***Grimm’s Fairy Tales***

***Chapter 4***

### ***A Tale About the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was***

***Summary and Analysis***

***Synopsis:***

This is the story of a young, mentally handicapped boy who is fascinated with other people's ability to shudder and react to fear, a reaction which he does not understand. He goes through a variety of trials meant to make him feel fear, but he does not respond properly to any of them. It is not until his wife pours fish on his back that he is able to shudder as he wishes.

Because of the imagery and supernatural happenings in this story it has a surreal, almost dream-like feel to it. Through his life, the ability to feel fear has been the boy's one great desire. The story teaches that if a person wants something badly enough and sets their mind to go after it, they will accomplish the goal, even if what they desire seems insignificant to others. In this case, the boy's hunt for his dream brought him riches and a happy life as extras.

***Summary:***

* A father has two boys. The elder one is hard-working and the younger one is, well, stupid.
* He's so stupid, in fact, that he doesn't understand what people mean when they say they have the creeps or are afraid. Much mockery ensues.
* A sexton (basically a church-dude) offers to teach the boy the creeps, so he takes the boy and gives him the task of ringing the church bell.
* The sexton dresses in white to scare the boy while he's ringing the bell, but things don't go as planned and the boy tosses him down the stairs instead.
* Horrified, the sexton's wife complains about how the boy broke her husband's leg, so the boy's father kicks him out of their village.
* The boy walks along muttering about how he wants to get the creeps so he can see what all the fuss is about.
* One guy tries to take advantage of him by charging him for advice: he tells the boy to sleep with a bunch of corpses on the gallows, but this doesn't faze the kid.
* There's a haunted castle nearby with a ton of treasures, but people keep dying when they try to spend three nights there. Whoever succeeds will wed the king's daughter, who's the most beautiful maiden in the land. Sweet deal if you can survive.
* The boy accepts the challenge and asks for a fire, a lathe, and a carpenter's bench to take in with him.
* Freaky things show up—demonic cats, a bed that runs around with him on it, dismembered but animated corpses, a malevolent old man—but the boy either beats them up or ignores them altogether.
* Boom. He's accomplished his feat. He gets the riches and the maiden. When he's still complaining about not knowing what the creeps are, she pours a bucket of cold water full of minnows on him so he can finally get the creeps. Now that's love.
* Also, side lesson: don't try scaring kids, because you'll get your leg broken.

***Critical Study:***

The Grimms’ tale that is one of the most populated by frightening imagery is also ironically one of their most comic tales. “A Tale About the Boy Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was,” or “The Boy Who Left Home to Find Out About the Shivers,” or others depending on the translation, is about a young man who is such a simpleton that he doesn’t understand what it means to get “the creeps,” even when confronted by every terrifying thing that the storyteller can throw at him.

An “extended anecdote,” according to Maria Tatar, the tale has the bawdy quality of a story meant to be told in various comic voices around a fire—like a ghost story that’s silly enough to make you laugh but creepy enough to keep you up later in your tent, wondering about the various noises outside.

The boy in the tale leaves home and experiences a series of increasingly unsettling encounters, from having a one-sided conversation with a slew of dead men hanging from a gallows to three consecutive nights in a haunted castle, in which he meets a pair of enormous black cats, two halves of a man that fall down the chimney to play cards, and a bed that gallops around the castle on its own when the boy tries to sleep in it. Throughout his trials, the boy is too dumb to realize that he should be afraid, and it is because of this that he comes out the other end with a wealth of riches and the hand of the king’s daughter. When the king’s daughter pours a bucket of minnows from the nearby stream on him, the boy finally knows what it means to have “the creeps.”

Marina Warner suggested something sexual behind the image of the newly-wed bride pouring a bucket of minnows over her husband—Bruno Bettelheim, too, posited that it was marriage which finally made the youth “human” enough to feel something like fear. The youth’s similarity to other German folk heroes such as Parsifal and Siegfried, who sings that he never knew fear until gazing on the sleeping Brunnhilde, makes him one in a long line of German “heroes” whose simplicity and good nature carry them through life until they meet with the fearful beauty of a woman. It’s a silly tale, and an incredibly satisfying one, too.

So what bugs me enough about this tale to prompt a 10-minute freewrite? If I had the guts, I’d ask what the most terrifying thing is that I can imagine, since this tale does suggest that the teller was meant to top themselves with something more and more terrifying each time they told it. But I’m afraid whatever I’d write wouldn’t be frightening enough—not for our lad, anyway, clearly. The satisfaction of the tale lies in the balance of utterly terrifying and utterly silly. So it’s hard to pull off. Let’s try it.

***Critical Analysis:****Moral: It sometimes pays to be stupid and br*ave.

“The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was”  (or its shorter 1812 version “Good Bowling and Card Playing”)is the fourth stale found within the Brother Grimm’s overall fairy tale anthology. From most of the sources I’ve come across, the tale originates from Germany which is further proven by the fact that most scholarship surround it is written in German. It’s a curious oddity and one of the lesser known of the Grimm tales with very few adaptions of it produced within the last forty years.

The basic premise is that a good for nothing son goes off to find what it means to shudder.

