

Plays for Young Audiences

A PARTNERSHIP OF SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY-MINNEAPOLIS

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The Midwife's Apprentice

Story by
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Cast of Characters

- Brat (also called Beetle, Alyce)
- Cat (also called Purr, played by a puppet)
- Will Russet
- Jack Snaggletooth
- Grommet Smith (also called Mistress Figtree)
- Jane, the midwife
- Thomas the Stutterer
- Gilbert Greyhead
- Robert Weaver
- Baker
- Miller
- Miller's Wife
- Merchant
- Boy (also called Runt, Edward)
- Bailiff
- Joan
- Jennet
- Magister Reese
- Aldon Figtree
- Rich Merchant
- Rich Merchant's Wife

Ensemble includes: fair vendors, crowd

Scene One

Early morning exterior. Early spring--early enough for the nights to be cold. The area near the Midwife's hut. Nestled in a nearby dung heap is a young girl. This is BRAT, later called BEETLE, then ALYCE. Exhausted, dirty and cold, she could be dead, but she's only dead to the world, sleeping. On a fence? (whatever) is a large, yellow tabby CAT*, cleaning himself. Offstage, we hear the sound of two rowdy boys--WILL RUSSET and JACK SNAGGLETOOTH--and one rowdy girl--GROMMET SMITH. The CAT takes off when the offstage sounds start. { *I think the CAT should be in this scene at the beginning to establish his presence in this world and the theatrical convention we use to portray him }]

JACK

[offstage]

We're late for the planting!

GROMMET

[offstage]

Let's make a path through the midwife's yard!

JACK

[offstage]

What say we get some horse apples and fling them down the midwife's chimney!

GROMMET

[offstage]

You can't throw that high!

JACK

[enters]

I can so! I'll show you!

GROMMET

[enters]

Alright! She ain't home yet--she's been up all night delivering Baker another brat! There's the dung pile--get a big one and fling it!

[JACK stops when he sees the girl in the dung pile, but GROMMET has already spotted her and motions for JACK to be quiet. They both sneak up on her, picking up some dung and debris to throw on their way over. Then suddenly, they attack, throwing their dung at her and yelling]

[WILL RUSSET enters]

GROMMET

Will Russet! You're missing the fun!

WILL

What?

[Sees BEETLE lying still in the dung]

WILL

Is she--is she--?

JACK

Dead?

[touching her, slightly]

The dung is warmer than she is.

GROMMET

Dung is always warm--that's why the rats like it.

[Extra loud, still trying to scare her]

JACK

Maybe the rats will eat her!!

[JANE, the midwife, enters, just back from trying to deliver a baby and is very tired. She's carrying a bundle of dirty linen and a basket filled with bottles of ointments, etc. WILL and JACK and GROMMET see her and freeze with fear of her]

JANE

Hey, boys! Have off! And what are you doing, Grommet Smith?

[They scramble to leave]

You're mucking up the yard here! If you make me soil my new Spanish leather shoes on some fresh cow patty, I'll have your hides!!

[The boys and GROMMET have gone. JANE notices BEETLE]

JANE

Are you alive or dead? Answer me.

[BEETLE tries to stand, is weak from hunger and cold]

JANE

Good. No need to call the Bailiff to come with the cart to haul you away to the boneyard. Now be off.

[JANE starts to leave for her front door]

BEETLE

Please. May I have some'ut to eat first?

JANE

You can talk?

BEETLE

Hungry, I am.

JANE

No beggars in this village.

BEETLE

Please, mistress, just a little to eat? And I'll go.

JANE

[stops to make it clear to her]

Girl--we believe in work here. I just spent a day and night trying to get the baker's wife to deliver another brat. After twelve of them you'd think she could do a better job at it, but I have to go back there and walk her around until that baby comes! I'm too tired to feed myself, let alone some skinny orphan.

BEETLE

But I can work. I'm stronger than I seem.

[BEETLE stands up, trying to look strong, at least]

JANE

That's not saying much.

[BEETLE turns around slowly for JANE, trying not to show how weak from hunger she is]

You playing dead for those hellions?

[BEETLE nods]

JANE

Well, you got some smarts, I'll give you that.

[Looking BEETLE over]

You done some sweeping and washing linen in your life? Lots of linen like this needs be washed in that stream over there--sometimes every day. And carrying bundles. And firewood. I'm always down on firewood. You strong enough for that?

BEETLE

Yes, mistress.

JANE

What's your name?

BEETLE

Brat.

JANE

That all?

BEETLE

All I know, mistress--"Brat."

