

The Boy Who Sought Fear

By Nathan Winant

Once upon a time, in a tiny village nestled deep in the forest, there was a boy named Wilhelm, who always had his head in the clouds. He couldn't learn a skill, he couldn't keep a job, and at times it seemed like he could barely hold a conversation.

"Why can't you be more like your older brother?" his father would cry. His older brother Fritz was strong and smart and everybody loved him. Wilhelm would sit around and watch him at sports. "Why can't you be more like your older brother?" his father would ask. Wilhelm would sit around and watch him flirt with the girls at the haufbrau. "Why can't you be more like your older brother?" his father would smile. Wilhelm would sit around and listen to his brother brag about how he had impressed his teachers. "Why can't you be more like your older brother?" his father would chide. One day, after watching his brother and hearing his father's words play over and over in his head, Wilhelm said to himself, "Yes. Yes, I will learn to be more like my brother."

Unfortunately, for all his other qualities, his older brother was a terrible coward. His father couldn't send him out to run errands at night, or he'd return hours late muttering, "It's scary out there. It'll make your flesh creep." If his father sent him out to the barn after dark, he'd just complain, "I can't go out there... It makes my flesh creep!" And his father couldn't send him to the other side of town, day or night, because it was past the old graveyard, and he'd whine, "But father, that whole place is full of ghosts and ghouls... Just thinking about it makes my flesh creep!"

The boy might have been a little slow, but he was observant, and so it was that he came upon a brilliant idea: His brother was good at everything, but he was *especially* good at having his flesh creep, whatever *that* meant. If he could learn only one skill, if he could excel at only one thing, *that would be it!* Father would *have* to be proud!

The boy spent a few days pondering what it might mean to feel his flesh creep, only to draw a blank. He asked the townspeople, who only laughed at him in the manner to which he had become so very accustomed. He tried asking his brother, who only beat him senseless for his trouble. Finally he went to his father, who only sighed and shook his head, and muttered, "Boy, it's time you learned a trade."

The father had been telling his woes to the church groundskeeper, and when he related his son's latest idiocy, the kindly old man laughed.

"Tell you what. Leave him with me, and so long as he does a good job, *I'll* see to it that he feels his flesh creep."

And so Wilhelm was apprenticed to the church groundskeeper, and spent his days sweeping and pruning and mumbling wistfully about how wonderful things would be if only he could feel his flesh creep. One day, the groundskeeper made a special request.

“Young Wilhelm, you seem to excel at your job of sweeping and pruning and mumbling. I think it’s time for you to have a little more responsibility.”

“My heavens, what joy!” exclaimed Wilhelm.

“Yes. Tonight, I want you to climb up the tower at midnight and ring the church bell.”

“But groundskeeper,” mullied Wilhelm, “won’t people complain if they hear me ring the church bell in the middle of the night?”

“Of... course not, young Wilhelm,” the groundskeeper replied, “They won’t hear you... After all, they’ll be sound asleep.”

“I suppose that *does* make sense,” Wilhelm considered, “Midnight it is.”

Midnight came, and Wilhelm stalked up the stairs of the tower and entered the belfry – only to find a silent figure, draped in white, standing ominously in the middle of the room.

“Who goes there?” cried the boy.

The figure stood motionless.

“You have no business here! Tell me who you are, or get out!” he yelled.

The figure did not move.

“What are you doing here? Speak up or,” Wilhelm thought for a moment, “Speak up or I’ll push you down the stairs!”

A long silence passed. The figure did not move. Wilhelm considered his options, and realized that he had, after all, made something of a promise to the ominous figure. And so he sighed, and shoved the figure, which cartwheeled down the stairs with a shriek.

“That’s *that*,” he shrugged, and went about the business of ringing the bell and waking the town, and then trundled down the stairs, past the corner where the specter was lying, crumpled and moaning, and headed on home to bed.

At about this time the groundskeeper’s wife awoke to a horrible clamor, and looked over to see that her husband was missing from their bed, which was now missing a sheet or

two. Thinking things rather strange, she threw on a robe and headed down to the church – only to meet Wilhelm halfway.

“Good evening, Wilhelm, have you seen my husband?”

“No, but I did just come from the belfry, where I pushed an ominous, ghostly white figure down the tower stairs,” Wilhelm casually replied.

The old woman considered this for a moment, and grabbed Wilhelm by the ear. She dragged him down to the church and to the base of tower stairs, pausing for a moment to shriek and scold her husband for getting his leg broken in such a foolish manner, and proceeded to drag Wilhelm, kicking and screaming, across town to drop him at the door of his father’s house, whom she then scolded for half an hour for raising such a foolish son. And then she stormed home, muttered to herself about how difficult it was to get bloodstains out of perfectly good linen.

