

# CANVAS' Stories for Children



# Elias and His Trees

*written by Jean Giono / adapted by Augie Rivera  
artworks by Romeo Forbes*

“**Y**our father and I, we both have moles on the soles of our feet!” my mother always told me while I was growing up. She was convinced that if your foot had a mole on its sole, you would always be itching to wander around the world. It must have been those moles that sent my mother and father sailing away in 1920 from the town of Tierra Verde in the Philippines to seek adventure and fortune in the sugarcane plantations of Hawaii.

I was born and raised here, but I was weaned on the stories my parents told me about the town they left behind. In my young mind, the map of Tierra Verde took shape and came to life - its verdant mountains, lush forests, pristine streams, towering trees, and crystal rivers. I wondered what sort of magic the moles possessed, to have charmed my parents away from such a beautiful country.

I did not expect that the town I was looking for would be in a secluded corner of the Southern Philippines. I had to trek mountains that no tourist had ever climbed.

I was surprised by what I found.

Tierra Verde was dull, barren and deserted. The streams had dried up, even the river, leaving behind a sandy, winding trail where the riverbed had been. The mountains were bare, save for a few patches of wild grass.

What had happened to the enchanting land of my dreams?

As I wearily looked out into the horizon, I thought I glimpsed a dark figure standing like a tree. I walked towards it and found an

old shepherd and his dog, surrounded by a herd of grazing goats.

He kindly let me drink from a canteen made of bamboo. The water, he said, came from a deep well near his house. It was getting dark, so he invited me to have dinner in his home.

The shepherd barely spoke. Nor did he glance back at me while I followed him home. I supposed that this is the way of those who lived alone.

He lived in a shanty built from the ruins of an old brick house. Inside, everything was in order. His dishes were clean and his pots and pans were neatly arranged in one corner. The delicious smell of cooking porridge wafted in the air. He served our meal and we ate dinner with hardly a word exchanged between us.

After we ate, he invited me to stay for the night, and I gladly accepted his offer. He told me that it will take one and a half days to reach the next town. I asked him questions about Tierra Verde. The quiet old shepherd was evasive, but eventually he told me the dark story of the town's destruction.

“A long drought came to Tierra Verde. Crops would not grow, forcing people to chop trees and burn down forests to clear more land for



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farming. Some of them sold the felled trees as lumber while others collected burnt wood which they sold as charcoal in nearby towns. After some time, the charred land became dry and barren. Hunger and poverty continued to torment the townsfolk.”

“The most peaceful and timid became violent and fought over the smallest things. Gossip, vice and jealousy spread like dreaded diseases. Many people lost their minds and killed themselves. In the midst of all these, the winds howled viciously, casting an evil omen over the town.

One night, while the town slept, a fierce storm came. Because the mountain-side was barren, water raged down its slopes and flooded the town. The whole town was devastated and almost no one survived.”

I was about to ask another question when the old shepherd suddenly stood up. He took out a small bag and emptied its contents on the table. “Narra seeds,” he said. He carefully examined each seed and separated the healthy from the small and cracked. When he had set aside one hundred seeds, he stood up and bade me good night.

When I woke up the next morning, the shepherd was not around. So I went out to



look for him. I saw him in his pasture in the valley. When he saw me, he left his goats to the care of his dog and climbed to where I was. He gestured for me to follow him toward the mountain ridge.

There he began digging small, shallow holes on the ground using his staff. He then dropped the seeds in one by one, and covered them with soil. He was planting narra trees!

I later learned his name was Elias Dakila and that he was fifty years old. He lived alone by the mountainside with his goats and dog. Elias decided to plant trees because, he said, the mountain needed help and care. In the past three years, he had already planted one

hundred thousand narra seeds. Thousands of the seeds and saplings did not survive, as they were eaten by rats or simply failed to cope with the forces of nature. I told him that in thirty years' time, even if only ten thousand trees survived, Tierra Verde would be a magnificent sight to behold.

In 1941, World War II broke out. The Japanese bombed our station at Pearl Harbor. For the first time, I witnessed the horrors and destruction wrought by war. Over the next five years, the war kept me preoccupied and I never really had a moment to think of Elias and his trees.



## *Elias and His Trees*

When the war ended, people felt the need to renew and rejuvenate themselves. It seemed war affected people this way - it drained their strength, sapped their minds and battered their soul. I needed a breath of fresh air, so I went back to Tierra Verde.

