



an OLIVE TREE for *Evelyn*

And the Perfect Memory in Calabria

BY MILES RYAN FISHER

It was our first Christmas together and as she opened her gift, her eyes grew wide. She opened a box to see several aluminum containers of olive oil. Then she removed the picture of her name—**EVELYN**—written in black marker on a tag that hung from an olive tree. She unfolded the accompanying letter, which explained to her that, deep in Calabria, there stood an olive tree more than a century old that now bore her name. The containers of olive oil came from the olives that grew in her adopted tree's grove. For one year, this tree would be *her* tree. A nature-lover to her core, Evelyn smiled her way through reading the letter as I stood there waiting for her final reaction to a gift I knew I'd nailed. She looked up from the letter.

"You know what this means," she said.

"What?" I asked.

"We have to go visit my tree."

The moment she said that, I knew



exactly where I would one day propose to her. After all, Italy was where we'd met just four months before on an August night in Rome in 2017.



On that August night, my friend and I entered an Irish bar named *Scholars*, located a block away from Piazza Venezia. We began tasting various types of the Irish whiskey, our salute to a long day of touring the Eternal City. It was day three of our eight-day trip that consisted of four days in Rome and four in Sorrento. As we bantered with the Irish bartender, we found out that Sunday nights were for karaoke, something that interested neither of us. At 10:30 p.m., the stage opened to the singers.

The first singer, a slightly stout older man wearing slacks and suspenders, shuffled on the stage and kicked off karaoke night in courageous fashion by crooning some Sinatra. After him, another singer took the stage, followed by another. Then the fourth singer



A summertime view from Santa Maria dell'Isola Monastery of Tropea's beach and cliffs.

stepped on stage, and the moment I saw her, I knew I needed to know her. But once the music started and she offered patrons a sweet, honey-like rendition of Dolly Parton's "Jolene," I realized that there were other guys who wanted to know her, too.

After she sang the song's final notes, I maneuvered my way across the bar's crowded floor and introduced myself to her. I told her that my friend and I were visiting from the United States and then found out that she and her friend were visiting from Aachen, a mid-sized city in northwest Germany. Once we'd started talking, we didn't stop. Our conversation took hold over the rest of the night and even led us into some open space onto the barroom floor once the older man shuffled back onstage to offer a reprisal of Ol' Blue Eyes. We danced and drank and lost ourselves in conversation until the bar closed. Afterward, we walked to Piazza Barberini and then up Via Veneto, where we sat down across from Villa Borghese. There, we continued talking through the night until the sun began to rise above the gardens.

The following evening, my last night in Rome before my friend and I were to leave for Sorrento, I stood at the base of the Spanish Steps, anxiously awaiting Evelyn for what would be our first date. That night, we led our friends on a *passeggiata* through Rome, stopping in Piazza Navona for cocktails and ending by the Tiber River for gelato. That was where we parted. She returned to Germany, and I returned stateside.



Originally built on what was an island in the 4th century, Tropea's Santa Maria dell'Isola Monastery has been rebuilt many times, going through several incarnations.



But the distance didn't keep us apart. We messaged each other every day, and soon we arranged our first video chat—a call that lasted four hours. Three months after we'd met in Rome, we rendezvoused in Paris. Then Evelyn came to visit me for the first time in Washington, D.C., landing two days after Christmas and opening her gift to see her olive tree in Calabria. One year—and one Evelyn olive tree re-adoption—later, I began to look for an engagement ring. It didn't take long for me to find the right one, a brilliant deep blue sapphire between diamond trillions set in a platinum band.

We began planning our trip to meet her olive tree that spring. We'd each fly into Naples, pick up our car rental, and spend a few days in Pompeii before driving five hours south to Tropea, a seaside Calabrian town with mesmerizing cliffs and a postcard-worthy monastery perched alone on a bluff. From there, we would make a day trip to Feroletto Antico, the rural Calabrian town about an hour



The path into the Melia Grove, TRE Olive's oldest olive grove with trees more than a century old.

northeast of Tropea where Evelyn's tree stood.

