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Tilda ja tolmuingel



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“Tilda and the Dust Angel”

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Rights sold: Latvian, Polish

Tilda lives alone with her mother. Her father died when she was still quite small, and the girl can't remember a single thing about him. Tilda's mom refuses to talk about the girl's late dad, which makes her extremely sad. Yet one day, after Tilda has forgotten to clean her room for a long while, the Dust Angel arrives: a nifty little creature who can only be seen by those who are born in the sunshine. All of a sudden, the girl starts recalling various things about her father: his green eyes and reddish beard, their trips to the zoo, and gleeful roughhousing. Thanks to the Dust Angel, the girl even starts to see her mother in a new light.

Awards:

2019 Tartu Prize for Children's Literature

(Childhood Prize) nominee

2019 “Järje Hoidja” Award of the Tallinn Central Library

2018 Annual Children's Literature Award of the Cultural Endowment of Estonia

2018 Good Children's Book



Reading sample

[pp 36–38]

Tilda lounged in bed, staring at the ceiling. The dream she'd had was very strange. A tall man with green eyes and a red beard had come to the girl, leaned over her, stroked her head, and then pulled a handful of buttons of different sizes and shades of color from his pocket. He extended the strange present to Tilda and smiled cheerfully.

And Tilda knew without a doubt it had been her father, even though she hadn't the slightest recollection of him. She'd never even seen a single picture of her dad; nor had anyone ever told her what he looked like.

What's more, it turned out that Tilda hadn't been wrong. Mom had confirmed her dad did indeed have a red beard and green eyes. Her dream-dad had been real.

How could that be possible?

Tilda rolled onto her side to enjoy snuggling under her blanket and think about the strange dream for a little while longer

Staring back at her were two big, dark eyes that glistened like the night sky. Someone was sitting on the pillow right next to her. Someone gray with pointed ears, holding a little red button.

Tilda gaped at the being in shock. That's right – she gaped. Because she could see it.

Let's not forget that the being was actually invisible.

Still, this didn't appear to surprise the little gray creature.



“You can see me,” it said calmly. “Well, that’s just natural. You were born in the sunshine.”

Tilda jumped out of bed.

“Who are you?” she exclaimed.

“Who do you think I am, Tilda?” the unfamiliar guest asked.

Tilda didn’t speak a word, even though the answer that had popped into her head at the very same moment was spinning around her mouth. She simply didn’t dare to say it aloud. Everything in her head was spinning right then, because what was happening was just so unbelievable – so unexpected and strange.

“Oh, yes, you actually know very well who I am,” the being said. The voice was so familiar, even though Tilda hadn’t heard it in years or could have ever guessed that she still remembered it. No, she almost certainly hadn’t remembered it before, just yesterday... But today...

Dozens of memories flashed through Tilda’s mind. She was lying in a stroller and a man with green eyes was leaning over her, handing her a tiny camel that rattled. She was right under the ceiling, held up in the air by a man with a red beard, while a woman with dimples – was that really Mom? – shouted: “Are you crazy? Watch out for the lamp!” Then, she was on the floor, crawling across a checkered blanket, and that very same man was crawling next to her: the man she’d seen in her dream. And then, she was sitting in a little highchair and the man with the red beard was sticking a spoonful of porridge into her mouth, and when Tilda spat it out, the man licked her face clean. His bristly red beard poked Tilda and the woman with the dimples said:

“Ew, Samuel – you’re not a dog!”

All of these memories swept over Tilda in the blink of an eye. She couldn’t understand how it could be possible she hadn’t remembered all those little flickering images before! How could she have thought she didn’t remember her own dad?! She remembered him very well!

“Are you my dad?” she whispered.

“IAT,” the gray being replied.

“IAT? What does that mean?” Tilda asked.

“I Am Dust,” said the little creature. “Which means I’m also your dad. I am everything that has ever been, because nothing disappears without a trace. Everything remains. Everything turns to dust.”

It spoke in Tilda’s father’s voice, and even though it looked more like a mouse than a person, Tilda had the feeling the being wasn’t lying. It really was her father. Her father and a million things more, of course, but those weren’t important right then. For Tilda, all that mattered was that she was talking to her father. It was completely unlikely, absolutely ridiculous—but even so, it was as true as could be.