The winding roads to Tierra Verde seemed unchanged. Not far from where I stood, I was surprised to see a thin mist crowning the mountain peak. It made me long to see my friend Elias and his narra trees.



I found him covered with a black mesh with a few bees in his trail. Elias had a new profession. He now had just four goats and one hundred beehives.

“I sold my goats because they were eating the saplings,” he said. I told him about my war time experiences. But when I asked him, he had no stories to share. The war, it seemed, did not reach Tierra Verde. Elias had simply continued to plant his trees.

He showed me around the forest and it was an impressive sight. The narra trees were now taller than the both of us and numbered by the thousands. The forest covered an area eleven kilometers long and three kilometers wide. Elias also pointed out kamagong, acacia, molave, almaciga and other trees which now reached up to our shoulders. These were the trees he planted during the war.

The view took my breath away. If one were to think that all of these sprung from the bare hands of a simple uneducated man, one would understand that, like God, man has the gift of creation, not just destruction.

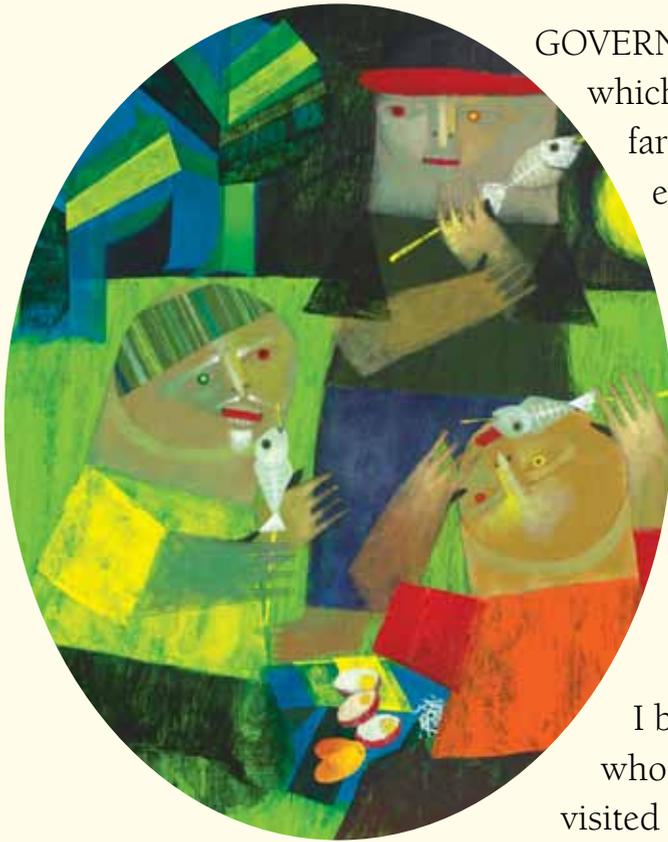
As we walked back to his house, I heard the sound of gurgling water. The river and streams had come alive once again! I also realized that the wind had scattered seeds bringing forth gardens, meadows, shrubs and flowers surrounding the area. Birds were also flitting from tree to tree.

Although he never intended it, the trees that Elias planted had an important effect on the gradual transformation of the environment, so slow that nobody noticed. Since then, I made a pilgrimage to Tierra Verde every year to see my friend Elias and his magnificent forest.

After fifteen years had passed, the trees that Elias had planted reached their maturity. Elias was now seventy years old and was finding the walk between his house and the forest increasingly difficult. So he decided to build a house made of stone in the middle of the forest.

One day, some officials from the Bureau of Forestry arrived to survey the land. They placed a sign that said "UNDER





GOVERNMENT PROTECTION”, which meant that slash-and-burn farming, charcoal burning and even commercial logging were prohibited in the area. The officials ended their little ceremony by having their photos taken, backdropped by the forest that had dazzled them.

Oblivious, Elias continued to plant his seeds.

Once, when I visited Elias, I brought along a forester friend who came with the officials who had visited Tierra Verde. We packed a simple lunch of rice, grilled milkfish, red salted eggs and tomatoes which we shared under the shade of the tall trees.

Elias bade us farewell after lunch as he still had more planting to do. My friend and I walked around the forest. I asked why he did not try to suggest which trees were ideal for the area. “He knows the forest better than us,” my friend said. “He has memorized each row like a solemn prayer.”

When Martial Law was declared in the Philippines, everyone was filled with dread and fear, especially those who lived in the countryside. I had to go back to Hawaii. It was the last time that I would see Elias for a long time.

