**THE PARABLE OF THE NIGHTBLUE BOOK**

A fairy tale by Willem Glaudemans

**I Departure**

Now upon a time there is a king and he has a son. He is the only son and he is the only father. The king loved the prince, and the prince loved his father, the king, just as much. Their love seemed to grow more with each day. They live together very happily in the palace. They get up together, go to bed at the same time and always have their meals with each other. They invariably discuss, in the greatest harmony with one another, the kingdom’s questions of state. If there is a difference of opinion they quietly wait for an inspiration that pleases them and makes them both enthusiastic. And the kingdom blossoms and thrives on their leadership. There is always a feeling of peace and tranquility, stretching out from the palace to the furthest corners of the kingdom. The father is very loving of the son, and he doesn’t want for anything. There is a bountiful supply of everything for everybody’s need. A truly fairy tale situation. But a fairy tale wouldn’t be a fairy tale if it ended here.

And so it happens that one day the father summones the son to him in the garden. The king sits on a magnificent chair, just at that moment reading from a thick, dark blue book, when the son enters. He looks up from his book, and it is as if a light, reflecting from the book unto his face, now shines through his eyes to the son.

-My boy, he says, I love you so much that I want to tell you something important, something you already know. I can, after all, never keep a secret from you. Now, what I want to tell you is: Everything that is mine is yours. Because you are my son. There is no boundary where my possessions stop and yours begin. They are completely one. My kingdom is yours.

\_Wow, the son says, thanks pa, but isn’t everything maybe a little bit too much?

\_No, says the father sternly but lovingly. My love for you is no small thing. When I say everything, I mean, truly, everything. And he smacks the book in his lap for emphasis. The son is dizzy, overwhelmed, it’s so much. And the responsibility that goes along with it. In his bed that evening he ponders in earnest, tossing and turning, deep in thought. Everything, everything, did he really mean everything?

That night, for the first time, the father and son do not go to bed at the same time.

The next morning the son dances in the palace gardens, overcome with the joy that ‘this is all mine, now, everything mine’. He looks at the trees, the plants and the pastures with trees and animals and says softly to himself: they are mine. He runs his eyes over all the buildings and says: all this is mine. He wanders through all the rooms and sees the riches there in evidence and says: this is all for me. He sees attendants and stewards walking around and says: they are mine. He climbs in the highest tower and observes all the land surrounding the castle and thinks to himself: this too is all mine. He walks around and around, singing all the time to himself: ‘this is mine, and that is mine, everything is mine, mine, yes, everything I see.’ In this dizzying, exquisite dream\_like state, he comes again to the palace garden where he sees, from a distance, his father reading the nightblue book. The prince stands still and is just about to repeat to himself ‘this too is mine’, when he realizes that his father does, of course, not belong to him, but to himself. He spies on him behind some bushes, and sees how happy his father is with the book. It truly appears as if the book shines a soft, white light on his father’s countenance, lighting it up. The prince has never seen such a book before. Maybe this is why he gave me his whole kingdom, he thinks, so that he can blissfully read his book the whole day. If he wants to give me everything, he mustn’t keep that book for himself. If everything is mine, well, then that miraculous book is also mine, it’s simple logic. All the world’s wisdom is in that book, and now he wants to keep that for himself.

And the son makes a plan.

That night the father and son go to their bedrooms at the same time, but the prince doesn’t go to sleep. When everything is quiet in the palace, he creeps through the hall to his father’s room. He knows that his father often reads in bed, so he supposes that the book will be on the bedside table. He listens nervously by the door and hears a reassuring snoring sound. Carefully he opens the door and, ever so quietly, he inches his way in until he is standing next to the bed. In the moonlight streaming through the window, he hears the quiet breathing of the sleeper, his chest restfully moving in and out. One hand is on the covers and an arm hangs down beside the bed. The prince bends over and moves slowly, closer and closer, keenly observing the sleeping king. When he is next to the bed he bends to his knees, so as to be all the more invisible, and he feels his father’s warm breath on his face. Watching the king fervently, he stretches out his hand to the table. His hand feels over the whole table, but doesn’t feel the book. The prince pulls himself up a bit: with the exception of a candleholder and a glass of water, the table is empty! Then he realizes that the book might have slipped out of the reader’s hand when he fell asleep. But nowhere on the floor is the book to be found. Blast it all! Where would he have hidden it? Is it so valuable for him that he would have put it away somewhere? Where, oh where, does he keep his treasures? Just at that moment the sleeping body moves. The arm is pulled back into bed closely brushing the prince’s face. His hair stands on end; drenched with sweat he quickly scrambles his way back out of his father’s room. I wasn’t born to be a thief, he sighs when he is finally out of the room.

