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Opening extract from

The Neverending Story

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Carl Conrad Coreander

Old Books

This inscription could be seen on the glass door of a small shop, but naturally this was only the way it looked if you were inside the dimly lit shop, looking out at the street through the plate glass door.

Outside, it was a gray, cold, rainy November morning. The rain ran down the glass and over the ornate letters. Through the glass there was nothing to be seen but the rain-splotched wall across the street.

Suddenly the door was opened so violently that a little cluster of brass bells tinkled wildly, taking quite some time to calm down. The cause of this hubbub was a fat little boy of ten or twelve. His wet, dark-brown hair hung down over his face, his coat was soaked and dripping, and he was carrying a school satchel slung over his shoulder. He was rather pale and out of breath, but, despite the hurry he had been in a moment before, he was standing in the open doorway as though rooted to the spot.

Before him lay a long, narrow room, the back of which was lost in the half-light. The walls were lined with shelves

filled with books of all shapes and sizes. Large folios were piled high on the floor, and on several tables lay heaps of smaller, leather-bound books, whose spines glittered with gold. The far end of the room was blocked off by a shoulder-high wall of books, behind which the light of a lamp could be seen. From time to time a ring of smoke rose up in the lamplight, expanded, and vanished in darkness. One was reminded of the smoke signals that Indians used for sending news from hilltop to hilltop. Apparently someone was sitting there, and, sure enough, the little boy heard a cross voice from behind the wall of books: 'Do your wondering inside or outside, but shut the door. There's a draft.'

The boy obeyed and quietly shut the door. Then he approached the wall of books and looked cautiously around the corner. There, in a high worn leather wing chair sat a short, stout man in a rumpled black suit that looked frayed and somehow dusty. His paunch was held in by a vest with a flower design. He was bald except for outcroppings of white hair over his ears. His red face suggested a vicious bulldog. A gold-rimmed pince-nez was perched on his bulbous nose. He was smoking a curved pipe, which dangled from one corner of his mouth and pulled his whole cheek out of shape. On his lap he held a book, which he had evidently been reading, for in closing it he had left the thick forefinger of his left hand between the leaves as a kind of bookmark.

With his right hand he now removed his spectacles and examined the fat little boy, who stood there dripping. After a while, the man narrowed his eyes, which made him look more vicious than ever, and muttered: 'Goodness gracious.' Then he opened his book and went on reading.

The little boy didn't know quite what to do, so he just stood there, gaping. Finally the man closed his book – as before, with his finger between the pages – and growled: 'Listen, my boy, I can't abide children. I know it's the style nowadays to make a terrible fuss over you – but I don't go for it. I simply have no use for children. As far as I'm concerned, they're no good for anything but screaming, torturing people, breaking things, smearing books with jam and tearing the pages. It never dawns on them that grown-ups may also have their troubles and cares. I'm only telling you this so you'll know where you're at. Anyway, I have no children's books and I wouldn't sell you the other kind. So now we understand each other, I hope!'

After saying all this without taking his pipe out of his mouth, he opened his book again and went on reading.

The boy nodded silently and turned to go, but somehow he felt that he couldn't take this last remark lying down. He turned around and said softly: ' All *children aren't like that.*'

Slowly the man looked up and again removed his spectacles. 'You still here? What must one do to be rid of you? And what was this terribly important thing you had to tell me?'

'It wasn't terribly important,' said the boy still more softly. 'I only wanted . . . to say that all *children aren't the way you said.*'

'Really?' The man raised his eyebrows in affected surprise. 'Then you must be the big exception, I presume?'

The fat boy didn't know what to say. He only shrugged his shoulders a little, and turned to go.

'And anyway,' he heard the gruff voice behind him, 'where are your manners? If you had any, you'd have introduced yourself.'

'My name is Bastian,' said the boy. 'Bastian Balthazar Bux.'

'That's a rather odd name,' the man grumbled. 'All those Bs. *Oh well, you can't help it. You didn't choose it. My name is Carl Conrad Coreander.'*

'That makes three Cs.*'*

'Hmm,' the man grumbled. 'Quite right.'

He puffed a few clouds. 'Oh well, our names don't really matter, as we'll never see each other again. But before you leave, there's just one thing I'd like to know: What made you come bursting into my shop like that? It looked to me as if you were running away from something. Am I right?'

Bastian nodded. Suddenly his round face was a little paler than before and his eyes a little larger.

