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THE ANGEL'S EYEGLASSES

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A lone wolf was walking in the forest. He saw a dog. The dog was doing something strange. He would bite a tree, look up, and move on to bite another tree.

The wolf thought about it and saw a sad story—the dog could not be doing very well if it was chewing on trees. And it was not even winter. The wolf had chewed on some trees himself, in the cold, when the snow was up to his sides, and his tail frozen stiff.

"What's going on, neighbor? Are you sharpening your teeth or is your stomach swallowing your guts?" the wolf asked.

The dog was old and gray and blind in one eye, too. But he didn't feel like talking with a wolf about his troubles. The truth was that his master had chased him out of the house, and worse yet, threw stones at him. "You old bag of bones, you're so old you can't recognize your own family," he had shouted.

Well, it was true enough. Žilius, that was the dog's name, had jumped up barking quite a few times after being awakened by the squeaking of the gate. His eyes were not so good anymore, that was the problem.

"So what can I do to help you, old neighbor?" the wolf asked.

Žilius was not interested in help from the wolf, so he answered, "I've decided I want to make a zither, so I'm looking for the right tree."

"Well, well, so you want to be a musician in your old age?"

"That's right. That's how I'm going to make a living," the dog said. But the wolf, whose own teeth were worn down by a hard life, understood that the dog had fallen on bad times. He looked like a rag thrown over a fence, his belly hanging down, legs bent, his tail like a worn out broom. Even his voice creaked.

The two parted. As the dog walked away, he took little bites from a birch tree or a fir or a skinny hazel nut bush.

* * *

One night the wolf heard a dog howling at the edge of the forest. It sounded familiar. Sneaking silently in the direction of the sound, the wolf saw Žilius howling bitterly, his muzzle pointed upward toward the heavens.

"Exercising your voice? talking to the moon?" the wolf asked. There was no moon, the night was black.

"Don't you know we dogs howl when we call to the moon?"

"But, neighbor, I can't see any moon, or stars either."

"When I howl, the moon and the stars appear." Žilius could not admit he was howling because he was starving. He was howling out of hunger, trying to fill his stomach with noise and air.

"You know, we wolves can howl, too. You dogs, you howl with your noses pointed to the sky, but we wolves point our muzzles into the forest when we howl. And that way, a rabbit or a doe just can't stand it any longer, so it comes to see

what's going on. Then we snap up the curious creatures."

"I'm not very predatory," Žilius said. "I get bored out here so I pass the time howling at the moon and the stars."

The wolf wanted to be helpful, but Žilius was too proud. Not once in his life had he taken charity. When his master had fed him a bone or a bowl of soup it was because Žilius had done something useful like watching the yard all night, or chasing a wolf away from the sheep, or protecting the hens and the roosters from the clutches of the fox.

* * *

One day the wolf was taking a noontime stroll along a stream when he saw something in the water. There was Žilius, splashing away.

"So, neighbor, now you're a fisherman? It's getting cold for swimming."

"You see, neighbor, I caught a fish, but I just can't remember if it fell back in the water or I threw it out on the shore."

The wolf looked around and saw a fish gasping in the deep grass of the meadow. Without a moment's delay the wolf ate the fish. He said to the dog as he walked away: "You probably dropped the fish in the water."

And since the wolf felt pretty full with the fish in his stomach, he added, "Doesn't the good book say seek and you shall find?"

The wolf left Žilius looking for more fish in the water.

* * *

The wolf sauntered away through the woods. He was thinking, a day would come, wouldn't it, when he, too, would be old and half blind like Žilius, staring into the water. The wolf heard cranes somewhere up in the sky. Coming out into a clearing, he saw them up high, flying south. Winter was at the door. Cold and hunger was on its way. And that would be the end of Žilius. Suddenly the wolf felt sorry for the dog. He went back and found Žilius stretched out on the bank, wet as freshly washed clothes. The dog was eating grass and did not hear the wolf creeping up from behind. Žilius was going deaf, too.

"So, how many fish did you catch?"

"Why joke with me, wolf? I flipped one up on the shore, but someone ate it."

"You know what Žilius? I owe you, and I want to make it right. Here's what I have in mind. I'll steal your master's baby—they leave him near the edge of the forest when they come to harvest flax. You will be nearby and as soon as you see me snatch the baby and head for the woods, you start chasing me. I'll drop it, you pick it up, take it to your master. He will welcome you with open arms."

And they did just that. Only Žilius out of old habit and the excitement of the moment, tore off half of the wolf's tail with his remaining teeth. The wolf dropped the baby, and screaming with pain was about to tear out a piece of Žilius's old gray hide, but by then, the master was running at them with a pitchfork raised to strike.

"Why, that's our Žilius, our dear Žilius! He saved our little one, our sweet baby girl from that robbing, murdering wolf!" the master's wife blubbered. The master was overcome, too, as he stroked Žilius's shoulders. "What a good dog. You're a real hero. I'm never going to let you go away, no I'm not." The master could not quite bring himself to say that he would never drive Žilius out again, as he had done before.

