

John Tavares

MAGIC HOUR

A few beachgoers called Magic Hour the Never Open Café. Some thought the café was never open because business was poor and weather at the clothing optional beach was unstable, frequently rainy, stormy, and windy, with gusts, cold water, and wind chill. But Hanlan's Hillbillies knew better, and that explanation ignored the gorgeous warm sunny days and the resplendent views of the cityscape and the sunsets from the beaches when Layla could never keep up with the customers that inundated her takeout and café. Layla also preferred to keep her café to a one-person operation, without any employees.

The city and the parks and recreation department that issued Layla her concession permits wanted to reissue those business licenses to an ice cream parlor, a donut shop, a hamburger joint, or another fast-food franchise. With the thirty-five hundred dollars her mother sent her every month, though, Layla hired a lawyer her mother recommended and fought the rescission. Embarrassed by her mother's allegation they discriminated against budding entrepreneurs and small business, the parks and recreation department and the city reversed the order.

The café was unprofitable on paper, according to Layla's mother's accountants, to whom she handed all the business records at the end of the quarter. The café, though, her mother understood, was her true purpose and meaning in life. Her mother kept calling her every Sunday afternoon with business advice, acting as if Layla, whom she described to friends and associates as her wayward daughter, was one of the most important clients in her business consulting practice. Joan also realized that true to her daughter's personality and

disposition she would never succeed in the competitive food service and restaurant sector. Her mother urged her to return to university and college to find her true bearings and callings in life.

“But I’m thirty-six,” Layla complained.

“You’ll simply apply as a mature student, and I’ll pay the tuition, the textbooks, and your rent, in residence, where you’ll do better and be among peers,” Joan said.

Layla was adamant and obstinate, insisting she was living the life she wanted to lead. Soon her business losses would reverse themselves. Joan threatened to stop sending her thirty-five hundred dollars a month. Layla dared her mother to do that precisely, and with that gauntlet thrown down Joan backed away.

The café should have been profitable, but Layla kept taking breaks at the clothing optional beach down the pathway. Sometimes Layla would ask one of the friends she made among the beach regulars who frequented Hanlan’s Point to mind the café, while she took a break on the shoreline. She got along well with these beach regulars, but at times she referred to them affectionately or pejoratively, depending upon her mood, as Hanlan’s Hillbillies.

When Joni, a beach regular, asked her the reason, she said because they acted as if they owned the beach. They practically lived on the beach, camped on the shoreline, and in the nearby bushes. Often, they frightened and harassed tourists and visitors from the mainland city. Despite her petite size, Joni, who sold homemade marijuana and cannabis edibles, caramels, brownies, cookies, on the beach, depending on which recipes she was experimenting with that week, pushed and shoved the tall, slender Layla and scattered her towel, beach blanket, and picnic basket across the beach shore and trail. Afterwards, Layla learned to keep the moniker to herself.

In any event, Layla loved the sight of the beach, the skyline of Lake Ontario, the cityscape, the boats, the yachts, the ferries, the cruise ships, and especially the bodies, nude and clothed. She sat on the quiet corner of the beach in a wooded area, along the cruising trail, and she injected herself with her magic hour. She covered her head with a towel, and she luxuriated in the warm rush, the orgasmic sensation, and the relaxation and euphoria the medication gave her, which she bought from a friend, one of Hanlan’s Hillbillies.

When Layla came down from the high, she returned in her bikini, wrapped in the beach towel or blanket, to the café. Invariably, one of Hanlan’s Hillbillies helped themselves to beer, pop, chips, snacks, which

she expected, but oftentimes they raided the store for their friends and gang and headed off with shopping bags of stuff. They even took money from the store till, even though these friends said they were happy to fill in for her in return for the odd coffee, snack, or takeout meal, which she always gladly gave them. Sometimes, they even took money from the till, or pilfered the whole day's receipts, but Layla did not care.

Joan's monthly allowance of thirty-five hundred dollars to her daughter—which Layla usually considered guilt money (for her broken marriages, divorces, and the childhood it spawned), usually covered the losses. Besides, the important stuff, the Magic Hour, she always remembered to keep locked in the safe in the storeroom, which itself was locked by a combination only she knew, even though Joni knew the combination number after Layla absently wrote it on a notepad. Joni regularly got into Layla's Magic Hour for her own dealings and diluted her supply with her own dealer's stuff and substances.

The Magic Hour she also sold to a few regular beach customers. The profits she earned from the sale of Magic Hour paid for her own habit and supply; so, in the end there was no profit or loss; she was simply living, surviving, as she told her mother. Joan kept emphasizing in her business voice she needed to change this edgy lifestyle, this hipster, hippie life she was living on the fringes of society was not sustainable.