I never received any news from Elias. Once, I read about a community that was suspected to be part of an anti-government

movement. Soldiers burned the whole town and killed all its residents. I prayed that my friend and his forest would always be safe from harm.

It was nearly fifteen years later, in 1986, when a peaceful People Power revolution took place, and Filipinos celebrated the rebirth of the nation. I decided it was the perfect opportunity to pay my friend a visit.

Onboard a train that now passed through the town, I no longer recognized the places that I saw. Trees lined the side streets. Had I not seen the sign that said 'Tierra Verde,' I would have thought that I was lost.

Everything was vastly different. The harsh wind that used to greet me was now a gentle and sweet breeze. There were also scores of new homes fronted by gardens filled with brilliant flowers and luscious vegetables. A symphony of chirping birds and rippling streams filled my ears.

Not far away, a kapok fruit burst and let loose its white, feathery seeds to the wind. A smile escaped my lips as a rain of white cottony kapok filled the air and giggling children ran around trying to catch it in their hands.



## *Elias and His Trees*

Despite my old age, I tried hard to walk the path towards Elias' house. I could tell that he was glad to see me. After all, it was the first time I ever saw him smile. Elias was now ninety-six years old.

From the side of the mountain, we gazed at the town below us and the prosperous, happy and verdant surroundings which were the fruits of his labor. "This would not have been possible if not for you," I told him.

More than ten thousand people owed their happiness to Elias. I realized that I, too, was indebted to Elias for the rebirth of Tierra Verde, the land of my roots.

Every time I reflect on how a land so neglected could rise again and flourish because of the perseverance, dedication and benevolence of one man, I am as much inspired as filled with admiration and respect for Elias Dakila, the simple shepherd who selflessly created a masterpiece worthy of God.

Elias Dakila died peacefully in his sleep in 1988 at the age of ninety eight.





# The Rocking Horse

*written by Becky Bravo  
artworks by Elmer Borlongan*

There was once a gentleman farmer in a town in the south, who planted fruit trees and raised a small number of horses. He once had a young and beautiful wife; whose smile felt like the sunshine warming up his face, and whose laughter fell upon his ears like tiny ringing bells. She used to run amongst the trees in her bare feet, and take horses for rides around the farm without a saddle. Such was the abundance of her spirits that her breath escaped her often.

Every day the farmer entreated her to exert herself less, and every day she promised that she would do just as he asked, but that was all soon forgotten at the sound of neighing horses or an inviting breeze drifting in through the wide slatted windows of their large old house. She continued to exert herself thoroughly, until the day she tried to catch her breath and never quite caught it again.

She passed away on the summer of their sixth year of marriage, and left behind their little son, Francisco.

'Chisco' was what the child called himself. He was a frail little child with fragile health, but he had his mother's smile, and much of her spirit. He tired very easily and could not play outside for very long, but he loved the outdoors nevertheless.

He would run to find his father and beg him for rides on his favorite horse, the large,



friendly stallion with the brownish black coat and a mane the color of raw sugar.

If his father happened to be tending to his trees, he would let the child ramble around in search of twigs and bugs and fallen leaves; and when he thought Chisco had played quite enough, he would pick a fruit from a random tree and bid the child to eat it under the shade of a stout kamagong, Chisco's favorite of all his father's trees. The boy would lie sprawled upon the ground underneath its branches and eat the pick of the day aratiles, or mango, or mabolo, or santol, or rambutan, or lanzones, or guava.

When he was finished, the boy would wrap his arms around the trunk of the kamagong and try to guess how long before he could reach all the way around it and touch the ends of his fingers.

"Papa," the boy once asked his father, "will this kamagong still be here when I am older?"

"Yes, I believe so, Chisco. Why do you ask?" the gentleman farmer said.

"Because I want it to be here when I'm big enough to reach all the way around it," Chisco answered.



## *The Rocking Horse*



“Then you will have to make sure it will want to stay here with us, won’t you?” the farmer replied. He bent down and whispered into the boy’s ear, “Visit it often and ask it to keep growing. It listens, you know,” and then he put a finger to his lips, just as if he had told him a secret.

Chisco never let a day pass without coming to see the stout kamagong and asking it to grow. He wrapped his arms around its

trunk and talked to it like it was a friend. The tree seemed to sense this down to its very roots, and it flourished. Its leaves grew ever so much greener, its trunk grew ever so much stronger, and it flowered and bloomed with red-brown mabolos even beyond their season.

