

THANK YOU, OLIVER

by
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I met Oliver the summer before I turned eight years old. But I'd heard about him long before then. My mom had told me the story of his trek to safety during World War II; and my dad always reminded me that my favorite snowshoes had been made by Oliver 40 years earlier. To me, Oliver always stood for some grand image of Up North and the group of hippies that had followed him to the Kobuk Valley in search of true and simple lives.

That summer in Fairbanks, Alaska, my mom and I were staying with Chris Todd, yet another member of my extended Kobuk River Valley family. I was taking dance classes in town and my mom was running—trying to get away from an emotionally hectic winter in Kotzebue.

Halfway through our time in Fairbanks, Chris informed us that Oliver would be coming out of the hills for doctors' visits and would be staying there with us all. Mom and Chris talked for hours about Oliver: his story, his effect on the Kobuk Valley group, where he was living these days. When he arrived, I was nervous. I was already a shy seven-year-old, and Oliver was so quiet and thoughtful. He seemed unapproachable upon our first meeting. I was upset—I wanted to know more about him. I'd been expecting someone like the rest of the Kobuk Valley group: always eager to share their stories and reminisce with my parents.

At breakfast one morning before dance classes, I was sleepily swallowing my Cheerios and milk when Oliver walked in and lowered himself into the chair opposite me. He set down his plate and tin cup. I curiously examined his plate—it didn't really look like breakfast to me. I hoped he would talk, I'd been searching the lines of his face, wishing he would tell me a story. Just then, he looked up and caught me staring. Embarrassed, I went back to my Cheerios.

Later, as Mom packed my lunch, I was sitting on the floor trying to coax the cat, Rascal, into allowing me to pet him. Oliver crouched down next to me, with a thin piece of leather between his fingers. He tied a quick knot, flawlessly remembering every step. I noted his ease with the knot despite his shaking hands. Turning to Rascal, Oliver waved the leather. Rascal's eyes were immediately glued to the string, and mine were glued to Rascal. Rascal jumped up and batted the string and bit it and rolled over. It was magic to my seven-year-old mind. Oliver pulled the string away and Rascal returned to his nonchalant, cool attitude. Smiling, Oliver handed me the string and said “For you.” I waved the string in front of Rascal, just as Oliver had done. Instant action. I giggled at the sudden transformation. Just then, Mom called me to the qanisaq. It was time to go. I thanked Oliver, and tucked the leather string safely into my jeans pocket.

In the car, I relayed the story to Mom. And all during dance class, I thought about that soft string

waiting in my pocket. I couldn't wait to be finished—so I could play with the cat and see Oliver. I hoped he would be there and not at the doctor's office like he had been for the past few days.

Mom picked me up at three o'clock. She'd gone for a run behind Chris's house again. We listened to music in the car, turning it up whenever she found a Rolling Stones song. Pulling into the driveway, I undid my seat belt, grabbed my bag and impatiently waited for Mom to go in the house. As we walked up to the porch, Chris crawled from underneath the house—there was something wrong with the water pipes again.

Mom stopped to talk to him, and then I was too impatient. I ran up the steps, kicked off my shoes in the qanisaq and rushed through the kitchen. Rascal was sunbathing in the living room. I showed him the string and tugged it across the floor. He was fascinated. After a few minutes, I started to wonder where Oliver was. Coaxing the cat around the house with my string, I looked for Oliver. Just as I started to give up hope, he walked in from the field behind the house.

In one hand he gripped his cane, and in the other he held a dozen dandelion stems. Oliver sat on the floor again as I watched curiously, the cat forgotten. He twisted two stems into loops and then, with another fancy knot, attached the two. He held it out to me. "It's a dandelion chain. Would you like to learn?" I sat next to him and he demonstrated again. I tried to do the same, and on the second try I had my own chain. Before long, Oliver said that I needed to gather more stems. "Just a few," he said as I ran outside.

For the next few days, Oliver and I ate breakfast at the same time. After dance class, I rushed into the house to find him. Often he was in the field out back, weaving between Chris's gardens and gazing longingly at the dog yard. We made more dandelion chains, and he showed Mom and I his pieces of leather. He explained to us how to make moccasins with them. I was riveted. Before Mom and I left that weekend, Oliver had promised to make moccasins for Mom and I, and I had promised (maybe just to myself) that I would keep making dandelion chains.

Today, I don't remember how to make dandelion chains, and I've long since lost the pieces of leather from Oliver. But I remember his quiet kindness. I remember his ease with knots and skin sewing. Most of all, I remember Oliver's wisdom and the way he captured a room. Though he was quiet, whenever he spoke, everything seemed to stop and listen—the grasses, the dandelions, the chickadees, the spruce trees, and me. So every time I use my old snowshoes, I run my fingers along the leather straps and think of Oliver.