

The
ASH
MUSEUM

REBECCA SMITH



MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR VISIT

Welcome to the Ash Museum.

On display are objects and letters telling the story of one hundred years of the Ash family. The museum's collection is arranged across many floors and through multiple rooms. You may not be able to see everything on one visit. Our guide offers a path through the museum that we hope visitors will find enjoyable and enlightening. If you wish to view the displays chronologically (i.e. in the order in which the objects on display were made or discovered), you will have to start elsewhere.

1940s

**Wooden Tennis Racket - some
strings broken (c. 1930s)**

Some stupid words from a poem were going round in James's head when he woke, still sitting and clutching his rifle in the trench. *Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, something and something the dance has begun.* The moon and stars were bright. He hadn't meant to drop off, but they had to snatch sleep when they could. Lewis was dozing to his right, Daas to his left. They should have been more alert – he should have been more alert. His back had seized up but he hardly dared move in case he made a noise.

For days they'd been dug in on Garrison Hill, above Imphal on the Kohima Ridge. They were pretty much surrounded, and the Japanese wore soft shoes – some sort of plimsolls instead of boots – so you never knew when they were going to come padding across the broken earth. There were a couple dead a few feet away. Just boys really. The stench was bad. James could see the district commissioner's bungalow, what was left of it, silhouetted up ahead. Some of their chaps were probably still in there, holding out. He'd envied them at first – lucky buggers with a roof over their heads – but judging by the mess and word coming down the line, they'd been some of the first to go.

And here he was on what had been a tennis court. The plateau of it was useful. The grass was long gone but the remains of a tennis racket lay in the mud between him and

the dead boys. *Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn, the dum de dum racket is back in its press.* He couldn't remember enough of the poem to get it out of his head. Margaret had sent it to him a while ago – his sister was always sending things snipped out of newspapers and magazines. He often had to read both sides of the cutting to work out which bit was meant to be significant. He wondered what she might be doing now, and his parents, and most of all, Josmi and the children. Asleep probably, all of them. Asleep in beds with clean sheets. Still the stupid words were beating time in his head – something about a summerhouse and a veranda and gin. He'd seen straight away why Margaret had sent it – it was about a girl like Lucinda. He hoped he wouldn't still be thinking about it when he copped it, as he probably would. They all probably would.

It wasn't yet dawn and the birds were silent. Any creature with any sense would have fled long ago. A few sounds came from the forest, occasional shots, and sometimes a vehicle noise somewhere far away. They'd been told other regiments were coming, reinforcements. God, they needed them. They couldn't hold out forever. They'd be picked off one by one, line by line, and the Japanese would stream over their corpses into India. There was a line about *ominous dancing ahead* – he had no idea what that meant. Mist was forming, dangerous stuff, ominous stuff. He heard something like a shuffling – shots and cries closer now. He nudged Lewis and Daas to wake up.

1970s

**Child's Fancy Dress Outfit - Native
American (c. 1974)**

'This cause must be especially close to your heart, Mr. Ash,' said the vicar's wife, offering him a Rich Tea.

'Jay,' he said, 'please.' He wondered why the plight of children in Africa should be closer to his heart than hers. Perhaps she thought that India and Africa were interchangeable. Aspects of Otterham reminded him of his early days in England when people had said in slow, loud voices, 'It Must Seem Very Cold To You.' After the first few times he'd just agreed with them. Why bother explaining that actually he had grown up in the shadow of the Himalayas where people often needed warm clothes just as much as they did here? He'd spent most of his childhood in a home for orphans and the discarded children of the Empire. He'd been constantly reminded that he was one of the lucky ones, as an aunt on the English side of his family was sponsoring him and he would be going to live with her when he'd finished school. Having met very few of his relations, Jay had pictured the two sides of his family as opposing hockey teams. He had been picked for one side, though he looked much more like a member of the other.

All Jay had left of his mother now were a few fragments of memories: a flash of silver and blue bangles; an image of pieces of broken crockery that they'd pressed into a flowerbed at the front of their bungalow after he'd driven his toy truck

into a rattan table and sent cups and saucers crashing to the ground; a feeling of her gripping his hand when his father had returned from shooting a leopard that had been menacing the company lines; and a few words of an Assamese song that she'd sung about the moon.

Now, here he was in an English vicar's dining room, wondering if there was any way he could make his excuses and leave, not just the meeting, but the committee, everything. It had all been Pammy's idea, but when she'd talked about signing up for the committee and getting more involved in village life he'd thought that she meant both of them, not just him.

