

## **Polish Fairy Tale: Peasant and Death as Godmother**

Polish Title: O chłopie co sie ze smiercia pokumal. (In collection: Wielka Ksiega Basni Polskich, 1994. Traslated by Kornelia Grabinska)

A very poor peasant had a sixth child born to him and his wife. When it came to a baptism nobody in his village wanted to be godparents to his child. For a godfather he asked the village church beggar. But all the village women refused to take on the role of a godmother. The man walked to the wagon road leading to nearby villages, to find someone he could ask to be a godmother. He didn't see any women he could ask. At the end of the day, tired, hungry and dispirited he sat on a stone next to the dirt road and cried. A beautiful figure all in white appeared on his right and lightly touched him on the shoulder. In a sonorous voice the figure said: "Don't despair, I will be a godmother to your child."

The peasant bowed his head and said: "Thank you for the good words, but who are you?"

"I'm your Guardian Angel."

The peasant thought for a moment and responded politely but decisively, "Thank you for your offer, but no, it will not do".

"Why is that?" Surprised angel asked.

"For so many years you were watching me with indifference as I was starving and suffering and not once, have you helped me. It's clear you are an unjust, unfair being. I don't want to have a relationship with someone like you." Ashamed the angel walked away and the peasant continued his waiting.

The sun was setting, the day was over. Disheartened, the peasant started walking home. To make it back home before dark, he took a cross country shortcut which led him by a swamp and marshland. When he got across the wetlands, he heard from behind, a voice calling for help.

"Human! Have pity, help me out of this bog!"

He looked back and saw an old woman submerged in the mud up to her hips; she could not move an inch. He was well aware how dangerous it was to enter the swamp, but he had a good heart and understanding of human misfortune. He wondered how was it, that he did not see the woman when he was passing

by. He continued wading in the deep bog to reach her. When he reached her, he saw that it would be easiest to carry the woman out on his back. She agreed to that. Once she was on his back, he was surprised that she hardly weighted anything: she was just bones and skin. When they got to the dry land, he asked her if she would become a godmother for his child.

She said “Yes”, but she added, “You may not want me when I tell you who I am. I am Death.”

The man was not afraid. He took off his hat and with reverence, bowed low in acknowledgement of her non-human power, and thanked her for the honor.

She said to him, “I see that you are not afraid.”

He said, “Why should I be afraid? Sooner or later, I must meet with you. Isn't it much better that when I see you the second time, I meet you as my acquaintance? Besides, nobody else in the world has the honor to have Death as a Godmother to their child”.

“Seems like you like me, laughed Death, “Why is that?”

He answered, “Because you are the most just being in the whole world. You treat a king like you treat a beggar. I hold that in highest regard.”

She gave him money to pay for the priest and to invite villagers to the feast.

At the christening, Death appeared to the villagers as not ostentatiously rich person, however, all felt power and gravity emanating from her, and that made them quiet and keeping their distance.

Afterwards, Death asked the peasant what would he like to commemorate the occasion.

He thought for a long time. At last, she suggested that she can come in a hundred years to get him.

He responded with a fright, “How could I live through so many years of suffering and poverty? No, come in 25 years— By then my children will be all grown and able to provide for themselves. I will be in peace to leave this life.”

Death agreed, then gave him a gift of telling people in sickness whether they are going to live, or die.

“If I am in the corner of the room the patient will be better in a week, if I’m at feet— within a month. If I’m at the head, there is nothing that can be done, they are ready to go with me.

Using that knowledge, the man became famous as a healer.

After 20 years of good life, the man started to worry about the approaching visit from Death. He thought of ways to escape Death. He had a bed constructed with a mechanism with which he could quickly turn the bed around.

Death came at the appointed time and stood at the head of his bed. He quickly rotated the bed. Death said, “Oh, that is very clever of you. I’m not going to play games with you. I am not going to chase after you.”

“Does it mean I can live longer?” the man asked with hope.

Death said in a cold voice, “You can live 300 years, but consider that from now on you will not have the gift of predicting who gets better and who is to die. Sooner or later, you will lose all the money and you will be poor and helpless. You will be a lonely and sick old man. All whom you know —your family, your friends— will be gone, and you will be alone and nobody will know you or need you; nobody will understand you.” With that Death left the room.

The man jumped from the bed and run after Death calling: “Wait, I’m coming with you! I understand now what a “bliss”/delight such a long life like that would bring!”.

When he came to her, she embraced him gently—[przytulila] —to her bony chest and carried him to the beyond. [zaswiaty.—the world beyond.]