“Wilhelm?”

“Yes, father?”

“Wilhelm, I think we’ve got a little problem.”

And so it was that young Wilhelm found himself wandering through the woods, cast out of his hometown, disowned by his family, with no more than fifty thalers to his name and a quest:

“If only I could feel my flesh creep.”

* * *

For the first day Wilhelm wandered aimlessly down the road, mumbling to himself, “If only I could feel my flesh creep. Oh, if only I could feel my flesh creep.”

For the second day Wilhelm continued down the road, mumbling, “I wish I could feel my flesh creep. Oh, if only my flesh would creep.”

It was on the third day on the road that an old man overheard Wilhelm’s mumbling and approached him.

“So you want to learn to feel your flesh creep, do you, boy?”

“Yes sir! Oh, but how I do. If you could make my flesh creep, I would happily give you my fifty thalers!”

The old man flashed a crooked grin and extended a gnarled finger to a nearby gallows.

“Do you see that tree over there, and those seven men that swing in its shade? Camp there tonight, and they will teach your flesh to creep as they dance in night air.”

Wilhelm was overjoyed. The old man watched him bound towards the gallows, and rubbed his hands and smiled, dreaming of how well he would drink with fifty thalers.

The next morning the old man returned to see the boy sitting by a dying fire littered with bodies, and wearing an expression of great disappointment.

“What happened?” he cried.

“Well,” sighed Wilhelm, “I made camp as you suggested, and they danced as you said they would, but that taught me nothing, and after a few hours I wondered if they weren’t getting cold. So I brought them down and sat them around the fire and asked them to tell me their secrets, but they were dead silent. One of them was sitting too close to fire, and his shirt caught, and he didn’t even have the good sense to put it out. I’m sorry, but they’re just not all they were cracked up to be.”

“Idiot...” muttered the old man.

“Yes, well they’re really *all* pretty stupid, but that one does seem to be the dimmest of the bunch,” Wilhelm added, glaring at the corpse.

Words failing him, the old man merely sighed.

“Well, I’d better be on my way,” Wilhelm replied, “I’m sorry I wasted your time, but I really can’t pay you fifty thalers for nothing. Good luck!”

“Yes,” murmured the old man, “good luck.”

* * *

It was late afternoon when the wagoner happened upon the boy shuffling down the road, kicking up clouds of dirt and muttering to himself.

“I say there, who are you?”

“I can’t say,” replied the boy.

“You... can’t say? Where are you from?”

“I don’t know,” replied the boy.

“You don’t know where you’re from?”

The boy shrugged.

“Do you know where you’re *going*?”

The boy shrugged.

“Okay... What are you muttering there?”

“I wish to feel my flesh creep, but nobody can show me how. How I do wish to feel my flesh creep. Oh, if only I could feel my flesh creep.”

The wagoner silently repeated these words and paused for a long moment, as if in very deep thought indeed.

“What the hell, it’s a boring stretch of road. Hop on.”

And so it was that Wilhelm found himself that night at an inn – the very first inn the wagoner had passed – drowning his sorrows in cheap pilsner.

“None of them understand,” he slurred at the innkeeper, “Not the townspeople, not my father, not the dancing men, not *nobody*. I’ll always be second-best.”

“Nobody understands what?” asked the innkeeper.

“My flesh. Creeping. If only I could feel my flesh creep. Oh, if only I could feel my flesh creep.”

“Oh, is *that* all?” laughed the innkeeper, “I’ve got just the thing! And you could make a small fortune besides!”

A hush fell over the bar.

“You be quiet!” cried the innkeeper’s wife, “You don’t go filling that boy’s head with crazy ideas! There are too many young men who’ve already paid with their lives, and it’d be a damn shame to lose another – especially one with such... pretty eyes...”

She shot a smoldering wink, which Wilhelm answered with a large dopey grin. This was not lost on the innkeeper.

“Oh, but he hasn’t even heard about it yet! Imagine, boy, an enchanted castle, filled with riches! A king, who has promised his daughter, the most beautiful girl in the land, to anyone who can free them! And all you have to do is spend three nights there and brave the evil spirits!”

“Evil spirits?” grinned Wilhelm.

“Evil spirits!” cried the innkeeper, “Sure to make your flesh creep!”

“Don’t you dare!” cried his wife, “Don’t you dare go sending that boy to his grave!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Look at the boy! So young! So strong! He could take on the world!”

