

The Crocodile Twins: A Folktale from Mermaid's Hands

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So you want to hear the story of the crocodile twins, do you? Settle down, then, and I'll tell you about them. The first thing to know is that they weren't crocodiles, no. They were people like ourselves. And the second thing is that for most of this story, they weren't "they." They were just "she."

Oh, they started out as "they": two newborn babes, her with her left arm under his right one, him with his right one over her left, the two of them always hugging each other close like that, even when they suckled at their mama's breast. A storm and the golden crocodile prince of the Caloosahatchee mangroves reduced the twins to "she."

You see, the twins' papa had left their mama behind on the island of Martinique, before the twins were even born, and sailed north to seek his fortune. He was supposed to send for his wife before her lying-in time came, but her belly grew as round and large as a ripe watermelon, and she still heard nothing from him. She wasn't one to wait pining on the shore, not her: she stole six silver teaspoons from the great house where she worked and bought herself passage on a ship carrying rum to New Orleans. On board that ship the twins were born—just ahead of the storm that shattered the ship and cast mama and babies ashore by the hungry mouth of the crocodile prince.

Snip, snap, he swallowed Brother Twin up in one sweet gulp, then went to close his jaws on Sister Twin, when her mama, screaming and weeping, thrust a broken spar deep into his gullet—and at the same moment, wouldn't you know, a ripple scooped up Sister Twin. Fresh from the warm seas of her mama's womb, Sister Twin felt right at

home cupped in the ripple's hands. She kicked her tiny legs and splashed her little arms, and all the mangrove fishes swarmed round, curious. The golden prince of the Caloosahatchee saw that the baby had fetched him a far finer meal than she'd have made, herself, and spitting out the spar, he slid into the water and feasted freely. Then he caught Sister Twin in his mouth, but carefully, and carried her back to shore. He enjoyed the flavor and feel of her on his tongue, but he didn't let himself swallow her.

"One of the merfolk, are you? And passed the seablood on to the hatchling?" he asked, and though his words were garbled—what with Sister Twin resting between his tongue and teeth and all—her mama understood him.

"No, never any such thing!" she said, looking round right and left lest the captain of the stormbroken ship, perhaps washed ashore nearby, might be hearing the crocodile's words.

No sea captain wants any of the merfolk on his ship. You might as well invite the ocean itself into your ship, if you once offer to carry one of the merfolk.

"Why deny it? I can feel where her gills would grow, if you gave her to the waves. But I can also feel hot human blood in her, and I see you leaking her nouriture down your front, so why don't you take her and feed her?"

Trembling, Sister Twin's mama lifted Sister Twin from the crocodile's mouth.

"Thank you for sparing her," she said.

"Sparing her? I'm adopting her—so don't you be thinking of running off with her," said the golden prince, and snapped his mouth shut on Sister Twin's mama's ankle, not so tight as even to break the skin, but tight enough to hold her.

“Now give her back to me,” he ordered, when he saw Sister Twin had drunk her fill. Her mama hugged Sister Twin tight, and the crocodile gave a low, rumbling growl and closed his jaw tighter on her ankle. Blood flecked the sand. Sister Twin’s mama moaned. When the crocodile loosened his grip, she laid Sister Twin back in the cradle of his mouth.

And so three, six, nine, twelve months passed this way: each day the golden prince used Sister Twin as his fishing lure, and when he was sated, turned her over to her mama for feeding, then demanded her back again. Each night, and every hour she wasn’t calling the fishes or nursing, Sister Twin was resting in the old crocodile’s mouth, between the ivory pillars of his teeth.

“*Papiyon volé*, fly butterfly,” Sister Twin’s mama would sing to her, an old lullaby from back on Martinique, but sometimes also, “Swim little fish, fast and far,” a lullaby from the underwater realms. But Sister Twin was too young to catch her mama’s meaning and just clapped her hands and smiled. And then Sister Twin’s poor mama began looking peaked and thin, shaking and shivering, while yet being so hot to the touch that Sister Twin shrank from her, and then blood mingled with the tears in her eyes and she vomited up something black and thick, and then she was dead.

“Diseased,” sniffed the golden prince, turning her body over with his narrow snout. “Not even good to eat now. I should have finished her off before she took ill. As for you, hatchling, you’ll live on fish from now on.”

And so five more years went by for Sister Twin, and just as the ball python your teacher keeps in that glass box in the classroom won’t grow no bigger so long as it’s in

that small space, so Sister Twin didn't grow no bigger, living as she did in the mouth of the golden prince of the Caloosahatchee.

Now sometimes she'd make an odd complaint to the old crocodile.

"My left arm aches," she'd say. "My left arm aches where it's half missing. Where's the rest of my left arm?"

