

WILHELM, THE HEDGEHOG

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translated by Alexey Potapov

to W. Kotarbinski





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WILHELM KOTARBINSKI was a Ukrainian-Polish artist (1848-1921). His murals are preserved in Kyiv on the walls of Saint Volodymyr's Cathedral and Taras Shevchenko National Museum, and his paintings are housed at the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Art. The life of the artist is full of mysteries, and his perception of the world of secrets. It was Wilhelm's works and his creative path that inspired me to tell this story: don't be afraid to see the world around you differently than others see it.

~ TANYA STUS



LIGHT

Usually, stories begin with details about who was born and where. However, the moment Wilhelm, a hedgehog who lived in the city, appeared is not known by anyone.

Wilhelm was born on the border between Light and twilight. You know? It happens when it is either evening or morning. Or before the rain. When the darkness cannot yet be called final. But a last bit of Light still remains.

It seemed to the little one that he dived into Light. Or that Light dived into him.

He did not have time to find out, although he would lie still for a long time waiting for what would happen next.

And what is close. And what is very close.

Ever since, he has acquired the habit of looking around very, very carefully. *As if he wanted to see the beginning and end of colour. Where does shadow begin? Where does the darkness disappear in the morning? And most importantly, what does Light begin with?*

Wilhelm did not understand what happened. Was he born? Or maybe he just woke up? *After all, it is a well known fact that hedgehogs in areas with cold winters sleep too long. And wake up really hungry.*

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FOOD

"Thwack!" - something pleasant-smelling fell next to Wilhelm.
"Caw!" A black-winged bird took off from a branch following her lost catch.
"Fedowwwa! Fedowwwa! Do not touch the kid." The pigeons started fussing near the bench.
The crow's name was Fedora. But everyone knows that pigeons cannot pronounce "r".
Fedora also knew that and was always careful when dealing with the imperfections of others.
However, the pronunciation of her name that way still made her laugh.



And again Fedora snorted from stifled laughter and hastened to fly away, in order not to offend old acquaintances.

The pigeons had been watching the rustling in a pile of last year's leaves since the morning. They were often exchanging opinions among themselves. They might have known about the hedgehog in the park. But the sparrows, as usual, paid no attention to anyone.

Because of the unexpected appetizing "thwack!", because of Fedora's grumpy wings, because of the pigeons cooing, Wilhelm rolled himself up into a prickly ball.

Someone's small piece of old bread crunched.

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That worked pretty well for Wilhelm! He immediately thought that there was nothing more important in the world than a dry piece of bread. (Nothing except Light!) He grabbed the food with his tiny toes and began to nibble.

Pigeons cooed approvingly. They looked at each other knowingly.

The sparrows carefully watched the crumbs of the small piece of old bread.



FRIENDS

"What are you going to do?" asked the pigeons when Wilhelm had almost finished eating. In order not to confuse him, they carefully avoided words with "r".

"I will look for the beginning of Light," said the hedgehog shyly.

The pigeons smiled. Well, is there anybody in this world who does not know that Light first appears in the morning?

KNOWLEDGE

"I read about such a thing! Such a thing!" the squirrel ran excitedly. "And I dreamed about it! dreamed! I dreamed about him! And I read!.."

Marusia the Squirrel was very fond of reading newspapers. She looked for them everywhere. She did not even mind rummaging in dumpsters. But usually she just grabbed her reading stuff from the benches.

"What? What?" one by one the pigeons moved to Marusia. "What-what-what?" The sparrows pretended that they were not interested.

"You are such a dwwweamer... You have to look for food, to hunt.

You are a hedgehog, fwwwom the city though you are. You have to take care of your own nest. And the Light is alwwweady there evewwwy day, why do you look fowww it...."

Wilhelm snuffled, rolled himself up into a ball again, and disappeared under the dry branches.

He did not want to argue with respectable pigeons.

The little hedgehog was awakened by noises. Daylight was fading...





"Just before this hedgehog appeared, I had a dream about him! Can you imagine?"

The squirrel could not stand in one place.

"Thewww is nothing surpwwising... You always dwwream of hedgehogs, Mawwwusia..." said the pigeons kindly. "So what?"

"That's right, that's right!" Marusia jumped up, waving a tattered newspaper. "But today I read this! This!"

The wind grabbed a piece of paper from the squirrel's paws and twisted the black letters of the phrase "Dream Book" in front of the pigeons. The pigeons picked it up and laid it out on the grass.

"Seeing a hedgehog in a dream portends great success in life... It is better to finish what you have started..."

Pigeons did not believe in dream books and horoscopes, but they decided not to argue with Marusia to be on a safe side. And also not to interfere in Wilhelm's affairs with Light. What if it was some kind of a good sign for all the residents of the park?

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SEARCH

Just in case, Marusia rushed to finish cleaning the house. But before that, she brought Wilhelm two handfuls of nuts from her stocks. There will be new ones soon anyway! There will be a lot of new things. And joyful ones. Now more than ever, Marusia was sure of it.