But one day, one clear, bright summer, Chisco stopped coming to see his tree. His health, fragile from the very beginning, began to look as if it might get worse. His face had lately seemed drained of color, and his breath seemed to escape him much too often to disregard. His father remembered what became of his dear young wife, and resolved that his son should not set foot outdoors, lest he never catch his breath again.

Chisco was restricted to the four walls of his room. He spent all his time looking out through the window, longing to be outdoors. He would wave to his father from his window in the mornings when

he left to see to the horses and the trees; and when the farmer returned at the gathering of dusk, Chisco would still be there, his face pressed against the grille.

The farmer did all he could to coax Chisco's mind away from the outdoors. He filled his room with all these things - toys of every shape and size, shelves full of books, sheaves of paper in the colors of a rainbow, paints and pens with which to draw and write.



Crowded together in one corner of the room there stood a trove of child-sized musical instruments: a piano, a guitar, a skin drum and set of tinkling triangles, a brass horn and a shiny little violin. Tutors came and went, and they tried to beguile the boy with letters and music and art, but as wonderful as all these things were, none seemed as wonderful as being outside.

Chisco missed running in the grass, riding on his favorite horse, eating fruit under the kamagong. He could see the tree from his wide, lonely window, and he knew that it waited for him to come and wrap his arms around it and to ask it to grow. He knew that it sensed he had been gone a long time. Its leaves became a little less green as each day passed, and soon it bore neither fruit nor flower.



## *The Rocking Horse*

Every day the boy asked his father whether he might be allowed to venture outside, and he insisted that he felt much, much better, but the farmer would only say “We’ll see” and that was that.

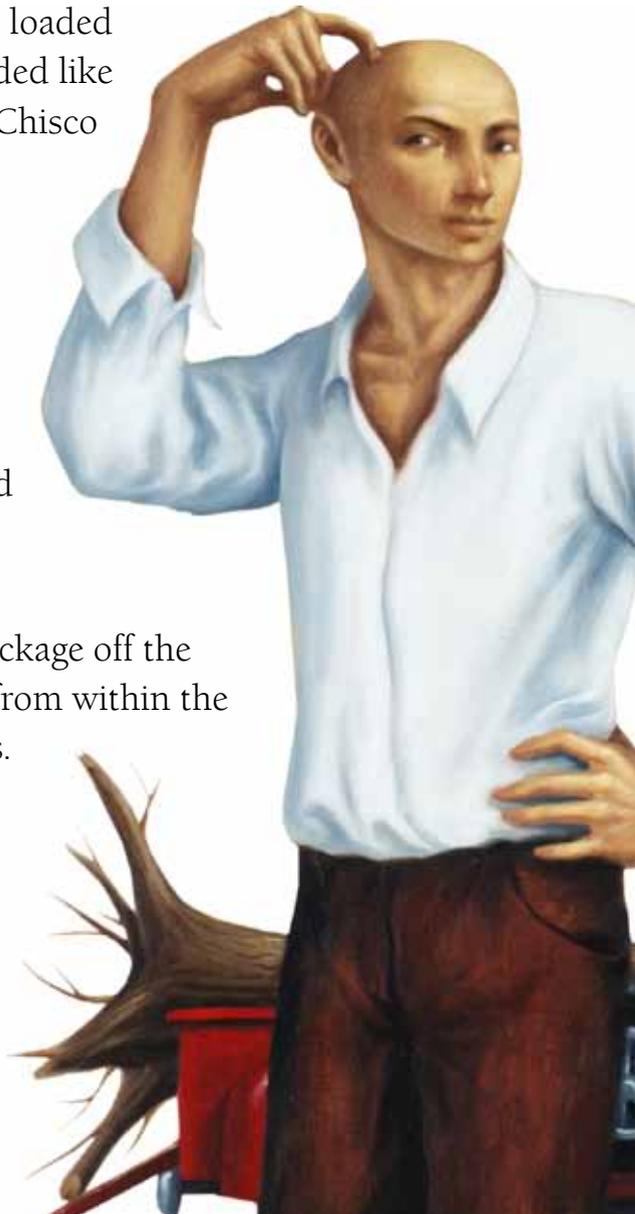
One day, the kamagong was found uprooted, lying on its side on the dewy grass one balmy morning, its crown pointing towards the house. It was as if it had freed itself from the ground and tried unsuccessfully to walk away. It was all the farmer could do to scratch his head and wonder at the sight; and then he pronounced the tree unfit to be replanted.