Fear in this story is mostly conveyed through its physical response. The main character’s brother is the first to introduce this idea to him when he refuses to go out into the woods because the thought of it makes him shudder. Our main character is branded the fool for not being able to connect the two ideas and going on this complicated quest to discover this elusive truth. In his travails, he pushes a local sexton down the church bell tower, burns several dead hangman to get them warm, and fights against various evil spirits during his three day luxury stay in a haunted castle. In the end, his fight against the dark forces wins the hand of a princess and riches. Despite his fortune, he is saddened because he still doesn’t know how to shudder. His wife, fed up with his stupid chatter, throws a bucket of cold water on him in his sleep and at last he learns the secret.

One of the most interesting things to note is how the idea of fear is treated in this story. Or more importantly, the main character’s lack of it. In the beginning, the boy is generally considered the fool. He is distinguished from his “smart and sensible” brother by being the child who could “neither learn nor understand anything” to the point that everyone in town said that he was bound to give his father trouble.His lack of common sense gets him booted out of his home town and left wandering through the land. Yet, this same lack of common sense is heavily rewarded with a princess and a kingdom.

On the one hand, it makes me question how well a kingdom could be run if an heir apparent could be chosen through such arbitrary means, regardless of political know-how. (I mean, this kingdom is going down real fast the minute this guy takes the throne). On the other, I think it’s an overall commentary on how a lack of fear is a big asset to greatness. He doesn’t overcome fear, he simply does not understand it. In the least. In most other stories (especially horror ones), a lack of fear is a quick way to get killed off because those type of characters don’t proceed with the caution that “cleverness” would implicitly instill.  But the other brother, who is arguably the smartest character in this story, is hardly ever heard from. His fate is uncertain yet the brother that was meant to cause trouble for the father ultimately elevates the family’s status. What greater position is there in a fairy tale than the next king?

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Another thing I found really interesting was the blasé-ness of the main character. He is beyond comprehending what makes things scary and, when he encounters things that are normally horrifying, he kind of rolls with it. When some evil ghost cats try to talk him into a card game, he readily agrees until the sight of their nails puts him off *(“I have looked at your fingers,” said he, “and my fancy for card-playing has gone,” (…) he struck them dead and threw them out into the water*). When he wants to take a rest on a bed that begins to run throughout the whole castle he replies sleepily: “That’s right…but go faster.”

The only incident that made me shake my head at the logic of it was the first time someone tried to frighten the main character. The sexton tries to scare him by standing at a distance dressed like a ghost in the dark. The boy called out to him three times before pushing him down the stairs and shrugs off the encounter by going to bed. I mean, I know logic isn’t the most synonymous with fairy tales but the fall out from this encounter was a bit too much. Everybody thinks the boy committed some great wrong by doing this but if I was in the same position I would have done the same (or at least run and scream in the other direction).

The overall impression I got from this story was that it was a silly dark comedy with your standard know-nothing character who manages to get lucky while being oblivious to everything. (A *Forrest Gump*, if you will). The fairy tale hasn’t been adapted that much in recent memory within the English language. The only thing I managed to find was a 1988 television episode within the British live action series Jim Henson’s *The Storyteller.*I wouldn’t mind seeing a Disney adaption of this though I realize how much of a difficult task it would be to adapt something like this.

Question:

What are your general thoughts about the fear? Do you think the lessons (namely, a lack of fear is a good thing) in the story have much utility in today’s society? Is this message safe?

For anyone else who has read the fairy tale, I wonder if you took anything different away from the tale.

***Significance:***

Tale of the Brothers Grimm translated by M. Hunt [1884]  
Interpretation by Undine & Jens in green [2018]

A certain father had two sons, the elder of whom was sharp and sensible, and could do everything, but the younger was stupid and could neither learn nor understand anything, and when people saw him they said, “There’s a fellow who will give his father some trouble!” When anything had to be done, it was always the elder who was forced to do it; but if his father bade him fetch anything when it was late, or in the night-time, and the way led through the churchyard, or any other dismal place, he answered, “Oh, no, father, I’ll not go there, it makes me shudder!” for he was afraid. Or when stories were told by the fire at night which made the flesh creep, the listeners often said, “Oh, it makes us shudder!” The younger sat in a corner and listened with the rest of them, and could not imagine what they could mean. “They are always saying, it makes me shudder, it makes me shudder!’ It does not make me shudder,” thought he. “That, too, must be an art of which I understand nothing!”

As the fairy tale of Mother Holle begins with a mother and two daughters, for whom the father is missing, this fairy tale begins with a father and two sons, whereby the mother is missing. This already indicates that it is less about the external nature but more about the inner mind. Also at the beginning there is an obvious contrast between the two sons. The older one was ’normal’ and the younger one was ’very strange’. He behaved completely differently than anyone else, because he lacked a little something in life - he knew no fear. And those who know no fear of neither punishment nor grief, naturally do not care about many things that seem very important to others.