To get over his unsuccessful mission he goes downstairs to drink something. He takes the servant’s stairs at the back of the castle. He walks through the dark hall leading to the kitchen. Then he comes to the central room where light is always burning. He hesitates for a moment before entering the lit\_up room. He looks up to the majestic stairs in the center. There is no one. He walks on, looks up again, and bumps clumsily into a table next to the front door. Bang! An empty clang echoes in the room and reverberates from all the walls and through all the halls. A shiver runs down his spine. The book is lying on the ground before him, it had fallen from a table!

He scoops it up quickly. Where shall he go? To the garden? He opens the door and steps out onto the terrace. Before he closes the door, the king appears at the top of the stairs. He sees his son and smiles.

Now the prince stands outside in the dark of night, and looks for a place where he is safe, where he can read undisturbed. It must be dark so that no one can see him, and it must be light so that he can read. Such a place doesn’t exist, at the same time dark and light, he realizes. With the book in his hands, the prince sinks to the steps of the terrace, overcome with the meaninglessness of his undertaking. Stupid book, now I’ve got you and I still can’t read you. He gives it an angry smack, and another smack, and throws it on the step beneath him, causing the book to fall open. In the dim moonlight he sees only white pages and no letters on the pages. He thinks momentarily that the book has fallen open to a blank section, exactly between two other sections. He picks up the book, holds it close to his eyes, and thumbs through. White pages, everywhere. He thumbs and thumbs further, unnerved: white, everything white, the book is and stays white! There is not a trace of a letter.

How can this be? He has seen his father reading it time and time again, and now the book is empty, all the letters suddenly erased. A cold sweat breaks out, like a wet blanket covering him, as he realizes what this might mean. The content and magic power of the book has been lost as a result of the theft. And this is his fault! He has stolen the most valuable thing his father owned, and he has annihilated it. How can he ever make up for this? Never! He thinks it’s so horrific what’s happened, that he decides to leave. How can he ever look his father in the eye to confess to what he has done? He, of all people, in whom his father had complete trust. He, of all people, whose father loved him as nobody else, has done this. He deserves his father’s love no more, so he can better take his leave. He quakes and trembles, his mind becomes anesthetized, turning in to itself, and disconnects from everything outside. He finds himself in a numb, foggy state of his own making. He languishes in a state of stupor and total anesthesia.

A door opens and closes behind him. But he doesn’t hear it. Dreadful feelings and thoughts consume him, and he is in need of solace. Soft, quiet footsteps approach him, but inside he has already left. Be gone for good then, anything is better than staying until tomorrow when his father discovers the theft and knows that he is the perpetrator. He stands up, no longer feeling the soft, comforting hand on his shoulder. Or rather, he feels it all right, but thinks it to be his father’s guards coming to take hold of him. He doesn’t look around; he has but one objective: escape. With the book under the arm he walks through the palace garden, the park and the pasture, as fast as possible, to the border of his father’s estate. He slips through a hedge somewhere, and walks on and on, by roads without end. As morning draws near he feels great fatigue. He leaves the road and lies down under a tree on a bit of moss. He goes to sleep with the book firmly cushioned in his arms.

That afternoon he wakes up, a sinking, heavy feeling in his breast. It takes a moment before he grasps where it comes from. The book! All the nasty feelings hit him like a battering ram smashing at his heart. The world looks unpleasant and threatening too. What must he do? He can’t go home anymore. But venturing into the unknown world is also not very appealing. And he can’t just sit here either, because then his father’s guards and soldiers could find him. A sudden fatigue overcomes him. He sighs deeply. With difficulty he stands up. He feels alone. The memory of his father’s love is painful. He is full of sadness when he thinks about the happiness he knew with him. ‘If I had just left that book alone, my father had given me everything, but I wanted more. And now I’ve lost everything, I’ve nothing more,’ he moans.

\_So, what are you so gloomy about there! a loud voice utters all of a sudden.

The prince looks up with a fright, and sees a hunchback standing before him. The geezer leers at him with one eye. He stinks of stale, wet rags. He has gray a stubble, and green, coagulated spit is sticking to the corners of his mouth.

\_What are you doing here anyway, with those fancy clothes on? You don’t belong here, no way. You should be on the other side of the palace walls, even I can see that.

The prince feels unmasked. He hadn’t realized that he would be recognized everywhere in the kingdom as a run\_away prince. The geezer sees his despair and guesses it’s source. Suddenly he throws his hunch to the ground. It appears it is just a ball of wet rags and old clothes that he carries on his back. There is a sly laugh in the ragman’s eyes: he smells business.

\_Shall we switch?, he says. You in these inconspicuous tatters, and I in your conspicuous garb? You can’t been seen here, not in that garb. Hey, I just want to help you mate. The prince looks at the exquisite clothes he’s wearing, his blue velvet cloak laced with golden thread, his gold brocade trousers and shirt. His shoes bearing silver buckles. Everything shines and glistens in the sun. You can see him coming, in fact, from miles away. The geezer is completely right. If he wants to stay invisible for those in pursuit, his father’s soldiers, then he can’t be seen walking around in these clothes.