What remained of the kamagong was loaded onto a farm truck with a horn that sounded like a quacking duck, and from his window, Chisco sadly watched it roll away from sight.

A week went slowly by, and then two more, and just before the last few days of summer, a package wrapped in folds of newspaper and tied with twine, three feet high and three feet wide, arrived in the very same farm truck, which quacked twice before it rolled to a stop under Chisco’s window.

Two young men gingerly lifted the package off the truck, and the farmer’s voice was heard from within the house, directing them to carry it upstairs.

In a moment they burst into Chisco’s room, and the paper-wrapped package was carefully set down upon the floor. Part of its wrapping had come undone from its journey through the house,



and peeking through the disturbed folds was a pointed ear and a long tail in shiny black wood.

The farmer came to cut off the twine, and when the wrapping was all drawn aside, there it was - a shiny wooden rocking horse, completely black, except for a mane the color of raw sugar.

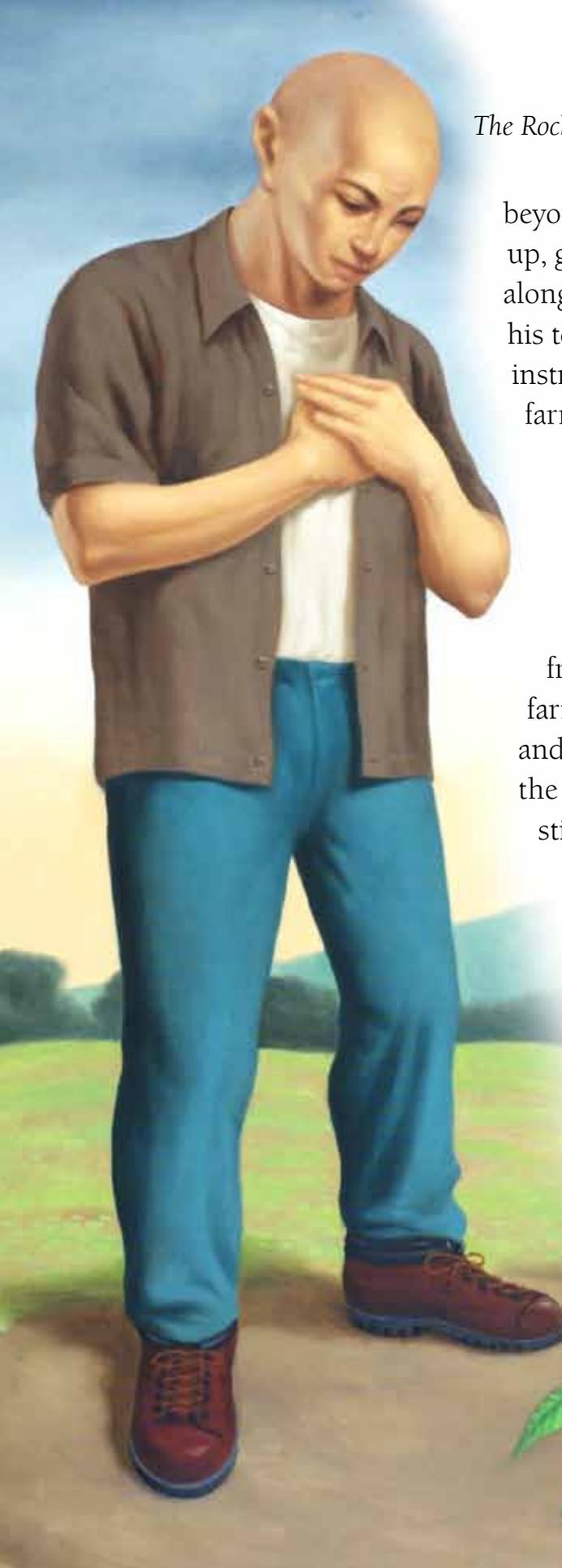
The farmer hoisted Chisco onto the wooden horse, and when he began gently rocking to and fro, such a smile spread across his face that his joy seemed to bounce off the very walls of his room.

The boy wrapped his arms around the horse's neck, the fingers of his hands tightly laced together. For a moment the farmer thought he saw something glinting in the dark carved eyes of the rocking horse, but perhaps it must have been a trick of the sunlight.