JANE

That a confusing name for someone like me to remember. I'm a midwife--all I handle is brats.

[Looks the girl over good]

All right. I'll feed you. You work for me. You work good, hear?

[BEETLE nods "yes"]

You're too big to be a brat. I'll call you, after the bugs that live in dung--"Beetle." You're "Beetle" now.

[JANE drops all that she is carrying and heads for her hut. BEETLE picks it up, with effort, and staggers after her]

You'll sleep on my floor come night. Not as warm as dung, but cleaner. Particularly after you sweep it up. I am so tired. You don't know what tired is, Beetle.

BEETLE

Yes, mistress.

JANE
Or hungry.

BEETLE
Yes.

JANE
What are you doing? I've been up all night working. I'm to bed until they fetch me again. You're to work. Here!

[JANE hands her a bundle of dirty linen she's been carrying in her bag]

JANE
Wash this in the pond, and do it well or you'll be out on your ear, I swear it!! Here's some food.

[JANE gives BEETLE some food and she eats it hungrily while JANE exits into the house]

[The CAT jumps up on the fence (?) or somewhere. BEETLE can't help but go over to him]

BEETLE
Hello, cat. You look hungry.

[Puts down the linen, reaches into her pocket, takes out some food]

Look! I got paid! For work I ain't done yet! And with some'ut to spare. A piece of apple--no. A whole onion? No. My favorite, anyway. Here. Cheese end--chew hard.

[BEETLE gingerly places the bit of cheese near the CAT. He's not sure he trusts her, but comes forward when she backs off and takes the cheese and jumps out of sight to eat it. BEETLE is pleased and returns to her linen when she hears the CAT hissing and screeching--being captured by the boys and GROMMET. Just then, GROMMET, WILL and JACK, enter, holding the sack containing the CAT and laughing, excited. BEETLE drops the linen and hides]

GROMMET
The cat's in the bag!! The cat's in the bag!!

JACK
With the biggest eel I ever seen!

WILL
We'll be whipped for sure 'less we get to the fields!

GROMMET
We have to see whether a cat can best an eel!

JACK

I'm betting on the eel! Throw them into the pond, Will!

GROMMET

Come on, Will. You can throw better than the both of us, 'specially Jack!

[WILL flings the sack around his head and lets it go toward the pond. We hear a splash]

JACK

Good toss, I guess.

GROMMET

Let the battle begin!

[The boys and GROMMET exit to the pond. The cat's screeching continues. BEETLE comes out of hiding and looks towards offstage, helplessly watching what they're doing with the CAT]

BEETLE

Poor cat. Poor cat.

[She picks up the linen. The screeching stops and the boys and GROMMET re-enter, carrying the soggy bag. BEETLE hides again, taking the linen with her. They hold the bag aloft and one of them shakes it for signs of life.]

WILL

The eel's still alive, but--

GROMMET

[giving JACK two apples]

You were right. The eel took that cat right down.

JACK

We'd better get to the planting! Will's right--they'll whip us 'til we're raw! Will?

[WILL is just looking inside the bag, distressed]

GROMMET

It's just a cat, Will.

JACK

Or was.

[They drop the bag and exit, running. BEETLE comes out of hiding again, drops the linen and runs to the bag and nudges it--some movement, but what if it's just the eel? She backs off, afraid. She crosses to pick up the linen and exits. After a beat, she re-enters, puts the linen down again, and walks directly to the bag, looks at it, shivers with revulsion]

BEETLE

I hate eels. I do.

[She opens the bag with a stick and jumps back as she sees the eel slither out]

Go on your slimey way--you're not even a proper snake!

[She shivers with revulsion again, then opens the bag and, carefully, pulls out the CAT. It's a thin mop of a thing and lifeless]

Are you alive at all?

By cock and pie, Cat. I would have you live.

[She takes her cape off and wraps him in it, then crosses to the dung pile and places him in it]

If I knew a prayer, I'd say it.

[Thinks--comes up with this]

Blast you, cat, breathe and live, you flea-bitten sod, or I'll kill you myself!

[She puts down a bit of cheese by the body and stands over it. BAKER enters, breathless]

THOMAS THE STUTTERER

J-Jane!! J-Jane!!

[Sees BEETLE]

Sh-She's not gone to another b-birth?

[JANE enters from the house, looking rumped and exhausted.]

JANE

What is it Thomas?

THOMAS

B-baker's b-baby...

JANE

Is it finally coming?

THOMAS

W-We have to hurry.

JANE

That's the only way I go anywhere, it seems.

[To BEETLE]

Have that linen washed and clean before I come back on you're be out of here and on the path again!

