

THE STORY OF TOBIAS AND THE ANGEL

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INSPIRED BY WORKSHOP OF VERROCCHIO

'TOBIAS AND THE ANGEL', ABOUT 1470-75

It happened one afternoon. Tobias's father, Tobit, had been dozing in the garden under the fig tree. A sparrow landed on his cheek and pecked at his sleeping eyes. Perhaps the bird thought that it was a strange fruit. Who knows?

At first, the old man's eyes turned red, swollen with fever. But as the swelling faded, so too did his eyesight. Within a week, the poor man was blind.

Tobias watched his father, stumbling from one room to the other, muttering crazily to himself. How he wished that his father could see. But his mother would scold him into work. For now his father was blind, every penny counted and every penny was harder to come by. Well, the days they ran by like rabbits and the family grew poorer than a rat's larder.

Luckily, Tobit remembered that many years before he had lent some money to an old friend who lived in Media, a city in Persia. So he decided to send Tobias to fetch the money.

That afternoon, Tobias went down to the marketplace to look for a guide. Such a long journey across the great deserts and mountain ranges would be dangerous. Tobias began to ask who might be free to travel with him but the tribesmen turned away. They had heard of Tobit's blindness and, being superstitious, were afraid that they might catch the disease. In the end, someone he did not know – a lone tribesman who sat by the village wall – caught Tobias's eye.

"My name is Raphael, and I will accompany you," replied the stranger, standing. He was tall and, unlike the local men, had blonde hair.

The next morning, Tobias and Raphael set off on their journey accompanied by Tobias's dog, Hera. Day after day they walked the ancient paths and in the evenings they would

find a place to sleep under the stars. Hera ran ahead, chasing rabbits or barking at the crows.

One evening, they came to the edge of a great river. "This is the River Tigris and tomorrow we must cross it," said Raphael, glancing at his young companion.

As the morning sun broke over the horizon, Raphael led the way into the dark waters, striding forwards. Tobias followed just behind him, using a mighty stick to help himself balance. But the river grew deeper and Tobias was afraid that it would swallow him. Just as they seemed to be nearing the other side, Tobias felt something push against his legs and in a moment he fell into the water, his arms flailing crazily. "Help!" he called, but Raphael stood quite still and watched.

Tobias tried to find his feet but as he did, a great fish rose up, its huge mouth open wide as if to swallow him. "Use your staff," called Raphael. So, Tobias raised his stick and hit the fish as hard as he could. Without thinking, he leaped onto the stunned creature and began to drag it to the far bank.

Tobias lay there gasping, with the dead fish beside him. Raphael stood patiently, waiting for his young friend to recover. Tobias panted and then struggled to his feet. He faced Raphael accusingly, "You're supposed to be looking after me!" he shouted. "But what was the problem? You only lost your footing," replied Raphael, pointing at the fish.

Tobias looked down and was amazed to see that what he had thought was a mighty catch was only the size of the sort of fish that his mother bought at the harbourside. Squatting down, Raphael showed him how to gut the fish and clean it, putting the fish's eyes and scales in a small, metal box that he carried. "We will need these," he said, as he stoked the little fire. Tobias shivered until the heat of the flames warmed him. His clothes steamed as they dried.

Later that day, they arrived at Media and were lucky enough to find good lodgings. Straight away, Raphael went to reclaim the debt owed to Tobit. Meanwhile, Tobias sat outside in the sun and watched as the townsfolk went about their business. A girl about his age, called Sara, caught his eye and soon they fell talking. By the time Raphael returned, Tobias was head over heels in love.

Raphael and Tobias stayed in Media for several months – long enough for Tobias to

woo and wed Sara. He was overjoyed but Sara sought out Raphael and confessed her story. A terrible demon called Asmodeus had fallen in love with her and, consequently, had sworn to kill any man that she married. Already six fresh graves lay in the town's graveyard. The demon paced outside her house every night, twisted with jealousy.

So it was that Raphael told Sara and Tobias that they should open the metal box and burn the entrails of the fish when they were alone. They waited until the moon was high and the town dark, except for the silvery starlight.

Alone in Sara's house, they could hear the demon breathing low and slow as it paced outside the door. It was looking for a way in.

Hera barked as they burned the entrails over a candle. The room filled with a strange smoke... and as Asmodeus sniffed at the windows, he suddenly paused and breathed in the stink of fish. With that, he seemed to freeze and then his body began to shrink... until he was just dust on the breeze.

Many months later, Tobias, Sara, Raphael and Hera arrived back at Nineveh. Tobit staggered out from the house, calling to his son. "Now you must use the fish's eyes," whispered Raphael.

So Sara ground the fish's eyes until they became a thin paste. Tobias sat down beside his father and rubbed the salve into his father's tired, sightless eyes. For a moment, the old man wriggled, finding the salve uncomfortable. Patiently, Tobias watched. He saw the strange milky film that lay across his father's eyes begin to fade. Eventually, each eye stared straight out at him with sharpness and clarity as the scales fell from the old man's eyes.

"I can see," hissed Tobit, rising up and clutching his son. Indeed, he could see and perhaps he could see more clearly than Sara or Tobias. For when he looked at Raphael, he did not see the tribesman who had accompanied his son across so many miles. No, he saw a man shimmering with light – or was it the sun behind him? No – he saw a man with silvery wings... Or was that just because he had been blind for so long. In a moment, the light was gone and Raphael too.

Tobit chuckled. Now he could see.

Pie Corbett, about 2009

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