



Prodigal Son

GARRISON KEILLOR

St. Paul, Minnesota

Sunny piano.

NARRATOR A happy day, a sunny street, you're young and in love and life is good and you're on your way to lunch, when suddenly a cold shadow falls and (*Loathsome laugh.*) you feel a cold slimy hand touch your face. (*Worse laugh.*) And it's your own hand. (*Worst laugh.*) That's evil. Where does evil come from? Whose fault is it? The American Council of Remorse—a nonprofit organization working for greater contrition on the part of people who do terrible things—brings you: The Prodigal Son.

(Theme.)

DAD I run a feed-lot operation here in Judea, fattening feeder calves for the Jerusalem market, in partnership with my two sons: my prodigal son, Wally, and my older son, Dwight. One morning about two years ago, I came down to breakfast and—no Wally. Morning, Dwight.

DWIGHT (*Sitting at table, reading newspaper.*) Morning.

DAD You see your brother this morning?

DWIGHT In bed.

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DAD I promised Harry Shepherd I'd be over to his place by seven-thirty. He's got a lost sheep out on the mountain wild and steep.

DWIGHT Says here that fatted calves are down one and three-quarter shekels on the Damascus market, Dad. Makes me wonder if maybe *lean* calves wouldn't have a higher profit margin, and then we could spend more time in the vineyard—Dad, are you listening to me?

DAD I'm worried about your brother.

DWIGHT We can't afford to stand still, Dad. Look at the Stewarts—they're buying up land left and right! You've got to move ahead or you lose ground....

WALLY (*Thickly.*) Morning, Dad. Morning, Dwight. (*He sits down, groans, puts his head in his hands.*)

DAD You look a little peaked, son.

WALLY I donno—it's some kind of morning sickness, Dad. I feel real good at night and then I wake up and hurt all over.

DWIGHT I noticed a couple empty wineskins behind the fig tree this morning.

WALLY I dropped them and they spilled! Honest!

DAD Where were you taking them?

WALLY I was putting them outside! Wine's got to breathe, you know. And so do I, Dad. I read an article the other day in *Assyrian Digest* that says bad feelings may be environmental. I donno. Maybe I need to get away for a while, Dad. Get my head straight. Work out some things.

DAD Well, if that's how you feel, I guess I...

WALLY I was thinking I'd sort of take my share of the farm and head for a far country for a while until I get back on my feet, headwise, and then come back a brand-new guy.

DWIGHT Dad, could we discuss this?

(Theme.)

NARRATOR And not many days after, the younger son gathered his inheritance together, and took his journey into a far country....

WALLY *(Walking.)*

I'm walkin'...to a far-out land.

I'm talkin'...got cash in hand.

I'm hot now...don't you understand. *(Yokel voices offstage.)*

You're lookin' at a brand-new man.

(FOOLISH VIRGINS enter, harnessed together, led by a WISE VIRGIN.)

Hey! Who's this?

Hey. What's shakin', babes?

WISE I'm taking these five foolish virgins home, mister. We were supposed to be

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at a wedding an hour ago, but they're low on oil. You see an oil station that way?

WALLY Hey, they don't look foolish to me. They look like kinda fun people. Tell you what, they can come with me. I'll buy them oil. My treat.

WISE Sorry, mister. I've got to look after these virgins myself. They take a lot of supervision. You gotta watch 'em pretty close so they don't bunch up and walk up each other's backs.

(Crash.)

WALLY Whoops—dropped your lamp, huh? Good thing it *didn't* have oil in it. Well, 'bye! Don't do anything I wouldn't do.

We're movin'...down the ole highway.

We're improvin'...every day.

We're groovin'...and we're okay.

NARRATOR And he took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance in riotous living....*(Enter LOOSE COMPANIONS, dancing, drinking, feasting, whooping, BIMBO on WALLY's arm.)*

WALLY Take it off! Take it all off! Put it on and take it off again!

(To audience.) Hey, you Pharisees, loosen up—

(To pianist.) Hey, you know "Hey, Judea"?

BIMBO You're such a wonderful, vital person.

WALLY *(To "Hey, Jude.")*

Hey, Judea—you're a real great place.
You're the best spot in the Bi-i-i-ible....
You're right there by Canaan and Galilee,
You're family, you're tribal.

Hey, publican! Another round of wine for my pals! Put it on my tab!
Phhhh! Blaaaaghhhhh! What is this??? Lite wine?

PUBLICAN You don't like it?

WALLY Give it to some virgins—and bring me your best.

PUBLICAN I'll give you a jar to take with you—it's closing time. Time to lock up, Mr. Wally.

WALLY Hey! I'll pay. Let's party!

BIMBO Oh, Wally! You're so joyful! So many persons with a farm background, they don't know how to let go and have a good time.

WALLY Not me, Wanda! Life is a feast if you know where to find it.

PUBLICAN Here's your bill, Mr. Wally.

BIMBO That's so beautiful: "Life is a feast." So many people—they place such restrictions on themselves. *(He reads bill, page after page, then searches his pockets and brings out a few coins.)* You have a better sense of who you are. You have that rare quality of trusting yourself. Believing in festivity, not negativity. In

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a smile, not denial. Sure, rules are good for people who need 'em. But you prefer freedom. You have this tremendous—this great— It's not a structured thing. You know? Your energy is so focused. Like a locust.

