

# The Myrtle Tree and Pomegranate-Shaped Mirror

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Once upon a time, a loving and happy couple lived on the outskirts of a village, nestled at the top of a mountain. Their window took in the expansive view of a forest that wove its way across the mountain. Many villagers did not dare to enter the forest, believing it was ruled by dark powers.

The couple longed for a baby girl to complete their family. Unlike the other villagers, the woman loved the forest and went there often. One day on her way back from her walk, she heard a little bird sing above her and to her surprise, the bird flew and spoke to her:

“Dear lady, find the myrtle tree, find the old woman, answer correctly, and you will be granted your wish.”

Unafraid, she followed the bird’s advice and went deep into the forest, deeper than she had ever travelled before. She was just starting to think that she had imagined the bird when a beautiful, sweet and cool smell wafted through the air. In front of her was a tree laden with white flowers.

“How have I never noticed you before?” She stepped closer to admire the beautiful flowers and inhale their intoxicating aroma.

A calloused hand gripped her shoulder, and a deep and eerie voice growled:

“Do you wish to steal the flowers in my garden?”

The woman turned her head and saw a goddess-like older woman dressed in midnight blue with threads that twinkled like the stars. Looking as though she had lived a thousand years, her face shone just like the light of the moon.

“Forgive me, I had no intention of stealing. A little bird told me to seek out the myrtle tree, to find you and to pray to receive a baby girl.”

The old woman looked her directly in the eye.

“If this is so, you will have to answer this question: What is the soul’s secret?”

“I can’t speak on behalf of everyone,” said the woman, “but I do so wish to follow the dance of my own soul.”

The old woman clicked her fingers, and a tree appeared behind her, so tall that its crown was lost in the sky.

“Please come inside!” The old woman carried her years with the lightness of the blue sky and white clouds.

The tree’s inside was cavernous, full of books, an eternal fire and a tsoukali, full to the brim with nourishing food. The aromas of cinnamon and clove from the tsoukali, together with the smell of wood and books, enchanted the woman.

“I will share with you a song and dance and a tale you must share with your daughter. The soul is a garden, and you must always remember to sing, dance and breathe so the flowers can grow. Take this myrtle branch, and drink the tea that you make from its leaves and flowers. Lastly, sow the seeds in your garden when the moon is full.”

So indeed, a baby girl, Mirtiya, was born soon after. Along with the baby, a small myrtle tree appeared. Everyone was overjoyed.

True to tradition, silver coins were thrown into the bathing basin at the baby's first bathing ceremony. Through the window a bird flew and threw something small from its beak into the basin. In the evening, as the water drained from the basin, the mother found a two-sided, silver, pomegranate-shaped mirror. The mirror shone in the moonlight—on one side shone the face of the baby daughter, and on the other side, that of the mother.

As she grew, the girl and her mother took many walks in the forest. The mother shared many stories, including that of the old woman of the forest who many people spoke of but few had actually seen.

On cold winter nights, their favourite game to play was Little Mirror. Mother and daughter would sit opposite each other, turn the pomegranate mirror and ask:

“Mirror, my little mirror, who is the kindest and bravest of them all?”

“You!” they would both answer together and burst out laughing.

Years passed, and the mother was struck down with a grave illness. One afternoon, she called out to Mirtiya:

“My precious daughter, it will soon be time for me to leave this world,” she said as she handed Mirtiya the mirror. “Live with kindness and bravery, and do what will make your soul dance.”

Time passed, and Mirtiya's father married another woman, who herself had a son. This woman was afraid of the forest and its darkness within. “It will steal your soul,” she warned Mirtiya and forbade her to go there. Slowly, the laughter that had once filled the house ceased all together. Only the pomegranate mirror brought Mirtiya joy.

One quiet evening, Mirtiya was in her room looking at her mirror. Sobbing as she grieved her mother, the pomegranate mirror reflected her pain with autumnal leaves and withered flowers falling from the trees in her beloved forest.

Her stepmother, fearful of any gift that had come from the forest, burst into the room and grabbed the pomegranate mirror from Mirtiya. “This mirror brings darkness into your heart and into our home.” She locked the mirror in a dowry chest in her room.