“Yes!” cried Wilhelm, staggering to stand atop the bar, “Yes, no price is too high!”

“That’s the spirit!” cried the innkeeper.

“No task too large! No challenge too great! I am prepared to risk my life!” cried Wilhelm.

The more bloodthirsty patrons let up a cheer.

“I set out with a goal, and I shall see it through. With God as my witness, *I shall feel my flesh creep!*”

The inn roared with applause, and Wilhelm collapsed to the floor.

* * *

“You’re sure you want to do this?” asked the king.

“Positive,” replied Wilhelm.

“Alright, boy. I can see you’ve got spirit. Tell you what: I like you. I’d like to see you succeed. I’ll give you three things to help you make it through the castle. What’ll it be?”

Wilhelm thought for a moment.

“Well, a fire would be good...”

“Mm-hm, of course.”

“And a whittling knife...”

“Mm-hm, that sounds reasonable...”

“And a bench with a vise and a lathe.”

“Come again?”

“A bench with a vise and a lathe.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“A bench with – “

“A *lathe*?”

“You know, a lathe. For shaping wood and stuff.”

The king raised a single eyebrow.

“You’re... planning to do woodwork in the haunted castle?”

“Well, I suppose you could work with materials other than wood. I don’t know, metal, maybe bone...”

“Bone? Why on earth would you *say* such a thing?”

“ I don’t know.”

There was a long and awkward silence.

“And the vise?”

“Well I – “

“Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

There was a long and awkward silence.

“Alright, well, your three days, your three items, your funeral. A lathe and vise it is. Good luck.”

And with that the king departed his audience hall, shaking his head.

* * *

That evening the boy made his way down to the castle and found a room in which to set up his belongings. Night came and midnight was drawing near, and the boy was growing restless and bored.

“This is ridiculous,” sighed Wilhelm, “I’ll never feel my flesh creep here.”

Just then he heard an unearthly mewing noise.

“Mrrreeeeooooowrrrr... We’re so coold... Mrrreeeeooooowwwrrr...”

“Who’s there? Come out, friend! Come out and warm yourself!” Wilhelm called.

From out of the shadows slinked two large black feline beasts, who curled up around the fire and stared at him with blood-red eyes.

“Why don’t you play a game of cards with us, mreowwr.”

“I don’t know,” replied Wilhelm, “I’d really have to see your nails first.”

The cats extended their claws – razor-sharp, enormous claws – for Wilhelm to study.

“Wow, you really can’t play cards with nails like that. I’ll have to file them for you.”

Wilhelm cinched their paws down in the vise and was just about give them a proper manicure when he noticed a certain murderous quality in their gaze. He considered the situation before him, and slowly came to the conclusion that perhaps releasing them from the vise might not be in his best interest.

“Tell you what,” said Wilhelm, clenching the whittling knife in his hand, “I don’t think I’m in the mood for cards after all.”

The boy had barely a moment to rest after savagely beheading the creatures before he heard a terrifying shriek. Suddenly, all manner of cat-beasts flooded out of the shadows, mewing and screeching and crying. Wilhelm swung and struck at the creatures, driving them away from himself, driving them away from the fire they were trampling, and after a long while, driving them back into the shadows. Gasping for breath, exhausted, he looked over to see a soft, gorgeous bed just sitting in the corner of the room.

“I certainly don’t remember that from before,” muttered Wilhelm, “but it certainly looks comfortable.”

No sooner had he sat down upon it than it sprang to life and began galloping like a wild stallion, bucking and kicking all the way. The boy clung tightly to the sheets, laughing and screaming, “Faster! Faster! Faster!” The bed ran all through the castle until it finally returned to the first room and flipped itself over in an attempt to pin him. Wilhelm leapt away in just the nick of time, landing comfortably in a pile of cat carcasses, and laughed himself silly until sunrise.

That morning the king returned to find, much to his surprise, that the boy had survived. Wilhelm eagerly relayed his tale of the night's events to a flabbergasted monarch.

"Good thing you just happened to have that vise," commented the king.

"Indeed! Who would have thought I'd need one?"

The king's eyebrow made a brief and involuntary twitch.

"So, let me get this straight," asked the king, "you not only survived last night, but you're willing to spend another night in that madhouse?"

"I suppose," replied Wilhelm, "it was long and dull and certainly didn't make my flesh creep."

"Uh-huh," replied the king.

"But it did pick up towards the end," Wilhelm added.

"Uh-huh," replied the king.

"Hopefully, the next night will be more interesting."

