

# COMING TO ASTORIA

Reader's Theater (Middle School Version)

By James Dott

## CAST

Narrator 1, 2, 3, 4 (Narrator Roles can be combined)

Ole (Father of Axel and Lars)

Anna (Mother of Axel and Lars)

Jacob (Ole's brother)

Axel (eldest brother)

Lars (younger brother)

Astrid (orphan)

Marie (Astrid's cousin)

Alma (Astrid's aunt and Marie's mother)

Eino (Astrid's uncle and Marie's father)

## ***Scene 1: A Farm in Scandinavia***

Narrator 1: Imagine a small farm in Scandinavia. It's the late 1800s. The crops have been poor, people are hungry, and families are struggling to survive. Ole and Anna have two sons, Axel and Lars. Axel is the eldest so he will inherit the farm but what will Lars do? The farm cannot support both brothers and their future families.

Lars: Father, I have finished my chores. Mother said you wanted to speak to me?

Ole: Yes, son. Axel will be married next week and his wife will be moving here. There will be no place for you here then. The farm will barely support us.

Lars: I understand. Maybe I can find work in the city.

Ole: People are going hungry there too. You should go to America. There is land there and many other opportunities for a hard-working lad like you. Your Uncle Jacob has written to you. Here is his letter.

Uncle Jacob: Dear Lars, you are standing in my shoes now. Years ago, when Ole inherited the farm after your grandfather died, I had to leave and to make my way on my own. I sailed to America and settled first in Dakota territory but the winters were hard and the land was so flat. Then I heard of a place called Astoria on a river near the sea, a place more like home. There is work here for a young man like yourself, logging, fishing, starting a farm if you wish. Let me know if you are coming.

Ole: What do you think?

Lars: I would go but I only have a little money. It won't be enough.

Ole: I know. Your mother and I have savings that will help pay your passage.

Lars: I will try to find work and save more if it is not enough.

Ole: I hope it will be.

Narrator 1: Axel and Ingrid were married the next week. Lars moved his few possessions from the room he and Axel had shared to the barn. A few days later Axel returned with Ingrid his new wife and she moved in.

Lars: It is time for me to go.

Anna: Oh Lars, Lars. I wish there was a way you could stay but there is not enough to feed us all. We can't eat stone soup.

Ole: Here is the money we saved. Good luck, son.

Lars: Thank you. Good bye. Good luck Axel. You and Ingrid take care of each other and Mother and Father.

Axel: We will. We will. Good luck to you.

Anna: Write to us son!

Narrator 1: With tears in everyone's eyes and a bundle on his back Lars left the farm house and started down the road toward the town and then the city. Axel came running after him.

Axel: Wait Lars! Wait!

Narrator 1: Lars stopped. His brother rushed to him.

Axel: Here, Lars take this money. I think with this and what mother and father have given you and what you saved, you will have enough to get to America.

Lars: But Axel you will need this.

Axel: We will get by. The farm will support us. You need it more. Take it.

Lars: All right. Thank you, brother. I hope we will meet again.

Axel:            So do I. Farewell.

Narrator 1:    Lars went on to the city. He had just enough money for his journey. He boarded a passenger ferry to Hull, on the east coast of England. From there he took a train to Liverpool, on the west coast. He bought passage in steerage (the cheapest fare) aboard the ocean liner *Majestic* bound for New York, New York.

## ***Scene II: A Small Town in Scandinavia***

Narrator 2:    Imagine now a small town in Scandinavia. A year later. Disease has killed many people in the area. Astrid has lost both her parents to tuberculosis. Her Aunt Alma, her Uncle Eino, and her cousin Marie are with her after the funeral.

Alma:            You cannot stay in that house alone.

Eino:            You will come live with us. Before she died, I promised your mother that we would look after you.

Marie:           You can share my room.

Astrid:           Oh, thank you all. But Marie, you have only one small bed.

Eino:            We can move yours from the house.

Astrid:           What will happen to the house?

Eino:            We will sell it. The money from the sale will take care of you until you are married.

Narrator 2:    So Astrid moved in with her aunt and uncle and cousin. Eino and Alma treated her like a second daughter. Alma and Marie grew to be close friends. Eino's fishing boat sunk but he was able to swim to shore along with his crew. He found work on another boat but the pay was much less than when he had his own. Astrid and Marie discuss their future.