THOMAS

Cccome quick!

[They hurry off. BEETLE exits with the linen to be washed]

Scene Two

[Late afternoon. BEETLE has hung the clean, wet linen on things to dry. GILBERT GREY-HEAD, an older man who is a joiner and carpenter, enters, carrying a bag of small pieces of wood.]

GILBERT
Looking for Jane.
Who you?

[BEETLE doesn't answer]

You a mute, then?

BEETLE
Nossir. The mistress is at the baker's.

GILBERT
I bring these wood pieces for her charcoal making. She give me wormwood salve for my finger joints. You get it for me.

BEETLE
I don't know where--

GILBERT
I need it, young miss. I can barely move my fingers and I've got days behind in my work. Wormwood--it's in a brown bottle inside.

BEETLE
Haven't been inside. Yet.

GILBERT
You belong here?

BEETLE
No. I just work.

GILBERT
I'll wait for Jane, then.

[He rubs his hands to relieve the pain. He notices the CAT]

Saving dead cats? Make some witches' brew?

BEETLE
He's not dead.

GILBERT
Looks dead.

BEETLE
He's alive!

GILBERT
Are you right in the head?

[JANE enters with many loaves of bread--she is suddenly gushing with happiness]

JANE
Gilbert!

GILBERT
Need my salve.

JANE
Have a loaf of bread! Baker's got another brat!

GILBERT
Getting paid in bread? Not something that will last or you can spend?

JANE
It's a gift from the baker.

[To BEETLE]
You did the wash. Good. There's more in my basket.

[She hands him a loaf and her basket to BEETLE and exits into her house to get the salve.
GILBERT notices that BEETLE is eyeing the bread. He offers some to her]

GILBERT
Hands too stiff right now. You tear some off for yourself.

BEETLE
[eating it quickly--talking with her mouth full. Then she puts a piece by the CAT]

Thank you, mister.

GILBERT

She feed you? Jane can be as tight with a helping of meat as she can with a penny. I don't mean to criticize. Everyone's got their story. She gave birth to six children when her husband was alive. None of them lived. So you could say she knows more about birthing than about taking care of. Now she's free to midwife the whole village. See? Nothing is wasted. 'Cept maybe a cat or two.

BEETLE
He's alive.

GILBERT
If you say so, girl.

[JANE re-enters with the salve, gives it to him--he starts to put it on his hands, immediately--seeking relief from the pain]

JANE
[to BEETLE]

Put the wood by the charcoal burner.

[To GILBERT]

Godspeed, Gilbert Grey-Head.

[JANE gathers the washed linen, humming as she exits into the house]

GILBERT
She is so happy for some reason. That strange unusual.

[Looks at BEETLE who is gingerly stroking the CAT and trying to feed it the bread]

Here.

[He hands BEETLE a whittling knife]

GILBERT
I can't whittle any more because of the pain. It's sharp, but since you know so much about wood, why don't you save--say--these two longish pieces of soft pine here and do some carving for your own pleasure. They won't make good charcoal, and you need something to do besides moping over a dead cat.

BEETLE
Thank you, mister.

[GILBERT exits. BEETLE takes the two long pieces of pine and the knife and hides them in the dung. JANE re-enters from the house, holding the linen and not happy]

JANE

These are the things I need from you: do what I tell you, take what I give you, and, if you fail, you have to try again. And again. The seasons don't stop turning and babies don't stop being born because the midwife gives up. And my mothers aren't happy if the linen is dirty!!

[Throws the linen at her]

Wash it again!!!

[BEETLE picks up the linen from the ground]

BEETLE

[to herself]

It's because I'm stupid that I can't do this right!!

JANE

That's for me to say, not you! Now stop feeling sorry for your poor stupid self and get back to work!!

[JANE exits into the house]

[end of scene]

Scene Three

[JANE is tarting herself up. BEETLE is holding the mirror]

JANE

The cleaning you did yesterday is passable fair, and yesterday's linen-washing was better. I'm leaving you with the cottage today. I'll be picking up our bread. I've taken a liking to bread. Bread is the staff of life.

[About herself in the mirror]

Perfect.

[She exits. BEETLE goes to check on the CAT]

BEETLE

Will you not live? It's been three days, Cat. You must live—you ate from my hand.

[WILL comes running in with THOMAS THE STUTTERER. BEETLE hides the CAT with her body]

WILL

Where's the midwife?

BEETLE

Gone to get bread.

THOMAS

M-my w-w-wife is having our b-b-baby in't field. N-n-NOW!

