

THE POST OFFICE

A one-act drama by
Melissa Leilani Larson

Adapted from the play of the same name by
Rabindranath Tagore; translated by
Devabrata Mukherjee

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www.youthplays.com
info@youthplays.com
424-703-5315

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

ASH, mid-teens.

MADDOX, 30s/40s.

DOC, 30s/40s.

THE STRANGER, 30s.

CHEESE SELLER

SOLDIER

VILLAGE SHERIFF

SAGE, mid-teens.

BADGER, 30s/40s.

HERALD

ROYAL PHYSICIAN

The cast should be diverse, and of a variety of ethnicities and body types.

Ash identifies as female or non-binary. Sage and the Stranger identify as female. All other roles can be played by any gender. Depending on casting, the cis pronouns on the page may be adjusted accordingly.

Age is also flexible unless otherwise noted. Ash and Sage should be the same age. Maddox, Doc and Badger are contemporaries and should be roughly the same age.

Doubling is possible and is left to the discretion of the director.

SETTING

The front facade and porch of a cottage that has seen better days. The cottage is situated on a rural road on the outskirts of a small village. A second space serves as the open countryside and as a stream of water. The stream should take several steps

to cross.

NOTES

The country depicted in the play is fictional; the design should not reflect any actual nation or government. The action takes place in the near future in the aftermath of a war.

When the play is more figurative and poetical, Ash is not limited by her illness and can move anywhere in the space; in more realistic moments, she is not physically able to stray very far from her window.

The play takes place over the course of a single day, beginning in the morning and ending just after moonrise.

A set of ellipsis points (...) indicates a brief pause, often at the beginning of a line. A double set (... ...) indicates a significantly longer – and potentially awkward – pause.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The Post Office was commissioned by Plan-B Theatre in partnership with Gandhi Alliance for Peace, Granite School District and United Nations Association of Utah. Its premiere coincided with the United Nations Civil Society Conference held in Salt Lake City, Utah in August 2019.

The Post Office received its world premiere at Plan-B Theatre Company (Jerry Rapier, artistic director, and Cheryl Cluff, managing director) in Salt Lake City, Utah, August 24–26, 2019. It was directed by Adam Wilkins; set and prop design by Madeline Ashton, assisted by Zach Scarborough; costume design by Maddiey Howell-Wilkins, assisted by Caitie Neilson; lighting design by Pilar Davis, assisted by Avero Larson; and sound design by Cheryl Cluff, assisted by Travis Fullerton.

The cast was made up of high school students from Salt Lake City's Granite School District and was as follows:

ASH.....Alexis Bitner
MADDOX.....Elaia Echeverria
DOC.....Kaplan Keener
STRANGER.....Sarah D'Anella
CHEESE SELLER.....Melainey Isaac
SOLDIER.....Hunter Oliphant
SHERIFF.....Andrew Pankey
SAGE.....Emily Tippetts
BADGER.....Carter Wagstaff
HERALD.....Jevahjire France
ROYAL PHYSICIAN.....Tyrah Sanchez

(Morning.)

(The front porch and facade of a rundown cottage that has seen better days. The cottage is situated on a country road on the outskirts of a small town.)

(Light reveals 13-year-old ASH asleep in a bed under the large window, its panes thrown open to let in the morning air.)

(After a moment, voices are heard off, and the light expands to fill the room. MADDOX and DOC enter.)

MADDOX: *(Coming in:)* There has to be something you can do.

DOC: Shh. You'll wake Ash. Let's step outside.

(Maddox and Doc move to the porch.)

MADDOX: I tell you, Doc — my life was so much easier before. Nothing mattered; I felt free. I didn't care about anything. But now I—

(A quick glance at the sleeping Ash.)

Everything is different when you have someone to take care of.

DOC: You're having doubts about taking her in.

MADDOX: No, it's not that. Once you have someone to care about, how do you go back to being alone?

DOC: None of this is your fault. You've done a fine job looking after her.

MADDOX: I haven't. I've failed. If it's as bad as you say — If anyone deserves a long life, it's Ash.

DOC: And what if the rest of us don't deserve to keep her here?

MADDOX: Don't start with your religious nonsense. It just makes me anxious.

DOC: A little faith never hurt anybody.

MADDOX: I'm still waiting to see who it helps.

DOC: She should stay inside and rest.

MADDOX: Ash lives to be outdoors.

DOC: We have to take every precaution. She's not improving—

MADDOX: Don't say it.