The summer of the pandemic, though, there was disruption in supply, in habits, routines, and lifestyle. People started to frequent and crowd the beach, since most of the restaurants, bars, cafes, and stores were forced to close, but through some loopholes, and in between waves of the pandemic, public health and the government allowed her to keep the Magic Hour Café open. The potency of the supply of Magic Hour she bought from a mariner and sailor at the yacht club was stronger than ever, more than she ever expected.

Several of the customers to whom she supplied Magic Hour overdosed on the beach. Two even died, although alcohol may have played a role in the death of a second victim, a nudist who sold beads and weavings on the sand of the clothing optional beach.

Police checks and patrols by by-law enforcement officers increased in frequency, to a level Layla never saw before on the beach. One of Hanlan's Hillbillies assured her no-one suspected her. Still, Layla became paranoid, albeit she thought her response was justifiable, given the circumstances.

Everyday on the beach that summer Layla passed a floral arrangement set up as a memorial for one of the overdose victims. Whenever she saw a police officer on the beach, she suspected they were looking for her,

intending to arrest her. Her paranoia and anxiety always increased her needs for Magic Hour. She started injecting herself behind the counter of the Magic Hour Cafe, which was not her preferred venue for shooting up. Layla favored the experience, the rush, the euphoria, the release, at the beach, which made the ritual more magical and the experience transcendent, especially around sunsets. She carefully measured her doses, and sometimes sent the stuff to a lab, but, lately, her Magic Hour, which became more adulterated during the pandemic, was laced with a potential derivative of fentanyl.

One of the beach gang members, the aged flower child, Joni, who sold cannabis and CBD edibles, found her, when she visited the café to buy a coffee and her favorite oat bran muffin. When she saw Magic Hour café was open and not shuttered, but Layla was not responding, she opened the side door, near the public washrooms and showers.

Joni went through the patio and side entrance into the cramped café, where she found Layla passed out in her wicker chair, with a book about the use of psilocybin and cannabis for psychedelic therapy, at a small antique hardwood desk that barely fit in her cubicle-sized business office.

Joni knew where the first aid kit and emergency supply of naloxone was located and carried her own supply in a red zippered case, like those for eyeglasses. Joni injected Layla with the antidote. Then she anonymously called 911 on her landline telephone, and whispered, cursed, and in her dreads, beads, and woven garments prayed to her Buddhist gods Layla responded to the antidote.

Later, before Layla fully regained consciousness in the hospital from the drug-induced coma, her mother discovered she had somehow contracted the hepatitis C virus.

Her mother was furious her daughter overdosed. What made her even more angry—she told Carlos, her personal assistant and current life partner—her baby, her daughter, had contracted the hepatitis C virus. She feared her baby, her girl, was tainted, contaminated now, damaged goods, ruined for life. Her mother could barely contain herself and control her anger.

A member of the team of doctors caring for her reassured Joan pharmacological science had discovered an effective cure for hepatitis C. They were starting to treat her with those medications in the hospital for that chronic condition as they spoke.

Her mother returned to her room and started reading the facts sheets and information about Hepatitis C and its treatment, which the doctor had given her at her bedside.

But Joan grew impatient and moved on to perusing her beloved *Globe and Mail* and then the *Wall Street Journal*. When Layla roused herself from her torpor and became aware of her presence, her mother glared at her, as if she had done something terribly wrong.

When Layla gazed at her mother, through oxygen tubes and intravenous lines, and she reached out to her, helplessly, Joan automatically slapped her hand, to which was taped and bandaged a tube and intravenous needle, hard. Her mother had never administered corporal punishment to her in her life. Her mother did not believe in the use of corporal punishment to discipline her child. (Joan had even had a grade schoolteacher fired from her position when she was a child. The teacher, in the heat of the moment, slapped Layla when she punched in the gut a grade five classmate, who had a history of teasing her for her height and long aquiline nose, a boy who sobbed and cried, as if he was dying from a perforated ulcer and internal hemorrhage. He was blocking Layla on the stairwell, stopping her from climbing the last flight of stairs, preventing her from reaching her classroom after recess.)

Layla drifted off to sleep. When she awoke, regained consciousness, as soon as her mother saw her eyes were open, she slapped her again but this time in the face, against her cheeks to which some color and red hue had returned. Her mother slapped her hard, and the smack echoed against the antiseptic hospital room walls and ceiling.

“Ouch,” Layla cried, “you’re hurting me.”

Layla covered her face, smarting from the sting.

Her mother tossed a packet of moisturizer and painkillers from her Coach handbag at her.

“You never slapped me before in my life.” Layla started sobbing and crying.

At thirty-six years old, recovering from a near fatal drug overdose, her mother slapped her. The nurse saw Joan slap Layla. Then, so, the nurse could witness firsthand how angry and outraged Joan felt she slapped her again.