[Offstage, we hear a woman scream with labor pains]

M-my w-w-wife is having our b-b-baby! H-h-her f-f-f-father--

WILL

Robert Weaver's brought his daughter down from the fields. She's going to have the baby NOW!

[JANE walks wearily back on]

JANE

Is it what I think?

THOMAS

M-my w-w-wife--

JANE

Oh, Thomas the Stutterer, that babe'll be born by the time you finish asking me to help.

[offstage, the woman screams again.]

WILL

His father-in-law has brought her.

JANE

Oh, and aren't we the fine little messenger then, Will? Stop throwing dung long enough to be a help instead of a hooligan?

BEETLE

I'll get the bottles and herbs, then, mistress?

WILL

[to BEETLE]

What? You??? What do you know?

JANE

No. Not a move until we negotiate the price.

[To prove that she belongs there, BEETLE moves closer to JANE, and stands next to her, presenting a united front against those who won't pay midwives]

THOMAS

B-b-b-but sh-she's--

[Offstage, the woman screams again with labor pains. THOMAS can't stand it and runs offstage to her. ROBERT WEAVER enters and takes over]

ROBERT WEAVER

[to JANE]

I see you're here. Thanks to God Almighty.

[ROBERT WEAVER starts to escort JANE to his daughter, but JANE doesn't move]

What's this, then, Jane?

[He looks at BEETLE, as if to say, "go get something to help my daughter." But JANE gives BEETLE a look and BEETLE stands frozen]

JANE

You know the terms, Robert. A silver penny, a length of newly-woven cloth, the best layer in your hen house.

[Offstage, the woman's cries let us know the contractions are increasing]

ROBERT

A penny it is. After harvest of this crop.

[JANE shakes her head "no" and doesn't budge]

All right--my best laying hen--Maisy. She's yours.

[Hates to lose Maisy]

You can collect her tonight, whenever. It doesn't matter--I've got a grandchild coming!

JANE

[to BEETLE]

And you're the witness to this agreement, Beetle! All right, get the lady's mantle and the wormwood and the hops--oh--just bring my basket. I'll send you back if we need more. And bring the clean linen even if it's wet!

[JANE exits with ROBERT. WILL stares incredulously at BEETLE]

WILL

A few days ago, you were sleeping in the dung pile and now you're the midwife's apprentice?

BEETLE

What?

JANE

[from offstage, yelling at the woman in labor]

Push, you cow! If an animal can do it! You can do it!

WILL

She yells like that right before the baby comes. I don't want to miss it!

[WILL runs offstage to see the event. The sound of a newborn-baby's cry. BEETLE is entranced with it--something awakens in her]

BEETLE

"Midwife's apprentice."

JANE

[from offstage]

Beeeetle! You Brainless Clodpole! Hurry up!

[BEETLE grabs the basket and the linen and exits to the birth]

[end of scene]

Scene Four

[Dusk. Same day. same locale. BEETLE sneaks outside with some food for the CAT, who is still in the dung heap and still unconscious]

BEETLE

[unfolding the underskirt she swaddled him in]

Cat? Cat! You haven't eaten the good cheese I left for you! And now I've gone and nicked some more--for nothing!

[Starts to hit the CAT, but ends up stroking it instead, feeling worse and worse]

Why won't you live? I did!
Please?

[She looks up at the stars, as if to pray, but doesn't know any prayers, so she addresses what she sees in the sky]

Stars--moon. . . can you. . .hear me?

[Sound of laughing nearby]

GROMMET

[Emerging from the shadows and taunting her]

Heathen!! Heathen!! Doesn't know any prayers!!
Doesn't know any prayers!!!

JACK

[joining GROMMET, from the shadows, and taunting BEETLE]

The Devil will get you! The Devil will get you sure!!!
IT'S THE TIME OF DAY WHEN THE DEVIL IS EVERYWHERE!!

GROMMET

[To JACK]

Hey, we'd better get home--it is getting dark.

JACK

[to GROMMET]

Afraid of the Devil, Grommet?

GROMMET
[to BEETLE]

Here, take the moldy apples! They weren't worth stealing anyway!!!

[Upset because he identified her fear, GROMMET throws the apples at JACK and exits]

JACK
You 'fraid of the Devil, too, then Grommet? I'm not!

[Turning on BEETLE]

And you. . .better watch out of the dark!

BEETLE
[picking up the apples]

I'm not scared of the dark--dark's a protector. I've spent most nights by myself in the dark. For one thing, people can't see you then and try to scare you. People like you. You leave us alone here!

JACK
"Us?" "Us?" is it? As if you belonged to anybody!! Dung Beetle!!! Even your dead cat has up and taken off on you!!!