DOC: You asked me here for my opinion.

(Ash stirs in bed and wakes. She lies still, listening to her guardian through the open window.)

MADDOX: I didn't ask for your opinion; I asked you to do something. But you don't know what's wrong, or what to do about it other than lock her away.

DOC: I can't name the illness, it's true. And since the Takeover it's harder to get access to supplies and medicine and—I can see the symptoms, Maddox. We need to do the best we can with what we have.

MADDOX: Fresh air can't hurt.

DOC: If it was summer, perhaps. But the autumn chill and the damp air are both enemies to our cause.

MADDOX: Your methods, your treatment—it's very hard on her. Are you sure this is the best course?

DOC: Sometimes we need a little pain to know that the medicine is working. "In medicine as in good advice, the least palatable are the truest."

MADDOX: What did I say about quoting scripture?

DOC: That I don't do it enough?

I must be off to see my other patients. She needs rest, and quiet, and nourishing food. None of that junk you two seem to prefer.

MADDOX: All right, all right.

(Doc exits.)

(Maddox sits on the edge of the porch with a sigh.)

(Ash sits up in bed, leaning out of the frame of the open window.)

ASH: Hey! Maddox!

MADDOX: Hey yourself. You should be sleeping.

ASH: I was, but my dreams were boring.

(She gets out of bed, hurrying to sit beside Maddox, who comes a little unglued.)

MADDOX: What are you doing?

ASH: Nothing. I was just going to sit with you and—

MADDOX: You're not supposed to be outside. You know better.

ASH: I'm feeling fine, Maddox.

(Maddox shepherds Ash back to bed.)

Really, I'm OK.

MADDOX: You're tired.

ASH: ...Maybe a little. But being in the sun helps.

(Maddox moves to close the window.)

Don't! Please. If I can't go out, at least leave the window open.

MADDOX: Doc didn't say to shut it, so we'll pretend it's all right.

ASH: I was really hoping to go for a long walk up in the hills today and maybe see some squirrels there. Can I go?

MADDOX: Another day, perhaps.

ASH: It would be such fun to be a squirrel. So soft and lean, and quick to jump from branch to branch, with cheeks you can fill with nuts to save for later.

MADDOX: You're thin enough now someone would think you were a squirrel.

ASH: But if I were a squirrel, you wouldn't let me come live here.

MADDOX: Heavens no, orphan or not. Squirrels are neurotic and paranoid and too fast for their own good. And they probably have fleas. And bad table manners.

ASH: But they're so sleek and clever.

MADDOX: It's a ruse. To get you to feed them.

ASH: Do you see that building over there? With the Queen's flag flying?

MADDOX: Huh. I don't know and I don't care to know.

ASH: What if the Queen is there?

MADDOX: Our town is far too dusty for the likes of the Queen.

ASH: So you don't think she'll ever come?

MADDOX: No. Thank goodness.

ASH: Why shouldn't you want her to come?

MADDOX: There are people in this town who would turn us all inside out to prepare for one woman to walk through without looking a single one of us in the eye. And for what? For her to go back to her palace and forget about our problems? Meanwhile, we'll have spent every last penny to carpet the ground in rose petals for her to walk on.

ASH: But those demands come from her councilors, not from the Queen herself.

MADDOX: That's true.

ASH: She can do whatever she likes, can't she? The Queen?

MADDOX: It seems that way.

ASH: Imagine being able to go wherever you like, whenever you like, with no one in the world to stop you.

MADDOX: There are stories of the Queen disappearing from her council chambers for days at a time. That she disguises herself and walks unseen among the people.

ASH: What if I were to go on a long walk and meet the Queen?

MADDOX: Someday, perhaps.

ASH: Why not today?

MADDOX: Doc says you need to stay inside.

ASH: How can Doc know?

MADDOX: Doc is educated. He's always got his nose in a book thicker than your arm.

ASH: Then why do I always feel like he's—uncertain about what he's doing?

MADDOX: Yours is a special case. A mystery. Don't worry; Doc is up to the challenge.

ASH: If you say so.

MADDOX: You could be like him some day. Think about it. Learned people like Doc are just like you—they never step out of doors.

ASH: Ha ha.

MADDOX: They have eyes for nothing but their books. And someday you'll learn to read—and even better than Doc. You'll go to the university and read every book ever written, and people will meet you in the street and marvel at how brilliant you've become.

ASH: Oh, no.

MADDOX: What's wrong?

ASH: I don't want to learn to read. I don't want to be educated in that way. That's the last thing I want.

