

The Potter

A long time ago, there was a village—a small place sheltered between the forest and the river, below the steep where vines grew wild among brambles. Although small, the village bustled with travelers passing through and across the steep to lands unknown. Along the westward edge of forest worked a potter. His hands were cracked like shattered clay from all the work. Yet, no matter how hard he toiled, the orders piled up without end. Unless he could learn to grow arms like an olive tree grows branches, he'd need to hire someone to help him.

He had tried apprentices before. They had skill and could talk at length about white clay versus red clay, or how watery the slip needed to be, or how fast to spin the wheel. And yet, he never quite trusted them to handle the work, and do the job as he would do it. That is to say, the right way. It seemed straightforward to him, but inevitably the apprentice would leave in a couple of months, much to the relief of them both.

Troubled and buried in work, the potter finally decided he'd try something new. If he couldn't guide another's hands by their elbows, he'd have to try to guide them through the heart. He didn't need another version of himself; he needed only find someone who could care as much as he did about the people who bought his pottery.

Quietly he went through the market looking for someone—someone who understood what it meant to be committed to others. Then he saw her, a young woman from a farm carefully cleaning and stacking every pepper and zucchini that came off the back of her father's cart. The stall looked wonderful because of her.

He offered her a job on the spot. She protested. She couldn't spin a potter's wheel any better than she could spin the earth on its axis. But he persisted, and she seeing nothing but decades of vegetables lined up in front of, relented and gave into the hope of something different.

He sat her in front the wheel and threw a slab of clay on it. "Spin it," he said. She started tentatively and the clay started to wobble and dance. Delighted she spun it faster until the clay flew out of control and splatter all over her and the potter. Crestfallen and covered in mud, she got up to leave—it had been foolish to believe at all. The Potter immediately sat her back down again at the wheel. "That was a good mistake," he said, "Do it again."

So she did. It was eighty—maybe a hundred—times before she managed an awful ugly pot. The potter immediately stole it away for her before she could collapse it down again. He fired it in the kiln, and when it cooled, brought it back filled with wine. They toasted to another good mistake. "Make another," he said. For the first time, she believed she could be a potter.

Each mistake quickly forgiven made her trust him more. And each time she returned with gusto to the wheel, gave him confidence that his gamble on her would pay off. He'd see her working late against the dying light of day, and every time he'd bring her something to eat and drink to encourage her.

Whenever he could, he'd introduce her to his friends and clients: the writer, the baker, the vintner, the caravan driver. When they'd leave he'd explain: "Our job is to make something empty; their job is to fill it."

After months and months, she finally made a decent jar. The customer looked it over, leaned close to the potter and whisper out the side of his mouth, "She's better than you, y'know." The potter scoffed in jest, but inside he couldn't be more proud.

One night during the hottest heat of summer, the villagers were out in the square when suddenly the old monk burst from church, "Fire! Fire! In the narthex."

Everyone sprang into action, forming a line between river and the church. People ran to grab everything they could: feed buckets, prized chalices, basins, tubs, vases, bowls, urns, jars, pots, cups—even ink pots. Anything that could carry water in it.

Sadly, there just wasn't enough to carry all that water to the fire. Someone cried out, "Unless we bring the church down to river to drink, it'll burn up by dawn."

The potter snapped to his senses. He grabbed the apprentice and dragged her to the shop. There in the back storage, lining every wall, was every poorly-made pot she ever created—a thousand failures that could all hold water.

They ran back and forth bringing out every failed mistake they could until, exhausted, there was a steady stream of ugly pots carrying water to the fire.

By dawn the fire was out. The narthex was ruined but nothing else, including, most importantly, the stain glass of the Virgin and John the Baptist that rested above the altar. And at every step between the church and the river lay a misshapen, ugly pot.