It was a great success for Žilius. Just imagine—he got soup twice a day and was allowed to sleep in the cowshed at night.

* * *

One day, in the dead of winter, when he was getting soup only once a day, and a small bowl at that, Žilius saw a sleigh enter the yard. Like any good watchdog, he started to bark. A woman stepped down with a bundle in her arms. Žilius, not losing a moment, sank his wobbly teeth into her skirts. "Žilius, have you gone mad?" shouted the woman, "Don't you know your family any more?" Only then did Žilius recognize Sigita, the master's daughter who had gotten married a few years ago to a man living three lakes away. "You need eyeglasses or something, Žilius. You're getting so old," Sigita muttered as she walked to the door. Poor Žilius didn't know where to hide his shame. All he could do was rub against her skirts and whine in a small, guilty voice.

The master appeared in the doorway. His bellow shook the rafters. "Get out, you blind fool. You don't even know your own people anymore!"

Žilius crawled under the granary, trembling with cold and shame. "Maybe I need eyeglasses. How could I not know Sigita, who got married and went to live three lakes from here? She wasn't wearing a big fur coat then. And she didn't have a bundle in her arms. How could anyone notice all that without eyeglasses, especially when it was getting dark?" Žilius sighed a deep sigh.

* * *

Nobody called Žilius for a bowl of soup anymore. And he was no longer allowed into the cowshed. The nights were so windy the wellpole groaned and the wind blasted under the granary walls tearing apart last summer's mouse nest.

Žilius decided to go back into the forest where he could dig a hole for himself under the dense branches of a thick fir tree.

As Žilius was looking for shelter, who should appear out of the snowstorm but the wolf. The wolf was surprised to see his old friend. At first, he wanted to bite Žilius in the tail, as Žilius had bitten him. But he was stopped by the sight of his emaciated neighbor, cowering under the tree. Žilius was not even aware that the wolf had come up until *he* put a paw on his shoulder. Žilius slowly turned towards the wolf, but did not recognize him in the dark. "Who is that?" he asked.

"Don't you recognize your old neighbor?"

"Oh, it's you, gray wolf. My eyesight isn't what it used to be. I'm on my way to look for a pair of glasses."

"Good idea, Žilius, you could use a pair of eyeglasses. Not recognizing your friends..."

The night grew darker as they talked. The treetops moaned in the wind and snow swirled around the trunks.

The two friends settled in against one another to stay warm. The wolf fell asleep at once, snoring with a grin. Žilius traveled in his thoughts back to the past. "Take Sigita, for instance. Wasn't she a pretty little thing, seven or eight summers old? Her favorite sport was chasing birds. Maybe she wanted to grab one, the sweet little black-haired devil..." The master plowing next to the stream... Sigita and Žilius suddenly stopping at the water's edge... they see their faces reflected and they both laugh... they laugh and see themselves laughing in the water... was this no more than a passing moment?

At the edge of the field, by the road, there was a linden tree. It was large, with spreading branches, and it was broken in half by a storm during that same harvest. It was under that linden tree that he would go to be with Sigita. She would sit for hours listening to the birds chattering with their little ones in their nests in the high branches. Sigita would sit with her elbow on her knee, her cheek resting in her palm. She sat there and Žilius kept her company for as long as she was there.

When Sigita and her husband went away one morning to a place three lakes away, Žilius sat under the linden tree all day and until the last hours of the night. He saw several falling stars. One came straight at the linden tree. Or maybe it just seemed that way to Žilius, maybe it was really a tear shimmering in his eye. It could have been either way.

How many times during the day and in the evening had he gone to that linden tree to sit and gaze for hours down the road that went on and on, down the hill from the linden tree. "And, can you imagine, Žilius, you old fool, that you didn't know her when she stepped down from the sleigh, in her fur coat, with a child in her arms? Žilius, you can't see any more without eyeglasses."

Suddenly, Žilius saw an angel with blue wings descending from heaven—a barefoot angel, wrapped in fine silks. Bluish vapor drifted in streams behind him, and his hands were white as the linen under the trees in the orchard. In one hand the angel carried a bowl of soup, in the other, a pair of eyeglasses. It was perfect timing. Žilius could not quite make out the green and yellow birds flying in the wake of the angel. He would see the birds clearly as soon as the angel gave him the glasses, perhaps these were the birds that Sigita had waited for under the linden tree. Now the eyeglasses were in place. How light everything became! How clearly he could see everything, even the five tiny thrush eggs in the topmost branch of the linden tree.

Never again would Žilius make a mistake! Never again would he fail his master, nor Sigita!

The angel adjusted the eyeglasses with gentle fingers. There, just right! Was there anything the angel did not know or could not do?

Warmth flowed from the angel's fingers into Žilius, and a sweet feeling overcame him.

* * *

Waking up at midnight, the wolf felt that his back was very cold in the place where Žilius was keeping it warm last night.

The wind was calm, and the stars were as thick in the sky as if someone had scattered them with both hands. Even the moon was out, resting on top of an old pine.

The wolf glanced at the frozen Žilius and saw a star shining brightly in his ice-bound eyes.

Translated by Jonas Dovydenas