Astrid:           I have decided to go to America. Come with me, Marie.

Marie:           What?! Why?!

Astrid:           I cannot continue to be a burden on your family.

Marie:           Maybe you could find a husband.

Astrid:           All the men our age are already married or have gone to America and the others are...

Marie: Old or ugly.

Astrid: Or both. Come with me, Marie.

Marie: I don't see a future here either, Astrid. I have no way to pay for the journey. Besides, how could I leave my parents?

Astrid: I understand. You are so lucky to have them. I don't want to go alone but if I must, I will.

Narrator 2: That night at the evening meal Astrid tells Eino and Alma her plan.

Astrid: Aunt, Uncle, I have decided to go to America.

Alma: Oh, Astrid! Why?

Astrid: I have been a burden on you long enough. There are no opportunities here. No one to marry...

Marie: Who isn't old or fat.

Eino: Or both.

Alma: But Astrid, a young woman alone on a ship and then in a strange new country. Horrible things could happen.

Astrid: I want Marie to come with me.

Eino: No! No!

Marie: What is true for Astrid is true for me as well.

Alma: Oh, no Marie. You cannot leave us. Please stay Astrid. You are not a burden. Things will get better. I hope.

Eino: We have spoken enough on this for now. We will speak of it again when the time is right.

Narrator 2: The girls knew that when Eino spoke that firmly, they must drop the subject. That night Marie and Astrid heard Eino and Alma talking long into the night. They couldn't hear the words but their voices were serious and once they heard Alma crying and Eino comforting her. The next morning Eino called everyone to the table.

Eino: We have important matters to discuss. Astrid, I promised your mother I would care for you as a father. As a father, I cannot let you go alone to America.

Astrid: But uncle...

Narrator 2: Eino put up a hand. Astrid was silent.

Marie: Then may I go with her?

Narrator 2: Eino put up his hand again. Marie was silent.

Alma: Two young women going together to America is little better than one going on her own. We cannot allow it.

Narrator 2: There was a long pause. Tears of disappointment spilled from the girls' eyes. Then Eino broke the silence.

Eino: But **we** can go with you to America. We shall all go and make a new life in the United States.

Alma: It will be hard to leave here but we must for you and for us.

Eino: My childhood friend Jacob went to America many years ago. He writes to me a few times a year. He now lives in a place called Astoria in Oregon. There are many people from our country there. Many young men. There is work there for fishermen and for young women too.

Alma: We will sell this house and with our savings and the money from your parents, Astrid, we will buy passage to Astoria.

Narrator 2: The girls were speechless but full of joy and excitement. The house was sold. Preparations were made. Trunks were packed. The four of them made their way to the nearby port city and said sad farewells to their homeland.

### ***Scene III: Scandinavia to New York***

Narrator 3: Lars arrived in the United States on a foggy spring morning in New York Harbor. He and his fellow passengers peered from the decks hoping for a sight of the Statue of Liberty. They feared the fog would keep her hidden. But then they saw her head and torch floating above the fog bank and a great cheer went up. Lars arrived at Ellis Island and then plunged into the noisy bustle of New York City. A friend he'd made on board ship invited him to Wisconsin where his cousin promised work on his farm. Lars wrote to Jacob in Astoria.

Lars: Dear Uncle Jacob, I arrived in New York in April. I have never seen so many people! I was glad to get to Wisconsin with my friend Erik. We are working on his cousin's farm. The work is hard but the food is good and there is plenty of it. There are many people here from our country. I am still hoping to make my way west to Astoria but must save money for the journey. Your nephew, Lars

Jacob: Dear Lars, I hope this letter reaches you. I too passed through Wisconsin on my way west. If you have saved enough money by fall, I you should come on to Astoria. There will be little work on that farm in the winter. The winter I was there a great many people died from cholera. That is why I left there and went farther west. Here, you can find work in any season. Your uncle, Jacob

Lars: Dear Uncle Jacob, I received your letter. You were right about work here in winter. So much snow and so cold! Once I have helped with plowing and planting, I will have enough to travel to Astoria. Look for me by the end of summer. Your nephew, Lars

Narrator 3: Lars left Wisconsin in June and traveled by foot and train west across the Great Plains, over the Rocky Mountains, and along the Columbia River to Portland. In Portland he found passage on the *SS Columbia*, a ship bound for San Francisco but stopping in Astoria. When he disembarked in Astoria he asked after his uncle. He was directed to a cafe downtown. He entered shyly, glad his English was improving.