'I suppose you made off with somebody's cashbox,' Mr Coreander conjectured, 'or knocked an old woman down, or whatever little scamps like you do nowadays. Are the police after you, boy?'

Bastian shook his head.

'Speak up,' said Mr Coreander. 'Whom were you running away from?'

'The others.'

'What others?'

'The children in my class.'

'Why?'

'They won't leave me alone.'

'What do they do to you?'

'They wait for me outside the schoolhouse.'

'And then what?'

'Then they shout all sorts of things. And push me around and laugh at me.'

'And you just put up with it?'

Mr Coreander looked at the boy for a while disapprovingly. Then he asked: 'Why don't you just give them a punch on the nose?'

Bastian gaped. 'No, I wouldn't want to do that. And besides, I can't box.'

'How about wrestling?' Mr Coreander asked. 'Or running, swimming, football, gymnastics? Are you no good at any of them?'

The boy shook his head.

'In other words,' said Mr Coreander,'you're a weakling.'

Bastian shrugged his shoulders.

'But you can still talk,' said Mr Coreander. 'Why don't you talk back at them when they make fun of you?'

'I tried . . .'

'Well . . . ?'

'They threw me into a garbage can and tied the lid on. I yelled for two hours before somebody heard me.'

'Hmm,' Mr Coreander grumbled. 'And now you don't dare?'

Bastian nodded.

'In that case,' Mr Coreander concluded, 'you're a scaredy-cat too.'

Bastian hung his head.

'And probably a hopeless grind? Best in the class, teacher's pet? Is that it?'

'No,' said Bastian, still looking down. 'I was put back last year.'

'Good Lord!' cried Mr Coreander. 'A failure all along the line.'

Bastian said nothing, he just stood there in his dripping coat. His arms hung limp at his sides.

'What kind of things do they yell when they make fun of you?' Mr Coreander wanted to know.

'Oh, all kinds.'

'For instance?'

'Namby Pamby sits on the pot. The pot cracks up, says Namby Pamby: I guess it's 'cause I weigh a lot!'

'Not very clever,' said Mr Coreander. 'What else?'

Bastian hesitated before listing: 'Screwball, nitwit, braggart, liar . . .'

'Screwball? Why do they call you that?'

'I talk to myself sometimes.'

'What kind of things do you say?'

'I think up stories. I invent names and words that don't exist. That kind of thing.'

'And you say these things to yourself? Why?'

'Well, nobody else would be interested.'

Mr Coreander fell into a thoughtful silence.

'What do your parents say about this?'

Bastian didn't answer right away. After a while he mumbled: 'Father doesn't say anything. He never says anything. It's all the same to him.'

'And your mother?'

'She – she's gone.'

'Your parents are divorced?'

'No,' said Bastian. 'She's dead.'

At that moment the telephone rang. With some difficulty Mr Coreander pulled himself out of his armchair and shuffled into a small room behind the shop. He picked up the receiver and indistinctly Bastian heard him saying his name. After that there was nothing to be heard but a low mumbling.

Bastian stood there. He didn't quite know why he had said all he had and admitted so much. He hated being questioned like that. He broke into a sweat as it occurred to him that he was already late for school. He'd have to hurry, oh yes, he'd have to run – but he just stood there, unable to move. Something held him fast, he didn't know what.

He could still hear the muffled voice from the back room. It was a long telephone conversation.

It came to Bastian that he had been staring the whole time at the book that Mr Coreander had been holding and that was now lying on the armchair. He couldn't take his eyes off it. It seemed to have a kind of magnetic power that attracted him irresistibly.

He went over to the chair, slowly held out his hand, and touched the book. In that moment something inside him went click!, *as though a trap had shut. Bastian had a vague feeling that touching the book had started something irrevocable, which would now take its course.*

He picked up the book and examined it from all sides. It was bound in copper-colored silk that shimmered when he moved it about. Leafing through the pages, he saw the book was printed in two colors. There seemed to be no

pictures, but there were large, beautiful capital letters at the beginning of the chapters. Examining the binding more closely, he discovered two snakes on it, one light and one dark. They were biting each other's tail, so forming an oval. And inside the oval, in strangely intricate letters, he saw the title:

The Neverending Story

Human passions have mysterious ways, in children as well as grown-ups. Those affected by them can't explain them, and those who haven't known them have no understanding of them at all. Some people risk their lives to conquer a mountain peak. No one, not even they themselves, can really explain why. Others ruin themselves trying to win the heart of a certain person who wants nothing to do with them. Still others are destroyed by their devotion to the pleasures of the table. Some are so bent on winning a game of chance that they lose everything they own, and some sacrifice everything for a dream that can never come true. Some think their only hope of happiness lies in being somewhere else, and spend their whole lives traveling from place to place. And some find no rest until they have become powerful. In short, there are as many different passions as there are people.