\_Good, good, he says. Still holding the book in his arms, he puts it down and undoes the golden clasps of his cloak. He takes off his soft leather shoes. He pulls his shirt and trousers off and lays them carefully in a bundle on the moss. Then he is ready to take a look through the old rags for something that fits. But the trader says:

\_No, mate, your underwear as well. Hey, that’s way too eccentric. Nobody walks around here with a silk undershirt and silk long johns.

The prince knows the geezer is right. With reluctance he undoes the cord of his undershirt and pulls it over his head. He undoes the trouser button and lets it drop. Naked, he stands next to his clothes. The geezer grabs up the clothes, rolls them into a ball, and makes a quick get\_away.

The prince, bewildered, stays standing and follows the geezer’s retreat. He searches through the smelly rags for something that will fit. Finally he finds a grubby shirt in shreds, a torn pair of trousers, damp felt shoes and a jacket full of holes. As he pulls on the shirt it tears further. The trousers pinch at the knees, the crotch and belly, and the coat feels like someone pulling at the scruff of his neck, his armpits pinched numb. His movements are restricted. The clothes make him unwieldy and slow, but they give him protection, and he’ll do anything for that. So, now his father’s soldiers, from whom he is running as a result of having stolen the blue book, won’t recognize him.

Where is it actually? He looks under the tree. He sees only clear, green moss. He throws, madly, all the strewn rags in the air, but the book is not there. He looks up the road. In the distance he sees the geezer walking away. He rounds a bend in the road and disappears.

The prince starts running. Will he ever catch up with that nasty guy? Will he ever see his book again? What does the guy want anyway? Rats, the clothes are a disaster, he can hardly move. He is homesick for his roomy and light princely clothes. But he buries the feeling immediately. He runs on, painfully and awkwardly, in the direction of the ragman’s last sighting. . Oh gosh, if he hasn’t taken a side road, or hidden himself somewhere, he thinks nervously. But as he rounds the bend, he can hardly believe his eyes, there he is, sitting calmly on an embankment by the side of the road. He is reading the book in his lap.

\_Give me back my book this minute!, the panting prince screams.

The man looks up, surprised. Tauntingly slow he forms the words:

\_Why should I?

\_It wasn’t a part of the switch, the prince says, losing heart

\_That’s what you say!

\_But it’s of no use to you, there’s nothing in it!

\_That’s what you think. There’s one fantastic story in this book, the guy says, and it isn’t finished either. Is this your story?

\_What do you mean?

\_Did you pinch this book from your father?

\_What if I did?

\_The old man’s pulled a fast one on you if you ask me!

\_Now, what do you mean?

\_I’ll explain it to you. He’s laid a trap for you, mate, with all that stuff about everything is for you. He was testing you. He was just enticing you to filch that book by pretending that it wasn’t a part of the bargain. That’s why all his sharing business was so covert. He knew all along that you’d just have to have that book! And now, well, now he’s got his whole kingdom for himself, doesn’t he. He’s got everything, he doesn’t have to share anything with you anymore! It was a sting, mate. He wanted to get rid of you.

\_I do not believe a word you’re saying, the prince declares angrily. My father is not like that!

\_Can’t you see it, mate, it’s staring you right in the face! He left the book right there on the table by the front door, for goodness sake! Real easy to see wasn’t it, right there in the light. You’d have to take it. You couldn’t have missed it. It was his way of saying: this is the acid test, you lift it, you leave through the front door, now. And that is exactly what you did.

The prince is stunned. This creepy guy was right again. His father knowingly set a trap for him. The prince feels a wall of rage within himself. How cruel his father is, knowingly maneuvering him into a corner. And to think that he had felt so guilty. But now it’s clear, it is his father’s fault! He never, never wants to go back to someone who, in the name of love, pulls such a dirty trick. He would rather forget him, completely.

The geezer looks on with delight at the result of his words.

\_I’ve also read the end of the book, he says softly, and I don’t like it, not one bit. And he rudely throws the book at the prince, who catches it, startled. He opens it immediately and sees that, indeed, there are letters in it. The first pages are full with text. Stupefied, he reads: ‘Now upon a time there is a king and he has a son. He is the only son and he is the only father.’ Flustered, he reads on, and everything is there, everything that has happened to him, everything he’s thought and felt till now. The text continues up to his meeting with the ragman. But there are other thoughts in the book that he does not recognize as his. He reads: ‘What a half\_wit, big nincompoop the prince is. He’s a pushover, trading his expensive clothes for dirty rags. Earned a pretty penny, I did. Ha, ha! He believes everything I tell him! What an easy catch! Oh, there he comes, running. I’ll tell him a thing or two about what I think of his father!’ After reading this, a dense, unremitting dread, black as death, overcomes the prince, never had he felt such dread. It made him sick. He knows that these are the deeper thoughts of the ragman. He wants to have it out with him, in no uncertain terms. But when he looks up, the guy seems to have disappeared. The prince scrutinizes the road in both directions, but there is absolutely no sign of him. Still, he couldn’t shake off the dread, it settled in his heart.