MADDOX: What are you talking about? How will you get out of this place without an education? Oh, Ash. My life would have been so different if I could have gone to school.

ASH: You work hard to keep a roof overhead and food on the table. That's nothing to be ashamed of.

MADDOX: I'm not ashamed. I'm – tired.

ASH: Do educated people get more rest?

MADDOX: Perhaps not. Just the rich ones. You're a smart kid, Ash. Education will open doors you've yet to imagine.

ASH: Of course I want to learn. I want to spend my whole life learning. But I don't want to sit in a room and read letters on a page. Get headaches from the smell of the ink. I want to go out and explore and see the world. Run my fingers through tall grass and feel glassy pebbles beneath my feet and figure the age of a tree by counting its rings and smell the salt of the ocean.

MADDOX: The ocean?

ASH: Yes! I want to see everything. I want to meet people and know what they know, and see how they live and love and evolve...

MADDOX: Haven't we already evolved? Are you looking to see people devolve?

ASH: You're teasing, and I choose not to listen. What I mean is that people change. Every day, we all change, even just a little bit from this day to the next. How does that happen?

MADDOX: We get older. Life wears on us.

ASH: That's some of it, yes. But people are all different from one another. Some will change so completely because of the

friends they make and the work they do. While others will simply grow up and be without a hint of change. Not a glimmer, not a shake.

MADDOX: I don't know that the world is as big as you think it is.

ASH: I'd like to find out for myself. You see that hill over there?

MADDOX: Past the squirrel hill?

ASH: Yes! The big, tall hill that is furthest from us. I often long to go there.

MADDOX: There's nothing to see.

ASH: I disagree. If I could get to the top of that hill, I could see everything. I bet the world would seem a completely different place than it does from here.

MADDOX: You don't talk sense, Ash. It's not practical to just climb a hill for the view.

ASH: Why else would you climb a hill?

MADDOX: We don't climb hills. We go to work. Or, in your case, you rest until Doc says you can go to work.

ASH: The sky is beckoning me to come. It wants me to climb that hill and go out into the world. This window frames that hill too perfectly for me to miss it. Do you think educated people look out windows like ours and see messages in the sky?

MADDOX: No. They don't have time for that kind of nonsense. They're not crazy like you.

(But it's said with affection.)

ASH: Yesterday I met someone quite as crazy as I am.

MADDOX: Really? Is such a thing possible?

ASH: I went out to the stream to see —

MADDOX: Ash!

ASH: Nothing happened.

MADDOX: You're about to tell me something happened.

ASH: Yes, well. What I mean is I didn't get sick.

MADDOX: You're already sick.

ASH: But I didn't die, did I?

MADDOX: You're lucky I don't save myself some time and kill you.

(Ash smirks at this, but Maddox regrets the joke almost instantly.)

ASH: Anyway. Down at the stream, there was this woman, a stranger, who looked like she had walked miles just that day. Her hands were dirty, but her face was full of light. She was washing her hands in the stream.

(As Ash tells the story, the lights shift, and the STRANGER kneels to catch water from the stream in her cupped hands. She carries a small bundle on her back. Her clothes are elegantly simple and well made but don't necessarily draw attention.)

STRANGER: Hello.

ASH: Hello. Where are you going?

STRANGER: I don't know. Anywhere.

ASH: Don't you like it here?

STRANGER: I used to.

ASH: Then why are you going?

STRANGER: To look for work.

(Ash pauses in the scene, turning back to Maddox.)

ASH: Have you had to find work before, Maddox?

MADDOX: Yes. Many times. It's very hard. Since the war, too many folks are looking for jobs.

(Ash turns back to the Stranger.)

ASH: Wouldn't that be great? To look for jobs? To find interesting things to do?

STRANGER: That's not quite how it—

ASH: I'd love to be out looking for things to do.

STRANGER: Then why don't you go out looking?

ASH: Doc says I'm not well enough to go.

(The Stranger takes off her shoes and carefully steps into the stream.)

Isn't it cold?

STRANGER: I've grown used to it.

ASH: Good luck! I hope you find some work.

STRANGER: I hope you do too.

(She crosses the stream and exits.)

(Ash watches her go. She steps to the edge of the water and considers. A shiver passes through her.)

MADDOX: Ash? Ash!

(Maddox rushes to catch Ash as she faints.)

I told you to be careful.

ASH: I didn't mean to—

MADDOX: I know, I know. But you've gone and worn yourself out, and it's just barely morning.