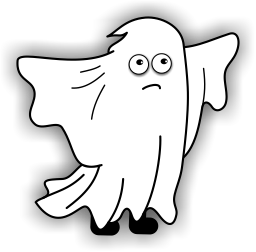
Even our medicine knows such rare cases and speaks of a serious illness, because people without fear live very dangerously, because they do not avoid many perils. But our youth does not seem to be so badly off. He only wonders about this world around him. So this story is about playing with the idea of what it means to be free of fear. A condition we often wish for, but usually cannot even imagine. On the other side, it is just as hard for the boy to understand a feeling he has never experienced. The whole is a wonderful thought experiment, and the first discovery is that our youth is regarded by others as a fool.

Now it came to pass that his father said to him one day, “Hearken to me, thou fellow in the corner there, thou art growing tall and strong, and thou too must learn something by which thou canst earn thy living. Look how thy brother works, but thou dost not even earn thy salt.” “Well, father,” he replied, “I am quite willing to learn something indeed, if it could but be managed, I should like to learn how to shudder. I don’t understand that at all yet.” The elder brother smiled when he heard that, and thought to himself, “Good God, what a blockhead that brother of mine is! He will never be good for anything as long as he lives! He who wants to be a sickle must bend himself betimes.” The father sighed, and answered him, “Thou shalt soon learn what it is to shudder, but thou wilt not earn thy living by that.”

Here we already have the first effect of fearlessness. Our youth lacks the usual ambition to start a career and get on his way in this world, because he is not afraid of the blame of the world. He seems hopeless. Since on the question of the father, what he wants to learn in life, he chooses what he least understands around him.

His brother laughs at him, because what kind of person wants to learn something unpleasant like fear, to prosper in the world? He even sees it as a proud arrogance and recommends his younger brother to bend to the world, if he wants to be useful here. The father sighs, but sees no problem in learning to fear, because that’s what the world is for. The world will teach him anyway, but fear will not pay his life. These days, however, this is not so clear anymore, because in our market economy, you can even sell the fear. This is absurd, but business like insurances or horror movies are going great. So the second discovery is that our youth is also considered proud and arrogant.

Soon after this the sexton came to the house on a visit, and the father bewailed his trouble, and told him how his younger son was so backward in every respect that he knew nothing and learnt nothing. “Just think,” said he, “when I asked him how he was going to earn his bread, he actually wanted to learn to shudder.” “If that be all,” replied the sexton, “he can learn that with me. Send him to me, and I will soon polish him.” The father was glad to do it, for he thought, “It will train the boy a little.” The sexton therefore took him into his house, and he had to ring the bell. After a day or two, the sexton awoke him at midnight, and bade him arise and go up into the church tower and ring the bell. “Thou shalt soon learn what shuddering is,” thought he, and secretly went there before him; and when the boy was at the top of the tower and turned round, and was just going to take hold of the bell rope, he saw a white figure standing on the stairs opposite the sounding hole. “Who is there?” cried he, but the figure made no reply, and did not move or stir. “Give an answer,” cried the boy, “or take thyself off, thou hast no business here at night.”

The sexton, however, remained standing motionless that the boy might think he was a ghost. The boy cried a second time, “What dost thou want here? Speak if thou art an honest fellow, or I will throw thee down the steps!” The sexton thought, “He can’t intend to be as bad as his words.” uttered no sound and stood as if he were made of stone. Then the boy called to him for the third time, and as that was also to no purpose, he ran against him and pushed the ghost down the stairs, so that it fell down ten steps and remained lying there in a corner. Thereupon he rang the bell, went home, and without saying a word went to bed, and fell asleep. The sexton’s wife waited a long time for her husband, but he did not come back. At length she became uneasy, and wakened the boy, and asked, “Dost thou not know where my husband is? He climbed up the tower before thou didst.” “No, I don’t know,” replied the boy, “but some one was standing by the sounding hole on the other side of the steps, and as he would neither give an answer nor go away, I took him for a scoundrel, and threw him downstairs, just go there and you will see if it was he, I should be sorry if it were.” The woman ran away and found her husband, who was lying moaning in the corner, and had broken his leg.

The great role that anxiety plays in our ordinary lives is shown by the many terms we use for it with a variety of nuances. It’s about respect, fear, anxiety and panic, including scare, horror, dread and dismay... Psychologists argue about the differences, but the people use these terms quite intuitively, as we do. So we would say here that our youth at least has respect, for he willingly follows his father, who now sends him into the training to the sexton, a church servant, who takes care of practical matters like a caretaker, among other things the ringing of the bell.

Well, this is about so-called education. This is a really big topic in which fear plays an essential role. If you have children, you will know this problem well. Children need their limits, they need to learn what to do and what to avoid, and here fear, in all its nuances, has a natural role to play, from respect for the parents to fear of pain, which warns of danger, so they stay close to their parents. Children without limits are fast becoming tyrants who undoubtedly do not do much good to themselves and their parents. The skill, of course, is to apply every mean reasonably in education, and to dose it carefully. Otherwise, the whole thing quickly backfires, as in our fairy tale.

To what extent this connection between sexton and ghost hints at the educational methods of ecclesiastical-secular institutions, one can only guess. Indeed, even in the Church, fear was often abused to oppress people or even to wage horrible wars, and accordingly great damage was done, which finally shattered the Church’s limbs. At least, our youth here is completely sensible in his view, feels challenged to fight, fights and even wins against an adult who has been completely surprised and overwhelmed by the boy’s reaction. Who should be blamed for this? Although the sexton meant well, the misfortune certainly did not hit him undeservedly.