Bastian Balthazar Bux's passion was books.

If you have never spent whole afternoons with burning ears and rumpled hair, forgetting the world around you over a book, forgetting cold and hunger –

If you have never read secretly under the bedclothes with a flashlight, because your father or mother or some

other well-meaning person has switched off the lamp on the plausible ground that it was time to sleep because you had to get up so early –

If you have never wept bitter tears because a wonderful story has come to an end and you must take your leave of the characters with whom you have shared so many adventures, whom you have loved and admired, for whom you have hoped and feared, and without whose company life seems empty and meaningless –

If such things have not been part of your own experience, you probably won't understand what Bastian did next.

Staring at the title of the book, he turned hot and cold, cold and hot. Here was just what he had dreamed of, what he had longed for ever since the passion for books had taken hold of him: A story that never ended! The book of books!

He had to have this book – at any price.

At any price? That was easily said. Even if he had had more to offer than the bit of pocket money he had on him – this cranky Mr Coreander had given him clearly to understand that he would never sell him a single book. And he certainly wouldn't give it away. The situation was hopeless.

Yet Bastian knew he couldn't leave without the book. It was clear to him that he had only come to the shop because of this book. It had called him in some mysterious way, because it wanted to be his, because it had somehow always belonged to him.

Bastian listened to the mumbling from the little back room. In a twinkling, before he knew it, he had the book

under his coat and was hugging it with both arms. Without a sound he backed up to the street door, keeping an anxious eye on the other door, the one leading to the back room. Cautiously he turned the door handle. To keep the brass bells from ringing, he opened the glass door just wide enough for him to slip through. He quietly closed the door behind him.

Only then did he start running.

The books, copybooks, pens and pencils in his satchel jiggled and rattled to the rhythm of his steps. He had a stitch in his side. But he kept on running.

The rain ran down his face and into his collar. The wet cold passed through his coat, but Bastian didn't feel it. He felt hot all over, but not from running.

His conscience, which hadn't let out a peep in the bookshop, had suddenly woken up. All the arguments that had seemed so convincing melted away like snowmen under the fiery breath of a dragon.

He had stolen. He was a thief!

What he had done was worse than common theft. That book was certainly the only one of its kind and impossible to replace. It was surely Mr Coreander's greatest treasure. Stealing a violinist's precious violin or a king's crown wasn't at all the same as filching money from a cash drawer.

As he ran, he hugged the book tight under his coat. Regardless of what this book might cost him, he couldn't bear to lose it. It was all he had left in the world.

Because naturally he couldn't go home anymore.

He tried to imagine his father at work in the big room he had furnished as a laboratory. Around him lay dozens of

plaster casts of human teeth, for his father was a dental technician. Bastian had never stopped to ask himself whether his father enjoyed his work. It occurred to him now for the first time, but now he would never be able to ask him.

If he went home now, his father would come out of his lab in a white smock, possibly holding a plaster cast, and he would ask: 'Home so soon?' 'Yes,' Bastian would answer. 'No school today?' – He saw his father's quiet, sad face, and he knew he couldn't possibly lie to him. Much less could he tell him the truth. No, the only thing left for him was to go away somewhere. Far, far away. His father must never find out that his son was a thief. And maybe he wouldn't even notice that Bastian wasn't there anymore. Bastian found this thought almost comforting.

He had stopped running. Walking slowly, he saw the schoolhouse at the end of the street. Without thinking, he was taking his usual route to school. He passed a few people here and there, yet the street seemed deserted. But to a schoolboy arriving very, very late, the world around the schoolhouse always seems to have gone dead. At every step he felt the fear rising within him. Under the best of circumstances he was afraid of school, the place of his daily defeats, afraid of his teachers, who gently appealed to his conscience or made him the butt of their rages, afraid of the other children, who made fun of him and never missed a chance to show him how clumsy and defenseless he was. He had always thought of his school years as a prison term with no end in sight, a misery that would continue until he grew up, something he would just have to live through.