“This is what I should tell people: This young woman—her tainted illicit drugs contributed to the death of at least one hopeless lost soul.”

The nurse asked Joan to leave Layla's room. When Joan ignored her, the nurse demanded she leave the hospital. The two women engaged in a literal stand off and glared at each other, until the nurse relented.

But the nurse consulted her supervisor at the nursing station. The nursing supervisor returned with security guards, who Joan also ignored, as if they didn't exist. Then the security guards returned with a police officer, who threatened Joan with arrest. So, Joan called Carlos on a security guard's smartphone to drive her home. Still, Joan continued to visit her daughter in her hospital room, as Layla was treated for hepatitis C, with a new medication that would cure her, doctors said.

The doctors insisted and recommended she not leave the hospital until she also entered the drug rehab program. During each subsequent visit, her mother slapped her. Her mother would sometimes lose control, wave newspaper clippings at her, call her ungrateful, a bitch, and slap her.

While the doctor made a tour and rounds with her medical students, pausing to visit Layla, Joan pointed towards Layla and asked if her patient was making progress. In her outraged voice, Joan loudly told the doctor, so her entourage of aspiring bright interns could hear; so, patients and visitors in the hallway could overhear; so, even the ward clerks and orderlies down at the nursing station could eavesdrop: "This girl, this young woman—her tainted narcotics led to the death of at least one hopeless lost soul."

Her mother argued with nurses, doctors, social workers, counsellors, psychologists, and hospital administrators until nursing staff complained and security guards and police were summoned. Hospital administrators ordered her banned from the hospital, but Joan ignored the ban. Then administrators applied for a restraining order. Her mother fought the restraining order with an expensive family law lawyer, who she was averse to hiring until she realized she had no recourse.

The lawyer admitted in court he handed out corporal punishment, which Joan resented since she had never administered corporal punishment in her life. Joan explained to the lawyer she never believed in corporal punishment. As she listened to the lawyer in his law office and court, she realized she totally disagreed on just about everything with this flamboyant character, who claimed he was a Christian fundamentalist when it was convenient.

Joan again felt like a failure as a parent, especially for having to hire such an ignoble man to resolve her legal problems. Her friends had reassured her, though, he was the right man and lawyer. Somehow, he won the case and the restraining order was thrown out of court. Joan resumed her visits to Layla in the hospital.

During each visit Joan found herself entangled in a heated argument and dispute with Layla, and she would slap her hard at least once. Her mother showed her clippings from the newspaper, which she asked her personal assistant, Carlos, to clip and scrapbook. The urgent articles reported the overdoses and death from overdoses on the clothing optional beach. Joan said it was a wonder Layla was not in jail on murder or manslaughter charges. Then, when Laya called Carlos a lackey, Joan whacked her even harder on the face. For the first time in a long while, her mother frightened Layla, and she wanted to frighten her.

“Reason does not work on you and your entourage—only passion and raw emotion.”

“I don’t have an entourage,” Layla protested.

“That just proves how estranged you’ve become from ordinary people, real people, not addicts and pushers, and society.”

Joan told her once she recovered, she would head to college or university. She was not accepting Layla’s age, at thirty-six, as an excuse. Joan did not care what subjects Layla studied at college; she only knew she could not live this life as a beach bum and boardwalk café owner and operator any longer. Joan’s personal assistant and secretary, who was the highest strung and most tense, nervous and anxious man Layla ever met in her life. He doubled as her submissive life partner these days, helped her with the university and college residence applications: the transcripts, resumes, the countless questions, documents, paperwork.

Layla did not see what choice she possessed. Carlos told her about his sister who was an alcoholic: she recovered, returned to university in her forties, and now worked as an addictions counsellor. Somehow the idea appealed to Layla: Addictions. Counsellor. She was addicted, and needed counselling, among other things. She could or would try to work from there. First, she went to York University, majored in psychology, and lived on campus, and in residence. She avoided the clothing optional beach, frequenting the gym, and swimming pool during the off hour. She swam so obsessively she frightened the lifeguards monitoring the indoor pool of the sports center on the university campus. The head lifeguard wanted to ban her for her arguments, and her loud

voice and hostile tone and aggressive attitude towards the lifeguards. Layla figured Magic Hour would have mellowed her, but she could no longer resort to that route of self-medication.

She obtained her degree in psychology. Then she studied in an addictions counselling program at an Ontario college of applied arts and technology. She did her internship at the hospital where she recovered from her overdose, her addictions, and Hepatitis C. She found work with a nursing station on a First Nation community with an Indigenous health services organization and then an indigenous social services based in Sioux Lookout, which gave her a position as a counselor on a reserve on the Hudson's Bay coastline.

This is the story, in one form or another, Layla tells clients and patients when they consult her or are referred to her for treatment. Layla feels the need to share, to tell them, if she believes it will help her connect with the client or patient.