

Olga and the Call of the Forest (Olga Et Le Cri De La Forêt)

Written and illustrated by Laure Monloubou, Amaterra (2020), 140 pp.

Target age group: +8

Genre: Fantasy

Interested publishers can contact: agent Sarah Daumerie
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Translation funding: Publishers can apply for CNL grants (applications open 3 times a year).

About: A sweet and suspenseful MG fantasy novel, in which young Olga manages to save her parents from a forest curse. This smart young girl is hard of hearing, but that doesn't hold her back from jumping in to save the day in the slightest. She can also count on the help of a worried elf and a grumpy cat who don't like one another at all!

This novel should be translated into English because the book offers a great quality fantasy with a strong and tender main character, who also happens to be deaf. Children deserve stories that represent us all in our wonderful range of diversity. *Foreign Rights Sold In Spanish, German, Italian & Turkish.*

Sarah Daumerie is a freelance agent who works with several French publishers and agencies, mainly on middle grade and young adult titles.

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SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Olga and the Call of the Forest By Laure Monloubou

**English translation
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Chapter 1

Olga was eight years old and she had moved house six times.

When you're eight, eating chocolate cake six times in your life isn't much, while brushing your teeth six times in eight years is hardly at all, but changing houses six times amounts to a lot in a young life like Olga's. Moving as often as this meant she kept her belongings to a minimum: Olga's bedroom fitted inside a small suitcase. So, whenever Bernard, her father, announced in the middle of breakfast: "My darlings! We're off on an adventure!" Olga had only to put away her notebooks, her pencil case, her four picture books, her box of coloured pencils, her blue rabbit, her five playing cards, her doll called Mirette, her dice, and she was ready! Next, Bernard would dismantle the bookcase in the living room, Fedora, Olga's mother, would gulp down her cup of tea and tidy it into a box, together with the teapot (still full of Russian blend that gave off a delicious aroma of orange and Christmas), kiss her husband, empty the fridge into the cool box, pack their clothes in another box, fold the camping chairs and rearrange her hairdo. Her husband would blow her a kiss as he loaded everything into the car. They would tie the sofa to the roof, stuff the mattresses into the back, pop Monsieur's cat litter on top, and all aboard, chocks away, I mean, hit the road, come what may!

Which explains how the three of them regularly found themselves on the front seat of their ancient Peugeot station wagon, 1957, inherited from a great-aunt who was very modern for her time. They would drive towards new horizons, leaving behind their past life...

Chapter 2

And that's precisely how our story begins, with a morning of setting off: Olga had scarcely finished eating her slice of buttered bread and jam, Fedora had scarcely finished brewing her tea, when Bernard, who had already swallowed his coffee, declared: "It's time to go!" On seeing her father take out the boxes, Olga understood what was going on. Soon, the old station wagon was full to bursting. This put Monsieur's nose whiskers out of joint, and ruffled his fur (although he didn't say anything). Olga had filled her little suitcase, so that her bedroom, or rather her ex-bedroom, was nearly empty: all that was left was the bedframe and matching white wardrobe. For the seventh time, the entire family was perched on the front seat of the station wagon, for the seventh time the three of them were back on the road, and, just as she did every time, Olga found herself wondering with no little excitement: *where are we going?*

They had already tested out the comfort of an English-style cottage, the cramped quarters of a maid's room in Paris, the modernism of an architect's house (complete with swimming pool), the simple pleasures of a bungalow in les Landes, the loftiness of a chilly castle, the cosiness of a chalet in the snow, and, finally, the practicality of a three-room flat with a fully fitted kitchen on the twelfth floor of an apartment block built in 1972. Where would they end up this time? Not that it mattered especially to Olga, when what she enjoyed was being on the front seat, between Mum and Dad, staring at the countryside, the towns, the hamlets, the people by the roadside parading past while staying on the spot. She enjoyed watching dusk fall, staring through the wide windscreen at the stars coming out, watching them twinkle; it seemed to her as if the car was about to take off and Dad would soon find them a fancy house on the moon. Olga drifted off to sleep with her cheek resting on Mum's arm, while guessing at the tales Mum span to keep Dad entertained.

"Here we are!" Bernard called out.

Olga was struggling to wake up, as a small sunbeam tickled her eyelids, softly trying to tease her eyes open.