(Maddox helps Ash back to bed – perhaps carries her. Once Ash is settled, Maddox starts to step away and Ash reaches for her. Maddox sits, and Ash leans close against her.)

ASH: When will I be well enough to go somewhere? Anywhere?

MADDOX: Not long.

ASH: Are you just saying that?

MADDOX: I don't know. Maybe.

ASH: Because I'm going to go to the top of that hill just as soon as I'm well. I'm going to cross that stream. So many streams. I'll go looking for work, and I will find it.

MADDOX: Then you'd better get well, hadn't you.

ASH: I'm working on it.

MADDOX: Speaking of work, I'm going to be late. You've distracted me long enough. Stay inside and rest, all right? Don't call out to strangers.

ASH: But I love talking to strangers.

MADDOX: What if they kidnapped you? Think what that would do to my nerves.

ASH: Oh, that would be so exciting!

MADDOX: My nerves fraying?

ASH: Being kidnapped.

MADDOX: You really are crazy.

ASH: It would be like—like a free ticket to a mysterious destination. But no one wants to take me anywhere.

MADDOX: I'm not going to a mysterious destination. And neither are you. Are you?

(Ash sighs.)

ASH: No. I'm not.

MADDOX: Good. Have a good day – a quiet day – and I'll see you later.

(Maddox exits.)

(Ash leans on the window frame, bored. But something catches her attention: the Stranger stands ankle-deep in the stream.)

(Ash sits up a little straighter. Waves at the woman in the stream, who holds up a hand in response.)

STRANGER: You're right. The view is different on the other side. You should see it.

CHEESE SELLER: *(Off:)* Cheese! Fine cheese for sale!

(The lights shift, and the Stranger disappears.)

(A CHEESE SELLER enters carrying a covered basket. Calls out:)

Cheese for sale! This is the best cheese you will ever eat. I know it.

ASH: Oh! I love me some cheese. Please, can I have a look? Or better yet, a taste.

CHEESE SELLER: And they said I wouldn't find any customers around these parts! Ha.

(The Cheese Seller comes up to Ash's window.)

How much would you like to buy?

ASH: Buy? I don't have any money.

CHEESE SELLER: What? Why did you call me over if you can't buy anything? What a waste of time.

ASH: I would go with you if I could.

CHEESE SELLER: Go? With me?

ASH: Mhmm. I felt homesick somehow, hearing you calling from down the road.

CHEESE SELLER: Isn't this your home?

ASH: Yes.

CHEESE SELLER: So how can you be homesick?

ASH: I want to see the world. I feel like I should be out in it, but I haven't had the chance. Doc says I can't go out. So I just sit here all day long.

CHEESE SELLER: Well, that's awful. What happened to make you so sick?

ASH: I can't say. I'm not educated enough to know what's wrong with me.

CHEESE SELLER: I'm sorry to hear that. And I'm sorry I snapped earlier. I just really need to sell something today.

ASH: You can at least sit for a minute and rest yourself. I have plenty of rest to share.

CHEESE SELLER: You're pretty clever for someone who isn't educated.

ASH: Where are you from?

CHEESE SELLER: My village lies on the river, at the foot of those hills. Have you seen it?

ASH: No. I've never been anywhere. But I feel like I can see it in my mind. Your village – it sits under some very big, old trees just by the side of the red road. Isn't that right?

CHEESE SELLER: It is.

ASH: There are cattle grazing on the slope of the hill. They wear bells that tell you where they are, and the fur around their eyes is long and curly.

CHEESE SELLER: Yes! Some of them are mine. How did you know?

ASH: I can see women at the river, filling their pitchers with water.

CHEESE SELLER: That's exactly what they do, every day. Surely you have been to my village. It sounds like you know it well.

ASH: No, I've never been there. But I would love to go. The very first day the doctor says I can go out, you can take me to your village.

CHEESE SELLER: I'd be happy to.

ASH: You can teach me how to make cheese and we'll walk the long road together, selling it from door to door.

CHEESE SELLER: Heavens, why would you? You're too smart for that sort of thing. You'll read big books and spend your days philosophizing.

ASH: No, I don't want that. I want to be like you, walking along the red road in the shadow of the trees, carrying cheese from house to house, singing along the way and sneaking a bite now and then.

CHEESE SELLER: Well, you could just have a bite now, you know.

ASH: I told you I don't have any money.

CHEESE SELLER: Let's not speak of money; it's vulgar. You'd make me so happy if you tried a bite. Please.