"Yes," replied the king, taking a cautious step backwards, "yes, hopefully it will."

* * *

The second night began much as the first had – with unspeakable boredom. Wilhelm had been sitting around his little fire for several hours, composing a tuneless ode to creeping flesh, when a blood-curdling scream rang out from the chimney, followed by a dull, wet thump. Wilhelm ran over to the fireplace to find the upper torso of a man.

"Hm. Half a man. That's not right."

Another ear-piercing scream rang out from the chimney as a pair of legs fell into the fireplace.

"Well," considered Wilhelm, "I suppose that's better."

He had just dragged the two pieces over to the fire to warm when they joined together into an old man and hopped onto Wilhelm's bench!

"Get off!" Wilhelm cried, "That my bench!"

Wilhelm pushed at the old man, and the old man pushed back at Wilhelm. Wilhelm took three steps back and charged the old man, knocking him clear to the ground, but no sooner had Wilhelm mounted the bench than shriek after shriek rang out from the chimney and a shower of body parts flooded the fireplace.

“Good heavens!” cried Wilhelm.

The pieces dragged themselves into the room, slowly and gruesomely assembling themselves into whole men, and then wandered back to the fireplace, where they pulled out nine bones and two skulls, and began to set up a bowling lane!

“Wait!” cried Wilhelm, “Can I play?”

“You have any money?”

“Fifty thalers.”

“You’re in.”

“Wait a minute,” said Wilhelm, “these skulls are far too lumpy for bowling balls. These will never do.”

Wilhelm took the skulls over to the lathe and worked them over until they were smooth and round.

“Huh,” commented one of the patchwork men, “how’d you happen to have a lathe with you?”

“I dunno,” replied Wilhelm, “just had a hunch.”

And so they bowled until sunrise.

When the king arrived he was delighted to see that the boy had survived.

“How did it go?” he eagerly inquired.

“Not bad,” replied Wilhelm, “but I did lose three thalers.”

The king cocked an eyebrow.

* * *

The third night found Wilhelm sitting on his bench beside his fire, muttering angrily to himself.

“This is fun and all, but I *must* learn to feel my flesh creep. Everyone says this is my big chance, and here I am, blowing it all on fun and games!”

Just then, six tall tuxedoed men walked past the door carrying a coffin. Wilhelm saw this and perked up.

“A coffin? Why, my cousin died just last month... It must be him! Come over here, gentlemen! I would like to have a word with my cousin!”

The men paraded into the room and set the coffin down. Wilhelm frantically pulled off the lid and drug out the body.

“Why cousin, you’re so very cold! You must come by the fire and warm yourself!”

After several minutes it became clear that the fire would not warm the corpse, so Wilhelm tried rubbed it, but this did not help either. Despairing for his poor cousin, Wilhelm dragged the corpse into the bed and curled right up next to it.

“Surely this will warm you, cousin!”

And indeed it did, but the apparent intimacy of the situation proved too awkward for the corpse who, in a fit of panic, began frantically choking the young boy. Wilhelm fought and struggled and finally kicked the corpse out of bed and back into the coffin.

“Well, if you’re going to be like that about it,” cried Wilhelm, “you can just *stay* dead!” and slammed shut the lid. The tuxedoed men obligingly hoisted up the coffin and paraded out of the room, leaving Wilhelm to his thoughts.

“My flesh will never creep,” sighed Wilhelm. “My flesh just will not creep,” he sighed, slowly resigning himself to failure.

“Oh, you want to feel your *flesh creep* do you, boy?” cried a voice.

Wilhelm looked over to see a huge sinewy old man with a knotty white beard that ran well past his toes.

“Well, you’ll certainly have chance to feel your flesh creep *while I kill you!*”

Wilhelm jumped to his feet.

“Who, you? You’re not so tough.”

“Oh?” sneered the old man, “You think you’re tougher?”

“Yeah,” smiled Wilhelm, “yeah, I think I am.”

“Alright,” replied the old man with a wicked smile, “I’ll give you a chance. Prove you’re stronger, and I’ll let you go. Fail, and... Well, let’s just say that you don’t want to fail.”

The old man led Wilhelm through a maze of passages until they arrived at a large, forgotten blacksmith shop. “Here,” cried the old man raising an axe, “let’s see how tough you really are!” And with that he slammed the axe into the anvil, driving it clear into the ground.

“Oh, is that all?” Wilhelm retorted. “Come close. You’ll want to see this... That’s right, come closer.” And with that the boy drove his axe into an anvil, splitting it clean in half and driving the axehead into the ground, pinning the old man’s beard.

