

## Olive

Peter Amidon's adaptation of "Olive" from Italo Calvino's "Italian Fairytales"

Once a long time ago a king and a queen gave birth to their first child, a son. On the day he was born they planted a pear tree and said, "This tree is your tree, our son, our child, our prince, planted on the day you were born."

As the Prince grew up he played around that tree, he climbed the tree, he ate the pears from the tree, he pruned and picked the tree.

A few years later the old king died and the prince became King. He lived in the castle with his mother, who was now called the Queen Mother, which meant not that she was the queen, but that she was mother to the King.

The King had a gardener whose only job was to take care of the King's pear tree.

One day the gardener said to the King, "Your Majesty, I am sorry, but some animal has been eating the pears right down to the core even as they hang on your tree.

"You hide and wait and watch," said the King, and you kill the animal that has been eating my pears."

The next day the gardener told the King, "I hid and waited and watched all night long, but I never saw anything eating the pears."

"You fell asleep! You wait again tonight."

When the gardener told the King he had seen nothing the second night, the King said,, "Then I will wait with you."

So, on the third night they both hid and waited and watched together. Just as the gardener had said, they saw nothing all night long. The next morning the gardener got up to leave, but the King said, "No, you stay here. We are not leaving until we see what has been eating my pears."

So they stayed and watched. The pear tree was just inside the wall that surrounded the castle. Suddenly they saw that wall split and open and they watched as the pear tree leaned outside the wall and lowered one of the pears right to the mouth of a young woman who stood just outside the wall. Using only her mouth she ate the pear to the core. That branch lifted up and another branch lowered down to her mouth. The gardener lifted his bow and arrow to shoot her . . . "NO!" said the King, pushing the gardener's arrow down, "I thought it was an animal." When they looked back up the tree was upright again and the wall was sealed shut.

The King and the gardener went to search for the woman outside the wall. She was not standing outside the wall where they had seen her, so they searched in widening circles through the forest. The gardener found the woman sleeping on a bed of leaves: "Get up woman!" he said, "You've been eating the King's pears." The King heard, and got there in time to see the woman get up and, to his horror, he saw that she had no hands!

"What happened to your hands?" The King asked.

"I can't tell you." Said the woman.

"What is your name?"

"Olive."

"Olive." said the King, "We will take you back to the castle and take care of you."

So they took Olive back to the castle and introduced her to the Queen Mother, who asked "What happened to her hands?"

"We don't know," said the King.

"Do you even know where she is she from?"

"MOTHER . . . Olive is staying here, and we will be taking care of her."

Weeks and months passed. The King, just as the Queen Mother had feared, started spending more and more time with Olive.

One day the Queen Mother said, "My son, you are the King. It is time for you to find yourself a proper wife, a queen. I have planned for you a journey."

And so the King set out and met one princess after another. When he returned, the Queen Mother asked about the trip.

"Ah, Mother," answered the King, "Thank you, it was marvelous. I met a princess who was so beautiful I was struck dumb, another who was so witty and funny that I almost fell down laughing. I met a princess who had a depth of wisdom I did not think possible, and a princess so powerful I covered before her. I met a princess who told stories I wished would never end, and a princess who was exceedingly generous, kind and thoughtful. I met a princess whose singing sent me to worlds I'd never known, and another who listened to me with both deep understanding and a kind heart. I can never fully thank you for such a rich journey."

"Wonderful, wonderful. And which will you marry?"

“Oh, Mother, each and every of the princesses would have made a marvelous wife. How to choose . . . but I do not have to, for even as I found each succeeding princess more extraordinary than the last, each one made me realize that I could never love any more than I love Olive. Olive is to be my wife.”

“But you do not even know . . . “

“MOTHER, Olive will be my queen.”

And so the King married Olive. Queen Olive and the King had never known such happiness, and could not imagine a happiness deeper than that which they shared, and so they were surprised when new waves of happiness washed over them when they found themselves with child.

One day a messenger came to the King with news that the northern borders were being invaded. The King, with heavy heart, had to leave his pregnant Olive behind to go off with his knights and soldiers to push back these invaders.