(The Cheese Seller takes some cheese, wraps it in a napkin, and gives it to Ash.)

ASH: Thank you. That's very kind.

CHEESE SELLER: You're welcome. It's a fair exchange; you've taught me to be happy on the road. I hope you feel better soon.

(The Cheese Seller exits.)

ASH: (*Calling:*) Cheese for sale! Beautiful, salty, creamy cheese for sale! Cheese from the dairy village on the bank of the river, where the cows graze on the slopes and the families work milk into curds in the cool of the evening. It really is the best cheese! You should try it.

(She tastes a bit and her eyes widen with pleasure.)

Mmm.

(A SOLDIER on patrol enters and approaches Ash's window. The Soldier carries a large handbell, holding the clapper carefully so it doesn't ring.)

SOLDIER: Hey. Are you the one calling out about cheese? Why are you making so much noise?

(Ash shrugs.)

Aren't you afraid of me?

ASH: No. Should I be?

SOLDIER: I could march you off to prison.

(Ash perks up at the possibility.)

ASH: Would you?

SOLDIER: What?

ASH: Would you march me somewhere? Please?

SOLDIER: You're out of your head.

ASH: No. I can't even get out of the house. But you could take me to prison if it was beyond those hills. Can you take me there?

SOLDIER: I can march you straight to the Queen.

ASH: Oh! Please do.

SOLDIER: You're not supposed to be excited about getting marched to the Queen. Don't you know anything?

ASH: No. I am severely lacking in education and experience. But I make up for it with an abundance of imagination and curiosity.

SOLDIER: Indeed. So you imagine it would be enjoyable to be marched to prison.

ASH: It would be enjoyable to be marched just about anywhere. Especially to meet the Queen. But Doc won't let me go.

SOLDIER: If the Queen calls for you, you don't refuse. Doctor or no.

ASH: Then we should go.

SOLDIER: Well. She hasn't asked for you, unfortunately. And your doctor's probably right; you don't look so well.

ASH: Aren't you one to talk.

SOLDIER: I didn't mean—

ASH: Are you going to ring your bell? Please ring it.

SOLDIER: No.

ASH: Why not?

SOLDIER: I'm only supposed to ring it at a certain time, on the hour. The time hasn't come.

ASH: Strange. Some people say that time hasn't come, while others say time has gone by. But surely the time comes at the moment you decide to ring your bell.

SOLDIER: No. That's not possible. I don't ring the bell until it *is* time.

(The Soldier checks a pocket watch but shakes her head. Not yet.)

ASH: But I'd so love to hear you ring it. Such a fine bell. It's brass, so it will ring long and loud and low, like a big man singing at the back of a church choir. I hear it at lunchtime,

when Maddox tries to steal a nap before going back to the factory and is startled awake by your bell – What does it mean? Your bell's song?

SOLDIER: That time waits for no one but goes on forever.

(Ash sees the Stranger standing in the stream, waiting.)

ASH: Where does the time go? To another land?

SOLDIER: A distant land that no one knows.

ASH: Then no one has ever been there to say what it's like. I wish I could go there and see what no one else has seen.

SOLDIER: We all go there some day.

ASH: Do we? Even me?

SOLDIER & STRANGER: Even you.

STRANGER: Everyone finds a way there, even if it takes some longer than others.

ASH: But Doc says I need to stay inside.

STRANGER: The doctor may be the one to lead you there by the hand.

(Ash and the Stranger stare at each other.)

SOLDIER: Hey, are you all right?

ASH: Sorry?

(She looks at the Soldier. When Ash glances back to the stream, the Stranger has disappeared.)

SOLDIER: You were staring off, like you were in a trance.

ASH: Oh. I'm sorry. I was just thinking – You're in the Queen's service. What is that building over there? They've been building it for weeks, and now it flies the Queen's flag, with so many people coming and going.

SOLDIER: That's our new post office.

ASH: Post office? Really?

SOLDIER: The mail was disrupted by the war, and the Queen has been working to reestablish it.

ASH: The Queen's post office. Does she send letters here?

SOLDIER: She does. And I'm sure several go back to her palace in the city.

ASH: Can ordinary people get letters?

SOLDIER: Of course. All the time. Ordinary people are the Queen's favorite kind. One fine day there may be a letter there for you, you know.

ASH: A letter for me? But I'm nobody.

SOLDIER: The Queen often writes to people who don't expect it. She likes to know how her people are, and what they're up to. Especially when times are hard, like they are now.

