne and Janine's old movie Saturday. Their talks went beyond movies and it was wonderful to have friends again, people who shared their love of film. Leanne's daughter had even moved out and on with her own life.

John and Janine were firm companions, living separately still, but meeting several times a week. They'd even kiss now and hold hands when out to lunch. John had his own money and tended to pay for their lunches and he never complained about Janine's tight fist. She continued to curl her hair and pluck her brows and they went together on Thursdays to Hollywood Classics. The staff at the Frankston library knew them well.

It was their final meeting of the year in mid December when Marian announced to



the group she wasn't able to secure continued funding.

"Well how much does this group cost to run," one of the participants asked.

"It's twenty dollars alone to rent the room. That doesn't include the tea and coffee. The purchase of the films has been approximately ten dollars a week, but I've been buying monthly online."

"Okay," another participant broke in, "so it works out to perhaps thirty-five dollars a week."

"Why don't we all start bring in our own movies then?"

"That's a great idea and maybe we don't have to hold the group here, at the library."

"My house isn't big enough. I think the library has been a great place to host our group. My granddaughter even wants to come to library now, though she knows she can't come on a Thursday with me, I've been taking her over the weekend," another said.

"I also like the library, so maybe it's about rostering out the costs. There are fifteen of us regulars. If we roster it out, it would be twenty dollars once and then nothing for that person until fifteen weeks, that's almost four months."

"Or we could all just bring a dollar fifty each a week. By fifteen that's twenty-two fifty."

"Yes, even two dollars a week. That's thirty dollars, more than enough for the room, new movies; and refreshments."

"I think we can do this," Janine added counting the money in her head and rethinking her budget, "I'd be prepared to pay two dollars a week for this group to continue."

John smiled and so did Leanne; both knew how important this group had been for Janine, in some ways it had saved her. From loneliness. From despair. It had saved them as well. So much had been added to each of their lives they didn't want to let go either.

"Let's vote!" said John, arm already up. "For those who want to continue the group, with Marian as our host, if you're prepared that is," he looked at Marian for approval. Her smile said it all, "put your hands up if the two dollars a week idea is a goer."

All hands shot up. Janine's heart was so full, she felt it might burst. She saw the tears in Leanne's eyes and rubbed her hand up and down her best friends arm. Marian had tears too.

"It's all agreed then," John spoke firmly, "no now more blubbing, lets watch this damned movie and enjoy our last day here before Christmas."

Marian popped in Hepburn's 1941 Oscar winner, The Philadelphia Story, and the room hushed into a happy silence.

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