The prince sits down with the book open in his lap. What a bizarre book this is actually; it knows and instantaneously describes all the thoughts and deeds of the owner. Even his offence was described in the book. Then he gulps, realizing that everything from his father, that would have been in the book, is now gone. How can he ever make up for this?

Can he, in the whole of his life, search for all the wisdom of the world and put it in the book? And would this ever make up for his father’s loss? But what the heck, it was his father’s fault, after all, that he took the book, no doubt about it. Why would he want to make up for something he wasn’t even responsible for?! ‘Guilt and anger wrestle in him for the upper hand,’ he subsequently reads in the book. He has to admit this is true. He shuts the book, smack, and stands up. If the book is such a know\_it\_all, maybe it could guide him in this world outside of his father’s estate. Maybe he can read in it what he’s supposed to do. Maybe it can even tell him the future. After all, hadn’t the ragman said something to him about the end of the book, something he didn’t like. For now, he doesn’t dare read that. What if things don’t work out for him. But, one thing is sure, the book can evidently tell the future. Just think of it, the whole story of his life is already written! This is a ghastly thought, one on which he would rather not spend too much time.

And so, relieved, he continues on his way. In the distance on the hillside, he has seen a village. Maybe he can get something to eat there, because since he left he hasn’t eaten anything. And he is thirsty. This encourages him to step up his pace. He walks a long way, but after a while curiosity starts to get the upper hand. What is in store for him in the future? Will he ever get home? In spite of his hunger, he sits down by the side of the road, and opens the book to the place where the last letters stood. He sighs. He recognizes, from the passage he is reading, his exact situation. Why does it stop here? Why can’t I read how it develops further? I want to know more, just a little bit. I don’t have to know how it ends right now, just the next step.

‘That’s not possible, dear,’ he reads to his horror, and at the same time hears the words reverberate. He looks up, and sees next to him an old woman looking in a friendly way at him. She too, carries a bundle of clothes on her back, but these are fresh and clean. They smell of flowers.

\_ Who are you?, he stammers.

\_ I am the wash woman, she says, I come from the spring. And she points over her shoulder with her thumb.

\_ But how come I first read you and then see you afterwards?

\_ Because, dear, I’m always here, the woman says with a friendly laugh.

- But then that means, doesn’t it, that the book does tell the future?

\_ The future that has already become the present, yes, that’s so, she says mysteriously. But what can I help you with, you called me.

- I don’t know anything about that, says the prince, stupefied.

- Now that’s often the problem with you people, the woman says without a trace of bitterness. I always answer directly when something is asked. People ask all right, oh they always ask, but they seldom listen to the answer. They forget to read their own book. You too. And it is so easy, it’s all there. Just look, and with a steady hand she points to the lines. And sure enough, immediately after his questions there are the answers; he had apparently overlooked them. He reads, right after the last entry, ‘why can’t I read how it develops further?’ the answer: ‘because otherwise you would be hopelessly disoriented in the future. You can only be awake in the now.’ At first, the prince is dumbfounded, but then a needling, rancorous thought begins to wriggle to the surface.

\_ Well, thanks a lot, who needs this, he grumbles. If that’s the only thing you can come up with, such a fuzzy, impractical answer! And then, suddenly, he feels the old woman is a tedious intruder in his life, a nosey, meddlesome bother.

\_ Oh, if my hearing serves me, I take it that you’ve met him also. Let’s have a look, and she quickly thumbs back through a few pages. Ah ha, this time he passed himself off as a ragman. That doesn’t matter, you’ll come to recognize him in his disguise. He’s always trying to get you to forget your roots, rubbing your nose in your past, so that you never feel happy NOW. If you can remember that, kido, you’ll recognize him more and more. And you can always choose not to listen to his advice.

\_ But he was right, the prince says. He told me exactly how my father tricked me; here, read it for yourself.

\_There’s no point in reading again, she warns, if you’re so uptight and mad. You’re just running in circles, never get anywhere that way. You turn your past, literally, into the present, only you don’t know that. The same text appears on the paper as the present, time and again. And time and again you relive the same story, only you think that it is something new. A lot of people do that who are afraid of their freedom. They put the blame on others for their own mess. They bear their pain as grievances against everybody. And they read, time and again, their own story because they are starting to believe in it.

\_I find this mighty complicated, the prince says irritably.

\_The woman laughs with compassion and understanding.

\_Nevertheless, it is not difficult, she says. All you have to do is ask for my help, and I’m there. You read my answer in your book. But if you don’t ask, well then I can’t help. Hey, in the end, it’s all about asking the right question.

\_Then what is the right question?, asks the prince immediately

\_Well, in any case, this one is not it, she says, amused. You must figure that one out for yourself. If I tell you, I’m not helping you to turn around// retrace your steps, not at all.

\_When do I know if I’ve asked the right question?, asks the prince, still trying.

\_When that time comes, then that will not be a question for you anymore, came the decisive answer. Now I’ll just be on my way, she says, and she disappears immediately.