Adrenalin coursing through his veins, Wilhelm took a moment to savor this turn of events. He stared at the old man for a long minute, gently hefting an enormous iron bar he’d found on the ground.

“About failing the test,” Wilhelm smiled grimly, “let’s learn what happens.”

The old man whimpered pitifully with the first blow, and was brought to tears by the second. After the third he collapsed, screaming.

“Please! Please no more! You’ve won! The spirits will leave! The treasure is yours! I’ll take you to treasure beyond imagining! Please! Please! Just stop!”

Wilhelm paused. Sweat poured down his face and back, his muscles throbbed, and he could hear his heart pounding like a triphammer... but this wasn’t him.

“Alright,” Wilhelm sighed, “Alright. I’ll spare you. But one false move...”

“I know!” yelped the old man, “Good lord, I know!”

And so Wilhelm was led through a series of winding corridors and tunnels deep into the castle, and eventually, deep beneath it. And there he was, presented with three enormous chests: one for him, one for the king, and one for the people. And there he was, presented with a bride who was the most beautiful girl in the land, and a tiger in the sack besides. And there he was, a hero to the people, cheered wherever he went. And there he was, a crowned prince, and an heir to the throne.

But he had not felt his flesh creep.

* * *

Days turned into months, and months into years.

King Wilhelm was loved throughout the land. He was revered for his courage, cherished for his kindness, and respected for his considerable, if sometimes circular, talent for practical wisdom. Yet, for all of this, a quiet ennui filled his court. Every accomplishment was muted, and from every regal pleasure he was strangely dispassionate, as if viewing his kingdom through the distance of a dream. He could not bring himself to visit his hometown, certain that the shame of his failure would be too great for his poor old father to bear. Only those closest to him knew of the nature of his inner torment, as only they would hear his mournful refrain in quiet moments, in the dead of night.

“If only I could feel my flesh creep.”

And while for all of this he was a gentle man, and a kind man, and oftentimes an unintentionally rather amusing man, his wife had had damn near enough.

“Twenty years, Madeleine!” the queen screamed, storming down the hall.

“Twenty years, Madeleine... Twenty years!”

Madeleine sighed sympathetically.

“Oh, I wish my flesh might creep...”

“How wonderful it would be to feel my flesh creep...”

“Oh, sigh, if only my flesh might creep...”

“I’ve had enough, Madeleine! I’ve had enough!”

Madeleine shrugged helplessly.

“You! You’re my handmaiden, make yourself useful!”

Madeleine started to open her mouth.

“I don’t care how you do it, Madeleine, but I want this madness out of that boy’s system by this time tomorrow!”

Madeleine desperately tried to form a syllable.

“I don’t care how, Madeleine, but I mean it! This time tomorrow!”

Madeleine tried to raise a hand in protest.

“And now if you’ll excuse me, I have peasants to execute!” and off stormed the queen.

“This time tomorrow!” called the queen from down the hall. Madeleine sighed.

Madeleine took a minute to consider the problem.

She’d heard the epic tales of the king’s youth. Raising the dead from the gallows? Battling demonic cats beasts the size of houses? Defeating an ancient white-bearded giant?

There was no way. There was just no way she could possibly scare the man. It was hopeless: this time tomorrow, she be standing in the same line as those poor, poor peasants.

Unless.

She’d heard the king plenty of times at night, and he never said he wanted to be frightened. He said he wanted to *feel his flesh creep*. And God bless that sweet old man, he could be little... literal at times.

It was her only chance.

The next morning Madeleine rose just before daybreak, and made her way down to the nearest creek. She filled a bucket with water, and made her way back to the castle. Silently she crept into the king’s chambers, took a deep breath, and threw the bucket full of water onto the sleeping monarch. The king awoke with a start to the minnows dancing and flopping across his back, and let out a mighty shriek.

“My lord!” cried King Wilhelm. “My flesh... *it creeps!*”

The king leapt out of bed in nothing but his soaked robe and ran down the hall, joyously crying, “My flesh! My flesh! It creeps! Oh, *how it creeps!*”

The queen raised an eyebrow quizzically at Madeleine. Madeleine merely smiled.

And so, for the first time in twenty years, King Wilhelm slept soundly. And so, for the first time in nearly twenty years, his queen didn’t contemplate strangling him in his sleep. And so, for the first time since anyone could remember, the kingdom was truly at peace.

The End

Adapted from the “The Story of One Who Set Out to Study Fear.” *The Juniper Tree and Other Tales from Grimm*, translated by Lore Segal, New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1992.