“I had this horse made from the tree that fell,” the farmer said at last, and Chisco just smiled and said, “I know.”

The horse was placed next to the window, and there the boy spent many a fine hour rocking to and fro, pretending he was leading a real horse around his father's farm. He imagined himself racing far



*The Rocking Horse*

beyond the gates, he fancied himself all grown up, galloping to faraway places and bringing along the teeming treasures from his room - his toys, his books and his wonderful musical instruments. The last days of his life on the farm were spent this way, happily.

Chisco passed away shortly after that summer. Quietly, just like his mother. His father placed the rocking horse on the grass next to his grave, and left it there to stand till its wood should fall apart from the ravages of weather. Sometimes the farmer thought he saw that horse rocking to and fro from a distance, even on days when the wind wasn't blowing and the leaves barely stirred from the treetops.

In the place where the old kamagong used to stand, the farmer found a sapling pushing its way out of the ground. It was all he could do to scratch his head and marvel at the sight.

He smiled.

Sometimes it passes beyond our sight, but life goes on.

Everywhere.



# Sol

*written by Agay Llanera  
artworks by Farley del Rosario*

The Sun used to shine not just with soft light, but also with captivating beauty. Her face was both delicate and magical, with sunny eyes flecked with rainbows and a smile that melted chill. Her long golden curls tumbled upon the earth, swathing it in warm yellow hues.

It was no secret in the heavens that the Moon was deeply in love with the Sun. So were thousands of stars, who, when ignored by the Sun, desperately flung themselves to the earth and turned into wishes. Saturn had offered his rings to the Sun but in vain; it had since floated aimlessly in space, writing love poems.

Earth beings also fell in love with her. But the Sun was too unreachable that they soon gave up all hope - except for one.

Day after day, Amorsolo loved the Sun more and more.

Since he was a child, Amorsolo had been drawn to the Sun. At dawn he would watch the Sun rise and yawn pinks and oranges into the silvery blue sky. By the time the Sun had combed out her golden locks, it was already daybreak. Amorsolo would hurriedly go out to watch the Sun shining on the fields.

He only came back inside to eat and learn his lessons.

Lessons meant struggling to run a long black bow on the strings



of her mother's violin. Its mahogany color had faded in time, but its sound still hummed pure.

When Amorsolo was born, his mother had looked at his son's fingers and knew that like her, he was born to be a violinist. So everyday, she patiently taught Amorsolo the stringed instrument and he patiently learned. After lessons, Amorsolo could still be seen playing the violin in the field, his face toward the sun.

At first, the townsfolk were amused at this smitten child, and thought he was merely infatuated. But when the years passed and he had become a young man, the people realized that Amorsolo's ardor went beyond mere youthful fancy. Some people called it a waste of time, but Amorsolo called it love.



Everyday, Amorsolo made his way through the forest outside town until he reached the river, on where the Sun often admired her reflection.

When late afternoon came, as the Sun prepared to sleep, Amorsolo brought out his violin and played the notes as if he were playing his very own heartstrings. Often, because of his passionate playing, a bowstring curled up apologetically. Without hesitation, he pulled out several strands from his long hair and stretched them across his bow. Then he resumed playing, coaxing out the lilting notes.

*Sol*

Amorsolo did this everyday - plucking and playing his own hair as if the Sun could see how much he loved her through this sacrifice. But in truth, no one witnessed it.

Except for the Wood. The forest surrounding the river had been on earth since the beginning of time, but nothing had pierced his heart the way Amorsolo's music did.

The Wood carried the music in his arms and spread it throughout the forest. He thought it was a pity the Sun could not hear it. She was, as usual, preening on the river and had eyes only for herself. The Wood chose not to intervene.

One day, he changed his mind.

In the middle of his serenade, Amorsolo suddenly stopped and looked at the Sun. He had always imagined that she could see him, but today, he knew he was fooling himself. In a fit of rage, he threw his instrument and it hit a boulder. Amorsolo looked in shock at the crack on its back, then buried his face in his arms.

I can help you.

Amorsolo looked up with a start.

“Who's there?”

I have been here long before you were born and remain, I shall, even after you have faded.

Amorsolo rubbed his eyes and gaped at an old, bearded man with arms of leafy branches and a head full of twigs. On his chest were never-ending rings within rings.





I am the Wood, the old man said, smiling kindly. I have heard your music and I am pleased with the instrument that you play.