Dazed, the prince stands up and looks around. Vanished into thin air, gone. But in his heart he felt a quiet joy. A deep comfort that everything will be all right, even if he doesn’t know what that everything is.

His stomach grumbles, and he decides to continue to the village he sees in the valley near by. It looks friendly enough, with red roofs and smoking chimneys, a well on the square. Exactly like a village in a fairy tale is supposed to look. Some cattle are roaming the hills and a dog barks in the distance. He walks down through the long grass. The descent is a rhythmic and controlled drop. Before he realizes it he finds himself on the village square. He feels the round cobblestones under his thin felt soles. The houses surround him, questioning. A dog sniffs his feet, sniffs in a circle around him. A friendly sign hangs from the biggest house on the square: a pot\_bellied kettle above a fire with a text that reads: My home is my castle. That must be an inn, there he can eat something at least. The dog follows him into the noisy barroom. Once he is used to the dimly lit room, he looks for an empty table, puts his book on the table and sits down. The innkeeper comes promptly, a robust man with a round, red face.

That must be the castle caretaker, the prince thinks, chuckling inside.

\_What’s so funny here?, the man grimly asks. What do you want here? He wipes off his greasy hands on his apron, then bores his fists into his side.

\_I would like to eat something, the prince says as friendly as possible.

\_We’ve got no use for tramps and drifters. And you stink to boot. You just go have a wash, mister. I’ll lose my customers because of you. I’ve got a decent business. You get lost!

\_ But I am a prince, the prince says indignantly. My father is the king!

\_Yeah, yeah, and mine is Donald Duck!

Before the prince has a chance to say anything, the man grabs him by the collar and pitches him outside. He falls with his bottom squarely on the cobblestones. The door swings for a bit, and with the last swing the dog comes out with a big piece of bread in his mouth.

Well, he, at least, had some luck, the prince thinks bitterly. They feed dogs, but they let people grovel on the streets. It’s not fair. He is consumed with an alien rage, a piercing hostility wholly overcomes him; he is stunned. Somebody who has everything won’t even throw scraps to the swine! He roars like a lion. They just throw me out on the street! I’m run\_out of every place. I’m not welcome anywhere, always on the outside. I don’t even have a home. Pain stabs at his heart. But the real root of his rage and despair lies deeply hidden, buried within him. He knows not wherefrom it comes.

At that moment something rock\_hard strikes his head. They’re throwing stones at me as well, he quickly realizes. This is utter madness! He snatches the stone to throw it back, only to find that it is his blue book. A lot of good you do me. You can’t even protect me or give me something to eat. You’re not worth a plugged nickle. A spot of blood drips on the book. He grasps his forehead with his hand. He feels the warm blood and his hand turns red. He stands up and walks to the well to wash his hands and face. But there is no bucket hanging in the well, and it appears that only moss is growing on the dark bottom. I have to wash, where can I wash, he cries out loud. And then he thinks, for a fleeting moment, of the wash woman. She promised to help me. She would come, wouldn’t she, if I called her? Where is she, now that I need her? I knew it, you can’t trust her either. In the space of a breath he thinks he smells the faint scent of flowers, but the stale smell of decay is stronger.

He lets himself drop to the ground, dead weight against the well, his head still bleeding. The book lies next to him. He takes it on his lap. Shall he try all the same? Maybe the wash woman left a message in it for him anyway? With little confidence he opens the book. As he leafs through the pages they become dirty from his bloody hands. When he finally finds the last printed page and is ready to read, blood drips onto the book Yuck, irritated, he slams the book shut. How can I give this book back, now that it is so dirty? But then he has second thoughts: ‘give back, wait a minute, why should I? To whom should I give it?’ He truly can no longer remember. With consternation he shakes his head. Then he feels something, a hand on his shoulder. Startled, shivers running up his spine, he looks right into the glowing face of a young woman.

\_Perhaps I can help you?, she pleasantly asks. That’s a nasty wound you’ve got. I can clean it for you at home, she offers.

He nods, and she helps him stand up.

\_I live close by, she says, pointing to a street. Just follow me.

She is a widow and lives in a nice house. Everything is clean and fresh, white curtains adorn the windows, and smartly polished copper kettles are on the stove. The floor is spotless, not a crumb, but now blobs of red disturb the peace. He is embarrassed; he doesn’t want to mess up her house.

\_That’s okay, she says calmly. You just sit down, and she points to a wooden stool by the table. I’ll just get some bandages. She bustles off to an adjoining room, probably a bedroom. He looks around at the simple furniture. The house has but two rooms. Presently, she returns with bandages, a bowl of water and a towel over her arm.

\_First, let’s get this clean, she says, and begins gently patting the wound with a warm towel. In no time she has a proper bandage around his head; he’s good as new. She occupies herself with the beginnings of a meal. It smells wonderful, and he watches lovingly how she busies about, doing her best for him. When it is ready, he falls on his food, famished.

