

Christopher Wood-Robbins
Boys And Women

Recovering from back surgery at Boston Hospital, Olivia reclined in her bed and watched an old episode of Sanford and Son on the Retro Channel. It was an extraordinarily sharp picture, even if the TV did resemble a dental X-ray. The only thing that could be better would be a handsome prince rescuing her from the monotony of being in a white room hooked up to heart-monitoring equipment. Or, never mind the prince; she just wished that one of her co-workers from the Newbury Inn homeless shelter would visit her.

A nasty suspicion haunted the back of Olivia's mind. Even though she was a top-notch cook, and fed hundreds of poor and homeless people each day, she often wondered if she was really appreciated at all. Maybe her liberal "sisters", who ran the shelter, didn't care much about black folk like her, despite all claims to the contrary. She had been in this depressing hospital for a week so far, not counting the actual surgery, and hardly anyone, save her family, dropped by.

The *Sanford* episode, where Fred the junk dealer finally got his high school equivalency diploma, was wrapping up. Olivia was trying to decide whether she should continue watching TV, or turn it off and put her radio on instead, when a nurse poked her head in the door and called out, "Olivia, you have a visitor".

At that moment, a young white boy walked in. He wore black pants and a T-shirt that read "Say No to Drugs; You're Already Screwed Up Enough Without Them". He stopped at the foot of the bed and held up a vase of red and yellow tulips. At first Olivia didn't recognize him, but then again, it would take a while for her to remember anything, with the medication the doctors gave her. Then the young man spoke "Hi, Olivia, I found out what happened when I came in to scrub the pots this morning."

Suddenly Olivia remembered. This kind young man was none other than Neil, one of the most dedicated volunteers the Newbury Inn could boast. Neil was quite a character. Sometimes he would draw coloring pages for the guest's children, then put blank rectangles (to represent hanging works of art) in those pages; encouraging the kids to make up their own pictures. Sometimes, during Halloween, he would dress up as a superhero and attempt to fly in the air, then when he fell on the floor, delivered the punch line "I forgot that this is reality!". Olivia specifically recalled the time when Neil embraced and comforted a scared woman from India, then ran to find a staff member who could assist her further. True, he was a bit awkward, and often reminded her of some overgrown child, but still he was a good loyal worker.

Olivia's voice trembled as she sat up, "Ah! Oh, yes! Neil! I'm so glad to see you! Who told you I was here?"

"No one," replied Neil. "I read it on the kitchen's bulletin board this morning. Here, I brought these for you". He walked over to the night table beside her bed and put the flowers next to the get-well card from her parents. That done, he kneeled down next to Olivia.

A wave of joy washed over Olivia. "Thank you, Lord, thank you for send-

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ing this gentleman," she thought. Neil leaned over and kissed Olivia's cheek. Mindful of her delicate condition, he gently folded his arms around her as her tears began flowing. "You're too sweet and beautiful to be hurting this way", Neil murmured as he held her in his arms. "Here, lean on me. I'm here for you."

"I'm so glad you came to see me," Olivia sobbed. Neil tenderly rocked her back and forth and whispered whatever he could think of to say. "I am not worthy to hold a wonderful angel like you. I just hope they do a good job repairing your wings." Even though Neil's comments were a bit awkward, Olivia was grateful for the compassionate love and support he was pouring into her.

On the TV, another golden oldie, *Love American Style*, came on. In this particular skit, set in 1933, Jerry Orbach and Bernadette Peters portrayed a mob couple running from the law or something like that. "Now, I got to ask you" Neil exclaimed, springing to his feet and gesturing at the screen. "Why are these romantic stories always portraying 'girls and men?' I know that many grown women think of themselves that way, but doesn't that sound a bit creepy to you?"