ASH: A letter from the Queen. Can you imagine? When do you think my letter will come?

SOLDIER: I can't say. But I know it will come. With a post office so close, how can you not receive a letter?

ASH: But how will I know that I have a letter and that I need to go and get it? And what do I do if the doctor won't let me get it? Oh no. That would be a tragedy.

SOLDIER: Don't be ridiculous. You don't pick up your mail yourself. If you have a letter, an official courier will bring it to you.

ASH: An official of the post office?

SOLDIER: Yes. In a uniform with a gilt badge. Haven't you seen a royal courier before? I'm sure they've at least passed by here; they're always running around everywhere.

ASH: Where do they go?

SOLDIER: All over the place. From door to door, delivering letters and packages. All across the country.

ASH: That's it.

SOLDIER: What's it?

ASH: That's the job for me. I could deliver mail in the Queen's service. I could walk the red road and bring people letters from far off. I could see the whole continent that way.

(The Soldier chuckles.)

SOLDIER: Goodness. It's not an easy job. Rain or shine, rich or poor, going from house to house to house carrying a heavy bag full of letters.

ASH: I'd cherish every moment. Hard work is what I like best. Why are you smiling?

SOLDIER: I can't say.

ASH: It's important work to deliver the mail. Of course, your work is important too. Letting people know what time it is, and whether or not they're late. I hear your bell at noon. Sometimes when I wake in the middle of the night to see the lamp blown out, I hear you striking midnight, and it's a comfort. I know where I am and when I am.

SOLDIER: Aren't you a strange child.

ASH: I get that a lot.

(Somewhere nearby someone whistles a tune.)

(The Soldier freezes.)

SOLDIER: Oh no. It's the village sheriff. I have to go; if he catches me chatting with you, I won't hear the end of it.

ASH: The village sheriff? Did the Queen appoint him?

SOLDIER: No, not at all. It's a title he gave himself. He's a busybody who likes to get in other people's business and pretend he's in charge. Rather unpleasant fellow all around, always making trouble for everybody. He doesn't care what happens to anyone else as long as he gets what he wants.

ASH: Someone should complain.

SOLDIER: No one dares bother the Queen with that kind of nonsense.

ASH: But you should. You should write her a letter. If he's abusing his power, someone should tell her –

(The whistling is closer.)

SOLDIER: I have to go. Bye now.

(The Soldier hurries off.)

ASH: Bye!

Huh. Imagine getting a letter from the Queen. Just one would be enough. But there is some lucky person out there who gets more than one letter from the Queen. Maybe even a new letter every day! For the first time I wish I could read. When I get my letter, I'll have to find someone to read it to me. Perhaps Doc could read it. Or the courier who delivers it. I bet they can read.

(The SHERIFF enters, whistling. There is something both lazy and sinister about him.)

SHERIFF: You there. What are you muttering about?

ASH: Nothing important. Just – the mail.

SHERIFF: Nothing important! Stupid kid. The mail is very important.

ASH: It's not as important as you are.

SHERIFF: Well, that's true.

ASH: I'm sure everyone listens to you since you're in charge.

SHERIFF: Perhaps you're not as stupid as I thought.

ASH: Do the couriers and postal workers answer to you?

SHERIFF: They had better. If I tell them to stop, they ought to freeze right where they are, in mid-step even.

ASH: Would you tell the couriers, please, that my name is Ash and that I live here?

SHERIFF: Why would I do that?

ASH: In case there's a letter for me.

(He stares at her for a minute. Snorts. Then laughs, loud and hard.)

SHERIFF: You? A letter for you? Who in the world would write to you?

ASH: The Queen.

SHERIFF: Ha! What's in that head of yours? The Queen! She doesn't have time for the likes of you. It's not like you're friends who haven't seen each other in so long that she decided to write you and catch up. Why would the Queen take the time to write a letter to a girl named Ash who probably can't even read?!

ASH: Why do you have to be so mean about it?

SHERIFF: Why do you have to be so ridiculous? A letter from the Queen. You could write to her, if you could write. But she's a very busy person and under no obligation to write back.

ASH: Never mind.

(She is upset and tries to hide it.)

SHERIFF: Come now, don't cry. You'll get your letter. I'll see to it myself.

ASH: Don't bother yourself with it.

SHERIFF: And why shouldn't I? I'll tell the Queen about you, and she'll drop whatever business she has to write back. I'm sure of it.