She carried him down, and then with loud screams she hastened to the boy’s father. “Your boy,” cried she, “has been the cause of a great misfortune! He has thrown my husband down the steps and made him break his leg. Take the good-for-nothing fellow away from our house.” The father was terrified, and ran thither and scolded the boy. “What wicked tricks are these?” said he, “The devil must have put this into thy head.” “Father,” he replied, “do listen to me. I am quite innocent. He was standing there by night like one who is intending to do some evil. I did not know who it was, and I entreated him three times either to speak or to go away.” “Ah,” said the father, “I have nothing but unhappiness with thee. Go out of my sight. I will see thee no more.”

“Yes, father,” (the youth answered) right willingly, “wait only until it is day. Then will I go forth and learn how to shudder, and then I shall, at any rate, understand one art which will support me.” “Learn what thou wilt,” spake the father, “it is all the same to me. Here are fifty thalers for thee. Take these and go into the wide world, and tell no one from whence thou comest, and who is thy father, for I have reason to be ashamed of thee.” “Yes, father, it shall be as you will. If you desire nothing more than that, I can easily keep it in mind.”

But of course, who would agree with the boy here and say, “You did well!”? With this we come to the third discovery that our youth is even considered evil, which at that time was closely connected with the devil, the embodiment of evil. This ends in a kind of banishment, the father renounces his son and sends him away. But our youth also seems to have no problem with leaving his home and family. He likes to follow his father and does not blame him for this grave reproach. Here we see already a strange simplicity, about which we want to talk later. He readily embraces the challenges of the world and hopes one day to learn what people around him understand as “fear”.

When day dawned, therefore, the boy put his fifty thalers into his pocket, and went forth on the great highway, and continually said to himself, “If I could but shudder! If I could but shudder!” Then a man approached who heard this conversation which the youth was holding with himself, and when they had walked a little farther to where they could see the gallows, the man said to him, “Look, there is the tree where seven men have married the ropemaker’s daughter, and are now learning how to fly. Sit down below it, and wait till night comes, and thou wilt soon learn how to shudder.” “If that is all that is wanted,” answered the youth, “it is easily done; but if I learn how to shudder as quickly as that, thou shalt have my fifty thalers. Just come back to me early in the morning.” Then the youth went to the gallows, sat down below it, and waited till evening came. And as he was cold, he lighted himself a fire, but at midnight the wind blew so sharply that in spite of his fire, he could not get warm. And as the wind knocked the hanged men against each other, and they moved backwards and forwards, he thought to himself, “Thou shiverest below by the fire, but how those up above must freeze and suffer!” And as he felt pity for them, he raised the ladder, and climbed up, unbound one of them after the other, and brought down all seven.

Then he stirred the fire, blew it, and set them all round it to warm themselves. But they sat there and did not stir, and the fire caught their clothes. So he said, “Take care, or I will hang you up again.” The dead men, however, did not hear, but were quite silent, and let their rags go on burning. On this he grew angry, and said, “If you will not take care, I cannot help you, I will not be burnt with you.” and he hung them up again each in his turn. Then he sat down by his fire and fell asleep, and next morning the man came to him and wanted to have the fifty thalers, and said, “Well, dost thou know how to shudder?” “No,” answered he, “how was I to get to know? Those fellows up there did not open their mouths, and were so stupid that they let the few old rags which they had on their bodies get burnt.” Then the man saw that he would not carry away the fifty thalers that day, and went away saying, “One of this kind has never come in my way before.”



One big fear we usually carry around with us is the fear of death. This fear was an important instrument to keep people within the limits of law. Those who crossed these borders had to face the death penalty and usually ended up at the gallows, where one was hung up with the ropemaker’s daughter, the rope, and dangled in the wind. And it was important that everyone could see this punishment, to be deterred from further misdeeds. But even here, our youth is not afraid, even death does not scare him. Actually, he does not seem to understand what “death” means. He treats the dead like the living and blames them because they are not careful enough about the fire. And surely, if they had been more careful in life, they probably would not have come to this end.

He also does not seem to be overly attached to his money because he is prepared to give everything away, just as he was willing to leave his family and his father’s house behind. That would then be the fourth discovery, that our youth knows no attachment.

The youth likewise went his way, and once more began to mutter to himself, “Ah, if I could but shudder! Ah, if I could but shudder!” A waggoner who was striding behind him heard that and asked, “Who art thou?” “I don’t know.” answered the youth. Then the waggoner asked, “From whence comest thou?” “I know not.” “Who is thy father?” “That I may not tell thee.” “What is it that thou art always muttering between thy teeth?” “Ah,” replied the youth, “I do so wish I could shudder, but no one can teach me how to do it.”

Now it gets even more interesting. Our youth does not know who he is and where he comes from. Does he not have a name? Is he not following a path? Is he not a person? Even though he only follows his father’s command, let’s be honest: Can we imagine what we would be without an ego, without this imaginary “me”, this strange personality with character, name and address? For ordinary people like us, this is just as incomprehensible as fear and death are unimaginable for our youth.