"It looks whole enough to me," the crocodile would growl in reply. "But if it bothers you so, I can bite it off at the shoulder. Although then you'll be hard pressed to swim, won't you. And if you can't swim, you can't lure in my dinner, and if you can't do that, I may as well eat all of you and not just your arm."

And Sister Twin would swallow her complaints and curl up in a sulky ball, pressing her left arm against the old crocodile's tongue, which always soothed the ache.

But what about Sister Twin's father? She all the time believed the crocodile was her papa. She thought herself the most unlucky crocodile child, with her too-soft skin and her tiny size, just a pimple on her papa's tongue and no more. We know that ain't so. Her real papa, her handsome, warm-blooded papa Olivier, found his way to the ship of *Sabelle Morning*, the poor folks' pirate. *Sabelle Morning* took a shine to him and gave up pirating for a season to sail the *Coral Spyglass* all the way down to Martinique to pick up his dear wife for him. Olivier's heart fair broke in half when he heard that she was lost to him, that the ship she took to find him been sunk in a storm, somewhere up Florida way. From that time on, Sister Twin's papa put *tris konsa* after his name, Olivier Tris Konsa, Olivier So Sad, because of his great sorrow.

After that, whenever the *Coral Spyglass* plied the waters off the Florida coast, Olivier Tris Konsa would scan the shore, looking for his wife's ghost. There came a day,

in the hottest month, when they were floating by the mangroves of the Caloosahatchee, that Olivier Tris Konsa turned to Benny Brave, the first mate, and said, “Those there, caught in the mangrove shoots, they look like rum casks.” And Benny Brave said yes, they did. “And do you see a mark on that one, a red mark, in the shape of a diamond?” And Benny Brave said he did see it. Then Olivier Tris Konsa kicked off his boots and tore off his shirt and dived into the water, because he knew the cargo carried by the ship his wife had taken had been marked with a red diamond.

He swam in among the mangrove shoots and saw that yes, it was old rum casks right enough, and marked with the red diamond. Some were still whole. He waded through the swaying underwater meadows of turtlegrass to shore, where a grim sight met his eyes, a skeleton reclining against a buttonwood tree, bleached tatters of clothing still clinging to it.

“Aliyet, is that you?” Olivier cried, but Aliyet had no tongue left to answer with. Olivier pulled his hair and flung himself at her feet, weeping.

“What a racket! Listen to him carrying on, like a crowd of startled shorebirds,” grumbled the old crocodile, coming ashore himself after fishing up a feast with Sister Twin.

“What a racket,” agreed Sister Twin, but her left arm ached something fierce just then, and also her heart: those old bones made her feel sad too, though she didn’t remember enough to know why.

That’s when Olivier Tris Konsa looked up and saw the great old crocodile with the tiny, miniature child crouching in its mouth, gripping one of its teeth in her right hand

and one in her left. The strange sight pushed his sadness right out of his mind for the moment.

“That’s a dangerous chair you’re sitting in,” he said to Sister Twin.

“My papa won’t eat me so long as I don’t whine too much,” said Sister Twin.

“And so long as I keep luring in his supper.”

“That creature was never your papa,” said Olivier. “Look at your legs and feet and look at his. Run a hand over his hide and touch your own skin. And if he’s your papa, where’s your tail?”

“Stepfather, then,” rumbled the crocodile. “Cared for her ever since her mother died—that pile of bones you’ve been sprinkling with your second-rate brine.”

“Oh!” cried Sister Twin, remembering a tune that made her think of fish and butterflies.

“Oh! cried Olivier Tris Konsa, looking at tiny Sister Twin with shock and comprehension. “Come here, little one. I’m your real papa, who’s wept and yearned for you these six long years.”

Sister Twin didn’t hesitate for more than a moment, but when she went to step from the golden prince’s mouth, he clamped down on her ankle, just as he’d done to her mother those six years past.

“You think I’m just going to give her up? What do I get in return?” he asked through his teeth.

“How about I reach both my arms into your mouth?” suggested Olivier. “You snap down, and whatever you catch, you can keep.”

Each of Olivier Tris Konsa's strong arms was twice as big as Sister Twin. The golden prince of the Caloosahatchee chuckled.

"It's a deal," he said.

So Olivier Tris Konsa approached the crocodile, but before he did, he grabbed one of his dead wife's arm bones, and he held it hidden under his own arm, so the crocodile wouldn't see it. No sooner had he stuck his arms into the golden prince's mouth then he jammed that bone in between the roof of the creature's mouth and his lower jaw, just like a tent pole, way back by his throat.