[JACK exits. BEETLE xs quickly to the dung pile where the CAT was, unwraps her underskirt/swaddle and sees that he's gone. She looks up at the night sky, not knowing what to thank]

BEETLE
Thank you, Mistress? Mister?

[JANE enters with several herbs in bundles and shoves them into BEETLE'S face]

JANE
If you're to be any help to me at all, you have to know these by name and tell them apart by smell. With Thomas the Stutterer's wife, you handed me the sage when I needed the goatsbeard. You can't do that again!

[JANE holds up a bundle to BEETLE'S nose, expecting an immediate answer]

BEETLE
Sage.

JANE
Right.

[Holds up another bundle to BEETLE'S nose]

This now.

[BEETLE sneezes]

JANE
Stop that! Now what is it?

BEETLE
Columbine seed? Goatsbeard?

JANE
Ragwort!!

BEETLE
Ragwort. For pain.

JANE
To speed the birth! Ragwort and columbine seed to speed the birth! Pain is later! The birth has got to happen before anyone gets any herbs for pain! And you know why?

BEETLE
Because the mother and baby will be in trouble if the birthing stops.

JANE
No! Because I don't get paid till the birthing is through! Now again--

[puts the bunch of herbs up the BEETLE'S nose]

BEETLE
Sage.

[JANE puts the other bundle up to BEETLE'S nose. BEETLE sneezes]

Ragwort.

JANE
It's a beginning. Now tomorrow I'll send you out into the forest to gather more of these, so remember what you learned. And take that thing to the pond and rinse it while there's still some light--it's filthy. Your dirt looks bad for me.

[After BEETLE has exited to the pond, the BAKER enters--he's dressed nicely and carries a basket of bread]

BAKER
[whispering]

Jane! Jane! Over here!

[JANE xs to him]

BAKER
I brought you these.
To thank you for the delivery of my fine son.

[JANE takes the bread, demurely]

Jane--you're a handsome woman.

JANE
You paid me yesterday, baker.

BAKER
Here's more.

[He leans forward and kisses her on the cheek]

JANE
What if someone were to see us--and you a new father.

BAKER
For the thirteenth time. I've watched you deliver them all and wanted to do this since number eleven.

[He kisses her in a full embrace]

JANE
You go home before your wife misses you!

[JANE almost skips into the house, she's so happy. BAKER turns to go, sees BEETLE entering from the pond, carrying her wet cape]

BAKER
What? You spying on us, then?

BEETLE

N-no.

BAKER

[grabbing her]

You tell anyone what you saw and I'll sick the Devil on you myself! I will!

BEETLE

[telling the truth]

I didn't see anything, sir. Truly, sir.

BAKER

And you keep it that way.

[BAKER exits. BEETLE xs to where the CAT has appeared]

BEETLE

There you be!

JANE

[from inside the house]

BEEEEETLE!!!!!! GET INSIDE HERE AND SWEEP THIS FLOOR!!!!

BEETLE

See? Life is worth living. Being yelled at and fed is better than being silent and starved.

JANE

Beetle!

[BEETLE pats the CAT and exits into the house]

[end of scene]

Scene Five

[Some months later--summertime. Exterior. BEETLE is on a path in the woods (?) and has been gathering herbs for the midwife's pharmacy. She is carrying a basket filled with herbs and flowers. She sits and shares some bread with the CAT who is by her side]

BEETLE

Cobwebs are for stanching the blood and there is blood, Cat. I've been watching through the windows when the midwife's delivering and I've learned how to use all these herbs. Bryony and woolly nightshade here are to cleanse and comfort the mother. Ragwort to speed the birth. [CAT sneezes] Stop that. This goatsbeard I just picked is to bring forth the mother's milk, and this sage is to make tea for her, if the mother's milk won't stop.

[Offering CAT bread]

Here's bread--we've got plenty since the baker has been visiting a bit. And then she'll go off on an errand with him and they don't come back. But I don't mind--we've got this time to ourselves more.

I wrote a little song for us--tune some'ut the midwife hums.

[Sings]

When late at night, the moon is up
The Devil has his evening sup
He don't eat breakfast like us ones
Who wash and sweep in the sun.

He walks about and peeks in doors
And hears the gossip through the floors
He knows things that people do
Just like me who knows them, too.

[MILLER enters at a dead run--past BEETLE. Then puts on the brakes when he sees her]

MILLER

Where's your midwife?

BEETLE

Not here.

MILLER

No. She's not! Blessed Mother, what am I to do?

BEETLE

Is your wife in labor, sir?