"Sometimes," she thought, "a small thing like that is missing for confidence. Just a few encouraging words..."

Wilhelm stared at Marusia's tiny figure for a long time.

She was already quite difficult to see, but the hedgehog recognized the squirrel by the small sparks of Light.

Every day the world was enriched with colours. Some colours made the environment brighter, others deeper. Still others absorbed the Light, mixed it, changed it...

"Good spring this year," Fedora greeted the pigeons, Marusia, and Wilhelm every day. She flew very far on business and sometimes sat on the Marusia's tree to take a rest.



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The crow came down from the very top, from the sky itself. Wilhelm felt an indescribable desire to go there. There was the most Light. Not covered by anything, only sometimes overcast. He squinted, looking at Fedora and listening to her stories about distant lands.

The bird really liked how attentively the hedgehog listened. And she barely restrained herself so as not to invent some new details.

Once Fedora brought something in her beak for Wilhelm. It sparkled in the light, shone out with sunbeams, split into rays.

Wilhelm was amazed. It seemed that he had finally found what he was looking for. It was a curved fragment of glass. The hedgehog studied its properties every time he woke up. However, the magic did not last very long. The light faded and didn't want to play with the hedgehog anymore.



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Even Marusia noticed that Wilhelm was becoming sadder. Summer passed after spring. The hedgehog sat for hours on the cliff, holding tightly to the handrail so as not to slide down, hunting out the moment of the last sunbeam fading. However, he never managed to catch the tail of the ray.

"What if this moment does not exist at all?" Wilhelm reasoned. The leaves on the trees began to turn golden. Everything seem flooded with sunlight. But the hedgehog already knew that it was an illusion. Because the less heat, the longer the night.



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GIFT

"You are stwwwange, our good hedgehog." The white pigeons cooed next to Wilhelm every morning.

They came closer when he fell asleep. If it started to rain, they covered him with a large leaf.

"All the hedgehogs should already be looking for a place for winter sleep," a worried Fedora shouted to them a little angrily from above. "Tell him this at last!"

The sparrows shivered from the damp cold, but did not hide.



There were days when the raindrops suddenly began turning into flying white fluff.
"How can he see the birth of Light if he falls asleep every day at dawn?" Marusia asked them.
"Why don't you explain it to him?"
"Why? He will soon completely fall asleep... Completely."

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"Because he still won't wake up in the morning. This is how hedgehogs are. Even when they are city-dwelling hedgehogs," the pigeons cooed excitedly. "They are nocturnal animals. So he will become an adult—and completely forget about this nonsense."
"But this is his dream! This is a dream!" Marusia did not hesitate. She was convinced that dreams must come true. "I will not let that happen, I will not..."

The squirrel went down to the pigeons and whispered to them for a long time. When she flew to the park the next evening, Fedora was burdened with something. "Finally!" Fedowwa! Did you bwwing?" the pigeons rushed to her. And Marusia was already waiting for the crow on the bench; she had noticed her from afar. Fedora laughed with satisfaction. (And this laugh could be explained by pleasure. Not by the fact that pigeons pronounced her name so funnily.) "I bwwought!" she announced and released something heavy from the newspaper. Marusia grabbed the newspaper and hurried home. However, she quickly came to her senses. She turned back, carefully smoothing out the paper, and they bent over the roll. "Tick-tock! Tick-tock! Tick-tock!" the shiny wonder, which Fedora brought, ticked.



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LIGHT

The sparrows jumped up and down, trying to catch a glimpse of something. Something crackled and rustled from behind. Wilhelm joined the company. "This is an alarm clock, my friend. Now you will manage to see the birth of Light," said Fedora. "You will not sleep through it! That's it!" Marusia jumped up. "You will be mewwwy now..." said the pigeons solemnly. And Fedora laughed again. Merry, of course! It's so nice to help a friend make his dream come true!

The next day, before dawn, Wilhelm began to fall asleep as usual. Lately he has been sleeping restlessly. Winter was about to come. His heart was slowing down. His movements were becoming heavier... But he not yet seen the birth of Light!

The alarm clock ringing made Wilhelm open his eyes. And then open them very wide. Because at first he did not understand at all what he saw.

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Everything around was Light... The first rays of the sun pierced the entire sky and the entire park. It seemed to astonished Wilhelm that he could touch them. The light around was a little cold. But Fedora, Marusia, and the pigeons ran up to the hedgehog. Their smiles were so warm...

The hedgehog smiled sleepily. "Light is friends. *And dreams. And joy. And love.*" he thought.

Now Wilhelm knew that he was finally ready to sleep soundly through the winter. Although he was a city-dwelling hedgehog.

"Snow! Snow! The first snow..." could be heard from afar. Sparrows excitedly jumped and caught snowflakes with their beaks. This was the beginning of a completely different story...



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