They were planning the annual village fête. Otterham Overseas Aid would have a stall and a float in the parade. He found himself offering to drive the float; he had a licence for the right size of truck from his apprentice days. The committee had decided on the theme of 'Peoples of the World'. They all seemed very keen to have Emmie among the local children in the tableau. They would wave collecting tins as they went. Somebody asked if Pammy would dress up too. The vicar's wife said that she could imagine Pammy as a Dutch girl with two long blonde plaits and a pair of clogs. Jay knew that Pammy's cooperation was extremely unlikely; she took three quarters of an hour to do her make-up before putting out the milk bottles, she would never appear in fancy dress unless it was something glamorous.

'Do you have some traditional dress that Emmie could wear?' Audrey Pheasant asked. She was a huge woman, taller than Jay. When he'd been introduced to her he'd thought 'Pheasant' must be a nickname. She had the beakiest profile he'd ever seen and little bright eyes that were alert for challenges to her running of village affairs, but then, as she was so tall, 'Audrey Cassowary' might have been a better moniker. There was a picture of one in Emmie's *Atlas of Animals*. They could disembowel a man with one kick.

‘Traditional dress?’ Jay asked.

‘Oh, a sari or some of those pyjama things that your people wear.’

He took a sip of his coffee. It was disgustingly weak and smelt as though the milk was on the turn.

‘Not really, Emmie’s always worn what the other children wear.’ He might have added that Emmie’s traditional dress was shorts and a t-shirt, and that she had only joined the Brownies when she’d accepted that she couldn’t be a Cub. She considered the Cubs’ uniform superior and had a Cub’s cap from a jumble sale. She wore it at home for meetings of the Cub pack of which she and her collection of toy animals were the only members.

‘Pity,’ said Audrey Pheasant. ‘Perhaps your wife could run something up from an old tablecloth or some sheets...?’

The other committee members smiled and nodded.

‘I’ll see what Pammy thinks,’ said Jay in a way that he hoped was non-committal. He could imagine how Pammy would react to this suggestion. His sister, Molly, wouldn’t have minded doing it, or Aunt Lucinda, but Pammy? Not bloody likely.

Matters moved on to the forthcoming Christian Aid week. They were all to be allocated streets and asked to go door to door with little envelopes, and then return a week later to collect them. The idea filled Jay with horror – knocking on the doors of strangers to ask for money? He knew the assumptions some people would make. Perhaps Emmie and Pammy could go.

The vicar’s wife had a map and a list of streets. He prepared himself to say no, he got back from London too late each evening.

‘Jay,’ she said, turning to him, ‘your road has always been done by Mrs. Greenfield. She used to be on the committee but her knees aren’t up to it now. I think she’d be very sad not be asked, though. Would you mind awfully if we asked her first, and then had you in reserve if she can’t do it?’

‘That’s quite alright. I do get back from work very late some days. I expect the neighbours would prefer a familiar face anyway.’

‘Well, just between these walls, and this really isn’t for the minutes, but I’m not sure if we have always had *all* of the envelopes back from Rhododendron Gardens, so perhaps you could offer to go with her?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Jay. He knew Mrs. Greenfield. She lived on the corner and had never once acknowledged his ‘good mornings’. She had several dogs with limps and her garden had no lawn, just compacted earth and collapsing sheds that appeared to be held together with a horrible sort of orange nylon string. Her washing line was made of the same string and hosted a permanent collection of greying nighties and huge pairs of knickers and Y-fronts. He had never seen Mr. Greenfield, but there was usually a gang of other Greenfields fixing cars and growling at the dogs. ‘I don’t know her at all well. The offer would probably be better coming from one of the ladies on the committee.’ He hoped that they would minute that.

The next morning, Jay told Emmie about the float.

‘Can I ask my friends? Can we choose what to wear?’

‘The theme is “Peoples of the World”. I think they’d like you to dress up as an Indian girl.’

‘Great!’ said Emmie. She had all the stuff: the headdress, a waistcoat, some brown trousers with a red pattern on that were cut at the bottom so that they looked all raggedy. It wasn’t an Indian girl’s outfit, it was a chief’s, but she could be an Indian girl chief if they wanted to say that she was a girl. ‘Dad, do we all have to be from the same country?’

‘Any country is fine. Peoples of the World.’

‘The twins will want to do it. I hope Sue Namey won’t be on the float.’

‘There’s no one called Namey on the committee,’ he said.

‘Does that mean she won’t be allowed on the float? And why’s it called a float?’ She pictured a giant glass with a big blob of vanilla ice cream melting to a glorious foamy slick on top of some cream soda.

‘Maybe they used to have parades of boats on wheels,’ said her mum. ‘Mrs. Namey’s always trying to make people join her stoolball team. If they’re on any float it’ll probably be something like that.’

‘What’s stoolball?’

‘Like rounders,’ said her mum as she forked cat food into Freddy’s bowl, ‘but meaner.’

‘Hmm,’ said Emmie. She would have preferred to be on a float with other people dressed up as animals, or maybe as robots or pirates.