(He exits, whistling as he goes.)

SAGE: What a horrible man. I hope he trips over himself.

(Ash looks up to see SAGE, a girl her age, standing at the edge of the path, carrying a basket of flowers.)

ASH: I don't hope for that. If he does, he'll come back and blame me. And then they really will take me to prison.

SAGE: If he does, I'll be a witness and call him a liar.

ASH: You'd speak out against the sheriff?

SAGE: I would if I knew he was lying. Anyway, I should go. My sister is expecting me.

ASH: You have a sister?

SAGE: Yes. She raised me when our parents died in the war. Now we work together.

ASH: Selling flowers.

(Sage nods.)

I've always wished for a sister.

SAGE: Is that why you look so sad? Because you're alone?

ASH: I'm not alone. Not really. Maddox adopted me, and we keep each other company. I'm sad because Doc says I have to stay inside.

SAGE: Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. Do you need to rest? Should I close this window a bit for you, or —?

ASH: No, thank you. It's fine. It's — all the others are shut, and I like to look out. I know what Doc says, but I could swear I feel better outside than in.

SAGE: Well, if the doctor doesn't mind.

ASH: He isn't here.

SAGE: And what he doesn't know...

(They share a conspiratorial smile.)

ASH: Besides, I don't even know if he's a real doctor. He just reads a lot and sounds like he knows what he's on about.

SAGE: I'm sorry you're cooped up in there. Though I don't think I would mind lying around all day. Even if was just once.

ASH: What do you usually do all day?

SAGE: I run errands for my sister. Back and forth, delivering flowers. I need to take these back to her before they wilt.

ASH: How do they smell?

SAGE: I don't know. I smell them all at once, and it gets overwhelming. But if you smell just one...

(She takes a single flower from her basket and gives it to Ash.)

ASH: Oh, that's nice.

(Ash hands the flower back, but Sage shakes her head.)

SAGE: You keep it.

ASH: But I don't have any money.

SAGE: It's all right. My sister won't mind. She might not even notice.

ASH: Someday, when I'm grown up and delivering mail for the Queen, I'll find you and pay you back.

SAGE: Will you?

ASH: Yes. I'll cross the stream and—

(Ash sees the Stranger standing in the stream, her shoes in her hand.)

SAGE: And?

ASH: Huh?

SAGE: You'll cross the stream and do what?

ASH: ...I'm going to travel the world.

SAGE: My sister says anyone who can get out of this place is lucky.

ASH: I bet we could do it. We could travel together. Imagine the flowers you could bring back to your sister from the other side of the world.

SAGE: I have always wondered what life is like in other places.

ASH: There's only one way to find out.

SAGE: What was your name?

ASH: Ash.

SAGE: Like the tree.

ASH: Yes. And yours?

SAGE: Sage.

ASH: Like the herb.

SAGE: It's nice to meet you.

ASH: And you.

SAGE: Look, I really do need to get these delivered... But why don't I stop by on my way back tonight?

ASH: Would you do that? We could make our plan to travel the world.

SAGE: Sure.

ASH: We could be friends.

SAGE: Aren't we already?

ASH: So you'll come back?

SAGE: I said I would, didn't I?

ASH: You won't forget about me?

SAGE: Ash, the girl who wants to cross the stream and deliver letters for the Queen. How could I forget that?

ASH: You could.

SAGE: I won't forget. You'll see.

(Sage exits.)

(The Stranger still stands in the stream, looking at Ash.)

(Somewhere, the Soldier's bell rings, long and slow. It's noon.)

(Ash rests her head on her folded arms on the windowsill and closes her eyes.)

(The Stranger crosses the stream and vanishes.)

(As Ash sleeps, the afternoon fades into the early evening. Another bell tolls.)

(Maddox enters with a friend, BADGER.)

BADGER: You, Maddox, an adoptive parent. My mind is blown. I didn't think you had it in you.

MADDOX: You've been away a long time.

BADGER: I couldn't get across the border. There's fighting everywhere. It was safer just to stay down and cover my head.

MADDOX: I believe it.

BADGER: What made you decide to adopt a thirteen-year-old child?

MADDOX: She has no one in the world. I couldn't leave her alone.

BADGER: She'll take all your money, every penny. One day she'll disappear and leave you destitute.

MADDOX: No. Ash isn't like that. She might wander off, but she wouldn't think to take anything with her. She would just go walking until it made sense to sit down. And then she would walk some more. She'd never think to take anything from anyone. You'd have to persuade her to pick your pocket.