MILLER

[suddenly gets the idea of using BEETLE]

YES!

[He grabs BEETLE by the arm and starts dragging her off. She manages to retrieve the basket.
The CAT runs off]

BEETLE

But I cannot--

MILLER

No, you must!

BEETLE

I don't know how!

MILLER

You must! You have to!!

BEETLE

Noooooooooooo!

[He drags her off.]

Scene Six

[Moments later. Interior--MILLER'S cottage. There's a big bed, with the MILLER'S WIFE in it. The MILLER enters, still dragging BEETLE by the arm]

BEETLE

Noooooo! I cannot do it!

MILLER

Couldn't find the midwife, dearest. But here's her apprentice. Things will go better now.

[He hands BEETLE to his wife who grabs her by the arm]

MILLER'S WIFE

I no longer want this child. It was a mistake. Make it stop. I will not go through with this.

BEETLE

I can't--

MILLER'S WIFE

Do something!

[The labor pains start up again and MILLER'S WIFE yells in pain]
Help me!!!

BEETLE

"A silver penny, a length of newly-woven cloth, the best layer in your hen house!"

[shouting it, like an incantation to make the baby come]

Ummm--uh--"Push you cow."

Uhh--"Pay me two eggs."

Umm--"IF AN ANIMAL CAN DO IT YOU CAN DO IT!!"

MILLER'S WIFE

What? You're an idiot!! By the bones of Saint Cuthbert, they have sent me a nitwit! What am I going to do????!

[Then the MILLER'S WIFE goes into a real rage, grabbing whatever she can find and flinging it at BEETLE, and screaming incoherently. BEETLE hides and soon the cottage fills with whomever is nearby. Suddenly, the onlookers part to let in an equally enraged but controlled JANE]

JANE

[To the onlookers]

Out! OUT!!!

Ouuuuuutttttt!!!!!!

[The onlookers clear out quickly, but the MILLER'S WIFE is still screaming. JANE grabs the woman and slaps her, again and again, until she stops wailing, then pours the contents of a mug down her and puts her into bed, propping her up for labor. The MILLER enters, sheepishly, and JANE grabs him and pushes him to his wife].

JANE

You see she stays in there.

[JANE xs to BEETLE and drags her from where she's been hiding]

JANE

Idiot! Clodpole! Nincompoop!!

Go out of here right now!!!

[JANE pushes BEETLE out of the cottage. The MILLER'S WIFE starts to groan with pain]

JANE

[inside to the Miller's wife]

And you--get to work having this baby!

[Outside to BEETLE]

What are you doing standing there? Go get my basket!

And don't tarry!

[BEETLE exits]

She'll do fine.

Scene Seven

[BEETLE in her own space, holding the CAT, listening to the newborn cry]

BEETLE

And then come a baby. After all that yelling--such a little cry and everyone running around—a little, little cry, and the world seem to stop and smile for just a breath. Wondrous strange. And this feeling—warm and happy, like when you come back to life, Cat. Well, we better stoke the fire--she'll be tired when she comes home.

[BEETLE exits]

[end of scene]

Scene Eight

[Exterior. The Saint Swithin's Day fair. {JULY 15} Nearby is a MERCHANT'S cart, filled with interesting goods. The MERCHANT stands beside his cart, busying himself. BEETLE enters, carrying an empty basket. Around her are the sounds of the fair--animal noises, music, vendors shouting. "Copper kettles!" "Tin to mend your pans! Tin from Cornwall!" "Woolen cloth of pure green from Lincolnshire!" "Get your fortune told, dearie? Need a spell to catch a lover?" "Murderer's wash water! Straight from the hangman! It'll cure what ails you!" {maybe a song is heard here that she repeats in the birthing of Tansy's calves and the Bailiff's wife, Joan's labor}]

MERCHANT

What you looking for on this Saint Swithin's Day?

BEETLE

What?

MERCHANT

I've got shiny brass needles, ribbons of red and lavender, copper spoons and bronze knives, boots of fine red leather with embroidery on the toes.

BEETLE

My mistress would like those boots.

MERCHANT

Well, buy them for her.

BEETLE

I'm here at this market to buy spices, which I have done. One copper pot which I got already. And some leather flasks, which I haven't.

[BEETLE notices a carved wooden comb--the MERCHANT nods and she picks it up to look at it more closely]

MERCHANT

I've got the best leather flasks for the price anywhere.

[He fetches the flasks and lays them before her, but she's in love with the comb and not noticing]

What about something for you?

[beat]

This comb you've been looking at?

BEETLE

No, sir.