[pp 43–45]

They were at the zoo the whole day long, even though the other visitors thought Tilda had gone to see the animals all alone. No one else could see the dust angel – no one else had been born in the sunshine, but instead under the lights of a hospital room. Everyone only saw a little girl with a wonderfully-woven braid that looked like a bale of hay wound around her head.

The dust angel would occasionally sit on Tilda’s shoulder, then twirl around her. Sometimes, it would even dart into a cage, and then, a lion would start roaring because he remembered the open savannah where his ancestors had once hunted, and the antelope would prance back and forth across their pen restlessly – just like they would out in the wild long ago, where there was no beginning or end to the limitless grasslands and, at any moment, a predator might attack instead of the zookeeper delivering a clump of fresh hay.

“Is it wise to remind them of that?” Tilda asked. For some reason, she was uncomfortable seeing the way an anxious glint would spark in the animals’ eyes and their nostrils would flare, as if they’d caught a whiff of the distant past. “Maybe they’re happier when they can’t remember their freedom at

all. Maybe it's easier for them to manage here in the zoo that way?"

"They themselves have never lived out in the wild," the dust angel replied. "They were born right here in the zoo and grew up here, too. But they do still remember long-ago times and their ancestors' freedom; it's inevitable. For it all still exists – it's simply turned to dust. And dust is everywhere. There's no getting around it."

"But you're the one reminding them of the past," Tilda argued.

"Exactly, Tilda. I remind them of it," the dust angel said. "But a person or an animal can only be reminded of things that they know already. That, which is in their memory; their blood; their heart. I merely help release that knowledge from deep inside. For if you no longer remember how to hunt, then you're no longer a lion. And if you no longer remember how you're hunted, then you're no longer an antelope."

"I suppose that's true," Tilda acknowledged.

"You actually remembered me, too, squirt," her dad continued. "You simply needed to be reminded of everything, too."

"Yes, thank you. Although I really didn't remember my dad looking like a tiny gray monkey who's head-over-heels in love with buttons," Tilda teased.

Dad laughed.

"This isn't me," he said. "This is just IAD. Or a dust angel, if that's what you prefer calling me. I'm merely a teensy-tiny part of him. In addition to me, there are millions more flecks of dust that come from a whole spectrum of places and different centuries. Some of them carry memories of the cavemen, others of colossal dinosaurs, while some are from even more ancient times – from when there was no life on Earth, only dust. Some come from completely different stars. We remember everything."

Tilda stared at the dust angel. The gray creature resembled her precious teddy bear at first glance,

but an endless, chilling universe glistened in the depths of its eyes. They were hard to look into; it seemed as if they were bottomless.

Tilda noticed that the button dangling from a string the dust angel was carrying was no longer red, but golden.

"What's that button of yours?" she asked. "Where'd you pinch it from?"

The dust angel looked embarrassed. It drew its big ears in front of its eyes like cabbage leaves.

"I saw it on a woman's jacket," it whispered. "And I just liked it so much!"

"But what happened to the red button from my dress? Where'd you put it?"

"I don't know," the dust angel lamented. "I lost it."

"Oh, you!" Tilda sighed. "Who does that? You've got to hang on to your things, not throw them away as soon as you see something pretty and new."

"You're right," the dust angel agreed, tugging its ears even lower in shame.

"If you spot another pretty button, then are you going to throw the golden one away, too?"

"Yes," the dust angel sighed pitifully.

"But that's not a nice way to behave!"

"I know," the dust angel agreed even more pitifully.

"So, don't do it!" Tilda suggested.

"I'm still going to," the dust angel whispered, standing with its head hung low.

"You're foolish," Tilda sighed. "And silly. Inside of you are stars and dinosaurs and all the ancient countries and nations and my dad, but at the same time, you chase colorful buttons around like a kitten."

"What can I do? That's the way we are," the dust angel shrugged apologetically. But then, it appeared

to have had enough of its shame. It leapt into flight and called out to Tilda with her father's voice:

"Let's go check out the penguins now. Penguins were always my favorite. I could watch them for hours on end. Your mom knew that, too, and when we came to the zoo together, she'd always bring a sweater and a stocking cap along because it's pretty chilly in the penguin house. You're not going to get cold, are you?"

"I don't think so. I've got a jacket, and I can pull my hood on, too," Tilda reckoned. She had a curious feeling: sometimes, she spoke to the dust angel like a child does to her father, but other times, she had to scold it just like a puppy that's been up to no good.

Translated by Adam Cullen