"This house is extraordinary! It's even better than in the photo!" Bernard exclaimed. Then again, Bernard was ready to express wonder and enchantment at the drop of a hat, despite his well-advanced years (he was nearly thirty-eight).

"Bernard, it's amazing!" gushed Fedora, who also shared a taste for the fabulous.

“Ah, Fedora! I knew you’d like it!” said Bernard, kissing his wife, before turning to Olga.

Having stepped down from the car, their daughter was staring at the building: she had never seen anything like it, except perhaps in illustrated fairy tales or remarkable stories. This house was astonishing, one of a kind: ever so crooked and aged by time, the rain and the seasons. There were windows everywhere! Big ones, small ones, round ones, elongated ones, flat ones, oval ones, arched ones, triangular ones, open ones and closed ones! The house spanned three floors, with a balcony on the second and a tower at the top. Who hasn’t dreamed of living in a house with a tower? This tower was pointy with a tiled roof and weathervane, flying a flag decorated with a design Olga couldn’t distinguish from ground level.

“Let’s go inside, my poppets!” trilled Bernard, brandishing a bunch of keys.

[...]

Chapter 6

Olga helped herself to three portions of pudding, much to Bernard's and Fedora's surprise. This was out of character, but Olga had a plan: over-eating would make it easier to fake a tummy ache, and then she wouldn't have to join her parents for their after-lunch walk! Olga rarely lied to her parents, but she had to get to the bottom of this door business. And so, after lunch, she patted her tummy and looked up with big, sad, spaniel eyes...

"Oh, dearie me, Olga, you've over-indulged!" fretted Fedora. "Make yourself comfortable on the sofa."

Olga's plan was working like a dream.

"You must rest, my darling," Dad added, his hands on his daughter's shoulders, "We'll take a short stroll as far as the woods, and be back in no time."

"D'you think we can leave her, my treasure?"

"We won't be long, she needs to rest, and Monsieur can watch over her."

Monsieur opened one eye, licked a paw and wiped it behind his ear: they could count on him.

Olga limped to the sofa: she really was a very good actor. Then, with a downbeat expression, she flopped onto the cushions. Fedora gave her a big kiss on the cheek, and Bernard a peck on the neck. They waved before setting off from the kitchen. Olga waited a few minutes, until it felt safe to poke her head up: she could just make out her parents through the window, at the edge of the woods, about to disappear into trees.

Monsieur, who wasn't born yesterday, stared at her inquisitively. Olga put a finger to her lips – urging him to keep this as their secret – then she stood up and headed for the bedroom. Sighing, Monsieur stretched and followed Olga upstairs. He sensed something was afoot and took his mission very seriously.

Olga moved the bookshelf: yes, the small door was still there. Monsieur kept an eye on Olga, and while her readiness to expend this much energy was beyond him, he wasn't in the least surprised by the door – it takes a great deal to surprise a cat. Olga tried once more to open the door, but it remained firmly shut. If she could have, she would have put her ear against it and perhaps heard sounds coming from the other side... Except that Olga's ears didn't hear. She was born without being able to hear voices, or musical notes or even meows. Monsieur licked her hand to win her attention; she smiled and knocked on the door, three taps and perhaps, quite simply, someone would open up! She knocked again, four taps this time, but nothing happened. She didn't know what to do. There was the drastic option: smash the door

down with an axe, but best not go there – after all, would you like it if someone smashed down your front door to make your acquaintance? No? Well, there you go. These were the thoughts travelling to and fro inside Olga’s head as she pushed the bookcase back against of the wall.

She picked up her doll Mirette and lay down on her bed, with Monsieur curled up next to her. At which point, Olga fell fast asleep.

Chapter 7

When Olga woke up, it was dark outside, and Monsieur was no longer anywhere to be seen. She climbed out of bed and headed downstairs, only to find that none of the lights were on. A flick of the kitchen switch revealed nothing had moved, and the table wasn't cleared. Olga went upstairs again to check all the rooms in the house: nobody. Unable to call out or shout for help, she peered outside where she could still see the car; at least, she thought, her parents hadn't driven away. But nor had they come back from the woods, or they would have cleared the lunch things and come to give Olga a kiss, gently waking her up, to see if she was feeling better. Olga began to cry, she didn't know what to do and suddenly felt very lonely, she was sorry she hadn't gone on the walk with her parents, after all, she was sorry about lying to them, and now she was sobbing her eyes out. Monsieur's soft fur caressed his legs, she picked him up and hugged him tightly, burying his face in Monsieur's warm belly, feeling him purr, and this comforted her, she was not alone. Monsieur licked her cheeks to reassure her, but he didn't really understand what was going on either.

