

People

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First Wives Club author Olivia Goldsmith dies during cosmetic surgery

Funny, fearless and self-deprecating, author Olivia Goldsmith never tried to hide the fact that she had had plastic surgery. "She actually urged me, 'If you ever want to do it, my surgeon's great,'" says Manhattan photographer Sigrid Estrada, who shot Goldsmith for the jacket of her 1992 satire, *The First Wives Club*. "I think she saw it as a completely natural thing that everybody should do."

It's also what may have led to Goldsmith's death: On Jan. 7 the 54-year-old lapsed into a deep coma while being prepped for a cosmetic procedure at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital in New York City. "They never started surgery," says Steven Mintz, her lawyer and close friend. "As soon as she was put under anesthesia, something went terribly wrong. She never came out of it."

Though she had just recovered from the flu and recently had undergone gallbladder surgery, Goldsmith's health had seemed fine before the crisis on the operating table. And her spirits were even better: With 10 successful novels, a slew of friends and a long-term beau, "she was excited about life," says her friend and literary agent Nicholas Ellison. According to Ellison, Goldsmith was busy decorating the SoHo loft that she bought from Sandra Bullock three years ago and looking forward to promoting *Dumping Billy*, a novel due out this spring that was "sold to the movies for seven figures," he says.

Though details were scarce in the wake of her death (which came after she had been on life support for eight days), the procedure that Goldsmith was to undergo was fairly routine--a "tuck" to tighten facial skin. By Estrada's account, it was not Goldsmith's first attempt to perfect her profile. "She was a bit chubby and the chubbiness showed up around her chin and neck. So in pictures, we always tried to use a turtleneck or put her hands in that area. She was happy I found the perfect angle to camouflage these spots she felt were just not attractive."

In 1995, says Estrada, Olivia had called her to say she'd gone under the knife to fix the flaw. "She said, 'I look great, and I need new pictures with my new chin!'" But within a year, Estrada says, Goldsmith was talking about having her chin tweaked again. "Whatever you weren't happy with could be fixed--she was always looking for perfection," says Estrada.

Raised in Dumont, N.J., by Martin and Estelle Goldfield (a schoolteacher), Randy

Goldfield began playing with different personas--and courting difficult characters--even before she became a writer. In the seventies, the New York University graduate fell in love with a charismatic executive so handsome that "people mistook him for Robert Redford," as she later told England's Birmingham Post.

A mixed blessing, to be sure. A management consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton when they wed in 1979, she was married for six years and spent another seven in divorce court after she split with her husband (whom she refused to publicly identify). Though they had no children, she told a British paper, "he wanted to keep a hold on me, so he got nasty about the house, the flat, the car ... and much of it was mine."

In the end, her ex got the house in the Hamptons, the Manhattan digs and the Jaguar, while she walked away with \$ 300,000. That, and the inspiration for a new role. Moving to London and changing her name to Justine Rendal, she began a comic novel about three wives who extract revenge on exes who've traded them for younger models. Using the nom de plume Olivia Goldsmith, she tossed on a blonde wig and dramatic sunglasses when she hit the road to promote the book.

Though Goldsmith suggested that the look was her publisher's idea, Estrada believes that Goldsmith (who called herself a "plain brown wren") simply "liked to change personas." At their photo sessions, "she came equipped," says Estrada. "She did her own makeup and came with all her wigs. She wanted to be a glamorous Hollywood person. She loved that world."

Not that it was the only one that mattered to her. A loyal friend and dog lover with "a deeply good heart," in Ellison's words, Goldsmith also "was supporting an army of needy people and organizations," he says. Adds Mintz: "She was there for everybody."

When it was time for her to go, Goldsmith was not alone. After she fell into a coma, friends gathered to "pray for a miracle," says Ellison. "A child she loved drew a picture of her smiling; we put it in front of her. She was comforted 24 hours a day with song, people talking to her or massaging her feet."

That final scene recalled a little joke that Goldsmith once made to PEOPLE. "I'm adorable, and I have very thin thighs," she said in 1996. Then she added, "Actually, my thighs aren't thin. But to my friends, I'm adorable."