“I-I am s-sorry.” Amorsolo’s hands shook as he took the broken violin and gave it to the Wood. “I didn’t mean to throw it away.”

It is mended, the Wood handed him back the violin. In wonder, Amorsolo ran his hand on the smooth finish where the crack had been. Its mahogany color was restored, its wood rich and sturdy.

I can make things from my own being, he explained. Return to this river tomorrow and I will help you.

“I don’t understand,” whispered Amorsolo.

Have faith in the Wood. I may be old but I still have my magic.

With that, he disappeared. Amorsolo looked up and realized it was already night. He ran all the way home.

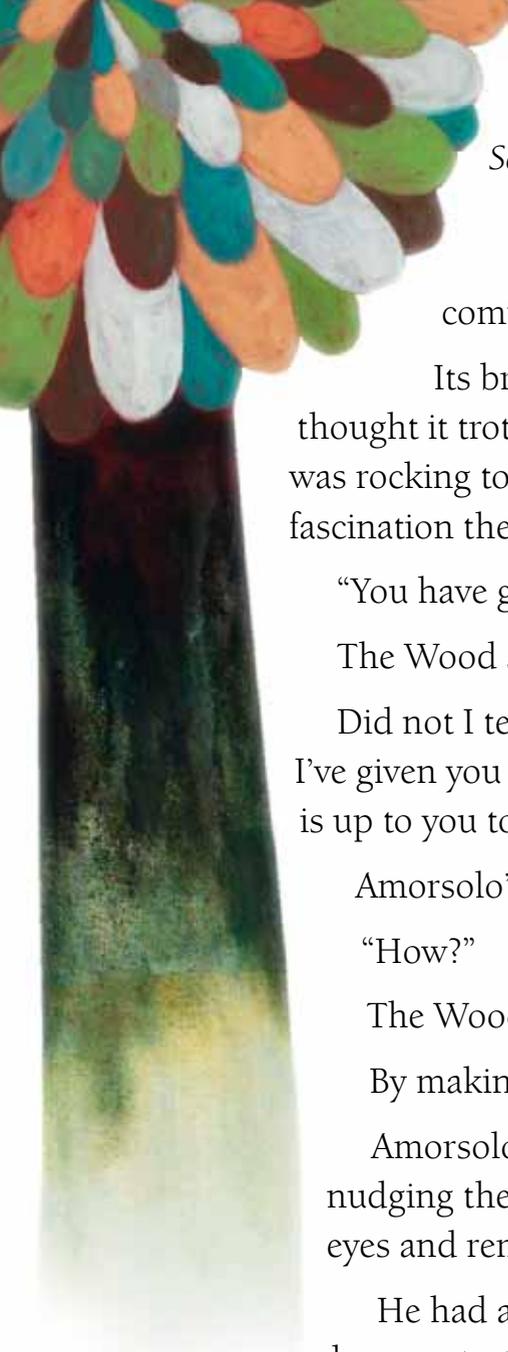
At daybreak, Amorsolo was at the river, dressed in his best clothes. Last night, he had looked at the mirror, and realized how ridiculous he looked with his long hair and bald patches. So that morning, he had shaven off his hair.

Beside the river, he paced back and forth with his violin and bow.

Finally, the Wood appeared.

I give you another gift.





*Sol*

Amorsolo heard the creaking of wood and saw a horse coming out of the forest.

Its brown coat gleamed in the Sun's light, but Amorsolo thought it trotted oddly. When it came closer, he realized it was rocking to and fro. Amorsolo's face changed from shock to fascination then to anger.

"You have given me a toy!"

The Wood shook his head and sighed.

Did not I tell you that I could only make things from my being? I've given you a wooden horse because I cannot fashion a real one. It is up to you to make it real.

Amorsolo's eyes widened.

"How?"

The Wood motioned to the violin.

By making your own kind of magic.

Amorsolo looked at his violin and his bow. The wind blew, nudging the wooden rocking horse closer. He looked at the horse's eyes and remembered.

He had a rocking horse like this when he was a child, just as he was starting his lessons with his mother. He would practice playing on the horse, and he would close his eyes and imagine he was in a faraway place where dreams came true.

Without hesitation, he now climbed on his back. Cradling the violin on the length of his left arm, he lifted the bowstring.

He played everything he felt. He played about desires wished on dead stars. He floated in that tiny space between dreams and





reality. He was in a hall with red velvet curtains and a green carpet. He was high in the clouds. He was playing for the Sun who was listening.

