

chutes & ladders

by Audrey McGee

Cast of Characters

LEIF

A VOICE

The CARTOGRAPHER

chutes & ladders was originally written and performed as part of Taproot Theatre's intern showcase, titled *Bloom*, in August of 2024.

Scene 1:

VOICE: Welcome. Begin.

Lights up on LEIF, who blinks into the light and looks around. They see a ladder.

LEIF: Begin? Climbing?

VOICE: Begin. There's a lot to do.

LEIF: Okay.

LEIF moves toward the ladder.

LEIF: Where am I going exactly? *(there is no response)* Cool.

LEIF turns toward the ladder with the intent to climb. They follow the VOICE's instructions.

VOICE: Arms up. Grab hold. One leg up, opposite arm up, grab hold. Again. And again.

LEIF: Oh, I can see it.

VOICE: Again. Once more. *(LEIF hops off the ladder.)* Great job. Breathe. *(LEIF breathes)*

LEIF: Neat – I can see so much from here! *(deep sigh)* Thanks.

VOICE: Begin.

LEIF: Oh, there's more?

VOICE: Begin.

LEIF: This is exciting.

They go back to the ladder and start to climb. The VOICE says nothing. LEIF looks for it but keeps going. They pause to crack their neck and shake out their limbs a moment.

VOICE: Keep going.

LEIF: Oh, I will, I just need—

VOICE: Keep going.

LEIF: Sorry. *(they continue to climb.)* Got it. *(hops off the ladder again.)* You were right. This is amazing. Just look at how far I've come! And over there! No way. Woah, where's that place? It's so far away, I can barely make it out. I gotta go back down, I gotta get there and see—

VOICE: Begin.

LEIF: Oh, no, I'm not going up again, sorry—

VOICE: Begin.

LEIF: *(getting on the ladder)* Going down.

VOICE: BEGIN.

LEIF: Later.

VOICE: NO.

LEIF stops.

LEIF: But I'm done here. I know where I'm gonna go, or at least where I'm going first.

VOICE: NO.

LEIF: Oh. Well. I guess it would be neat to go to the top. I shouldn't be too far, right?

VOICE: Begin.

LEIF: Sure.

They begin climbing again. Blackout.

Scene 2:

Cold lights up on LEIF, shivering, exhausted, and slightly in pain, climbing.

LEIF: I've been in this cloud for hours. I can't see anything. And you've been making me go longer every time, don't think I haven't noticed.

VOICE: Wrong. *(LEIF winces)* Try again.

LEIF: What?

VOICE: Try again.

LEIF: *(in a small voice)* Oh no.

They keep climbing, trying to out-climb the pain of the VOICE.

VOICE: Wrong. Try again.

LEIF: I'm still going up!

They scream as they're knocked down a couple pegs.

VOICE: Wrong. Try again.

LEIF: Up, up! I'll do better, I promise. I promise. *(beat)* Almost there.

VOICE: Wrong. Try again.

LEIF: Sorry.

VOICE: Wrong.

LEIF: Almost there.

VOICE: Wrong.

The light comes out stronger and warming, and LEIF's shivering slows.

LEIF: We're out! And I'm here...at...at the top.

They look upwards. Above them, there's an endless length of ladder still stretching into the sky.

LEIF: What? *(They look down)* There's nothing. It's just clouds, there's nothing.

VOICE: Begin.

LEIF: What is this?

VOICE: Begin.

LEIF: *(still clinging onto the ladder)* What. Is this? *(beat)* Is this a joke? Is this hell? I don't know anything anymore.

VOICE: The more you know, the more you realize you don't know.

LEIF: Forever. This ladder goes on. Forever. Each rung I climb, another infinity adds onto it above me, is that it? No. no. no. no.

They just hang there on the ladder.

VOICE: Begin.

LEIF: Go away. I'm going back down.

VOICE: NO.

LEIF: Don't care.

They begin climbing down.

VOICE: NO.

LEIF doesn't respond.

VOICE: NO. WAIT.

The ladder breaks above LEIF.

LEIF: No.

Blackout.

Scene 3:

Lights up on LEIF in the place they spotted from far off. It's colorful. It has texture, levels – it looks more like a Place than a Void. Ethereal music, plus some sort of natural sound (animals, wind, birds), can be heard. LEIF is passed out, clutching a roll of paper. The CARTOGRAPHER enters. They have many maps sticking out of a pack/bag, with several pens stuck behind their ears and a smattering of inkblots. They're holding one map out in front of them as they hum a little tune, looking around. They notice LEIF.

CART: Oh. Hello. *(LEIF stirs)* Good for you. You look like you've had a time.

LEIF: Hi.

CART: *(pleasantly)* Hm.

LEIF: Where's the ladder?

CART: Do you need one?

LEIF: No.

CART: Good, I don't have one.

LEIF: Is there a lot to do?

CART: Oh, absolutely.

LEIF: Not again.

CART: There's not a lot you have to do. There's a lot you can do. There's the mountains over that way, the forest's by the lake, and I don't know how far you can go in this direction.

LEIF: But the more you know, the more you realize you don't know.

CART: Sure. But just cause you haven't seen the inland doesn't mean the coast is worthless. Here. *(shows map)* have a look.

LEIF: Wow. That's beautiful.

CART: There's a lot empty. Empty for adventure. Want to come?

LEIF: I'd just be slow. And I don't know anything.

CART: Then what's that?

LEIF notices and unrolls their paper. It's a beautiful map.

LEIF: What? What is this? When did I...

CART: You don't always notice. You might want one of these, though. *(hands LEIF a pen)*
Ready to begin?

LEIF: Can we go this direction?

CART: Lead the way.

End of play.