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My name isn't very important, in fact it's not even mentioned in this story at all. Most of you are familiar with this story, it is most often called "The Prodigal Son," which I resent somewhat, I must honestly say, because this title refers to my younger brother and not at all to me, even though I am also a main character in the story. Even though neither one of us is named, though, it's a great story, a family favorite, and one that deserves some time and attention.

I have this younger brother, the one who grew up to be called "The Prodigal Son," who has always driven me absolutely crazy. Since the moment he was born, he was spoiled and babied, even well into his adult years. Our mother always loved him best, but she died when we were young, and so we don't remember her much...but since that time, our father has doted on him all the more. It's ridiculous, really, the way he babies my brother.

Even when the two of us were young and would go out and tend the sheep, my brother received patient instructions and frequent pats on the back, even though he often fell asleep or daydreamed, letting the flock wander here and there. I, on the other hand, always kept a close watch on the flock, keeping one eye open for signs of danger, keeping the other eye open for the occasional stray. But did I ever receive patient instructions or warm praise? No, our father always spoke to me in clear and crisp commands; rarely did he offer his approval, and I never got a single pat on the back, even though I never, ever let a single sheep stray, and everybody knew it.

Don't get me wrong, my father was never cruel to me—not at all. He was just firm with me, a far cry from the softy he was with my brother. Whenever I tried to point this out to him, he just said it was all in my head, so I eventually stopped bringing it up and realized that's just how things were going to be. But it *wasn't* all in my head...even now, as I look back over the years to when my brother and I were small boys, I can see the difference in how we were treated. I have a great illustration that will help you understand this.

A long time ago, while we were both still quite young, we both decided to run away from home, as little kids often do. And so we each ran away, on separate occasions. I ran away in the morning, just before the sun came up. I ran through the hillsides, free as a little rabbit. I had no particular destination in mind, I just remember the intoxicating feeling of freedom, which I had never really experienced before. But, as the day wore on, the sense of thrill diminished, and I started to worry about my flock...was my brother tending them? Had he fallen asleep in the warm sun and let them wander all over the countryside? Finally, as the sun sank low in the west, I made my way back home, hungry and tired. While I was still far off, my father spotted me and came running out to greet me, "Son," he gasped, "I am so glad you're home! Your brother fell asleep tending the sheep and a stray wandered off. I'll stay with the flock while you go and search for the lost one. Go now, quickly, before night falls!" And, just like that, I was back and things resumed their normality, without so much as even a welcome-home hug. Nothing.

And then a few weeks later my brother ran away, and you would have thought the universe was about to unravel. My father paced the house, wringing his hands and muttering to himself, "Where could he be? How could he do this to me?" He even left the

entire flock to me all day, while he went out and searched for this younger brother of mine. But he returned alone and didn't sleep at all that night, and when my brother finally came home in the morning, my father ran out to meet him and picked him up and hoisted him high on his shoulders and paraded him around, laughing and dancing, singing at the top of his lungs that his youngest son had finally come home. He gave him the day to rest and to eat, and waited on him like a nurse, while I alone tended the sheep.

So, do you see? Can you understand why I might resent this brother of mine, who doesn't pull his own weight and yet is rewarded for it? Can you understand, then, why I was so angry when he pulled the same stunt not too long ago, running away like that, but this time going even further by blowing a huge portion of our father's savings? My brother's drama does not impress me at all; I see right through him. He likes the attention; life is like a play to him, and we are not real people, we are merely actors meant for his entertainment. But in the meantime, while he carries on with his theatrics, the rest of us work and go about our lives in the real world.

And the thing I never get is that my father never, *ever* gets mad at him. What father would rejoice over the return of a son that had wasted all his money in such an embarrassing, shameful way? Where's my dad's sense of pride? I tried to tell him this, but he just said, "He is my son, and I will love him no matter what." But I am not as even-tempered as my father, and so when I came in from the fields a few weeks ago and saw the calf roasting over the spit and heard the music coming from the tent, I knew my brother had come home, and I just lost it. Seriously. I *exploded*.

The servants tried to calm me down, but I didn't care what they had to say, and finally my father heard me shouting and came out of the tent to find me. His face was beaming and his smile was from ear to ear. "Son!" he exclaimed, "your brother is home! He is alive and he is safe! Come celebrate!"

"Are you *kidding* me?" I exploded, "It's bad enough that he had the nerve to come back home after what he's pulled—haven't you *heard* people talking about what he's been doing with your money? Don't you *care*? He is a disgrace to you and me and our family name! Kick him out of this family! He has never done a thing to earn his place in this family, he has never earned a single penny. You *should* boot him out of this family, but is that what you do? *NO!* What do *you* do? You throw a huge party for him and you give him brand new clothes and you invite everybody, but do you know who you *didn't* invite? Do you know who was *not* here when this party got started? *ME!* You didn't even wait for me! Where was *I*? I was working! Like always! I was out in the fields, tending *your* sheep, working in *your* fields, caring for *your* land, doing the responsible thing, because that is *who I am* and you have never, *ever* given me credit for any of that! You have always loved him more than me, and *we both know it!*"

There was a long pause. I was out of breath.

"Is that what you think?" my father asked in a soft voice, "Do you really think I love him more than I love you? Here, sit down on the ground with me. Let them carry on inside the tent. Sit with me, underneath these stars, and listen to what I have to say."

We walked a few paces away from the tent, the music faded, the torchlight grew dim...we settled on the ground, the stars were clear and brilliant. My father began to speak.

"Your brother cannot take care of himself like you can. He needs me. You don't need me. But I need you. You are strong. He is not. You are capable, he is not. When you

ran away, I knew you would come back to me. When he ran away, I thought he was gone forever. Don't you see? I don't love him more than I love you. I just love you differently, because you are two very different people. Calm your heart, my son," my father said, "because everything that I have belongs to you, *everything that I am is because of you*. A father's heart can love two sons or three sons or three hundred sons, and it doesn't mean he loves any one of them any less. A father's love grows into infinity, and there is love enough for all his children, even the ones who are a disgrace to his name. My loving your brother does not diminish the love I have for you. If I can love him in his shame, I can love you in your devotion. I can love my sons at their worst and at their best, and I will always rejoice to see you return to me, no matter what you have done. I will always love him with all my heart, and I will always love you with all my heart. Be secure in this, my son—my wonderful son. Now let us sit here underneath these stars together until you have calmed yourself, and I will wait here with you, and then we will enter the tent together, and rejoice together."