At this point the story reminds us less of a terrible disease, than rather of the unbelievable reports of people who have achieved the so-called liberation or salvation of which the great religions speak. What are they freed from? From the illusion of the imaginary ego, and thus from the shackles of this world, from death, fear, attachment and sin or karma. Such people have always been very rare, and some of them seem to have received this great freedom as if they were accidentally buying a ticket and winning the lotto jackpot. At first, they are very surprised at what happened to them and cannot understand it themselves.

Two examples that we know about in our time are Eckhart Tolle and Dadaji. But surely, there are more in this world, but not every one of them became a famous teacher. And if this rare event occurs while still being a child, then perhaps we have a situation as in this fairy tale. Even at old age, such people still have what is called the pure simplicity that has already been mentioned. And here we come back to the four discoveries mentioned above, namely that their wisdom often seems like useless stupidity to others, and often they are even called proud, arrogant and vicious and get strangely insulted, because their nature seems so alien. They react unexpectedly, for they are free from worldly attachment, desire, hate and passion, and united with a higher truth. Only therefore they can allow themselves to live in this world without fear, which is otherwise necessary to set natural limits to our selfish inclinations. Therefore it is quite normal that other people, who have no access to this spiritual level, do not know what they are talking about.

“Give up thy foolish chatter.” said the waggoner. “Come, go with me, I will see about a place for thee.” The youth went with the waggoner, and in the evening they arrived at an inn where they wished to pass the night. Then at the entrance of the room the youth again said quite loudly, “If I could but shudder! If I could but shudder!” The host who heard that, laughed and said, “If that is your desire, there ought to be a good opportunity for you here.” “Ah, be silent,” said the hostess, “so many inquisitive persons have already lost their lives, it would be a pity and a shame if such beautiful eyes as these should never see the daylight again.”

But the youth said, “However difficult it may be, I will learn it, and for this purpose indeed have I journeyed forth.” He let the host have no rest, until the latter told him, that not far from thence stood a haunted castle where any one could very easily learn what shuddering was, if he would but watch in it for three nights. The King had promised that he who would venture should have his daughter to wife, and she was the most beautiful maiden the sun shone on. Great treasures likewise lay in the castle, which were guarded by evil spirits, and these treasures would then be freed, and would make a poor man rich enough. Already many men had gone into the castle, but as yet none had come out again. Then the youth went next morning to the King, and said that if he were allowed he would watch three nights in the enchanted castle. The King looked at him, and as the youth pleased him, he said, “Thou mayest ask for three things to take into the castle with thee, but they must be things without life.” Then he answered, “Then I ask for a fire, a turning lathe, and a cutting-board with the knife.”

The story continues full of wonderful symbols. A waggoner brings him to a host. His wife recognizes in the eyes of the boy already something special, maybe an unusual shine. And the host speaks of a castle in which there are incomparable treasures guarded by evil spirits. Could this be our body? Our dark spirits are certainly familiar to us, but what is the big treasure inside? And why is it so hard to leave this physical castle alive again? Of course, there is also a king of the castle, and those who pass the test win his daughter together with the royal dignity.

Here one could symbolically think of the soul that dwells in the body, of the pure spirit who flees from his castle, because there reign the spooky illusions. And the pure nature is the king’s daughter, with which the soul can reunite, if it has turned inward and defeated the spooky illusions. The three famous days of the test are then probably three years or even three decades in life. But time does not matter, because the journey is the goal. Thus, what follows is not only a description of how a fearless person can act, but also, probably, a way to approach even this spiritual level of fearlessness. The whole is described with many symbols and begins with the three useful tools for the path that leads into our inner world.

The King had these things carried into the castle for him during the day. When night was drawing near, the youth went up and made himself a bright fire in one of the rooms, placed the cutting-board and knife beside it, and seated himself by the turning-lathe. “Ah, if I could but shudder!” said he, “But I shall not learn it here either.” Towards midnight he was about to poke his fire, and as he was blowing it, something cried suddenly from one corner, “Au, miau! How cold we are!” “You simpletons!” cried he, “What are you crying about? If you are cold, come and take a seat by the fire and warm yourselves.” And when he had said that, two great black cats came with one tremendous leap and sat down on each side of him, and looked savagely at him with their fiery eyes. After a short time, when they had warmed themselves, they said, “Comrade, shall we have a game at cards?” “Why not?” he replied, “But just show me your paws.” Then they stretched out their claws. “Oh,” said he, “what long nails you have! Wait, I must first cut them a little for you.” Thereupon he seized them by the throats, put them on the cutting-board and screwed their feet fast. “I have looked at your fingers,” said he, “and my fancy for card-playing has gone.” and he struck them dead and threw them out into the water.

But when he had made away with these two, and was about to sit down again by his fire, out from every hole and corner came black cats and black dogs with red-hot chains, and more and more of them came until he could no longer stir, and they yelled horribly, and got on his fire, pulled it to pieces, and wanted to put it out. He watched them for a while quietly, but at last when they were going too far, he seized his cutting-knife, and cried, “Away with ye, vermin.” and began to cut them down. Part of them ran away, the others he killed, and threw out into the fish-pond. When he came back he blew up the embers of his fire again and warmed himself.