Being the fearless girl she was, Olga sat down at the kitchen table and tried to think, except that it's not easy to think when you're feeling upset. Monsieur sat on the table and looked at her, as if awaiting instructions, or chicken skin leftovers, who knows? Suddenly, Olga stood up, blew her nose loudly in a hankie and went back up to her bedroom. Monsieur leapt elegantly off the table and followed her. Olga positioned herself in front of the small bookshelf: she knew there was something behind the door and that, given the turn of events, she had to open it by whatever means possible. This little girl had one big personality! So, she shifted the bookshelf. Monsieur sniffed at the base of the tiny door. There *was* something; Olga moved in, nudging Monsieur out of the way; a small scrap of paper was sticking out from under the door. Olga snatched hold of it to take a closer look: it was an envelope, a teeny-tiny envelope, no bigger than a teeny-tiny stamp. On it, someone had drawn a microscopically small question mark. Everything was scrambled inside Olga's head and body: she felt confused and excited, scared and thrilled to be holding this envelope. Monsieur was growing impatient: *open it!* With great care, Olga peeled open the flap of the tiny envelope and removed a folded piece of paper. She unfolded it, but even then its size didn't amount to much at all: the page was filled with a series of miniature drawings. Somebody lived behind the door, and that somebody was trying to communicate with Olga...

Chapter 8

Olga positioned herself underneath the desk light, to get a better view of the tiny pictures on the piece of paper. The first drawing was of a man standing next to two pinecones on top of one another: Olga guessed straight away that this was the letter's author letting her know his height (I told you Olga was smart). The second drawing was of a tree. Olga frowned, a tree... She decided to keep going and return to the tree later, she enjoyed puzzles and would figure out the answer. There was also a cat, crossed out in red: Monsieur scowled and feigned interest in the next drawing, of the house, which was instantly recognizable by its three floors as well as the tower. The final drawing featured some kind of building, with lots of windows... and an arrow with a key drawn at the end.

There was no other house nearby, reasoned Olga, let alone an apartment block. So, what did this drawing represent? Monsieur sighed, he was beginning to find all these mysteries rather tedious: mealtime was coming up and there was no guarantee of getting fed. Olga kept pondering the tiny piece of paper, turning it around every which way, but no ideas were forthcoming.

Instead, she took out her notebook, tore off a sheet, grabbed a pencil and began to scribble: she drew a self-portrait and then she drew a pinecone at her feet, she also drew Monsieur (he spotted himself immediately) and next to them she drew two hearts in a beautiful shade of red: she wanted the little person to understand they weren't hostile. As the finishing touch, she drew the key and a question mark. Olga cast her eye over her handiwork and was pleased enough with it; she folded the piece of paper and slid it under the door. It disappeared instantly, caught by whoever lived just behind the door. Monsieur jumped down from desk, sniffed under the door and sneezed.

Chapter 9

Moments later, the piece of paper reappeared. Monsieur, who was on the lookout, pounced with his paws and carefully slid the scrap towards Olga, who unfolded it: a tiny heart had been added next to the drawing of Olga, while a few extra scribblings – such as smoke ushering from his ears and other places – completed the picture of Monsieur. The cat raised an eyebrow: what kind of nutcase was this fellow? But these details made Olga smile, and that had to be a good thing. Next to the drawing of the key was the picture of what Olga had, at first, mistaken for an apartment block: realising her error, she turned around. This was no apartment block but the desk in Olga's bedroom – with all the little drawers she had mistaken for windows!