WALLY That's the last of my money. That's all I have left. Amazing.

PUBLICAN You all right? You need a ride home?

WALLY No.

BIMBO Wally—listen. It's been great. Three of the best weeks of my life. Bye.
(The BIMBO, the PUBLICAN, and the LOOSE COMPANIONS leave, one by one.)

NARRATOR And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want. And he went and lived with a farmer who sent him into his fields to feed swine.

FARMER You ever feed swine before?

WALLY No, but I fed calves. You just dump the husks and swill down in front of them, right?

FARMER Lot more to it than that. Usually we require swine feeders to have at least four years of professional experience. But tell you what—I'll put you in my internship program.

WALLY What does it pay?

FARMER Pay! I'm offering you a chance to learn the swine business from the mud up.

WALLY So, you mean I'll sleep out here and eat with the pigs?

FARMER You want it or not?

WALLY Fine. Just want to get it clear in my own mind, that's all. C'mon, hogs. Sooo-eyyy!

C'mon. C'mon, piggy, piggy, piggy.

NARRATOR And when he came to himself, he said:

WALLY How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

No, that doesn't sound good.

I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him: "Father, it was a great learning experience, and now I'm back, looking for an entry-level position—" No.

I will arise and go to my father and will say unto him, "Hi, Dad, how you been?"

Oh, I'm fine. Had a good trip. Say, you got anything to eat around here?"

NARRATOR And he arose and came to his father.

WALLY I'm ruined...I lost my goods.

So I'm goin' back to my roots.

SAMARITAN *(Enters and latches on to him.)* Here, let me help you!

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WALLY Hey! Let go!

SAMARITAN Easy. Everything's going to be all right. I'll bind up your wounds here—

WALLY I don't have any wounds! Let go!

SAMARITAN Easy.

WALLY Let go!

SAMARITAN You sure I can't help?

WALLY Yes! Let go!

SAMARITAN Sure you're okay?

WALLY Yes! Let go!

SAMARITAN Okay. 'Bye. *(He leaves, reluctantly.)*

WALLY Boy, sometimes those Samaritans won't take no for an answer.

NARRATOR And when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion on him, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him...

DAD Wally! Son! Oh, Wally! *(He shouts offstage.)* Bring some clothes! And a ring! And some shoes! And not those running shoes! The dress shoes! And make that two rings!

(Offstage clamor.)

WALLY I spent all the money, Dad.

DAD And bring the fatted calf—let's eat and be merry! My son who was dead is alive again; he was lost and now he is found. Amazing!

WALLY Mind if I invite some friends too?

(The FOOLISH VIRGINS enter, roped together.)

I met them on the road. They're okay people once you get to know them.

DAD More rings! More shoes! Another fatted calf! You look good. You look like you've lost weight.

WALLY I've been on a high-husk diet.

DAD Dwight! Look who's here! It's Wally!

DWIGHT *(Enters reluctantly.)* Hi. Nice to see you. *(His DAD turns to WALLY, and DWIGHT*

shakes both his fists and sticks out his tongue and makes a vulgar gesture.)

DAD We're having veal tonight, Dwight! Wally's home.

WALLY I'm going to get some of that calf, Dad. Be right back.

DWIGHT Dad, I don't want this to sound negative in any way, but—how many years have I been working here?

DAD All your life.

DWIGHT Have I ever disobeyed you, Dad?

DAD Never.

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DWIGHT And have you ever given *me* a fatted calf and thrown a big party for me and *my* friends?

DAD No, but, son—

DWIGHT But the minute this *bozo* comes hoofing it home—this leaker—

DAD But your brother was dead and he's alive again! He was lost and now he's found!

DWIGHT I don't think you're hearing what I'm saying, Dad. You never ran up to me and hugged me—I'd just like to point that out.

DAD I'm not a hugger, I guess.

WALLY *(Enters, mouth full.)* Have some calf, you guys. That fat won't keep, you know. Sure is good fatted calf, Dad. Sure beats husks. *(Off.)* Care for another piece, you virgins?

DWIGHT Ever stop to think who *fatted* that calf, Wally? That was our best calf, Dad. The *best* one. *(The others slowly leave, talking among themselves.)* Try to think how I feel. I'm hoeing corn all day, come in bone-tired, there's my brother smelling of pig manure, and they got the beer on ice and *my calf* on the barbecue! And MY RING on his hand! *My ring!* You promised it to me, but oh no—can't give it to the son who's worked his tail off for thirty years, oh no, gotta give it to the weasel who comes dragging his butt in the door— Oh great— Wonderful, Dad. Terrific. Maybe I'll go sleep with the pigs, seeing as you go for that. See ya later, Wally. Help yourself to the rest of my stuff—clothes, jewels, shekels, just take what you want. Take my room. Don't worry about me. I'll be in the pigpen.

(He leaves. Offstage sounds: A stove being kicked, muttered curses, pots and pans being thrown, dishes broken.)