If night falls outside, our senses are more and more directed inwards, towards our spiritual world. Here you make yourself a bright fire, which gives the warmth of life and also the light to recognize something. Then you keep your tools ready, sit on the lathe and wait in full mindfulness, which is also called meditation. The lathe is a wonderful symbol here. To sit in meditation is to turn your head round and balance the opposites, so that the thoughts might not bump into something and get stuck everywhere, but can flow freely.

When the night was deepest and the fire, that is, the mindfulness, was neatly stoked again, two black cats appeared with fiery eyes, seeking the warmth of life. And when they felt well and alive, they wanted to play. But you should not play with such cats, because they have sharp claws and probably symbolize here wilfulness and deception, so the illusion (as you can read in the fairy tale “cat and mouse in partnership”). That’s the biggest obstacle on the spiritual path to liberation. The illusion binds us to this world and is the cause of fear and death. And anyone who has ever tried to defeat the illusion knows how sneaky it is. If one is slain, the next ones come in the form of endless thoughts from some holes of the mind. We have so many dark beings in us, and next to the black cats, the black dogs come out of desire and hate, who bark at us and pull on their chains so much that they are already glowing. Now it is time to use the tools, the clever means to ward off the spirits.

The carving bench is also an exquisite symbol. What do you do with it? You tuck in the raw wood and shape it with a knife. The same thing happens in mediation when one tries to transform the forms of the mind like a skilled craftsman. That works, and with some practice, many a nightmare can be transformed into peace, some hatred in love and some failure into success. It works because it has to do with illusion, and illusion can be changed into everything. That’s certainly a big help in life.

But the night is not over yet. Those who try will soon see the power with which new thoughts and illusions come and try to divert the focus, dispel or even quench the fire of mindfulness. You might equally look at it for a while, and then you should react, fight and, if possible, win and return to collect the remnants of the mindfulness and make it blaze up again. The best way to fight is with the famous Sword of Knowledge, and put the corpses back into the water. That is amazing. What could be meant by this water, the moat around the castle and the pond? Surely, those who seek spiritual struggle should not leave corpses behind, because at some point everything will come to life again. So they are best given back to nature, where they belong, into the water, from which our life originated, or even into this mystical sea of the mind, from which everything arises. In this way you bring everything back to its source.

And as he thus sat, his eyes would keep open no longer, and he felt a desire to sleep. Then he looked round and saw a great bed in the corner. “That is the very thing for me.” said he, and got into it. When he was just going to shut his eyes, however, the bed began to move of its own accord, and went over the whole of the castle. “That’s right,” said he, “but go faster.” Then the bed rolled on as if six horses were harnessed to it, up and down, over thresholds and steps, but suddenly hop, hop, it turned over upside down, and lay on him like a mountain. But he threw quilts and pillows up in the air, got out and said, “Now any one who likes, may drive.” and lay down by his fire, and slept till it was day. In the morning the King came, and when he saw him lying there on the ground, he thought the spirits had killed him and he was dead. Then said he, “After all it is a pity, he is a handsome man.” The youth heard it, got up, and said, “It has not come to that yet.” Then the King was astonished, but very glad, and asked how he had fared. “Very well indeed,” answered he; “one night is over, the two others will get over likewise.” Then he went to the innkeeper, who opened his eyes very wide, and said, “I never expected to see thee alive again! Hast thou learnt how to shudder yet?” “No,” said he, “it is all in vain. If some one would but tell me!”

Even with all mindfulness, at some point sleep comes. The symbolism reminds us of a dream that takes us away and makes us wander around. Our youth is relaxed and watches, how he is carried away. What would he have to fear? Only if it goes too far, because everything reverses and oppresses him, then he shakes off the dream and lies down again on his fire of mindfulness, until it becomes day.

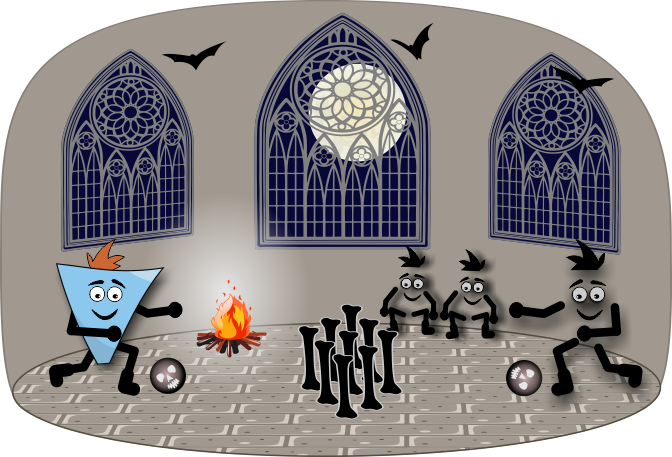
Another interpretation would be how comfortable things actually affect our lives, from which we expect all our happiness in life. It all goes well for a while, and then, alley-opp! they turn upside down and come at us. It is said that with all the luxury we quickly lose the ground under our feet, the grounding in nature and the fire of mindfulness. As much as modern technology helps us, it also brings us attachment, restlessness and suffering. And often we mistake the wild back and forth of this hectic world with the liveliness of life. Who does not whirl around, is regarded as dead or at least boring, and you hear, “It’s a pity about his life!” Gandhi is said to have said once: “There is more to life, than increasing its speed.”