I'd contacted Joe Maruca, one of three partners who own and operate TRE Olive, the family-owned company that opened its first olive mill in 1934 and offers olive trees for adoption. I asked him for specific directions to the Melia Grove, the oldest of TRE Olive's groves, rich with olive trees born long before our own great-grandparents. Then I let him in on my secret: We weren't *just* visiting Evelyn's olive tree ... I was going to propose to her there.

Although about 50 visitors meet their adopted olive trees every year, TRE Olive had never had an actual *marriage proposal* at one of their trees. Thrilled, Joe sent us directions to their mill, where we would meet Diego, another of the three owners, who oversees the olive groves and could guide us to Evelyn's tree. Then Joe went a step further for the special occasion. He contacted a personal friend who owns a Prosecco vineyard in northern Italy and asked him to send a bottle of Prosecco "Venti22due"—the same bottle sent to the Italian Embassy in the United States—so that Diego could present it to us once the moment unfolded.

As Evelyn and I were planning our trip, she began to research the possibility of finding work in the United States so that we could be together. It wasn't long before she grew discouraged at just how difficult it would be for her to find a job.

"I hope you have a Plan B," she told me.

"I don't just have a Plan B," I said. "I have a Plan A."

When she asked what I meant, I wouldn't tell her. All I said was, "Just wait. You'll see." Part of me wondered if I'd given away the surprise.



The field dogs that came to visit and land some snacks.



In April 2019, a year and a half after we'd met on that August night in Rome, we met once again in Italy—this time in Naples. We spent the first days of our trip in Pompeii, touring two thousand-year-old ruins. Then we drove south along the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea, starting in Campania, passing through a short stretch of Basilicata, and reaching the Calabrian town of Tropea.

On the morning of our second day in Tropea, while Evelyn was preparing for our day trip to the olive grove, I snuck the sapphire ring out of my luggage and slipped it into my jeans pocket. We packed a full picnic into my backpack and then made the drive over bumpy country roads to Feroletto Antico. We arrived at the mill where TRE Olive pressed its olives to see several pallets of aluminum containers, the kind we'd received full of fresh olive oil.

We met Diego and followed him along some dirt roads that weaved through the olive groves until he parked by an indistinct entrance to the Melia Grove. He opened the gate, and we followed him down a path that



Evelyn showing off her engagement ring.

led us straight to Evelyn's olive tree. The moment we saw her, we took in just how wondrous she looked in real life—with two separate trunks whose olive branches overlapped to make her appear as one full, abundant tree.

Evelyn and I walked up to her and ran our fingers over her 100-year-old bark. Evelyn was elated in that moment as I stood there, my hands clammy, my stomach knotted.

"You know how you've been so worried about finding a job so we can be together?" I asked.

She nodded.

"And how you told me that you hoped I had a Plan B, and I told you, 'I don't have a Plan B, I have a Plan A,?'"

She nodded.

I slid my hand into my jeans pocket, feeling for the engagement ring.

"Well," I said, "are you ready for Plan A?"

I took the dark blue sapphire from my pocket.

"Will you marry me?" I asked.

Evelyn started to shake as she said, *Yes*.

I steadied her hand, slid the ring on her finger, and kissed her.

Diego pulled the bottle of Prosecco out of his bag and handed it to us along with a couple of glasses. He took a few pictures for us and then headed back to the mill, telling us to simply close the open gate when we left.

Evelyn and I settled beneath her olive tree and took our picnic out of my backpack. The goat cheese, the sun-dried tomato spread, the jar of olives, loaf of bread, and of course, olive oil. As we began eating, four field dogs appeared. They cautiously approached

us, and once they were within reach, we tossed them a few pieces of our picnic food. Before long, they were lying beside us getting their bellies scratched. One even snuck behind our tree and, in one brazen move, grabbed hold of my backpack—still with food inside, including a package of salami—and attempted to drag it away.

As we sat there, a newly engaged couple, picnic and prosecco beside us, field dogs among us, I could tell that this moment in Calabria was Evelyn's perfect memory.

Then she looked at me and asked the same question that she'd asked when she originally opened the Christmas gift that was her olive tree. "You know what this means, right?"

"What?" I asked.

"We have to come back to visit my tree."

Which meant that I'd have to re-adopt Evelyn's olive tree every year for what will turn into the rest of our lives.

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Evelyn and Miles standing in front of her olive tree.