\_Has it been a long time since you’ve eaten?, she asks.

\_Yeah, ever since I left home, he says, and that seems ages ago. He sighs.

\_Oh really, where is your home then? You’re not from these parts? She asks gently.

\_Actually, I am a prince, he says, his coolness now melted as a result of her warm care. But at the same time his heart skips a beat, all the guilt and anger for his father is still lying in wait. That is the price you pay for love, he now knows, it melts your pain instantly.

- Aha, we’re all kings’ children, she says decidedly.

He is perplexed. He thought he was something special. But he is totally nothing anymore. Nobody recognizes him as the only prince. The innkeeper didn’t; he thought he was a drifter. And this gentle widow also not, she thinks we’re all kings’children. One thing is certain, he must definitely forget his roots, just fit\_in here, like he’d never lived anywhere else. The abandonment and longing for home that these thoughts bring into focus weigh heavy on his heart. They must be put instantly to rest in a deep chamber of his mind.

\_What kind of book is that?, she asks, pointing to the table.

\_Oh that, that is my indignity. Have a look, it’s messed\_up with blood. It is the remembrance of my sin.

\_Don’t be daft, let’s have a look, she says and she pulls the book across the table.

\_No, oh no, you may not read it, he quavers.

He snatches the book up from the table, jumps like lightning, and rockets out of the house. The woman, flabbergasted, stays behind.

Now he is once again outside. He knew he had been ungrateful towards the woman. She helped him unconditionally, and he left, abruptly, without so much as a good by. Guilt and shame begin to gnaw, and he doesn’t understand himself. But he also doesn’t want to go back inside. What he really wants is to just get out of this whole village. He has heard that there is a city not far away. Maybe he can find a job there.

**II The Turn Around**

And so, boys and girls, he traveled over the whole world. And believe me, the world is a big place. He walked, and walked and walked. Seven times seven miles he walked, seven times seven days long. His clothes pinched but he was used to that; he had become a master of his personal drawbacks. He drifted from city to city, from land to land, through all of the kingdoms. He had utterly forgotten where he belonged. For he didn’t feel at home anywhere, always the same, nagging unrest, move on, got to move on. He steered his course by an opaque, vague sign, I’m out of here, out of here.

And so, for many, many stormy years he wandered. He kept his book with him, even if he didn’t take a look. Sometimes things happened that reminded him of his indignity. He would then instinctively hide his book for safe keeping, so nobody could see it. Sometimes there were things that reminded him of his lost happiness, but then he felt a throttling pain in his chest. And somehow the pain had a vague connection with the book. This all, he tucked away in the secret chambers of his mind. And as the book had foretold, there were things that reminded him of his long trip. But, of course, he wouldn’t open the book, oh no. In this way the book had no influence. His attention was drawn to the peculiarities of this world, bodies, drink, curiosities, power games, self\_interest, little shining coins and strips of printed paper. Finally, he didn’t know any better; this was everything life had to offer, any life, anywhere in the world. All this worked as a diversion and anesthetic for his unremitting blurred sense of anxiety and shadowy guilt. And these suppressed feelings interlaced with the broader fabric of life, everywhere. When he observed other people, he felt threatened and felt the call to attack, born out of fear for their attack. He held them, by definition, guilty for his muddle. He especially shunned innkeepers and widows, but he didn’t know why.

This lasted for many years. We don’t need to spend time here, because all you boys and girls can fill in the pieces with your own lives.

But, then on day he came to a conclusion, that he couldn’t continue anymore in this way. He had discovered that, putting the blame on other people for his muddle never brought him happiness. It was weird, but the more he tried to put the blame on others, the more unhappy he would become. It simply didn’t work. There must be another way, he thought, but who would help him to find it?

\_Me, he heard, but he saw no one.

It was doubly weird, because it was as if the voice came from the book. His book! He hadn’t looked in the book for a long time; in all honesty, he had forgotten about it. After scrounging around for a bit trying to find the book, he found it and opened it. Letters, everywhere letters. He leafed on and on. And then he noticed that his book was almost full. He could vaguely remember his promise, that he would gather all the wisdom of the world through his life and put it in the book. Had he mastered all the wisdom of the world? He couldn’t believe it. Had he been everywhere, seen everything, done everything, was there nothing left? He thought not, but there weren’t many pages left. There was nothing left for him to do but look for his original home, wherever that might be. He also remembered the ragman’s words about the end of the book, that he didn’t like it. Again he felt the pinchers squeezing his heart. What if he should die in the end, what if he never finds his home again. Or, perish the thought, that he finally might suffer his deserved punishment, For this there is no way out.