Lars: Hello, pardon me. I am looking for my uncle. His name is Jacob.

Narrator 3: A tall man that looked a lot like Lars' father stood up from a table.

Jacob: Lars!?

Lars: Yes.

Jacob: Come in. You can speak your birth tongue here. Your journey is ended. Welcome to Astoria! You look hungry. Join me for lunch then I will get you settled in your new home.

Lars: Thank you, Uncle. I am very hungry and glad to speak in our birth tongue again.

Narrator 3: Lars ate a huge meal and then was given a tour of the town. Jacob let him sleep at his house for a few weeks until Lars found work on the docks loading lumber onto ships. He got a room at a boarding house and began to make friends.

### ***Scene IV: On to Astoria***

Narrator 4: Astrid, Eino, Alma, and Marie followed the same route as Lars to Liverpool. They also sailed on the *Majestic* but in third class, not steerage. Even Eino got seasick as their ship sailed the rough seas of the open Atlantic. They too cheered at the sight of Lady Liberty and passed through Ellis Island. From New York they took the transcontinental railroad across the United States to Sacramento, California. They then made their way to San Francisco. Once there they booked passage on the *SS Columbia* bound for Portland, Oregon with a stop in Astoria. When they arrived, Eino located his old friend Jacob.

Jacob: Eino, I am so glad you and your family have come. There are rooms for you all at Olga's Boarding House. Alma, Astrid, and Marie can get work there cooking and cleaning. Tomorrow you can speak to some of the fishermen here about fishing for one of the canneries.

Eino: Thank you, Jacob.

Narrator 4: Soon Eino was fishing for salmon on the Columbia River. Olga had bought a second boarding house and hired Alma to run it. Marie and Astrid joined her there, doing the laundry, cleaning the rooms. One day Astrid was carrying a huge pile of sheets to be washed when she bumped into Lars in the hallway. They stared at each other across the pile on the floor. At first, they spoke in English.

Lars: Ooof. Didn't you see me?

Astrid: No. How could I? I was carrying all these dirty sheets. Yours are probably here.

Lars: Sorry.

Astrid: No, I am sorry. I should have peeked around this pile.

Lars: Aren't you Eino's daughter?

Astrid: No, his niece.

Lars: Sorry. Are your parents here in Astoria?

Astrid: No. They are dead.

Lars: Oh. I am sorry.

Astrid: Nice to meet you "Sorry." I am Astrid.

Lars: Oh no, no, my name is Lars.

Astrid: Jacob's nephew?

Lars: Yes, Jacob's nephew. Let us speak in our home country's tongue.

Astrid: That would be good. English is hard. Lars, I am glad to meet you but I must do this laundry.

Lars: Wait. Wait.

Astrid: Yes?

Lars: Ah. Uhm. There is a dance on Saturday.

Astrid: Yes? And?

Lars: Will you go?

Astrid: With you?

Lars: Yes. Please.

Astrid: All right, I will. If you help me pick up these sheets and bring them to the laundry.

Narrator 4: They went to that dance and enjoyed getting to know one another. A few months later they were married. Marie also met her future husband at that same dance, another young man from their home country. Astrid and Lars built a house and had four children, three daughters and a son. Although they learned English, they still spoke their first language to each other. They never returned to their home country.

Narrator 1: Lars never saw his parents or his brother again although the two brothers wrote to each other all their lives. Astrid's and Lars' children got married and had children as did the next generation. Some of Astrid and Lars' great-grandchildren live and work in Astoria. Several have traveled to their great-grandparents' home country and visited the town and farm where Astrid and Lars grew up and met Axel's and Ingrid's grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Narrator 2: This is one Scandinavian immigrant family's story. There are thousands of others.

Narrator 3: The End.