

Misadventures of a Boy Player

# The Wagabond Stage



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# Prologue

*To my crowd, whoever you might be.*

*It has taken time to find the words to tell this tale. Not just the time I spent mastering a quill, learning the sounds and strokes of every letter. It's easy enough to make the shape of a word, but the hardest thing of all to make those words speak. Especially for me and who I've been – a stuttering farm lad, afraid of his own voice. A boy who long kept his mouth shut and lived only in his head.*

*But I know the words now. I've collected enough words to tell the story of all I have*



*become since I left that boy behind. All the roles I've taken on, each with their own voice and their own guise. And for the parts that I've played...their own dress.*

*My master says that to be a player is to live and die many times over. He's the one who wrote my girls into being. Those girls I became on his stage. My master writes stories to be said out loud. His scripts are filled with the hottest of words that must be raged, wailed or wept over when they are performed before a crowd.*

*I cannot write like he does. This isn't a story that I can shout over the drunken bellows of the inn yards we usually play. These are words that I*



*want to pass on very softly. Words I want to whisper from this parchment to one listener at a time.*

*Are you listening? Then let me tell you.*

*Let me put down in words how my first life ended and how my many lives that followed began.*



# Act One

## Scene One

### The Dying Boy

The night I saw my first play was the night I burst into flames. It wasn't the first time I had feigned my own death, but I felt certain it would be my most horrifying attempt so far. I had sworn that this would be the death that stuck. The death that I never returned from. Leastways not to my family, who'd proved to be such a poor audience.

It'd once been my habit to snatch up my father's butchering knife, jab it beneath my arm



and stagger to the ground, rattling out a scream as I fell. This rarely earned the response I was hoping for. I belonged to a farming family and slaughter was a part of our routine chores. Pa would sometimes jump at my shrieking displays, little flinches that filled me with mirth. But after booting me in the ribs and seeing no signs of bleeding, my dramatic turns would receive only gruff orders to put the knife down and get back to work. Pa had no use for my many and varied deaths. He kept saying I needed to grow out of them.

Everything needed to grow on the farm. I was forever in trouble for being the stunted



member of the Child family. I was in the summer of my fifteenth year, but my spine had yet to stretch, my beard had not sprouted and my voice remained shamefully squeaky for a lad my age. But in spite of my weedy appearance, I was quietly mastering a skill. Even if it was only this secret craft of my own invention. Even if, in my family's eyes, I was just playing pretend. I felt certain I would one day use my sole talent to devastate them all.

I was ready now. I was rehearsed. This night, if all went to plan, I would give my family something they had never seen before and would never forget. They'd get a glimpse of everything



that I might become. And then they would never have to see me again. Neither would I see them...which would be a relief for all concerned.

I stood in my room, staring down at my props. For months I'd been gathering materials to stage my own spontaneous combustion. I'd been polishing the chalky bones that were all that remained of our pigs once their meat was stripped and cured. I'd been pocketing fistfuls of ash from the hearth early each morning. Slowly I had crafted a burnt black skeleton. *My* burnt black skeleton that I had been hiding under the bed, waiting for the right moment to make it smoke.





I took a breath, my nerves rattling me. I wasn't ready to explode just yet. So, I slipped out from the bedroom, wanting a last look at my intended audience before I took my leave of them. I shrank against the wall as I tiptoed downstairs. I knew where all the creaks were in our floorboards. I'd practiced avoiding them so I could lull the old house into an unsuspecting silence. I was quiet as a shadow, a ghost haunting my own home. If I held my breath, then I could make-believe that I had disappeared from sight. I was especially good at this last charade. My family were always so willing to play along.



Pa and my brother Flannery did not see me as I peered into the kitchen to find them sitting beside the heap of turnips they'd unearthed that afternoon. They studied the roots vegetables like they were lumps gold, inspecting them for dirt in the fading light. It was dusky but not yet dark beyond the farmhouse windows, the sun reluctant to set on what had been a sweltering July day. It was a day I'd spent lurking in patches of shade, playing out my death scene in my mind and assessing it for possible pitfalls. Meanwhile, the other men of the Child family had been toiling in the fields, picking and preparing our crops for the market on the morrow. Now they sat slumped in



their chairs, their eyelids drooping and neither of them talking.

I was never close to my pa or brother, but it was hard to look away, knowing this would be the last time I saw them. My eyes lingered on Flan's face the longest, the face that I shared with him – the same wide green eyes and short snub noses. My brother's cheeks were fuller and his skin more sun-browned, lending him an altogether more comely appearance. The same features on my face were pinched and pale and seemed to bulge from my skull. Such was the result of me shying away from outdoor chores and consequently going without so many



suppers. As we'd grown, Flan had gained the height and weight advantage and he always made me painfully aware of it.

He had a sense of timing Flan, I'd give him that. He always waited for just the right moment when our pa turned his back before lashing out with his feet or fists, bruising me for no better reason than that he could. I had only one fond memory of making Flan jump in return. It was the morning I suspended myself from the rafters in the barn. I'd coiled a rope loosely around my throat, but fastened it about my waist, hiding it beneath my shirt so it looked like I was strung up by my neck. I had dangled for almost an hour



before Flan found me. His scream upon entering the barn had thrilled up my spine.