MERCHANT

It's got a cat carved on it. See?

BEETLE

Yes, sir.

MERCHANT

You like cats, then?

BEETLE

Yes, sir.

[With real effort, she hands the comb back to the MERCHANT]

These the flasks? I'll take those two. How much?

MERCHANT

[merchant points to coins in her bag]

Four of those.

BEETLE

Wait.

[She turns her back and counts the coins laboriously, carefully remembering what each is worth, then she turns back to him]

That's too much.

MERCHANT

Three, then.

BEETLE

Flasks?

MERCHANT

[laughs]

Coins!

BEETLE

I think I need a flask for each coin.

MERCHANT
All right. Done.

[She pays the MERCHANT and he puts the flasks in a sack and hands it to her]

You're good at bartering--your mistress is lucky to have you.

[This a new idea for BEETLE--it stops her for a beat]

And, you know, there's nothing wrong with asking for what you want--it might turn out to be just what you need.

BEETLE
I don't understand.

MERCHANT
[the MERCHANT gives Alyce the comb]
Here. Comb those long curls until they shine, girl, and you'll have a lover before nightfall.

BEETLE
Thank you, sir. Thank you.

[The MERCHANT rolls his cart off. BEETLE puts her basket down and begins to comb her hair, using the copper pot as a sort of mirror]

Those are curls--I thought they were just tangles. My eyes are so big--I never noticed.

[A MAN enters and xs right to BEETLE and starts pulling on her arm, trying to show her something he's holding--a small piece of leather]

MAN
Alyce, hey Alyce. I need you. What do this say?

[He thrusts the piece of leather at her, expecting her to read it]

BEETLE
Who is Alyce?

MAN
Don't joke with me, Alyce. Money is at stake.

BEETLE
I'm not Alyce.

MAN

'Course you are.

[The MAN leans into BEETLE'S face and looks closely at her]

Wait! You're not Alyce! You're not Alyce at all! What are you doing looking like Alyce?

[Goes off calling]

Alyce? Alyce? Alyce! Where are you?

[He's gone. BEETLE picks up the pot and looks at herself again]

BEETLE

This face could belong to someone who can. . .read. Someone with a given name who can read and who has curls and who could have a. . .lover by nightfall. This face isn't Beetle's face. This face belongs to someone named Alyce. Alyce.

[She exits, carrying her stuff and practicing her new name as she walks]

[end of scene]

Scene Nine

[Exterior--Midwife's cottage. Four months later. {Mid-November} BEETLE is working on some plants that have been gathered for the pharmacy. She has them in bunches and is stripping off the useful parts. JANE is getting ready to leave for a secret date with the BAKER. The CAT is nearby.]

JANE
Beetle?

[No answer from BEETLE]

Beetle!!

[Still no answer]

Beetle!! It's been four months since you came back from that fair and you still want to be called "Alyce." Well, I won't do it. You still look more like a "Mudhen" or a "Toad" or a "Weasel" than an "Alyce." I feed someone named "Beetle." Anyone else is a trespasser. Well, I'm off, "Beetle"--make certain you strip all the thorns from the dogberry roses. I don't have time to do them after you. I have to be home before dark. Roger Mustard's cow gave birth to a two-headed calf and a magpie sat on the Miller's barn and would not be chased away.

[BEETLE just stares, silent--she doesn't understand the portent of these signs. JANE leans in to explain and to torture BEETLE with the scary knowledge]

JANE
The Devil's about. Don't want to be caught after sunset when the Devil's about. You heathen child, you don't know what I'm talking about, do you? Well, he'll be getting after you first!

[JANE exits. BEETLE starts to trim some of the plants. She talks to CAT as she does her work]

BEETLE
All this fear of the Devil. And the dark. I've slept outside in the dark for most of my years and I have yet seen the Devil and had nothing to fear from the night. You ever seen the Devil, Cat?

You know, now that I've a real name, you should have one, too. You tell me which you like.

[The CAT indicates no]

Columbine? Cuttlefish?

[The CAT indicates no.]

BEETLE

Clotweed? Shrovetide? Wimble?

[The CAT indicates no.]

Horseradish?

[The CAT indicates no, but after a moment purrs]

Purr?

[The CAT purrs in response]

Purr it is, then. You're not "Cat", you're "Purr."

[The CAT purrs, a lot, in response]

Ow! This knife is dull as a rock. She never sharpens them. Wait, where's the knife that Gilbert gave me?

[BEETLE remembers the knife GILBERT GREY-HEAD gave her. She goes to the dung pile and pulls out the package with the two pieces of wood. The look of the wood startles her]

Oh! It's just the wood he gave me--the dung has got these so dark they look all the world like the legs of some dead animal, like a goat or a cow.