Programme for a Surrey Village Fête (1974)

Otterham Village Fête

June 22nd 1974

Programme of Stalls and Events

5p

**Noon - Arrival of the Carnival Procession
and Official Opening of the Fête by Our
Special Guest Mr. Roy Castle**

**Stalls: Raffle, Tombola, White Elephant,
Treasure Map, Stocks and Pillories - Sponge
the Vicar! Plate-Smashing, Cakes and
Preserves, Smash the Rat, Flowers and
Produce, Books and Toys, Teas, Cream
Cracker Eating Contest and Many,
Many More.**

Events in the Arena

1 pm - Performance by the Scouts Brass Band

1.30pm - Police Dog Performance Team

2pm - Children's Fancy Dress Judging

2.30pm - More from the Scouts Brass Band

3pm - Drawing of the Raffle and Other Prizes

Your Lucky Number is 283

Jay hardly thought about the Overseas Aid committee and village fête for the next few weeks. He was busy at work, and when he got home in the evenings Pammy was distant, plonking his dinner down on the table, saying that she'd already eaten with Emmie and was very tired. Village life didn't seem to be suiting her at the moment. At least Emmie was happy. She played with a group of children outside and always had stories to tell him about school: who'd won which race, how Sue Namey had been in trouble for wearing see-through nail polish, what Mr. Long had said about the trip to Arundel Castle. The details of her days delighted his heart.

She would sit next to him while he ate his dinner, soothing him with her chatter and smiles. His dinner was often some reheated thing, and now that the village shop sold Findus Crispy Pancakes, they seemed to feature quite often on the menu. He thought of Aunt Lucinda returning home from her work at the centre for blind veterans that she managed and cooking them meat and two veg. She'd soon taught him and Molly her own style of cooking. But Pammy was a vegetarian and Emmie, consequently, was one too. He decided that he would try to do more of the cooking, at least when he was on holiday. They usually all did the shopping together on Saturday mornings, but today was different. It was the day of the fête. Emmie was excited out of all proportion.

He was to meet Audrey Pheasant in the car park behind the rugby club. The truck would be there, decorated by Audrey and the poor souls she referred to as her Band of Willing Helpers. At least he had escaped that. Perhaps he could resign after this event. There would never be any question of him having to collect envelopes with Mrs. Greenfield if he did. Aunt Lucinda had probably never resigned from a committee in her life. She'd see things through, and if they weren't running properly, she'd change them. He sighed.

Emmie was downstairs. He heard the clatter of her breakfast things. Golden Nuggets were her current favourite. He'd tried them. They exploded in the mouth like lumps of

honeycomb toffee, a bit like the Space Dust that was her favourite sweet. Each Thursday night he'd ask what she would like and bring it home from work with him on Friday. When he asked Pammy she always said: 'The usual, please, love,' which meant a bar of Old Jamaica rum and raisin chocolate. She'd eat the whole bar on Friday night, occasionally offering him a piece. He always declined. Emmie would be given one square. Pammy said that the alcohol content might be bad for her. Sometimes he brought home Indian sweets from a shop near where he worked. Emmie wanted to know what the different ones were called but he had no idea. He'd not had them often when he was growing up.

Jay went downstairs and buttered himself a piece of cold toast. He heard the doorbell and Emmie's excited voice. The twins from two doors down were coming with them. Pammy said she'd watch the procession go by and meet them at the fête. The girls came clattering through the hall and into the kitchen. Samantha and Deborah were dressed as Chinamen, wearing embroidered blue tunics over matching trousers. Their mother must be good at running things up from old tablecloths, Jay thought, or perhaps from specially bought blue material, sequins and embroidery thread. Their red hair was scraped back into single tight plaits that hung down their backs. They wore straw coolie hats and when they took them off, he saw that their faces had been painted bright yellow and black lines had been drawn to extend their eyes upwards.

'Can I have make-up?' Emmie asked, standing on her toes and leaning over the breakfast bar. 'Please?'

'Our mum does the make-up for the All Village Show,' said Samantha (or possibly Deborah; Jay was never sure which one was which). 'She could make Emmie all red.'

Jay shook his head. 'I don't think there's time. We'd better go now. Emmie, go and get your costume on.'

Emmie ran upstairs, and a few minutes later reappeared in her Indian chief's outfit: a feathered headdress, a printed waistcoat over a plain yellow T-shirt, and brown trousers

which had zigzags and stencilled buffalo running down the sides. The girls all wore their black school plimsolls – the accepted neutral footwear for any child in fancy dress.

‘Can we take the wigwam and put it up on the float?’ she asked. Jay laughed.

‘I think it might blow over, and it probably isn’t quite what Mrs. Pheasant had in mind.’ But if they wanted an Indian, he thought, let them have whatever type of Indian Emmie wanted to be.

Emmie was ready to go when her mum appeared, hairbrush in hand.