The second night he again went up into the old castle, sat down by the fire, and once more began his old song, “If I could but shudder!” When midnight came, an uproar and noise of tumbling about was heard; at first it was low, but it grew louder and louder. Then it was quiet for awhile, and at length with a loud scream, half a man came down the chimney and fell before him. “Hollo!” cried he, “another half belongs to this. This is too little!” Then the uproar began again, there was a roaring and howling, and the other half fell down likewise. “Wait,” said he, “I will just blow up the fire a little for thee.” When he had done that and looked round again, the two pieces were joined together, and a frightful man was sitting in his place. “That is no part of our bargain,” said the youth, “the bench is mine.” The man wanted to push him away; the youth, however, would not allow that, but thrust him off with all his strength, and seated himself again in his own place.

And it goes on in search of the fear within us. We already know the chimney from other fairy tales. It reminds us of soot and darkness, smoke and fog - a good source for the illusion. From this appears half a man. It is said that another great obstacle on the way to freedom from fear and death is thinking in opposites, such as hot and cold, good and evil, mine and yours, death and life. It is the nature of our intellect to distinguish and separate. And then we rack our brains, how we can put the parts back together into a whole that we have artificially separated before. The story reminds us also of a ghost-curse, that some beings must err in two halves through the world, until someone puts them together again, so that the spook ends. And with the joining together, life comes back where there were two dead ghost parts before.

The present symbolism is very interesting. The being that our youth unites and brings back to life now seems to press him. This danger always exists that our self-created beings displace our true essence within. Self-created are the roles we play in life (e.g. manager today and nursing case tomorrow), and also this weird ego, who appears as an independent being and is confronted with the rest of the world instead of being in harmony with it. In the worst case, even the ego begins to meditate. Well, our youth does not allow the ghost to oppress him. Why, when he is not afraid? He keeps his mindfulness and knows that it is nature that brings forth all creatures. Nature, mind and life are a whole. All the opposing parts that we see, seize and put into individual categories, certainly have their job and are useful for our daily life. But in truth, everything is connected and nothing can fall out of this whole.

Then still more men fell down, one after the other; they brought nine dead men’s legs and two skulls, and set them up and played at nine-pins with them. The youth also wanted to play and said, “Hark you, can I join you?” “Yes, if thou hast any money.” “Money enough,” replied he, “but your balls are not quite round.” Then he took the skulls and put them in the lathe and turned them till they were round. “There, now, they will roll better!” said he. “Hurrah! now it goes merrily!” He played with them and lost some of his money, but when it struck twelve, everything vanished from his sight. He lay down and quietly fell asleep. Next morning the King came to enquire after him. “How has it fared with thee this time?” asked he. “I have been playing at nine-pins,” he answered, “and have lost a couple of farthings.” “Hast thou not shuddered then?” “Eh, what?” said he, “I have made merry. If I did but know what it was to shudder!”



Now we come to a sensitive topic, the piety. Playing with human bones and bowling with skulls would certainly not be a problem for children. But many adults do not even dare to think about their deaths. To regard death and life as a game usually meets the toughest protest: “That’s a serious thing!” Yes, it certainly is for many people and often even a taboo, and there is something in it. But hereby, the oppo-sites harden in our thoughts, and there is a great source of fear, the so-called mortal fear: “I will lose my life!” Eckhart Tolle asked: “How can you lose your life? Who are you? And what is your life?” Life is nothing you can own or possess. You are the one life, it can only change on the surface but never get lost.

Well, anyone who wants to overcome the fear of death someday, should play with these thoughts. In order that the heads do not bump so much and roll without obstacles and attachment, it is good to turn them round and round. Then the bowl rolls by itself, and when all the nine fall, death is defeated with death. This is a symbolism that you can certainly think about for a long time. Of course, you lose something of worldly possessions, but the spook disappears along with the inner fear that worries us so much.

The third night he sat down again on his bench and said quite sadly, “If I could but shudder.” When it grew late, six tall men came in and brought a coffin. Then said he, “Ha, ha, that is certainly my little cousin, who only died a few days ago.” and he beckoned with his finger, and cried, “Come, little cousin, come.” They placed the coffin on the ground, but he went to it and took the lid off, and a dead man lay therein. He felt his face, but it was cold as ice. “Stop,” said he, “I will warm thee a little.” and went to the fire and warmed his hand and laid it on the dead man’s face, but he remained cold. Then he took him out, and sat down by the fire and laid him on his breast and rubbed his arms that the blood might circulate again. As this also did no good, he thought to himself, “When two people lie in bed together, they warm each other.” and carried him to the bed, covered him over and lay down by him. After a short time the dead man became warm too, and began to move. Then said the youth, “See, little cousin, have I not warmed thee?” The dead man, however, got up and cried, “Now will I strangle thee.”