[GROMMET SMITH enters with JACK SNAGGLETOOTH. They are chasing a small BOY, poorly clad. He runs to the dung pile and tries to hide]

BEETLE

What are you doing?

[To the BOY]

Come here.

[To GROMMET & JACK]

Leave him alone!

JACK

He's a beggar boy! Found him sleeping in Will Russet's barn.

GROMMET

He's another heathen like you!

BOY

Help me, miss!

BEETLE

Hush. Stay next to me.

GROMMET

Look at you, dung beetle! Trying to make that mop of hair on top of your head into something pretty?

JACK

Trying to look like a lady!

GROMMET

A lady of the manor!

JACK

[looking closer and liking what he sees]

Hair's gotten longer. She does look pretty, Grommet.

GROMMET

No, she doesn't!!

But she could with some special hair wax that all pretty ladies use.

JACK

What hair wax, Grommet?

GROMMET

The special "wax" over there in the dung pile--the wet stuff.

JACK

I'm not going to get it. Uugh.

GROMMET

Get it, Jack!!!

[JACK SNAGGLETOOTH doesn't move. In disgust, GROMMET SMITH goes to the dung pile, gets some wet dung, chases BEETLE and, with JACK'S help, manages to catch her and rub the dung into her hair. The BOY tries to defend her, but he's too little to do much good]

GROMMET

Now you're a fit bride.

JACK
For the Devil!!

BEETLE
Well, call him then! Bring him to meet me! I'm not afraid of him.

[Calling out]

Devil! Master Devil, Sir! I be here waiting for you!!

GROMMET
Stop that! Stop that!

JACK
Don't call him--he might come!!

BEETLE
What would you do if he did come? I dare you to come, devil!!! Come now and give Grommet and Jack a big kiss!! Come right now! Mr. Devil! I COMMAND THEE!

[They both exit, afraid now. After they're gone]

BOY
I thank you for saving me. I be going now, mistress.

BEETLE
Thank you for saving me. Trying to. Come here.

[She smooths his hair]

What's your name?

BOY
Runt.

BEETLE
Where you come from?

BOY
Dunno.

BEETLE
How long you been traveling?

BOY

Forever. I be going now, mistress.

BEETLE

Have some cheese.

[She gives him some cheese from her pocket--he eats it hungrily]

And here's a piece of bread. We have plenty of that since my mistress is such good friends with the baker.

[He eats that hungrily, too]

The weather's turning tonight. I lived outside for a long time--I can smell the snow coming. You sleep in the dung until I can take you somewhere.

BOY

[mouth full]

Thank you, mistress. But I got no place for you to take me.

BEETLE

The manor, over by Will Russet's, they need a kitchen boy. I trade for mallows and anise with them. I'm the midwife's apprentice.

BOY

[mouth full]

Thank you, mistress.

BEETLE

Here's something to drink.

[Hands him a flask of ale]

What do you know about the Devil? What does he look like?

BOY

All I know is he has feet like goat's feet. And he travels at night.

BEETLE

Like us, sometimes.

[The CAT appears]

And him--here's my cat. He's come to look at you. I named him "Purr" and I named myself "Alyce." Now you need a proper name. "Runt" be a name for a small pig. You need a name for a person. Purr picked out his name. You pick out one for yourself.

BOY

Your name's Alyce?

[BEETLE nods "yes"]

Then I be Alyce, too.

BEETLE

You cannot be Alyce, for Alyce is a name for a girl.

BOY

What the name of the king, then?

BEETLE

"King."

BOY

He must have another name.

BEETLE

I'll ask someone tomorrow.

[She takes off her cape again and wraps it around the BOY'S shoulders and tucks him into the dung pile]

BOY

Alyce? What I think about the Devil is, he's got an easy job because there are plenty of mean people to do the work for him.

BEETLE

Well, you don't need to worry about any of them 'cause I'm taking care of you now.

[She strokes his hair as he falls asleep. She talks to CAT]

You know, Purr, so much has happened since I met you. I was nobody and now I'm someone with a name and someone who can help someone else.

[She picks some of the dung out of her hair, then grabs one of the two sticks of wood and the knife that GILBERT gave her. She sits down and begins to whittle at the stick]

BEETLE

And I'm also someone who can have a little revenge. After all, a heathen girl like me doesn't know any better.

[Smells the air again]

Yes, first snowfall tonight. We'll be able to see if the Devil is about. He'll leave tracks.

[End of scene]