‘You can’t ride on the back of a lorry for all the village to see without brushing your hair!’

‘Red Indians didn’t have hairbrushes,’ said Emmie.

‘Of course they did, teasels or combs made out of horses’ hooves or something,’ said Pammy. She grabbed Emmie’s unruly mane and began to drag the brush through it. Emmie squealed.

‘Just stand still,’ Pammy said. ‘It won’t hurt if you stop pulling away.’ She raised the brush threateningly at Emmie in the mirror, but she was smiling. Emmie stood to attention and submitted to the brushing.

‘Can I have two plaits?’

‘Ok.’

Emmie tried not to move as her mum used a biro to get the parting straight. Her dad and the Chinamen watched in silence. She hoped her mum wasn’t drawing a blue line down the back of her neck.

‘Come on, girls, time to go,’ said her dad.

They walked up the road and across the big field where Emmie and her best friend, Karen, often flew homemade kites. In winter it would have been churned up by rugby boots and speckled with peel from half-time orange quarters. Giant puffballs grew there too. Emmie had seen the vicar’s wife

collecting them. She'd said that you could slice them and fry them like steaks. Samantha and Deborah kept stopping because they thought they saw four-leaved clovers.

Soon they saw the decorated truck and the other Peoples of the World waiting for them. There were some extras from *The Black and White Minstrels Show*, a few self-declared Eskimos already sweating in parkas with the hoods up, various Mexicans, a flamenco dancer and a bullfighter. The vicar's wife was wearing an orange-and-red African dress with big puffy sleeves. There were some little Dutch girls with plaits made from yellow wool that had been wired so that they curved upwards, and a man in lederhosen that was much too tight for him.

Audrey Pheasant marched towards them, clipboard poised. As she came closer Emmie saw her face fall. 'Oh,' she said, 'this wasn't what I wanted at all!'

Emmie looked at her dad and he gave her a smile, then turned to Mrs. Pheasant, raising both eyebrows and tilting his head as if he was confused.

'I wanted Emmie as our centrepiece – look!' She gestured towards the truck which was festooned with sheets painted with slogans like 'Overseas Aid – Please Give Generously!', 'Help the World's Poor!', 'Hunger Kills!' and 'Help the Needy'. In the centre of the float was a dais, just big enough for a child to sit on, with a wooden bowl positioned next to it.

'Don't worry!' barked Mrs. Pheasant. 'I've got some blankets in the car we can use to get her dressed up properly!' She marched off to her blue Range Rover, opened the boot and grabbed an armful of itchy-looking tartan travel rugs and a patchwork blanket made from knitted squares.

'What's she talking about, Dad?' Emmie whispered. But Mrs. Pheasant was already back beside them. She dumped the blankets on the ground. A miasma of dog fur and dust rose into the air.

'That's the blanket we made at Brownies!' said Samantha. 'That's the blue square I made!'

‘That’s my purple one!’ said Deborah. ‘I wonder why Mrs. Pheasant’s got it for her dog. It was meant to go to the earthquake children!’

Emmie couldn’t tell which square of the many in the grey school-cardigan wool that Brown Owl had supplied was hers. Mrs. Pheasant appeared not to have heard them.

‘Now, Emmie,’ she said, ‘you can carry on wearing that T-shirt and the trousers will be hidden, so they don’t really matter. You were expected to come as your *own* sort of Indian, because we need a pretty little beggar-girl to go at the centre of the float.’

‘I don’t want to be a beggar-girl,’ said Emmie. If only she’d worn war paint and brought her bow and arrows and the scalping knife – though that was plastic and not very sharp, and the arrows had orange rubber tips, though you could take those off.

‘If we have a pretty little beggar-girl, don’t you think we’ll raise much more money for children around the world, children who wish that they lived in a nice village and went to a nice school, with nice friends like yours; children who wish that they were as lucky as you?’ Mrs. Pheasant said.

Samantha and Deborah smiled and nodded from beneath their hats.

Mrs. Pheasant made a lunge for Emmie’s headdress, grabbing and crumpling some of the feathers. ‘You won’t be needing these!’

‘You’re damaging it!’ Emmie cried. ‘You can never fix a feather once the little hooks have been undone!’

‘Now, don’t be silly,’ said Mrs. Pheasant. ‘It can ride in the truck with your dad. You can put it back on for the fancy dress parade. Now don’t you want to raise as much money as possible for the starving children?’

‘I really don’t think that she wants to be a beggar,’ said Emmie’s dad, stepping forward. ‘Why can’t some of these other children do it? The Eskimos could just take off their anoraks.’

‘Emmie’s perfect – anybody can see that. She’ll look just right. The dais is just the right size for her.’

The vicar’s wife appeared with a concerned smile. ‘Is there a problem?’