“You’ll go to hell, you know that!” Flan had snapped, realizing my trick only after I had scuppered my illusion with a smile. “Why do you do these things, Timmy? What’s it all for?!”

I’d shrugged, swinging on my rope harness.

“It’s just something I’m working on.”

“You never *work*,” he’d sneered, before seizing my breeches and yanking them to my ankles, leaving me squirming and exposed.

I swallowed the memory down and turned my back, leaving Pa and Flan to nod off over their vegetables. I’d be getting their attention soon



enough. And this time, there'd be no logistical difficulties, no trouble with timing or twitchy involuntary movements that gave me away. No more cords that snapped, blades that nicked or water that got up my nose. I'd leave them trembling in cold sweats. I would –

“What are you creeping for?” a voice sneered.

I froze in the doorway of my mother's room. Ma had already given up on the futile evening, though the moon was barely visible in the still blue sky. I twisted my neck to see her slumped in bed, her back thrust at me. She might have been



talking in her sleep. It wouldn't be the first time I'd overheard her scolding me in her dreams.

I held my breath, willing her to drift off again.

“I can *tell* you're creeping,” said Ma, her voice a slurred murmur. “Get back to your shadows, you morbid thing. Stop tiptoeing your cursed presence all over my house. May the Devil strike you down. May he turn you to ash and bone...”

This last happy thought was how my mother had bid me goodnight all my young life. It was me who'd prevented her having a larger brood of children, so many lost siblings that might have



been of better use in the running of the farm. I'm told that after Flan came, Ma's body had been racked with birthing pains once more, pains so grievous she had screamed the house down and brought many townsfolk trudging uphill to what they'd assumed would be her deathbed. They say Ma begged a physician to take a knife and cut the '*Imp of Satan*' from her belly, but the man hadn't the skill or stomach for such an exorcism.

It was a full day later that I had finally emerged. The midwife had predicted I would be stillborn, but after my wailing proved her wrong, she persisted that I'd turn blue by the following winter. Somehow, I'd survived to grow into the





scrawny whelp now darkening my mother's door. She'd never forgiven me for living this long. My hard birth had left her not only barren, but near crippled, rarely moving far from her bed. Though her hand still whipped out to wallop me whenever I was within reach. Ma liked to put tears in my eyes. She swore she'd never known a boy so quick to cry. She said if only I'd been born a girl, then they could've sold me off as a little wife to some lonely traveller.

Ma was the one I'd miss the most. Her superstitious ravings had fed my imagination more than anything else on the farm. If there was anyone in the Child family I took after, it was her.



I waited until Ma's breath fell back into a steady rhythm of snores. I couldn't risk her stirring like that again. I had to act now. I stepped back into the room I shared with Flan. The single cot bed belonged to my brother, of course. I slept in an itchy nest of straw on the floor. Or at least I did on nights when I wasn't locked in the sty as punishment for my idleness. Since my own bed wasn't fit to serve as a stage, I spread my bundle of bones on my brother's sheets instead. My charred remains were tucked inside my single set of work clothes, the final costume for the corpse I would leave behind. As a last touch, I took a



pinch of cinders in my fingers and sprinkled it over the mattress, like seasoning.

Everything was made ready. I climbed up onto the cot, stepping carefully around my mock skeleton and clutching my bag of ashes. I cleared my throat, ready to speak my last words. It was so rare that I used my own voice. I still didn't know enough words to string into a fitting speech and I had a lingering childhood lisp that always forced me to keep my sentences short. But there were a few fiery words I'd been holding in my memory. The curse words that Ma spat at me every day...the only thing that she'd ever given me.



“May the Devil strike me down!” I cried at the top of my lungs. “May the Devil turn me to ash and bones!”

I threw up my arms, scattering ashes into the air around me. I stood in the black cloud that filled the room, letting its flakes rain down on my face. The noise of my eruption was still echoing off the walls as I leapt down from the cot, landing noiselessly on my toes. Panting for breath, I had to resist the urge to cough. I could already hear feet upon the stairs, feet rushing up to see. Without wasting another moment, I rushed to the window and jumped to the ground.



I could've done myself a mischief with this fall, but I had a lot of practice in leaping from high places. It's one of the few ways a restless farm boy can find release – the thrill of climbing to a precipice, then plummeting from it. I had suffered bruises and sprained ankles through most of my childhood, but now I was nimble enough to land like a cat. Even so, this particular fall caused my knees to crack at the joints. The soles of my feet were stunned by the ground and tingled numbly inside my shoes. My teeth cut into my lower lip and I was tasting blood on my tongue as I pressed my ear to the wall.



I had to clamp a hand over my mouth to muffle my own cackling laughter. I could hear Ma shrieking new curses, Pa stumbling on the stairs and Flan yelling from the landing to '*Come quick! Come see!*' The farmhouse had been thrown into chaos. I could picture my family huddled together, staring into the smoke that'd once been their lunatic son. The son who they had tried to starve and shun out of being. Now in place of that son they'd have a story to tell.

And it felt good to be leaving them that way. Better to be a story than their boy.



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