

Onutė and the Oak Tree

Onutė left the house early with her brother Antanas. Their mother had sent them to gather wild mushrooms and berries, typical of the Dzukija region in southern Lithuania. These they hoped to sell to highway travellers. If they made enough money, Father had promised, they would all travel to the Kaziukas fair next Sunday.

Onutė loved the fair. It was an arts and crafts fair organized every year on the Sunday before St Casimir's Day - the patron saint of Lithuania. Onutė loved exploring all the curious stalls and hearing all the traders calling back and forth. It was a magical atmosphere, craftsmen from all over Lithuania and beyond would gather to sell their trinkets, and there was always music and dancing.

Onutė and Antanas lived on a farm in an area surrounded by forests and swamps. There were seven of the children in all, with Antanas being one of the oldest. They quietly made their way across the farmyard, trying their best not to disturb the animals. It was first light and the hens were still sleeping soundly in their little house. Onutė liked feeding the hens, they were always so hungry!

They passed the sleeping cows, their hair still damp from the morning drizzle. The pigs, too, were snoozing in their sty, keeping warm from the cool March air

outside. They had one horse on the farm and he was already grazing in his paddock. He was always happy to see Onutė who longed to ride him but, like most of the animals on the farm, he was a work horse, used for ploughing the small field nearby.

Leaving the farm they set off down a dirt track towards the nearby forrest. Upon entering the light forest, they were greeted by the sweet smell of the pine trees. They gathered mushrooms and berries as they meandered between the trees and soon their pockets were full.

It was very quiet in the forest, only the sound of their footsteps crunching on pine needles and the rushing waters of the nearby Neris river could be heard. They made their way towards the sound of the water and skirted the sloping riverbank. it was here that they usually went swimming in summer: Antanas could swim to the other side because he was older and stronger.

Some way along the bank and further inland they came to the sacred oak tree. Oak trees had long been revered in Lithuania, since Pagan times where it was said to represent Perkūnas, God of Thunder. Onutė and her brother knew this particular oak tree well. Standing proud and strong, it provided food and shelter for many forest creatures.

Underneath the tree, scattered all around, were the tough acorns that Onutė and Antanas had come here to gather. They were a particular favourite treat

for the farm's pigs and helped to fatten them up for the market. Antanas had brought a small woven sack and together they started to gather the acorns and fill the sack.

They were almost finished when they were both surprised by a high-pitched squeal behind them. A wild boar, who had presumably been dozing in the shade of the oak tree, had been rudely awakened by their intrusion and was now charging towards them.

At once Antanas sprang into action, darting for the safety of the oak tree, scrambling up the rough trunk, before pulling Onuté up into the tree. The boar circled the tree, issuing grunts and slashing upwards with his tusks.

They were safe in the tree but the hairy boar below showed no signs of leaving, now having abandoned his aggressive behaviour and starting to forage among the leaf litter at the base of the tree. Onuté was frightened but she didn't tell Antanas. She was very glad he had agreed to come with her today as she would usually have come alone.

They waited a long time in the tree but still the boar seemed content to stay. They were both becoming stiff from crouching on the hard branch. Onuté tried shouting at the boar and shaking some branches but it had no effect. Growing impatient, Antanas started throwing acorns from the sack at the wild boar. The

boar squealed in anger and moved away a little. Onuté joined in and soon they were able to drive the unhappy boar away.

Antanas swung himself down from the branch and dropped to the ground.

Making sure that the boar was nowhere in sight, he helped Onuté down from the tree. They quickly retrieved the scattered acorns and stuffed them in the sack once more before hurrying back to the farm. This time they didn't linger in the forest and Onuté was relieved when they reached the familiar farmhouse kitchen.