

# BAG OF NAILS

An Oater in One Act

Written by  
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bag of nails: *n.* [mid-19<sup>th</sup> century] **chaos, disorder**  
– *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang*

## CHARACTERS

STAGEFRIGHT – late 20s/early 30s, physically ragged and seemingly a bit simple, but with a subtle, sly intelligence

THE COWBOY – late 30s, fancies himself a typical John-Wayne-style hero, but with an intense, childlike joy that's a bit wild and unnerving

## SETTING

The desert east of Yuma, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## NOTE

This play features quite a lot of archaic slang. These terms are defined for the actor and director in italic brackets after each example, e.g. “you’re liable to find yourself all wamble-cropped [*get a stomach ache*].”

*At rise: Small tufts of grass dot the barren landscape under a big blue sky and a blinding hot sun. Vultures cry.*

*(From the stage left wings stumbles STAGEFRIGHT, dressed in a plain white shirt and tan pants, tattered, ragged, and dirty. He gasps and looks around, exhausted and disoriented. He staggers, stops, pants. He staggers a few more feet, then drops to a seated position. He folds his knees and hangs his head, breathing weakly, ready to die.*

*From offstage, we hear a horse approaching across the sand.)*

COWBOY

*(offstage)*

Whoa, Melissa! Steady on!

*(We hear THE COWBOY dismount and approach. He enters from the stage right wings. He wears a classic John-Wayne-in-Stagecoach outfit, all clean and crisp and bright, like it's just out of the box. He walks towards Stagefright, who ignores him. When he reaches Stagefright, he stares at him, an odd, forced grin on his face.*

*Long beat.*

*Stagefright looks up and shields his eyes.)*

COWBOY

Morning, my friend! You look as though you've been rode hard and put up wet!

STAGEFRIGHT

*(parched)*  
Water?

COWBOY

What about it?

STAGEFRIGHT

Water!

*(He gestures wildly at himself, demonstrating that he needs to drink, but he doesn't seem capable of saying more than the single word.)*

COWBOY

You want some water?

STAGEFRIGHT

Water!

COWBOY

Well why didn't you say so?

*(He jogs offstage and returns with a canteen, and Stagefright shoves himself up and grabs at it like a caged animal. The cowboy lets him have it, and he collapses back onto the ground, opening the canteen and guzzling ferociously.)*

COWBOY

Careful, friend. Take a breath else you're liable to find yourself all wamble-cropped [*get a stomach ache*].

*(Stagefright shakes his head and keeps drinking. The cowboy watches. Stagefright realizes the canteen is emptying, and he shakes it and looks up at the cowboy, panicked.)*

COWBOY

It's all right, there's more.

*(Stagefright is a kid on Christmas, and keeps guzzling. He finishes the canteen, satisfied. He hands the canteen back.)*

STAGEFRIGHT

Which direction's Phoenix?

*(The cowboy points, smiling.)*

STAGEFRIGHT

How 'bout Mexico?

*(The cowboy points another direction. Stagefright nods, pushes himself up, and*

*starts trudging that way. The cowboy matches.*

*Stagefright stops and looks back.)*

STAGEFRIGHT

How far t'Mexico?

COWBOY

Why, that'd be about thirty miles or so. Bit of a slipe [*a long way*].

STAGEFRIGHT

Thanks.

COWBOY

You sure are welcome, my friend.

*(Stagefright commences trudging.)*

COWBOY

What's got you off to Mexico? Family? Business?

STAGEFRIGHT

*(over his shoulder)*

Supposed t'be in jail.

COWBOY

How's that now?

STAGEFRIGHT

*(turning to look back, tired)*

Supposed t'be in jail. Can't get me in Mexico.

COWBOY

Why's that now?

STAGEFRIGHT

Not their jurisdiction. Be safe in Mexico.

COWBOY

My friend, I believe you have entirely too much faith in the enforcement of international law.

STAGEFRIGHT

Can't get me in Mexico.

COWBOY

I assure you they can.

STAGEFRIGHT

Against th' law.

COWBOY

Of course. Well, allow me to offer an alternative plan.

STAGEFRIGHT

No. Mexico.

COWBOY

I can't present you a favorable alternate option?

*(Stagefright shakes his head fiercely and goes back to trudging, first in the wrong direction, then realizing his error and turning.)*

COWBOY

I'll tell my horse about it, then.

*(He jogs back to stage right and stage-whispers into the wings.)*

COWBOY

Psst! Melissa! Listen here! I could help this boy, Melissa. Really, I could. He doesn't know that I'm a deputy in town, and that the judge is married to my sister. He doesn't know that it would be infinitely better to be acquitted and exonerated than to remain a fugitive.

*(Stagefright stops.)*

STAGEFRIGHT

I didn't reckon with the lion's share'a that. Ya sayin' you're th' law?

COWBOY

I was talking to my horse.

STAGEFRIGHT

Naw, ya said deputy. You the law? Have t'tell me th' truth.

COWBOY

In a manner of speaking, I'm the law, but I offer acquittal and exoneration.

STAGEFRIGHT

What'sat mean?

COWBOY

It means good things for you.

STAGEFRIGHT

You sayin' I could get straight in the eye'a th' law?

COWBOY

It's probable verging on indisputable. My family and I have a way of making problems...inconsequential.

STAGEFRIGHT

Why'd ya help me? You a good man or some?

COWBOY

I fancy myself to be a noble gentleman –

*(Stagefright gnaws his bottom lip.)*

COWBOY

– and I do consider myself an exceptional judge of character. I think you can learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.

STAGEFRIGHT

That don't sound true.

COWBOY

I'm a smart man, a fair man, a *perceptive* man. I consider myself a man among men, for what that's worth, and I think it's worth quite a lot. And I can tell that you, my dear – what's your name?

STAGEFRIGHT

Call me Stagefright.

COWBOY

My dear Stagefright, I do believe you to be a man of deep character and exceptional forbearance. And I believe you can't be guilty of whatever crimes you're supposed to have committed.

STAGEFRIGHT

No sir. Innocent as a newborn cottontail.

*(The cowboy grins.)*

COWBOY

Then come with me to the little town of New Bethesda, and I do believe there's no reason you couldn't be legally exonerated –

*(Stagefright clears his throat, glaring.)*

COWBOY

– uh, right with the law, this time tomorrow.