‘Emmie’s come as the wrong sort of Indian. I was led to expect an *Indian* Indian. They are reluctant to cooperate.’

Emmie felt her dad clutch her hand and give it a squeeze.

‘I don’t mind being a beggar,’ said the vicar’s wife. ‘After all, “Blessed are the poor...”’

‘Anybody else willing to be a beggar with Emmie?’ cried Mrs. Pheasant.

Samantha and Deborah shook their heads so vigorously that their plaits swished from side to side.

‘I don’t mind,’ said one of the so-called Eskimos. ‘I’m dying to get out of this coat already. Even a dog blanket would be preferable...’ She shed the parka, revealing herself to be Carol, one of the ladies from the nursery school. Emmie remembered that she’d spent most of the sessions hanging people’s paintings on a sort of indoor washing line and taking them down again to see if they were dry; they never were.

‘What do you think then, Emmie?’ said Mrs. Pheasant. ‘It isn’t as though anybody’s gone to much trouble with your costume. You can wear this nice patchwork blanket and the big beggars can wear the tartan ones.’

‘You really don’t have to, Emmie, if you don’t want to,’ said Jay, still holding her hand firmly.

‘Mr. Ash, would you like to familiarise yourself with the truck’s controls while we get everybody into position?’

‘Only when Emmie’s made up her mind,’ said Jay.

Mrs. Pheasant squatted down in front of Emmie. ‘Come along now, Emmie, it will make all the difference,’ she said. ‘Afterwards I’ll buy you and the other girls some ice cream or candy floss.’

‘Go on, Emmie!’ chorused the Chinamen.

‘Well, OK,’ said Emmie.

‘Good girl!’ said Mrs. Pheasant. ‘Come on, everybody! Let’s get you all into position!’

Mrs. Pheasant lifted Emmie up onto the truck and struggled up after her to construct her tableau. Emmie was led to the dais and instructed to sit down.

‘If you can squat on your haunches like a real beggar, all the better,’ said Mrs. Pheasant.

‘I can’t,’ said Emmie, ‘my legs don’t like doing that.’

‘Just do your best.’ Mrs. Pheasant draped the Brownies’ blanket over her. The vicar’s wife and Carol from the nursery school sat down either side of her. The dais was so high that, even sitting, she towered above them.

‘At least we get to sit down,’ said the vicar’s wife. ‘I’ve been on my feet since six thirty this morning setting up the teas and building the stocks and pillories.’

‘What’s stocks and pillories?’ asked Emmie.

‘A medieval punishment device. The person who’d done something wrong was put in them, trapped, so that all of the villagers could laugh at them and throw rotten tomatoes and fish.’

‘A bit like this?’ Emmie asked.

‘Of course not! Nobody will throw anything apart from money into our buckets. People will be throwing wet sponges at my husband and the akela. And it’s for fun.’

‘Not like this then,’ said Emmie grimly.

‘No, not like this at all.’

‘I’m going to tell Brown Owl that Mrs. Pheasant has stolen the blanket we made for Africa,’ said Emmie. The grown-ups pretended not to have heard, but Emmie saw Carol give a little smile.

The Peoples of the World were in position now. The so-called Eskimos had begun catching tin foil fish from a pink washing-up bowl using rods made from bamboo canes.

‘Everybody ready? Mr. Ash, time to go!’ shouted Mrs. Pheasant.

Emmie’s dad gave her a reassuring wave and plodded towards the cab.

Mrs. Pheasant loomed up at his window. ‘Ready to go? Just give me a minute to climb back onboard, and then we can be off. Take it nice and steady, please, no more than ten miles an hour. The procession is forming on the road to the green.’ She climbed up onto the truck and gave two sharp bangs on the roof of the cab. They fell into position behind the village cricket team’s not very imaginative effort on the theme of cricket teams through the ages.

‘They always do that. No imagination, men,’ said Carol, craning round to look at the float in front of them. Behind them was the St John’s Ambulance float which was on the theme of the St John’s Ambulance because, the vicar’s wife pointed out, its members were also on duty.

‘What if one of them gets hurt?’ asked Emmie.

‘Well, I suppose the others can easily look after them,’ said Carol.

‘But what if they all get hurt?’

‘That’s very unlikely,’ said the vicar’s wife, ‘but I suppose somebody would just call a proper ambulance.’

Emmie couldn’t think of anything worse than being one of the members of the St John’s Ambulance on that float. Imagine having to wear a grey dress that was even more boring than a Brownie’s dress! Imagine having to just watch everything, waiting, probably just *hoping* that somebody would get hurt by falling into the hook-the-duck paddling pool. As the truck’s fumes began to envelop them, she realised that there was something worse than being in uniform on the St John’s Ambulance float, and that was being made to dress up as a beggar and wear a blanket that was meant to be sent to starving children in Africa and was now covered in dog fur. Everybody would see her. They might think she was really a beggar. She pulled the blanket up over her head and threw one end of it over her shoulder so that it was wrapped around her. She could only just see out. Up ahead was a brass band playing tunes that she recognised but didn’t know the names of. A few floats behind them were some majorettes with their

own music. She hoped they'd all drop their stupid pompoms. And why did they have to wear those stupid long white boots?

