

HOW THE CHILDREN PLAYED

adapted by Tom Smith

from the Brothers Grimm's "How Children Played Slaughter With Each Other"

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CHARACTERS

Wilhelm 12, he/him

Jakob 12, he/him, adopted

Mother 30-40s, she/her

TIME/PLACE

The past

A remote farmhouse

***Note:** Although the characters of Jakob and Wilhelm are he/him, they may be played by performers of any gender. If preferred, directors may change the characters' names and pronouns.*

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A yard in front of a remote farmhouse. Mother, a large, brooding woman, walks in blood on her apron and blouse, holding a dead pig still dripping in one hand and a large knife in the other. A baby is strapped to her chest. Wilhelm and Jakob follow. Wilhelm looks at his mother with great admiration as Jakob wipes away tears.

MOTHER

No more crying! What's done is done. Some creatures are born to die.

(Wiping the bloody blade on her skirt and handing it to Wilhelm.)

Wash my knife. The beast must be cleaned before it can be sold.

(She exits into the house.)

I have to bathe your sister and put her down for her nap.

WILHELM

Your pig put up such a fight!

JAKOB

Wouldn't you?

WILHELM

He was strong for a runt.

JAKOB

He was.

WILHELM

I had to help Mother hold him down. And where were you? Crying like a baby!

JAKOB

Shut up! I raised him. He was mine.

WILHELM

Crying harder than when your parents died.

(Laughs.)

JAKOB

Shut up, Wilhelm! Someday you will die and then you'll pray someone cries for you.

WILHELM

...There's still daylight. Let's play something.

JAKOB

Like what?

Soldiers? WILHELM

We played that this morning. JAKOB

So what? WILHELM

You never die. I'm always the one getting killed. JAKOB

Well, then, what do you want to play? Spies? WILHELM

Doctor. JAKOB

No, not that again! WILHELM

Then...coal miners. JAKOB

What fun is that? WILHELM

You'll see. JAKOB
(He starts pretending to mine coal with a pick axe.)

Do something, Wilhelm, don't just stand there!
(Wilhelm starts to pick axe as well.)

"Mining is sure hard work."

"I'll say!" WILHELM

JAKOB
"Look what I've found: dynamite! We don't have to break our backs any longer with these pick axes. We can blow the coal out of the mine!"

WILHELM
I want to light it! I mean, "Hand me the dynamite; it's my job to light it."

JAKOB

Fine. "Here, you go. Be careful. There are so many sticks of it."
(Hands him imaginary dynamite. Wilhelm lights it. As he does so, Jakob screams sounds of a huge explosion!)

"Cave in!"
(He jumps on top of Wilhelm, and the two fall to the ground.)

WILHELM

Get off me!

JAKOB

"It's a cave-in! We can't move. We're trapped."

WILHELM

I said, get off, Jakob!

JAKOB

"I'm trying to, but I can't! We're stuck here."

(It becomes apparent that Jakob is grinding up against Wilhelm.)

WILHELM

(Enjoying it for a moment.)

Oh...

(He suddenly stops and pushes Jakob off.)

Stop it, Jakob! You're disgusting!

JAKOB

Keep playing, Wilhelm.

WILHELM

Not that way.

JAKOB

Why not?

WILHELM

I told you before. It's sinful!

JAKOB

(Approaching Wilhelm.)

No it's not. Let's play a little longer...

WILHELM

(Throws Jakob down to the ground.)

I said no! You're an abomination! You have the devil inside you, Jakob.

JAKOB

Then so do you. You liked it.

WILHELM

I did not!

JAKOB

I felt you against me!

WILHELM

You are no longer a child! You can't do things just because you want to! Now, leave me alone. Mother gave me work to do. She sees I'm grown up.

(Grabs the knife his mother left and begins to clean it in a bucket of water.)

JAKOB

We're the same age.

(Wilhelm ignores him.)

We can play a different game.

WILHELM

Mother will be asking for her knife.

JAKOB

One more. Just one.