That night, the stepmother talked to her husband: “I fear for Mirtiya. The magic charm her mother received from the forest brings her only such darkness. She must start a life of her own. Her mother would have surely wanted that.”

“Perhaps it is time for us to arrange for Mirtiya to marry,” her father sighed.

Overhearing this, Mirtiya knew she must leave for the forest. At dawn, she carefully opened the dowry chest with her hairpin and was reunited with her pomegranate mirror. She glided out of the house like a shadow. Only her beloved dog heard her leave, barking as she closed the gate. The household awoke, finding Mirtiya’s bed empty.

The stepmother was alarmed and went to her son, now a young boy. “Mirtiya has gone to the forest. My son, you must find her! Bring her back home before the villagers know she is missing,” she demanded.

He eventually found Mirtiya sleeping under a bay tree. He crept quietly behind her and tied her tightly with a rope. The little bird appeared again.

“To untie the rope, hold your breath and then shout loudly to make it unravel.”

Mirtiya did as the bird said, and the rope loosened and fell to the ground. Mirtiya immediately fled.



When the boy returned home without Mirtiya, his mother fell to the ground and wept. “Our household will be cursed if she doesn’t return,” she believed. “Take this sack, and capture her in it, so the villagers will not see you bringing her home.”

As Mirtiya walked along the path immersed once again in a nightingale’s song and the beauty of the forest, she failed to notice the stepbrother’s trap that was set with the sack in the undergrowth. She was captured again.

The boy made his way home with Mirtiya trapped in the sack.

As he walked, a deer followed close behind. The deer whispered to the girl:

“Don’t worry, Mirtiya, I will take your place so you will be free.”

“Mother, I have Mirtiya!” he said on his return. As he opened the sack, the deer leapt out, bucked and ran towards the forest. The stepmother was frantic. “What magic is this? What will become of us?!”

Mirtiya, meanwhile, walked deeper and deeper into the forest. Looking up, she saw a tree so tall it was lost in the sky, just like the one from her mother’s tales. A calloused hand gripped her shoulder.

“Who are you to try to break into my house?”

“Forgive me, good-hearted woman, I am Mirtiya.”

“Oh, Mirtiya! You must know the secret of the soul!”

“It is to follow the dance of our souls.”

“Feel free to stay as long as you want.”

Time passed, and one day Mirtiya was out collecting saffron from the edge of the forest. Her stepbrother was collecting wood for the fire and spotted Mirtiya in the distance. He ran home to tell his mother. “Go quickly,” she said. “Tell Mirtiya her father is on his deathbed and she must return immediately.”

The boy, accompanied by Mirtiya's dog, rushed to the edge of the forest. The dog ran into the girl's arms, spilling saffron stems on the ground.

"Mirtiya," the stepbrother called out, "I have something to tell you. Your father is seriously ill, and he wants to see you one last time." He ran and grabbed her by the arm to lead her home. "Come now!"

The bird appeared again and whispered in her ear, "It is not the truth he speaks." Mirtiya screamed and the dog grabbed her stepbrother's sleeve and dragged him away from the forest. Not to be deceived again, she fled into the woods, vowing never to return.

The boy returned alone again. His mother was furious. "We have to end this once and for all!" She grabbed an axe and struck the myrtle tree in the garden. Mirtiya, running through the forest, fell to the ground. The stepmother hit the tree again, snapping a branch of the tree. Mirtiya felt her wrist break and writhed with pain on the ground. The stepmother, about to strike again, felt a hand grab the axe.

"Enough of this superstition! Let Mirtiya have her freedom!" Her father wept as he tenderly wrapped the broken branches with cloth.

Mirtiya, bruised and broken, found her way back to the old woman and the safety of the tree. In time, she healed and became a healer herself. The myrtle tree in her father's garden bloomed again. He knew she was safe and well. Every time Mirtiya looks in her pomegranate mirror, on one side she sees her own image, and on the other, that of her mother. And so Mirtiya followed the dance of her soul and lived a life filled with kindness and with bravery.