It hadn't occurred to Olga that the key might be right there, under her nose. She jumped up, positioned herself in front of the desk and started opening the drawers one by one. The first one was empty, the second was filled with buttons, the third with wilted daisies, the fourth was empty... Monsieur scratched at the drawers and sniffed, beside himself... the fifth drawer was overflowing with paper fasteners, in the sixth were old used stamps, in the seventh a spool of thread, the eighth contained shells, the ninth a blue ticket from a merry-go-round ride... Monsieur sighed and sat down... the tenth contained sweet nothing, the eleventh a few specks of dust, the twelfth a pen lid, the thirteenth a single feather, the fourteenth some small pebbles, the fifteenth a piece of wool, the sixteenth... at the sixteenth, they stopped breathing: Monsieur looked at Olga, and Olga looked at Monsieur. In the sixteenth, there was a key, a dinky key just waiting for them! As Monsieur moved towards it, his whiskers quivered. No two ways about it, it was the key all right. Olga picked it up and found that, despite its tiny size, it was heavy and real. There was a label tied to it, on which was written: *Under no circumstances open the door.*

Olga hadn't yet learned to read.

She took the key over to the door, inserted it into the lock and turned it.

Chapter 10

The door slid open and Olga and Monsieur, both rooted to the spot, stared at it. A tiny hand appeared, waving a white cloth; Olga recognised this sign: “Stay calm, I come in peace, don’t kill me.” The tiny energetic hand never stopped shaking the piece of cloth. Olga and Monsieur glanced at one another, and Monsieur raised an eyebrow: at this rate, they weren’t going to get to the bottom of this business any time soon! So, he offered a friendly miaow. By way of a reply, he received a tiny ball to the forehead: a very small man, with a peashooter in his mouth, had just emerged through the door. He attacked again, and pop, Monsieur took a second ball between the eyes. Monsieur sighed in exasperation: did this fellow realise how easy it was for a cat like him to gobble up a gnome like that?

Monsieur went up to him, his muzzle almost touching the minuscule nose belonging to the little man, who froze; given the peashooter was still in his mouth, he tried to shoot again, but he was so tense that he swallowed the pea instead, his eyes betraying first fear then surprise, as he began to splutter and turn bright red. Olga scooped up Monsieur and held him firmly in her arms. She watched the little man gesticulating, he was coughing and thumping his chest and turning scarlet: things weren’t looking good at all, something had to be done! Olga grabbed him by the leg and turned him upside down, like a saltshaker: *what had in had to come out!* She shook him vigorously, and suddenly the pea fell to the floor. Olga smiled. How diddy he is! she thought. Sure enough, he was as tall as two pinecones, two *small* pinecones, he wore a white shirt, beige trouser and boots (shoesize: -10 junior?) It was a shame he wasn’t wearing a handsome elf’s hat, Olga reflected, because then he would have been picture perfect. The little man kept gesticulating and pointing at the ground, and when Olga kept on staring it only made him protest more vigorously!

Olga finally understood what the problem was - his head was still upside down – so she carefully set him back on his feet. He dusted himself off, smoothed his curly chestnut hair, cleared his throat and began to speak. Naturally, Olga couldn’t hear him, but ordinary mortals wouldn’t have heard anything either: his voice was so high-pitched that it was audible for only the most acute sense of hearing, such as a cat’s: Monsieur could hear him, but as we’ve established Monsieur was a cat, and – you know this as well as I do – untio proven otherwise, cats can’t talk! In short, things had reached an impasse. Olga smiled at the little man to make him understand that she was doing her best, while indicating that her ears couldn’t hear him. The tiny individual was becoming very cross and flustered about not being heard. He was still just as red in the face! Monsieur, for his part, was quite happy with not being able to speak: if

it meant repeating this kind of rubbish, no thank you! The little man broke off and disappeared behind the wall again. *Bother*, thought Olga, *we've upset him*. But Monsieur licked his paw, confident that this wasn't the last they'd seen of the rude and unpleasant fellow.

Chapter 11

Sure enough, after a few seconds the mini man was back, wearing a green cap, much to Olga's satisfaction. He carried with him some rolls of white paper. Monsieur sniffed the diminutive wall-dweller: he smelled of dandelion and flies which, to a cat, made him even less attractive. Olga gathered their early correspondence and spread the letters out on the floor: the small individual bent over them and pointed to the tree, eyes bulging, teeth clenched. What was it about that tree? Olga gave him a quizzical look: he proceeded to take out a small pencil from one of his pockets and draw more trees next to the first one. Soon, there was a whole row of tiny trees on the sheet of paper: a forest! These were the woods!