And, for the first time in years he asked his book a question, would he ever come home. And beneath all the smudged lines of his despairing life he found delicate, embellished letters with the answer written: ‘A happy end is guaranteed.’ Still, he didn’t dare to read on to the end. But the book had, for the first time, put him at rest. And so, comforted, he ventured off to find his original kingdom. He knew now it couldn’t be too far off, because he was on the last pages. From this he gained confidence. He even dared to ask the book where he should go. And when he had that thought, ‘where do I go?,’ he heard immediately, once again, a voice that he recognized as the wash woman:

\_You asked the right turning\_around question. It isn’t ‘out of here’, but ‘where to?’ And a yearning arouses, nameless and without definition, a longing, a craving hunger to go home, instead of run away. A place where he has been, to someone he used to know, even if he can’t remember who. Because, he also didn’t know who he was. He asked himself: who am I after all?

And the voice of the wash woman says:

\_Now you’re on the right road. This question will take you home.

And thus, he found himself in a valley, close to a village he knew. He heard a dog barking and saw the inn with the pot\_bellied sign hanging and the text that read ‘My Home is my Castle’. And he had to concur, he would do anything to get home again. But, he also had to admit that he had nothing except his book. He opened the door and entered the barroom. It is deserted. Just the innkeeper is standing behind the bar. He is friendly and offers him a drink. He is obviously happy with any visitor. Without being asked, he explained why it was so still in his business:

\_Everybody has gone to the city, some kind of celebration. A party. Something to do with a book. I don’t know, it’s pretty strange what all I hear about it.

\_What kind of book?

-All I know is it’s dark blue and real thick, and promises miracles, like heaven. I think I saw one once, before it was finished. But then I see so much. Do I know you?

\_Do you know who I am? I’ve been here before; you thought I was a drifter and pitched me out on the street with my blue book.

\_You don’t mean it? Was that you? Gosh, I’m sorry. Oh yeah, now I remember, you said your father was the king. That really got my goat. I didn’t believe you.

\_It doesn’t matter, you’ve really helped me by saying who my father is. Thanks for the drink; I’m going to the city too.

He walks through the village and recognizes the widow’s house. He remembers how abruptly he had left. He knocks on the window. But nobody opens up. Pity, I would have loved to have spoken to her, he thinks. He steps up his pace in the direction of the city not far away. More people are walking along the road; there are carts and carriages and riders. And in the distance he sees blue and golden flags fluttering on the city towers. Because he is so used to walking, he walks fast, passing up many of the other people. A young woman notices him as he walks past her.

\_The wound has healed beautifully I see, she says.

\_Do you know who I am then?, he asks, slowing down.

\_Well of course, you were the prince who I once was able to help, she says, giving him a friendly nod.

\_I am sorry, he says, I was embarrassed for what was written about me in the book. I wanted you to see me as I am, a prince: and not a thief.

\_Naturally, you were always a prince for me. And now you’re in luck that the celebration is in the city, because we’re expecting our prince.

The prince waves warmly to her and walks on to the city.

**III Coming Home**

And so he arrives in the city. He crosses a bridge and now sees the blue and golden flags from the towers. He goes further into the city and sees a building, a bit set\_off from other buildings, on a busy street. There are fences around it, and a lot of work is being done. It is an old building made of bricks. There are some decorative white stones adorning the walls. Masks and musical instruments. ‘Unity Institute’ is written in big letters. Would the party be here? He sees a lot of spirited people going inside, full of expectation. Would people be united here again? He walks in with the mass of people. He ascends the stairs by two distinguished pillars and enters a huge chamber. A veritable din confronts him, hundreds of people are there. He walks in the middle down an aisle to the front and looks for a place to sit. There is piano music. Later, a woman gives a speech and distributes a dark blue book to a few people. For goodness sake, it truly looks like his book! But it is, it is his book! And all these people seem to be happy too, how is it possible!? There is applause. He looks around. Even more people are sitting with the same book in their laps. And the woman says that now the book is for everybody. He feels uncomfortable. Then happily, comforting music begins about a lost song, a song that, miraculously enough, reverberates in him an old, old memory. It is beautifully and melodiously sung, an old yearning clings to every note, a call to go home. Then a man appears and tells a fairy tale. ‘Now upon a time there is a king and he has a son. He is the only son and he is the only father.’ When he hears the sentence, he starts to sweat, profusely. This is his story! How does that guy know all that? His exact biography is being uncovered. He is eerily afraid. Instinctively he feels resistance. He doesn’t want to hear it, but there is no stopping the inevitable story. And then it happens: it tells how he took his father’s book. Everybody hears of his miserable deed, that monstrous deed he had forgotten so successfully. He twitches and shakes. He feels naked and revealed. But hey, all these people are just as responsible. That’s putting it mildly seeing as they all have the book!

But the man continues the story: how he left and how he roamed all those years. How he was at the end of his tether but somehow managed to go on. How he had taken a decision and then reversed that decision. And how he had come into the building. He appears to even know that he is sitting in the audience, he can no longer keep himself hidden. He wants to be invisible, but the storyteller invites him to come forward. ‘Hey, you there, where are you? Come on up here!’ he cries.