“What!” said he, “is that the way thou thankest me? Thou shalt at once go into thy coffin again.” and he took him up, threw him into it, and shut the lid. Then came the six men and carried him away again. “I cannot manage to shudder,” said he. “I shall never learn it here as long as I live.”

This is symbolism at its best! Six men bring in a corpse. Is it perhaps the five senses and the thinking that also carry death into our inner being? Our fearless hero does not see anything strange in it. He even feels very close to the dead and tries everything to give life to this cold body. And he succeeds. But what does the dead do? He wants to kill and reaches for death. This is the reason, why he had to die, therefore he’s a dead man. That’s the law of cause and effect. He has nothing to do with this realm of truth and life and so he comes back into the coffin, and as he came in he goes out again. Still no reason to be scared.

Then a man entered who was taller than all others, and looked terrible. He was old, however, and had a long white beard. “Thou wretch,” cried he, “thou shalt soon learn what it is to shudder, for thou shalt die.” “Not so fast,” replied the youth. “If I am to die, I shall have to be present.” “I will soon seize thee,” said the fiend. “Softly, softly, do not talk so big. I am as strong as thou art, and perhaps even stronger.” “We shall see,” said the old man. “If thou art stronger, I will let thee go—come, we will try.” Then he led him by dark passages to a smith’s forge, took an axe, and with one blow struck an anvil into the ground. “I can do that better still.” said the youth, and went to the other anvil. The old man placed himself near and wanted to look on, and his white beard hung down. Then the youth seized the axe, split the anvil with one blow, and struck the old man’s beard in with it. “Now I have thee,” said the youth. “now it is thou who wilt have to die.” Then he seized an iron bar and beat the old man till he moaned and entreated him to stop, and he would give him great riches. The youth drew out the axe and let him go. The old man led him back into the castle, and in a cellar showed him three chests full of gold. “Of these,” said he, “one part is for the poor, the other for the king, the third is thine.” In the meantime it struck twelve, and the spirit disappeared; the youth, therefore, was left in darkness. “I shall still be able to find my way out,” said he, and felt about, found the way into the room, and slept there by his fire. Next morning the King came and said, “Now thou must have learnt what shuddering is?” “No,” he answered; “what can it be? My dead cousin was here, and a bearded man came and showed me a great deal of money down below, but no one told me what it was to shudder.” “Then,” said the King, “thou hast delivered the castle, and shalt marry my daughter.” “That is all very well,” said he, “but still I do not know what it is to shudder!”

Who is this old man? A giant, a blacksmith with a long, white beard. And what is he forging? The fate, the world or even the chains that bind us to this world. He challenges our youth to a fight to the death. Wow, that far you have to come! But he answers: “Should I die, I must be present.” This is a huge sentence, that might really give you food for thoughts. The reverse would be: “If I’m not here personally, than I cannot die.” The only problem is the personal attachment of “I”.

Well, dark passages lead deep inside, where the mystical forge fire burns, from which everything is created. Equally mystical is the contest of who can struck the anvil farthest into the earth, like a nail in the wood. The old blacksmith shows his full power of nature and sinks the anvil at a single blow. Well, if we want to compete with these forces of nature, then of course we should use what makes us humans so powerful, namely the spiritual power. The symbolism of how to forge a sword, which eventually even splits the anvil on which it was forged, reminds us of the ancient Germanic myths of Siegfried and the blacksmith Regin. In our fairy tale it is an axe and in spiritual terms we speak of the sharp Sword of Knowledge that can penetrate into everything, even the hardest.

The anvil breaks and pinches the beard of the giant. This too is an old symbolism that we also find in “Snow White and Rose Red”. The beard seems to be a weak point of mighty beings, just as one can tame a wild bull by the nose-ring. Our youth also wins this last fight and is richly rewarded, but without promoting the ego. He finds his way back to his fire and sleeps peacefully until daylight. Still he could not find what people call fear.

Then the gold was brought up and the wedding celebrated; but howsoever much the young King loved his wife, and however happy he was, he still said always, “If I could but shudder - if I could but shudder.” And at last the young queen was angry at this. Her waiting-maid said, “I will find a cure for him; he shall soon learn what it is to shudder.” She went out to the stream which flowed through the garden, and had a whole bucketful of gudgeons brought to her. At night when the young King was sleeping, his wife was to draw the clothes off him and empty the bucketful of cold water with the gudgeons in it over him, so that the little fishes would sprawl about him. When this was done, he woke up and cried, “Oh, what makes me shudder so? - what makes me shudder so, dear wife? Ah! now I know what it is to shudder!”

The last picture of the ten ox herding pictures of Zen Buddhism, which are describing the spiritual path, shows the return to the world. So our youth marries the king’s daughter and deservedly becomes a young king in the world as well. This finally brings the female influence back into the game. He associates with nature, and so he learns that all the horror, fear and death that people like to talk about belong only to the external or the surface of the world. For verily, who attentively looks with the eye of truth into his inner being, will not find any fear. It is only our sensory impressions and thought constructions that come true to us. A wonderful fairy tale, and maybe we now know what shuddering is!