Olga's eyes misted over again, her parents were in the woods, so did this mean they were in danger? What was in those woods? Why was this happening to her? Why hadn't she gone with them? The little man gestured, mimed, sketched, and walked round and round in circles, Olga couldn't make head or tail of any of it, she was tired, the tears trickled down her cheeks. It was dark outside, and her only company was a cat and an elf she couldn't hear. She wanted to close her eyes and have everything return to how it was before. Monsieur approached Olga, he didn't know what to do, it was late and they were exhausted: let's sleep on it and we'll deal with this tomorrow, he thought. And he thrust himself into Olga's arms and cuddled her, while Olga wiped her nose and lay down on the floor, her eyes still fixed on the little man who was busy drawing, as if fired up by creative impulses, unable to stop scribbling. Olga tried to resist, but the combination of Monsieur's reassuring warmth and her own fatigue soon got the better of her. The last thing she registered before falling asleep was the little man tearing off the label attached to the key.

Chapter 12

Olga was woken by the soft morning light. She knew it hadn't all been a dream when she felt how sore her back was, and on seeing the tiny pieces of paper on the floor she deduced that her parents still weren't home. She rubbed her eyes to wake herself up some and rubbed her back to make her body feel less sore. The little man wasn't there either. When she caught Monsieur's gaze, she understood what really mattered: first things first, eat breakfast! She headed down to the kitchen, cleared the table, filled the sink with dirty dishes, took out two bowls, some milk, and chocolate, cut herself some bread, and tucked in. As a special treat, Monsieur was allowed to drink his milk on the table: you can bend rules in exceptional circumstances. Olga stared at Monsieur, who had always been by her side, and who had even been there before she was born. He consoled her and protected her. Olga took a deep breath, she was so glad to have Monsieur. He lapped up his milk enthusiastically, while staring at Olga in turn. He was building up his strength, since they were likely to have a long day ahead: one that might be treacherous, surprising in all likelihood and full-on, for sure. This was their day to find Olga's parents again, because otherwise... well, otherwise, what were they going to do, all alone, just the two of them?

Olga stroked Monsieur's head; it was time. They made their way back to the bedroom. Olga stared at the papers on the floor, Monsieur saw that he featured on the sheets of paper, but rarely in a flattering light: this tiny fellow, who smelled of dandelion, wasn't telling him anything useful. He would have to remain alert and watch over his young mistress. There were several new drawings, depicting the woods, the house and its tower, and you could even make out Olga and the elf. On one of the tiny pieces of paper, the elf had drawn a man and a woman. Dad and Mum! thought Olga. Hold on, where had that little person got to? The miniature door was shut. Olga knocked... Nothing. Perhaps he was in the tower? She stood at the bottom of the spiral staircase, took a breath and started climbing up. The room at the top was empty: all Olga could see was the memory of her father who had cavorted around this very room only yesterday. She felt the tears welling up, but Olga told herself she wouldn't find her parents by crying! Just then, she spotted the little man on the window ledge, pointing to the woods. Olga felt her heart racing: she understood they had to go to the woods! Monsieur was convinced this fellow was hiding something, but what...?

Don't trust anybody who smells like a fly, Monsieur kept telling himself. The little man jumped to the floor and signalled for Olga to follow him. He raced downstairs and, once he was back

in Olga's room, he returned to his drawings, lingering on one that featured the woods, Olga, his little self and Monsieur.

The elf directed his words at Monsieur because he knew the cat could hear him. Monsieur hummed to himself to block out the words: he didn't want to listen to this second-rate imp! Enough, already! On a normal day, he would be stretched out on the sofa, relaxing to some pleasant music while waiting for lunch time to come around! He wasn't about to start listening to a gnome. But he could also see the despair in Olga's gaze, and he knew that she couldn't hear or understand... So, he made up his mind to look the wretched fellow in the eye.

"Aha! Finals! Listen up, cat, you take me wood. We go wood. Them over there. You me understand?"

Monsieur sighed, it was better not to enter into conversation with this kind of person. He licked his paw and contemplated Olga.

"Cat... You me understand? Them over there!"

The elf was showing him a piece of paper, pointing out the trees he had drawn together with the two grown-ups. No two ways about it, they were going to have to go into the woods.

"Them over there..." Monsieur repeated to himself.