'Excellent, Emmie! That's the spirit! You look just the little Indian beggar-girl!' shouted Mrs. Pheasant from her position at the back of the float. 'But keep those big brown eyes on show!'

Emmie shrank down even lower. Perhaps if she made herself small enough people might not realise there was anybody there. They might think that there were just two grown-up beggars sitting beside an old blanket.

'Don't forget your begging bowl! Let's see that little brown hand reaching out for alms!' called Mrs. Pheasant.

Emmie could feel the tears welling up. They might start falling into Mrs. Pheasant's stupid wooden fruit bowl. She'd probably love that. She felt the vicar's wife patting her leg.

'I'll hold the bowl. You've been really nice, Emmie, doing what Mrs. Pheasant wants. Just sit tight there, and everybody will be clapping and giving money as we go by.'

Emmie nodded, unable to speak. She thought of her class on Monday morning. Would everybody be laughing and pointing at her? Through the tiny gap she'd left for her eyes she could see that people had come out of their houses and were standing outside their front gates, clapping and shouting hello to people they knew as the procession passed. There was a gang of boys from the class above her on bikes. She pulled the blanket tighter and hoped and hoped that nobody could tell it was her. There were bits of dried mud and grass and fur caught in the wool. Mrs. Pheasant had three big spaniels. Until now Emmie had liked them because they were so bouncy and their ears were so silky; she'd often seen them on walks or tied up outside the shop or the village hall. Now she knew how awful the smell of them was. They were probably secretly mean dogs who snarled and bit.

Samantha and Deborah were blowing kisses to people and waving as though they were royal. The boys on bikes were riding alongside them now. Emmie saw one of them

throw something. It landed near her feet. Debbie scrambled for it, so it couldn't be something disgusting, the sort of yucky thing that boys usually threw. It was the end of a packet of strawberry Spangles. Debbie pushed one through a gap in the blanket at her.

'Who's that under the blanket?' the boy yelled.

'It's Emmie Ash!' Samantha yelled back.

'Why's she hiding? Is she in the nuddy?' He cackled and rode back to his friends.

'Get off and milk it!' yelled Debbie, but the boy was already out of earshot. *Get off and milk it.* Emmie had always found that phrase completely baffling, and if someone shouted it at you when you rode by, there didn't seem to be anything to reply. But then, her own bike was decorated with red-and-white Humphrey stickers from the milkman, so perhaps in a way it did make sense.

They were getting near the river and the procession was slowing now. As they went over the bridge she could jump up, throw off the blanket (or keep it as evidence to take to the police) and dive into the water and swim away. She would miss the worst bit – circling the village green. But then she remembered, the water would be at its summer lowness. It wouldn't even cover her ankles. She'd have to climb down from the truck and run away, or else just stay there and hope she was invisible until it was all over. Now it was their turn to go over the bridge. She saw the sign *No Heavy Goods Vehicles*. What was a heavy goods vehicle? No idea. She imagined the bridge crumbling and collapsing, the truck landing in the gravel. She would just paddle to the riverbank and go home. She crossed her fingers and hoped. With the brass band ahead of them, the noise of all the trucks, and the majorettes somewhere behind them, she couldn't even hear the water as they passed over to the other side. The truck picked up speed. She was trapped.

Jay was growing hotter inside the cab. The seats were made from a pale brown leatherette, the exact colour of Caramac,

the sort of chocolate that Emmie hated because it wasn't actually chocolate. They felt sticky beneath him, as though they had begun melting already. An ancient copy of the *Daily Express* lay crackling into dust on the floor, alongside what was probably the remains of somebody's meat paste sandwich. He nudged them aside with his foot. He thought of the beloved cargo balanced on that dais behind him. He could see a Viking ship and a Noah's Ark up ahead. He had not only sold his precious daughter down the river but was driving the boat himself.

He glanced over at the crumpled feathers on the seat beside him. That woman! How dare she do that to Emmie and her headdress! He thought he might send her a bill for it. A dark blue and a green feather were badly bent, and those either side of them looked ruffled and greasy where they'd been grabbed. Bloody bully. Emmie loved that costume.