Suddenly a bowstring broke. Instinctively, he reached for his hair. But before he could realize that he was completely bald, he was shocked to see that he was really floating among the clouds!

“Ahh!”

Amorsolo nearly fell off his horse when he looked down at the river, reduced to the size of a puddle. His horse neighed a warning; its tail swished and patted him on the back.

Don't stop.

And Amorsolo looked in front of him and beheld the face that had given him the reason to play.

Please continue.

*Sol*

He couldn't move. He was drowning in the swirling colors of the Sun's eyes. The colors shifted and Amorsolo saw his own dumbstruck reflection. He forced himself to speak.

"I-I beg your pardon. My bowstring broke and I have no more hair to replace.... aaw!"

The horse had thumped his back with its tail.

"...the broken string...aaw!"

This time, the horsetail had really whipped his back. Amorsolo grabbed it in his hand, and when it swished back to place, he was clutching a few strands of its hair. He had an idea.

"Just a moment, please."

And Amorsolo quickly strung the horsehair in his bow. He continued playing.

When he was finished, the Sun was staring at him, enraptured.

What wonderful magic! What is it called?

"A song," Amorsolo breathed. "I have made it for you."

For me? The Sun gazed at him. No one has ever made a song for me. She smiled. And it's made of little pieces with different sounds, isn't it?

"Pieces? Oh, I see. You mean notes. Like this."

And Amorsolo played a note, sweet and clear.

Beautiful.





“Not as beautiful as you.”

The Sun giggled.

“And each note has its own name,”  
Amorsolo hurriedly explained, abashed by his forwardness.

What is the name of that note you just played?

“Sol.”

Because I am more beautiful than that note, I deserve to have its name, she teased.

Amorsolo blushed.

From that day on, Amorsolo rode his horse and serenaded the Sun, who quickly fell in love with his music.

The Moon looked at all this in disgust. He thought of a way to win back his beloved. He knew he had to act quickly.

That day, while the Sun was setting, the Moon rose.

The young man has captured your heart, I see.

The Sun sighed dreamily. He has magic. He played me songs. He is different from anyone here in the heavens.

But my dear, he is a mere mortal. The Moon took her hand. I have loved you since the heavens were made.

*Sol*

Pouting, the Sun withdrew her hand.  
You have nothing new to offer me.

But I do.

And the Moon brought out a crown,  
so bright and golden, it made the Sun  
cover her eyes.

I have crafted this from my own beam,  
from the glow harnessed from my depths.  
It is my light, and I share it with you.

The Sun took it, awed by its blinding  
radiance.

If you accept it, we will be sharing  
one light and we will be forever bonded.

The Sun knew what this meant.  
Amorsolo's music flashed in her ears and  
for a moment, her heart ached. But when  
she saw her reflection, ephemeral on the  
crown's shiny surface, she knew what she  
wanted.

The following day, Amorsolo rode his  
horse towards the sky. But he had not even  
reached the clouds when he felt the blazing  
heat. He could not breathe. In desperation,  
he played a note.

Amorsolo?

“Sol! Show me your face so I will be  
relieved of this insufferable heat.”



Here I am, wearing the Moon's light.  
Don't I look more beautiful than  
ever?

Amorsolo covered his  
eyes with his arm.

"Where are you?"  
He gasped, "What has  
happened to you?"

And the Sun came  
closer, with her light  
thousands of times  
brighter, her old gentle  
warmth now turned to  
deadly, fiery heat.

I am wed to the  
Moon. We share the same  
light. I'm now brilliant and  
dazzling!

Amorsolo's violin strings  
snapped and curled up from the heat.

He could feel his skin on fire. His horse was crying out in pain.  
Before he knew it, he was falling.

A lush treetop broke his fall. Amorsolo looked down and saw that  
his horse had turned back into wood, in splinters and ashes on the  
ground. His violin was burnt black. He longed to cry but the Sun had  
dried his tears even before they fell.

The Sun shines now not gently, but fiercely. It is impossible to see  
her beauty because of her blinding radiance. Her heat scorches and

*Sol*

burns, but she continues to shine everyday, convinced that she is the most beautiful thing in the sky.

She still longs for Amorsolo's songs, even after he has departed and returned to the ground. They say a huge tree has grown on top of where he lays, its sturdy trunk in rich mahogany. When the wind blows through its branches, a singular note is heard, whooshing clear across the woods. But it no longer reaches the heavens.