Olivia smiled patiently at Neil. She figured that maybe Neil was just being his usual wise-guy self. In any case, she had enough of television for one day. Reaching for the remote control, she asked Neil, "Do you mind if I turn this off"? Neil replied, "Not at all. Go ahead". Olivia clicked the TV set off and put the remote control on her night table. Neil continued his philosophical musings. "Seeing as how they're always talking about girls and men, shouldn't they also portray 'boys and women'? It would only sound fair to me!"

Olivia just couldn't picture this. Men were supposed to be the same age or older than the women they dated! Neil was 25 years old to her forty-seven; young enough to be her son. But just the same, her heart was all aflutter when he held her hand and gazed into her eyes with genuine admiration. It seemed like, had she given permission, his ivory soul would willingly melt into her ebony one.

For the next twenty minutes Olivia talked while Neil sat beside her and held her hand. She spoke about her happy memories; playing hopscotch and jump rope with her childhood friends Yolanda and Linda, her attempts at baking red velvet cakes, the wide open smile of gratitude on her Daddy's face when she finally got the recipe right, her mother teaching her the politeness of saying "hello" and "goodbye" to guests before running out to play ("Uh, excuse me young lady,..."), and her years of singing in her African Methodist church choir. Neil smiled at her tenderly and gave an occasional nod of his head for acknowledgment. Olivia still couldn't get over the way Neil looked upon her with awe, even though she wore a white hospital tunic, instead of a flowing romantic dress, and was recovering from a broken back on top of it all.

"Wow, that's wonderful!", Neil chimed in. "I wish I could get a recording of your church singing and play it on my radio show!" Before Olivia could ask what he was talking about, Neil continued. "Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you, when I'm not painting houses or volunteering, I have a Saturday evening slot at this community radio station. You should tune in sometime, 88.5 from 8pm until 1am, that's my show!" He glanced at his wrist

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watch and added, "I got to go and get ready! My shift starts in an hour. But before I leave, I can give you one more thing".

With that, he hastily picked up the Bible on Olivia's night table and trembled with anticipation as he turned the pages back and forth. When he finally found what he was looking for, he began reciting the 23rd Psalm to her. Once more, Olivia was amazed. This free-thinker was the last person she ever expected to be religious in any way shape or form. By the time Neil got to the last sentence, both he and Olivia spoke in unison while holding hands, "...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen."

Tired out, Olivia reclined back into her pillow. Neil leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'm off to my radio gig now. Get well soon and God bless you". As he walked away, Neil smiled and gave Olivia one more tender glance. To Olivia, the look almost seemed to be one of longing.

Later that night, Olivia woke up and put on headphones. She tuned her radio dial to the station Neil had mentioned. His voice came through surprisingly professional for someone who often carried himself like an overgrown kid. "Thank you for tuning in to 88.5 FM, that was Janis Ian's classic *"At Seventeen"*. My heart goes out to so-called "ugly duckling girls"; I mean, there's situations in this song that we ugly duckling *guys* can relate to, also!"

Upon hearing this, Olivia was stunned. She got the sense that Neil was being a good sport about some bad thing he went through. Men rarely, if ever, admitted to feeling any kind of hurt. She wanted to hold him in her arms, as he had done with her, and put an end to whatever rat-race of self-doubt he had to endure.

"And now, this goes out to a special lady. One whom I have great pleasure working with at the Newbury Inn shelter! Here's a double-play of *Sweet Honey in the Rock*, on 88.5 FM, WVPA, The Voice of the People! Olivia, this is for you!"

A few moments later, as the *Sweet Honey* song "*Women Should Be a Priority*" segued into another, titled "*All Praise is Due to Love*", Olivia drifted off to sleep, happy and content for knowing that a gentle prince (or at least a kind-hearted friend) was looking out for her. Perhaps there was a place in love stories for "boys and women" after all.

This love story is dedicated to the staff, volunteers and guests of the Women's Lunch Place in Boston, MA. It is one of the cooks, known as "Queen Oliver", upon whom I base the Olivia character.