Now you wouldn't think a human bone, a thin bone like that, would be any match for a crocodile's jaws, not jaws that can crunch a wooden spar to splinters the way the golden prince's had, back when Aliyet and her babes first washed ashore. But maybe Olivier knew just where to put it, or maybe it was Aliyet's own great desire, present in the marrow of her bones, to foil that old lizard. Whatever it was, the bone held, and the crocodile's jaws stood propped open. "Ahh, Ahh! Eh ihh Ah! Ah oahhh!" was all he could say. Olivier bundled the rest of his wife's bones in the remains of her skirt and slung them on his back. Then he lifted Sister Twin into his arms.

"Are you ready to come home with me now?" he asked, kissing the top of her head.

"Yes," she said, tracing his eyebrows with her thumbs, then touching his nose and his hair, but as they waded out toward the *Coral Spyglass*, she moaned a little.

"What's wrong, treasure?"

"My left arm. It hurts me sometimes."

Olivier looked it over but could see no bruise or scar.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with your arm, except that it’s so small, but that matches the smallness of the rest of you. Hush now.” And he took a few more steps, but Sister Twin moaned again.

“It’s getting worse! There’s a piece of my arm missing, Real Papa, and the only thing that makes it feel better is to press it against Crocodile Papa’s tongue. Please take me back!” Poor thing was wailing by then, and squirming like an eel in Olivier’s arms, trying to slip free and swim back to the crocodile. So Olivier turned round, but when they came in sight of the crocodile, he set Sister Twin down on a rum cask and told her to bide there.

“Are you hiding a piece of my daughter’s arm somewhere, you old lizard?” demanded Olivier.

“Aahhhaaa, ahhh, uaah,” said the crocodile, because his mouth was still stuck open.

Olivier reached one of Aliyet’s leg bones out from the bundle on his back and used it to knock her arm bone loose from the crocodile’s mouth. When the crocodile spit it out, Olivier caught it. Now he had Aliyet’s arm bone in one hand and her leg bone in the other: short sword and long sword.

“Where are you hiding the rest of my daughter’s left arm?” Olivier asked again.

“Are you blind? You can see for yourself it’s whole,” retorted the crocodile.

“She says a piece is missing, and that nothing eases the pain but pressing what’s left against your tongue.”

The golden prince gave a rasping laugh. “It ain’t her arm she’s hankering after, it’s that other hatchling I swallowed, so long ago, that came from the same clutch as she did.”

“Twins!” gasped Olivier. In a single leap he was on the crocodile’s back, squeezing tight with his knees and brandishing his weapons.

“Cough up that other one, or I’ll kill you,” he ordered.

“You really are soft in the head. Nothing I once swallow comes out from me alive again.”

“Give me the other one, or I’ll tear you apart from the inside, looking for him,” threatened Olivier, preparing to thrust Aliyet’s arm bone back into the crocodile’s mouth.

“All right! All right! Why should I want to keep the tumorous lump anymore anyway, now that you’ve taken his sister off my hands?” And he lifted his tongue as much as the membrane that connects it to his mouth would allow.

You knew that, right? That a crocodile’s tongue don’t move free, like yours and mine? It’s true: crocodiles can’t lick no lollipops, can’t get the last taste of their meals off their teeth or scaly lips. Their tongues are fastened down.

Beneath the membrane holding down the golden prince’s tongue, was a sleeping boy—Brother Twin.

“Fool thing swam right back from my stomach to my mouth, after I swallowed him. Trying to reunite with his sister, no doubt,” muttered the crocodile. “I learned a trick or two from the oysters about how to keep him from bothering me, wrapped him up in spit and kept him tucked in down there. But now you’ve got the one, you might as well have the other, I suppose.” He tipped his head and the sleeping boy fell out onto the sand.

He opened his eyes and looked right and left, blinking. He yawned and staggered to a stand, awake for the first time in six years.

“My left arm!” cried Sister Twin, splashing through the turtlegrass to shore.

“My right arm!” cried Brother Twin, and they locked in an embrace, him with his right arm over her left one.

“That’s not your left arm--that’s your brother. That’s not your right arm--that’s your sister,” their papa said.

“I dreamed so many dreams about you,” whispered Brother Twin. “All I did was dream about you.”

“I missed you. I missed you with a powerful ache, every day,” replied Sister Twin.

Olivier took them home with him. He called Sister Twin Aliyet, after her mama, and Brother Twin he called Reveye because Brother Twin slept all those years beneath the crocodile’s tongue but was awake at last. For himself, Olivier took *tris konsa* off his name and added *tèlman kontan*—Olivier So Happy. And maybe tomorrow I can tell you more stories about the mischief Aliyet and Reveye made for their father and their new friends, but not tonight. This is enough story for tonight.