You don’t want to, You’d be crazy to go stand in front of a thousand people. But the man cries again ‘Where are you? Come here!’ And he inspects the public. He really means business. There is a little voice in you that wants to answer his call, but it fades quickly. The man seems to have noticed. With even more emphasis he calls and looks, with a penetrating gaze, in your direction: ‘Come on home, you want nothing more!’ That remark puts you in doubt, more than ever you want to crawl in a hole. But, in spite of yourself, a chord had been touched in you. And only because you want to know how it ends, you decide to go. Quaking a bit, you stand up. You know the man is talking about you, even though all the other people look around, as if it might be them. Slowly you walk through the aisle to the front. You look around and see all the astonished faces. They were all called, but you evidently are going for them. And then you see him! Your father! What is he doing here on the stage?! You are speechless. A flash goes through you of a vengeful, malevolent king. But you see that his arms are wide open, smiling warmly at you. You stay still a moment; you feel an irresistible urge, a forceful tugging, all you want to do is throw yourself in his arms, surrender completely, forgetting everything that has happened. But you can’t believe it. You take a step, and stand still again. Deep doubts snare you. A dull thought stuns you. You say to your father:

\_I don’t deserve your love. I stole your most precious possession.

And the father says:

\_You are the dearest thing I have, not that book. And you couldn’t have stolen it, because it was already yours. So, nothing has happened.

But then, why did you leave it by the front door as if to defy me to steal it?

And the father says;

\_Once again, you cannot steal what is already yours. And I left it purposefully in sight because I knew you were looking for it. I wanted to show you that I didn’t want to keep this book for myself, but wanted to share it with you as well.

You happily take a step forwards, but then realize:

\_Nevertheless, I’ve ruined your book. Because I stole it, I mean, took it with me, it suddenly became empty. Everything you put in the book is gone. I’ve really done my best to put all the wisdom of the world in it. But it has turned out to be my own miserable story. The book if filthy and blood stained. Your text is lost forever.

\_No, the father says, something that didn’t happen cannot be lost. My thoughts are quiet and unfilled, and so my book is the same. There never was anything there. You took something that was already yours, and you destroyed something that never existed. Honestly, absolutely nothing has happened.

You timidly inch your way forward, you can’t believe your ears. All the time the book was white and empty?!!

\_But, but what were you reading all the time?, you ask bewildered.

\_I wasn’t reading. This book helps me to keep my mind empty. When I saw letters appear, I was thinking too much. If I could make my mind empty, the paper stayed white. And then the only thing I see is the white light streaming off the pages, and my own light reflected in it.

You want to take a step towards him when you think:

But, then I have woefully sullied the book with my own story and own thoughts outside of the kingdom. Surely I have ruined your book then!

\_No, obstinate you, the father says, that is not possible. Wake up, boy! All this time you’ve been sitting right here, on the steps by the front door, with the book open in your lap. You stared at the white pages, and it appeared as if you were mumbling stories galore. A legion of words and images came on the pages, rapid like a dream. I looked over your shoulder and saw them come and go. You kept turning the pages persistently, and with each page you appeared to be, more and more, mesmerized by your own theater, by the horror of your own dramatics. You simply forgot that you were not the character in the story, but the one thinking it all up. You identified completely with the one who left and made a detour through fear. You were deaf and distant, unreachable. I would put my hand on your shoulder to comfort you, but you felt the talons of an imaginary villain. I whispered consoling words to you, but you heard the strident scream of terror. I gave you the wash woman, but you listened to the ragman. I have never sent you away, but in every way you acted as if you were not welcome and sent yourself away. But, in spite of all the terror and as realistic as it seemed, the pages stayed white the whole time. Take a look for yourself.

And he takes the book out of your hands and opens it. It is white and empty, the whiteness shining on you. You are amazed.

\_Did I live through all this for nothing? Is all that trouble I went through for nothing? All that pain, for no reason at all? Is there no meaning at all to the whole of my trip?, you blutter.

\_Yes and no. It was never necessary, but if you have learned to no longer fantasize that you can be separate from me, then it was all worth it. And if you now know that I never condemned you, was never angry with you, regardless of what you thought you did, then is this worth its weight in gold. Then there is nothing more that can get in the way of our love, because that was always impossible anyway.

And after a short pause he added:

\_But truly, when all is said and done, there never has been a journey. All that time you were safe, right here with me. And it didn’t take very long, no longer than a moment.

You take another step in his direction.

\_But, you ask, how could you know that I would come to my senses?

\_Where you come from, boy, is where you come back, your source is your future and your home\_coming, he says solemnly, but with a laugh. I knew how it would end, he says, because I wrote the last words in the book. However thin or thick you book is, and yours was mighty thick, ultimately it will always bring you back home. You see, at the end I wrote your awakening. And he opens the last pages, the ones you never dared read. And there it is: GOD IS.

Then the Father takes the last step, adorns you in princely clothes, and encloses you in his arms. Tears stream down your face as you feel his total acceptance and warmth. You feel at home with him. A deep joy burns in your heart. Your heart opens up. Unified.

And finally the son laughs.