When he was gone, the Queen Mother found a midwife from a distant village and had her secretly brought back to the castle and installed in a room in a high tower in the castle where, weeks later, Olive gave birth to twin boys. Queen Olive was secluded with the midwife for weeks until she had her strength back. The Queen Mother then took Olive with the twins in her handless arms to the gates of the castle and said, “You take your boys and go, go, and if you want your boys to grow up and live, you never show your face in this castle again, “ and sent her out into the forest and closed and locked the castle gate behind her. Then the Queen Mother had one large and two coffins built, and had waxed figures put inside each, had the whole castle draped in black, and had a fake funeral for Olive and her two sons. Then the Queen Mother wrote a letter to be delivered to the King: “Queen Olive has died in childbirth, along with her two baby boys.”

Meanwhile, Olive was wandering the forest with her two babes in her handless arms. Day turned to night, and night turned to day, she lost track of time. She found no food, she found no water. She nursed them till there was no more milk. They cried, and then, worse, they became silent.

Days later Olive stumbled upon a spring. There was an old woman washing out her linens. “Woman, please squeeze some of that water into my mouth”

“Get your own water.”

“Oh, woman, my children and I, wedf are dying of thirst.”

“Get your own water!”

“Oh, but can’t you see, I have no hands.”

“GET YOUR OWN WATER!”

So Olive leaned down to get her own water, and her two babies slipped out of her handless arms and fell into the water; they slipped below the water.

“Woman, help me, my babes are drowning.”

“Get your own babies.”

“I can’t, I have no hands.”

“GET YOUR OWN BABIES!”

So Olive reached into the water with her handless arms, and, when she did, she could feel hands, fingers, around her babies, and she pulled them, sputtering, and yes, thanks be to heaven, crying, out of the water, grasping them with her hands which had magically grown back in the water.

When Olive looked up to thank the woman, the old woman had disappeared. Olive drank until she could drink no longer, and then nursed her hungry children.

Once more Olive wandered the forest until it was getting dark. She looked for a soft place to sleep with her babes, but instead she saw a light, and followed it to a tiny cottage. She knocked on the door, knock, knock, knock. No answer. She opened it just a teensy bit, and she she smelled the most delicious food - she could smell chicken soup, hot bread. She peeked in; no-one was in the house, but on the stove she saw a pot cooking, and a setting on the table. She walked in, and there on the table was a bowl, a plate, a mug, a spoon, and a bottle of wine just opened. On the floor next to the table was a blanket. She laid the two baby boys on the blanket, ladled a bowl of chicken soup from the pot, took the bread piping hot out of the oven, and poured herself some wine.

After she ate she picked up her babies and found another room with a bed all made up with a cradle on each side, and there they slept, such a wonderful and deep sleep. When she woke up the next morning there was porridge and fruit and coffee. Now I know that you know that you have heard of this before: it was one of these houses that takes care of all your needs, And over the years there she lived and raised her two boys.

Let’s return to the castle now.

When the King returned from the wars, he was so devastated by the news of the loss of his wife and newborns that he took to bed and would speak to no one. Doctors were called in from all over the land, and when they failed, soothsayers, but the King did not improve, he just seemed to be wasting away. Of course this was the talk of the castle, and late one night after the castle work was finished the servants were talking over tea. “What can we do, what can we do?” they were asking. One of the King’s oldest servants said, “You know, the King is not sick, he is just very, very sad.”

“Well then, he needs something to cheer him up.”

“You’re right, something to cheer him up. What does the King like to do.”

And one of the King’s huntsmen said, “Well, the King loves to hunt.”

“HUNT! They all said, as if one, and they all knew just what to do.

The next morning some went to saddle the King’s hunting horse, others got his hunting clothes and gear. They dragged the King out of bed, took off his bedclothes and put on his hunting clothes and boots, hoisted him up onto his horse, and slapped the horses rump. Off the horse charged, with the King flopping around on top, hanging on as best he could. But then, as the King rode into the forest, it was as if a mantle of sadness fell off him. The King did love to hunt, and he had a wonderful day hunting. As he rode back through the castle gates, he felt a mantle of sadness fall on his shoulders once again.

So you can imagine how the King lived then. Every day he went hunting, only returning in the evening to sleep. Sometimes he was gone for two or three days at a time, traveling further and further into the woods. This went on for years.