WILHELM

You can't be trusted.

JAKOB

Please, Wilhelm. See: the knife is already clean. And there's nothing else to do. I won't play like that again. I promise. Please...

WILHELM

...Fine. But I pick.

JAKOB

All right.

WILHELM

(Handing him the knife.)

You are the butcher. I'm me, coming to sell our pig.

JAKOB

But—

WILHELM

It's this or nothing!

JAKOB

Fine.

WILHELM

Start.

JAKOB

"Good day, young sir. I see you have brought me something."

WILHELM

"Yes, it's my brother's pig. I want to sell it."

JAKOB

"Why would you ever kill such a fine looking beast? It's magnificent. And obviously so well taken care of. You should have kept it to breed. It's a travesty what you did."

WILHELM

"It was a runt."

JAKOB

"It doesn't look small to me."

WILHELM

"It never grew up right. It kept trying to do things. Sinful things."

JAKOB

"I hardly think a pig cares about sin."

WILHELM

"It should, because it is an animal, and all animals have a soul. It was corrupting all the other pigs. Making them do things they shouldn't. Feel things. It was possessed by demons. So, you see, this pig deserved to be slaughtered."

JAKOB

"Then I don't want it!"

WILHELM

"What do you mean? You have to take it."

JAKOB

"No, I don't!"

WILHELM

“You are the butcher.”

JAKOB

“Even so, why would I want to buy a pig possessed by demons?”

WILHELM

Play right or I am going inside!

JAKOB

“Inside where? This is my butcher shop.”

WILHELM

“You know, I was going to sell it to you cheaply, because it’s unnatural. But the more I think about it, I realize it has no value at all so I’ll give it to you for free.”

JAKOB

(Taken aback by this.)

“But, sir...it is worth something!”

WILHELM

“No. Absolutely nothing.”

JAKOB

Don’t say that, Wilhelm...

WILHELM

“In fact, you would be doing me a favor by taking it off my hands. I’m disgusted by it. The way it looks, the way it acts. It is worthless! Completely and wholly worthless!”

(Throws the imaginary pig on the ground, stomps on it hard, and walks away. Jakob looks pained and upset. Then:)

JAKOB

“Wait, sir! I can’t take this pig. Not like this. You didn’t prepare him properly.”

WILHELM

(Stops, a bit confused, but back in character.)

“I slaughtered him perfectly.”

JAKOB

“No, sir, indeed you did not. Look right here.”

(Wilhelm crosses over. Jakob points to the imaginary pig’s neck with the knife.)

“Why, it’s unforgivable what you did. See, you missed the main artery. Here, in the neck!”

(Jakob raises his mother’s blade and rams it into the side of Wilhelm’s neck. Blood. Wilhelm falls to his knees. He tries to scream, but all that comes out is a loud awkward gurgling sound. Jakob turns Wilhelm to face him, the blade still in his neck, pulling it

across his throat. Much more blood. Wilhelm falls prone, using his last breaths to attempt to pull the blade out. Jakob puts his face close to Wilhelm's, as if wanting to see the light extinguish from his eyes.)

MOTHER

(Rushing on.)

Wilhelm, Jakob, what was that horrible noise?

(She sees what is happening and is horrified.)

Jakob! Stop it!

(Panicked and in a rage, she pushes Jakob off Wilhelm.)

Stop it, I say! The devil has possessed you!

(Jakob, in a blood-soaked frenzy, laughs and rushes back to Wilhelm. He kisses his now-dead brother, partially in spite, partially in attraction.)

Jakob!

(She grabs the knife from Wilhelm's throat, pulling it violently to dislodge it. She thrusts the knife into Jakob's back again and again. Blood. Jakob falls off Wilhelm. She slashes his throat. Jakob dies. Mother stands, covered in blood, knife in hand, panting. She does not cry. She prays. And then:)

What's done is done... Some creatures are born to die.

(In a haze, she rinses her knife off in the bucket. She dries it on her apron. She slowly makes her way back inside.)

END OF PLAY