He couldn't wait for this stupid morning to be over. He'd buy Emmie as many ice creams as she wanted at the fête, and then they'd go home. Well, he'd have to drive the truck back to the rugby club, but that shouldn't take long. Emmie could ride back in the cab with him if she wanted. She'd like that. It would be a good antidote to this whole sorry morning. And then he'd resign from the committee. He wasn't going to put up with any more of this, and neither was Emmie. He tried to go a little faster, but the crucial gap he was meant to be keeping between his lot and the load ahead disappeared, and he had to slow down again. They were approaching the green now for the final laps. Pammy should be here somewhere. He hoped Emmie would spot her and that it would cheer her up. Past The Royal Oak. They'd only been there once. The landlord had stood there polishing glasses and talking to everybody but him until he'd been forced to return empty-handed to the table in the garden, where Pammy and Emmie were waiting, and say that they had to leave. They crawled past the Spar. He didn't often go in there either, but that was because it was hardly ever open when he wasn't at work.

Maybe one day he could slip in and ask them to stop stocking Findus Crispy Pancakes, or at least see if they had anything preferable and mention it to Pammy. Tonight he would make it up to Emmie. They'd have one of their special Saturday nights. Emmie loved it when they got their old records out. They had a great big basket of singles – the Everly Brothers, Elvis, Ricky Nelson (who Pammy said he looked like when they met), The Beatles, The Crystals, The Ronettes. Emmie loved the songs with stories – 'Leader of the Pack', 'Take a Message to Mary', 'Twenty-Four Hours from Tulsa'.

They passed the church and had to circle the green once more. He spotted Pammy with some other mothers, all dressed in identical outfits of white cheesecloth shirts and jeans.

At last they reached their final position. He parked and climbed out of the cab. Emmie was sitting at the back with the blanket rolled up and cradled in her arms like a newborn. He smiled and lifted her down.

'Let's steal the blanket back, Dad, and send it to the poor.'

'Ok.' He stashed it in the cab and gave Emmie her headdress. She let it dangle from her wrist rather than putting it on. They found Pammy looking at the plant stall.

'Did it look like me on the lorry, Mum?' Emmie said.

Jay, standing behind Emmie, shook his head vigorously.

'I could hardly tell which one was you!'

'Mrs. Pheasant made me be a beggar!'

'Well, you don't look anything like a beggar now. Let's go and look at the other stalls.' She took Emmie's hand. Jay wondered if he could go home for the next two hours.

'I think I'll just go and wait on that bench,' he said. 'Come and find me when you're done.'

After a very long time, Pammy brought him a cheese scone with margarine wrapped in a paper napkin. It was time for the fancy dress parade. They watched as Emmie, now wearing her headdress, walked in a huge circle with a few dozen other children. She was behind her best friend, Karen Martin, who was wearing a baffling ensemble – a blue nylon

zip-up tracksuit with bright green crêpe paper stems and leaves coiling around her legs and body, and a green crêpe paper hat like the one the Disney Robin Hood wore. There was a gang of princesses in party dresses teamed with conical hats made from old wallpaper with chiffon scarves sellotaped to the top, cowboys, knights, kings and queens, a penguin, several cats and dogs, and someone who had come as the red double-decker bus that was kept in the vicarage drive and used for Sunday school outings.

‘That girl’s jolly good,’ said Jay, indicating an elaborate Elizabeth I.

‘Don’t say that to Emmie, that’s Sue Namey, the girl she doesn’t like.’

There wasn’t really a contest. Elizabeth I won. The bus came second and a toddler cat third. Roy Castle played the *Record Breakers* tune on his trumpet and presented the prizes.

‘Is it going to be a world record of something?’ asked Emmie.

World’s Longest Day, thought Jay, Slowest Moving Queue for the Candy Floss.

‘Most Unwanted Bath Salts Donated to a Village Fête?’ said Pammy. They bought Emmie and Karen ice creams, Audrey Pheasant’s offer having melted away.

‘I’m really tired,’ said Pammy, as she took Jay’s hand, and they found a table outside the tea tent. ‘Get us a cup of tea, love.’ She smiled up at him. ‘Is every fête so exhausting?’

Karen had to go home. She hadn’t minded that her runner bean costume hadn’t won a prize. Karen never minded much about anything. Emmie had minded on her behalf, and had hoped to win herself too, of course. They were calling the raffle numbers, but she and Mum hadn’t bought any tickets so it didn’t matter.

Emmie couldn’t see her mum and dad. She took off her headdress and hung it around one of her wrists again. She

decided to walk around the edge of everything to try to find them. Lots of the stalls had been abandoned while the grown-ups gathered to see if they had won raffle prizes. It was lucky, she thought, that nobody was stealing the leftover things on the tombola or having free goes on the coconut shy or hook-the-duck. She came to the plate-smashing stall. There were a few plates left on the shelves and a big cardboard box with a few saucers that had escaped. How awful, Emmie thought, to deliberately break such pretty things. The ground was littered with pieces of broken china. She squatted to get a better look. Lots had flowers or ivy leaves on, some were a bright blue with big white dots, and the most beautiful piece had a yellow bird. She started to look for other yellow birds or pieces of the beautiful blue. There was a screwed-up paper bag in the cardboard box. She checked nobody was looking and then took that to put her pieces in. Perhaps she could glue all the bits back together or make a mosaic. She started to pick up pieces with tiny pink roses on as well. She cut her finger a bit, but it wasn't too bad.