BADGER: Even if she doesn't steal it, she'll get everything you earn.

MADDOX: That's just it, Badger. I don't mind. I want her to have it all. Going to work used to be just that—work. I used to dread it, standing for hours on the factory floor... But now I have someone to work for, and earning that paycheck every week is a joy—

(She stops in front of the house. Sees Ash sleeping in the window.)

Badger. What if this week is the last?

(Badger comes up beside Maddox.)

BADGER: My friend, thinking like that will only bring you heartache.

MADDOX: I can't seem to help it.

BADGER: What you both need is a good laugh. I have an idea.

(Badger gestures for Maddox to go first.)

(Maddox touches Ash gently on the arm, waking her.)

(Badger hangs back where Ash can't see him. While Ash and Maddox talk, he takes a coat and hat from his pack and puts them on.)

MADDOX: Ash?

ASH: Maddox? Oh no. I forgot your supper.

MADDOX: Don't worry about it.

ASH: There was this lovely girl and we talked, but I got tired.

MADDOX: What did I say about calling out to strangers?

ASH: She's not a stranger. Sage is my friend. But I guess I fell asleep. Who's that?

MADDOX: Oh. Um. That's my friend, Badg—

BADGER: (*Perhaps in a British dialect:*) I am Sir Ealing Broadway, world famous explorer, amateur pilot and expert pedestrian.

ASH: Are you really?

MADDOX: Oh, good grief.

BADGER: (*To Maddox:*) Hush. (*To Ash:*) I am indeed. I have visited all sorts of interesting places across the globe. I've been lost in a number of terrifying situations, at least one of which involved a spider of unusual size.

ASH: I would love to be an explorer.

BADGER: You can be, if you put your mind to it.

ASH: Tell me about your adventures! All of them.

MADDOX: (*Drily:*) Yes, why don't you tell us about your— adventures.

BADGER: Well, to begin, I've just returned from the Isle of the Parrots.

ASH: What was it like?

MADDOX: Loud.

BADGER: Magical.

ASH: Perhaps you could take me there one day.

MADDOX: Ash—

BADGER: Of course I will. I'll teach you all of the great secrets of exploration, so that not even the tallest mountain or widest desert will bar your way.

MADDOX: Nonsense.

BADGER: (*Aside, to Maddox:*) I know what this girl needs. Let me help her.

(*Badger turns back to Ash.*)

You can conquer any ocean, but it takes faith in the unseen and belief in one's self. Maddox and Doc—they believe in science and sitting quietly. But sometimes a good adventure can cure anything.

(*Maddox rubs at her eyes.*)

ASH: We won't tell Doc, will we, Maddox? And someday I will go with you and conquer the oceans.

(*Something in Maddox snaps.*)

MADDOX: Stop it! Just—stop it. Talking about leaving—you know I don't—

(*Maddox exits.*)

ASH: Maddox—

BADGER: Let her go. She'll be back soon enough.

ASH: What about the parrots?

BADGER: The Isle of Parrots is a place of wonders; it's haunted by birds. When I was there, I was the only person on the entire island. Every other occupant sang and flew.

ASH: Oh, that's wonderful. It's by the sea?

BADGER: It is.

ASH: And there are green, rolling hills?

BADGER: And the birds live among them. When the sun sets, there is a red glow on the hillside, almost like the tall grass has caught fire. And the birds with their green wings fly back to their nests.

ASH: Are there waterfalls?

BADGER: You can't have hills without waterfalls – waterfalls that sing as they course over the rocks, rushing down the hills toward the sea. If I could, I would build a cabin among their nests and spend my days counting the waves as they crash on the shore.

ASH: Did the birds mind you being there?

BADGER: They didn't even give me a thought. I was just a sad, trifling creature without wings.

ASH: You're not sad. You're not trifling. You can travel and see the world and walk beyond this window. Beyond this village. How is that sad?

(Badger considers this.)

BADGER: You're right. It's not sad. Not at all.

(Maddox, her face still stony, re-enters.)

ASH: I'm sorry, Maddox. I didn't mean to upset you.

MADDOX: It's all right. I know you just want to go out. But I worry.

ASH: I know.

(She sits up, remembering. Looking around.)

MADDOX: What? Is something the matter?

ASH: No, nothing's the matter. I just wonder if it was delivered while I was asleep.

MADDOX: Delivered?

ASH: A letter.

MADDOX: Are you expecting a letter?

ASH: From the Queen.

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