One day the King was out hunting as usual. He had been out for over a week, and found himself in a part of the forest he had never been in before. As a matter of fact, he was a little bit lost. It started to get dark, and the King was preparing to sleep on the ground, as he had so many nights before when he was out hunting, when he noticed a light. He rode up closer and saw it was shining through the window of a tiny cottage. “What is this cottage doing out here so far in the middle of this strange forest?” the King said to himself, “Well, better to sleep on a nice dry floor than on this cold, wet forest floor.” He got off his horse and went up and knocked on the door, knock, knock, knock.

The door opened, and when the King saw the face he so loved and had dreamed of for years he almost fell over. But as Olive came fully out, the King saw her hands, and he figured that, in his grief, his mind had been tricking him.

Olive, of course, recognized her husband immediately, and she saw his quick change from joyful recognition to doubt and she understood perfectly what had happened. So, instead of confessing the truth, she pretended that she had never seen him before.

“Kind hunter,” she said, “So far from anywhere. Please do come in, you can share a meal with my two sons and me.”

“Oh, I would never bother you for a meal,” said the King, “Just a bit of dry floor to sleep on.”

“Oh no, we have plenty of food, and it would be a pleasure and a treat for my two sons to have a guest.”

So the King came in and met the boys and they had a wonderful meal, Olive telling the King about how her boys were always getting into trouble and how she loved them so, and the King telling about his hunting adventures. After dinner Olive said, "Kind sir, we have an extra room with a bed for you. Boys, come help me make up the hunter's bed." As the boys were helping Olive in the extra bedroom, Olive said to the boys, "Hey, do you want to play a game?"

"Oh yes, we love games!"

"OK, here it is: when we go back in with the hunter, you keep asking me to tell you a story. I will refuse, but you be very insistent and keep on asking, no matter what I say. Remember, it will just be a game. Does that sound like fun?"

"Oh yes, yes, mother, I can't wait, let's go."

When they got back to the kitchen the two boys started running and yelling, "Momma, Momma, tell us a story."

"No, you know that it is too late for a story."

"Oh Momma, Momma, please tell us a story."

"No, it is late, the hunter is tired, we all need to go to bed."

"Oh, please, please, Momma, tell us a story."

"If you don't stop asking you are going to get a spanking!"

"Oh, please," said the King, "Go ahead, tell them a stories. I would love to hear a story myself."

"Are you sure? Well, OK then."

Olive sat down. The King sat down. The two boys sat down.

"Once upon a time," Olive started, "a long time ago, a king and a queen gave birth to their first child, a son. On the day he was born they planted a pear tree and said, 'This tree is your tree, our son, our child, our prince, planted on the day you were born.'

"As the Prince grew up he played around that tree, he climbed the tree, he ate the pears from the tree, he pruned and picked the tree.

"A few years later the old king died and the prince became King. He lived in the castle with his mother."

The King was sitting on the edge of his seat. He felt like he was in a dream.

“One day he found a woman with no hands eating the pears from his pear tree. He took the woman in and after a while the King and the woman fell in love and got married.”

The King felt dizzy, he felt like his mind was leaving his body.

“When the new Queen became pregnant, the King had to go off to war. After the Queen gave birth to twins, the King’s mother sent Queen and her two sons off into the forest, held a fake funeral, and sent a note to the King saying his wife and babies had all died in childbirth.”

The King looked wildly at Olive - What is this? Who is this? He could not restrain himself and stood and shouted, “What about the hands?! What about the hands?!”

And Olive told him about the old woman and the spring with the magic water.

“Oh Olive, my love!” cried the King, and he picked her up and danced her around, both of them weeping and weeping.

“Mother, mother, what is wrong? Why are you crying?” shouted the boys!

“Oh boys, it is your father! The King!” she said.

(Summary of ending: The four of them return to the castle. King has Olive and boys wait in room while he confronts his mother, asking to take him to where his wife and children are buried. She tells her son the King that he should get over his grief, take responsibility, and become the king that he is. Finally the King says “Enough!”, opens the door to the room, and out come Olive and the boys. When the Queen Mother sees them she is so shocked her heart turns to stone and she falls dead on the floor. The King, Olive, and the boys live happily ever after.