‘What are you doing? Picking up rubbish like a gypsy? You think you can sell it?’ Emmie looked up. Sue loomed above her in her Elizabeth I costume. She was eating candy floss and bits of it were stuck around her mouth.

‘I’m going to make something,’ said Emmie, standing up.

‘No one would want to buy anything you made. It would be too dirty.’

‘I wouldn’t *sell* it. And there’s a wasp on your hair,’ said Emmie. ‘You’d better stand still until it goes away.’ Now she could see her parents walking towards her. Emmie took her bag of fragments and set off to meet them. After a while she glanced back. Sue had dropped her candy floss and was standing there as still as a statue with her arms stretched out. There would probably be a wasp by now anyway.

Her dad had to deliver the truck back to the rugby club, so they squashed into the cab together. She sat in the middle,

leaning her head first on her mum's shoulder and then on her dad's.

'Let's go for a little drive,' said her dad. They drove away from the village and on to the main road. Her dad said that if they kept going they would hit the south coast. They could take the truck and run away. They could get the ferry from Newhaven and be in France in a few hours. They would just keep driving. He sped up.

'Let's just go,' he said. 'We can go to Italy and all the places we've always wanted to see, drive across Europe, follow the hippy trail, the Silk Road...' Emmie's mum laughed and reached behind Emmie to put her cool hand on the back of his neck, the way she did. At the next roundabout there were signs for Brighton. He took that exit. Her mother laughed some more.

'But who will feed Freddy?' cried Emmie.

'Ah,' he said, 'that's a good point.' At the next roundabout they turned back.

At home, Emmie realised that there was no way she could rebuild any of the plates. She took the fragments out to the little flowerbed that was hers. The marigolds she had grown were strong and bright. She fetched some buckets of sand from her old sandpit to make a background then pressed the china pieces into patterns around her flowers. She was going to call her mum and dad to come and have a look but decided to keep it a secret. They'd get a lovely surprise when they saw it. They might think it was a real one like at Fishbourne Roman Palace. When she went back indoors her parents were in the kitchen making potato and cauliflower curry for tea and listening to the Everly Brothers.

'Can we have poppadsoms?'

'Of course!' said her mum.

After dinner they closed the curtains in the front room even though it wasn't dark, and her mum lit some candles. Emmie chose a stack of records and piled them up ready to play. Then

the three of them danced, twisting and shouting as though they were the only people in the world.

Emmie's dad always put on 'Elizabethan Serenade' when it was time for Emmie to go to bed, and he always said the same thing:

'Your Auntie Molly and I stood on deck when the ship was leaving Bombay and they played this tune. We were so excited. I arrived in England richer already because I was so good at working out how many miles the ship had travelled each day. Every time I bought a ticket I won. Other people guessed, but I worked it out.'

When Emmie was in bed her mum came in to kiss her goodnight. She sat on the bed trying to smooth out the feathers of the headdress.

'Happy? Nice day?' Emmie sat up.

'Mum, was Daddy a beggar in India?'

'Of course he wasn't! His parents died, it was the war, and then his English family looked after him.'

'What about his Indian family?'

'We don't know much about them. He didn't see them again after he went away to boarding school.'

'Not even his mum?'

'Not even his mum, Josmi. He doesn't even have a photo of her.' She rubbed the end of one of Emmie's plaits against her cheek.

'Are the Indian family all dead then?'

'We don't really know.'

'He could go and look for them.'

'He doesn't want to go back. Everything has changed.'

'I would want to go back. I would want to find out.'

'You know he doesn't like talking about the sad things.' She kissed Emmie on the forehead and gently pushed her back down. 'Sleep well, sweetheart.'

'I'll have to wash my hair tomorrow or Sue Namey will say that it smells of curry.'

'OK, honey. Sleep well. Don't think about Sue Namey.'

Emmie tried not to think about Sue Namey. Instead she thought about the grandmother whose photo they didn't have. She knew that her name had been Josmi Tantiani, and that was really pretty. She said it out loud: *Josmi Tantiani, Josmi Tantiani*. But what had she looked like? Perhaps like the sippy girl with huge eyes at the end of *The Jungle Book*. Emmie would have stayed with Baloo. She knew what her dead grandpa had looked like – they had a picture of him on the mantelpiece. He was riding a horse. You couldn't see his face very well. Imagine, thought Emmie, if you suddenly never saw your own mum ever again.



Press the button to hear the Everly Brothers sing
'Take A Message to Mary'.