But when he now passed through the echoing corridors with their smell of floor wax and wet overcoats, when the lurking stillness suddenly stopped his ears like cotton, and when at last he reached the door of his classroom, which was painted the same old-spinach color as the walls around it, he realized that this, too, was no place for him. He would have to go away. So he might as well go at once.

But where to?

Bastian had read stories about boys who ran away to sea and sailed out into the world to make their fortune. Some became pirates or heroes, others grew rich and when they returned home years later no one could guess who they were.

But Bastian didn't feel up to that kind of thing. He couldn't conceive of anyone taking him on as a cabin boy. Besides, he had no idea how to reach a seaport with suitable ships for such an undertaking.

So where could *he go?*

Suddenly he thought of the right place, the only place where – at least for the time being – no one would find him or even look for him.

The attic of the school was large and dark. It smelled of dust and mothballs. Not a sound to be heard, except for the muffled drumming of the rain on the enormous tin roof. Great beams blackened with age rose at regular intervals from the plank floor, joined with other beams at head height, and lost themselves in the darkness. Here and there spider webs as big as hammocks swayed gently in the air currents. A milky light fell from a skylight in the roof.

The one living thing in this place where time seemed to stand still was a little mouse that came hobbling across the

floor, leaving tiny footprints in the dust – and between them a fine line, a tailprint. Suddenly it stopped and pricked up its ears. And then it vanished – whoosh! – *into a hole in the floor.*

The mouse had heard the sound of a key in a big lock. The attic door opened slowly, with a loud squeak. For a moment a long strip of light crossed the room. Bastian slipped in. Then, again with a squeak, the door closed. Bastian put the big key in the lock from inside and turned it. Then he pushed the bolt and heaved a sigh of relief. Now no one could possibly find him. No one would look for him here. The place was seldom used – he was pretty sure of that – and even if by chance someone had something to do in the attic today or tomorrow, he would simply find the door locked. And the key would be gone. And even if they somehow got the door open, Bastian would have time to hide behind the junk that was stored here.

Little by little, his eyes got used to the dim light. He knew the place. Some months before, he had helped the janitor to carry a laundry basket full of old copybooks up here. And then he had seen where the key to the attic door was kept – in a wall cupboard next to the topmost flight of stairs. He hadn't thought of it since. But today he had remembered.

Bastian began to shiver, his coat was soaked through and it was cold in the attic. The first thing to do was find a place where he could make himself more or less comfortable, because he took it for granted that he'd have to stay here a long time. How long? The question didn't enter his head, nor did it occur to him that he would soon be hungry and thirsty.

He looked around for a while. The place was crammed with junk of all kinds; there were shelves full of old files and records, benches and ink-stained desks were heaped up every which way, a dozen old maps were hanging on an iron frame, there were blackboards that had lost a good deal of their black, and cast-iron stoves, broken-down pieces of gymnasium equipment – including a horse with the stuffing coming out through the cracks in its hide – and a number of soiled mats. There were also quite a few stuffed animals – at least what the moths had left of them – a big owl, a golden eagle, a fox, and so on, cracked retorts and other chemical equipment, a galvanometer, a human skeleton hanging on a clothes rack, and a large number of cartons full of old books and papers. Bastian finally decided to make his home on the pile of old gym mats. When he stretched out on them, it was almost like lying on a sofa. He dragged them to the place under the skylight where the light was best. Not far away he found a pile of gray army blankets; they were dusty and ragged but that didn't matter now. He carried them over to his nest. He took off his wet coat and hung it on the clothes rack beside the skeleton. The skeleton jiggled and swayed, but Bastian had no fear of it, maybe because he was used to such things at home. He also removed his wet shoes. In his stocking feet he squatted down on the mats and wrapped himself in the gray blankets like an Indian. Beside him lay his school satchel – and the copper-colored book.

It passed through his mind that the rest of them down in the classroom would be having composition just then. Maybe they'd be writing on some deadly dull subject.

Bastian looked at the book.

'I wonder,' he said to himself, 'what's in a book while it's closed. Oh, I know it's full of letters printed on paper, but all the same, something must be happening, because as soon as I open it, there's a whole story with people I don't know yet and all kinds of adventures and deeds and battles. And sometimes there are storms at sea, or it takes you to strange cities and countries. All those things are somehow shut up in a book. Of course you have to read it to find out. But it's already there, that's the funny thing. I just wish I knew how it could be.'

Suddenly an almost festive mood came over him.

He settled himself, picked up the book, opened it to the first page, and began to read

The Neverending Story.