



## The Stranger

It was raining when he arrived at the edge of town, unnoticed by the locals taking refuge from the weather. The rain did not seem to bother him, though, and he climbed down from his perch atop the grey beast and offered it a shiny red apple pulled from a small sack attached to the reins. The beast reached out with nimble lips and plucked the apple from his hand, munching heartily. The man loosened the reins and removed the sack before retreating into the shelter of the small, covered wagon that trailed behind. It was old and wooden, with a tin roof off which the rain plinked and plunked as it fell. A lantern, now lit inside, cast its warm, yellow glow through the window; soon after, smoke began to curl from the tiny chimney at one end as the man settled in for the night. The grey beast gave a snort and shook her head, then lowered herself to the soft earth beneath her feet and went to sleep.

When morning came, it did not take long for word of the stranger to spread amongst the townsfolk. The man, himself, was a bit of an oddity; Riverbend did not receive many through-travelers, and certainly none with a companion as exotic as his. Mr. Wabash had spotted his campsite in the distance on his way to open the tavern for Sunday breakfast and, curious, ventured out into the field to have a look.

“Hello there,” he called, cautiously, so as not to startle the beast. There was a clanking from inside the wagon and movement past the window before a little door on the front creaked open and a tall, thin man with dark hair and weathered skin stepped out to greet him. “Good morning, Sir, good morning!” he boomed in a voice unexpected from a man of such slender stature. He grabbed the right hand of Mr. Wabash, cupping it in both of his and shaking it with enthusiasm. It was clear he had not had human company for quite some time and was glad to make a new acquaintance.

“Good morning,” answered Mr. Wabash, recovering from the surprise of the zealous greeting.

“Thaddeus Turner,” said the thin man, introducing himself, “Pleased to meet you.”

“Finneas Wabash. Likewise, I’m sure. Quite a storm we had last night.”

“Oh that...just a little rain is all. Nothing Molly and I aren’t used to. Isn’t that right Molly old girl,” he said, landing a friendly swat on the rump of the beast. She snorted and twitched her ear.

Thaddeus stood, his hands on his hips and a wide grin on his face, as he surveyed his surrounding and looked toward the town at the edge of the field. “So, where is it that I’ve landed this time,” he asked.

“Riverbend,” offered Finneas, still unsure of the new arrival.

“Riverbend. Aaah....I like the sound of that,” said Thaddeus.

“I was just on my way to open the tavern. Sunday services will be done soon and most of the town will be by for breakfast. You’re welcome to stop in as well.”

“Thank you, I’d like that,” said Thaddeus. “Been a long time since I shared a meal in the company of anyone besides Molly.” She snorted again and shook her head, upsetting a little brown bird that had perched atop the giant horn at the end of her nose. “Oh c’mon old girl, I didn’t mean anything by it. You’re just not much of a talker and a little conversation would be nice from time to time. I’ll be along shortly, Mr. Finneas. Thanks for the invite.”

Finneas returned to town and readied the tavern for the morning rush. As the townspeople began to arrive, the place was abuzz with talk of the traveler and his strange companion. None was more interested than Ginny Lane, who sat quietly at the corner table with her father, while he and their neighbors debated the possible intentions of the newcomer. Riverbend was a happy place, but tame to the heart of the young girl who yearned for fresh adventures she could only dream of in such a small town. Hanging on every word, Ginny struggled to contain her excitement. She slipped from the table, barely noticed amid the fervent conversation, intent on going out to the field to have a look for herself. She opened the door to the tavern and hurried down the front steps so lost in her own thoughts that she nearly ran into him.

“Well hello,” he said, grabbing her shoulders to steady her as she stumbled sideways.

“Hi.” Ginny grinned, embarrassed by her clumsiness, and tried to regain her composure. A tall man with friendly eyes and a kind smile stood before her and Ginny knew instantly that her life would never be the same.

“You’re Mr. Turner.”

“Yes, but Thaddeus will do. And you?”

“Ginny. Ginny Lane”

“Pleased to meet you, Ginny Lane.” His smile was warm and genuine, as wide and welcoming as the vast blue sky above them. “I was just heading inside for some

breakfast and a little company and here you are and I must say I'm disappointed to see you're leaving."

Ginny blushed and lowered her eyes, but only for a quick moment. He was too interesting, too tempting somehow, and she had to look at him again. He was still smiling at her. Ginny smiled back.

"I heard you have a rhinoceros," she said. "Is that true?"

"Molly? Absolutely. Would you like to meet her?"

"Mmhm," Ginny shook her head eagerly in agreement and they turned and headed toward the field.

She peppered him with questions along the way and Thaddeus obliged her with answers, happy to have someone so eager for conversation. He had been the world over while Ginny had never once left Riverbend in all her nineteen years; they were different in so many ways, alike in so many others. They talked and laughed and talked some more that day. They talked past lunch and well past dinner and it wasn't until the stars began to shine in the night sky that they noticed how much time had passed.

"I really should be getting back," said Ginny. "Dad will be wondering about me by now."

"Ginny Lane, I certainly have enjoyed your company today."

"And I yours, Mr. Thaddeus," she said. "May I come back tomorrow and help you with Molly?" Hearing her name, Molly grunted and shifted slightly where she lay. "I could bring her some apples and perhaps some carrots if you think she'd like them."

Thaddeus stole a quick glance at the night sky and a thousand tiny points of light stared back at him, twinkling. "Yes," he said, "I think Molly would quite like to see you again." Molly snorted at this and twitched her ear and Ginny laughed.

"I best be off then."

"What kind of gentleman would I be to allow a young girl to walk home alone after dark? Come along Molly, you could use a stretch. We'll escort Miss Ginny home." The three of them walked slowly back toward the town. As they walked they talked some more, their laughter breaking the stillness of the night air and drawing curious townsfolk to peer out their windows at the peculiar sight of Ginny strolling home alongside the tall stranger, a rhinoceros ambling along behind them.

There would be talk of Ginny and the stranger in the days that followed but Thaddeus, being the kind and jovial fellow that he was, quickly inserted himself into the daily routines of the townspeople and they grew to appreciate his presence and quite enjoy his company. Even Molly became a beloved sight around town, being offered more than her fair share of apples and treats. Thaddeus and Ginny spent most days together, as if somehow making up for lost time. Tales of his travels quieted her

wanderlust while the regularity of small town life seemed to suit him and Riverbend settled in to its new normal.

It had been almost a month since he had arrived when Mr. Wabash, serving up breakfast in the tavern one morning, commented to Thaddeus on his aching knees. "It's nothing, though," said Finneas. "Always throbs a bit before the rain. It'll pass with the storm and I'll be good as new 'til the next one."

Thaddeus stopped, fork half way to his mouth. "Rain?"

"Yep. A bit overdue, too. My garden will appreciate it even if my knees won't. It's been...four weeks? That's a long time to go without rain this time of year."

Mr. Wabash continued on, talking about his garden and the weather and what else Thaddeus did not know for he had stopped listening, thinking instead of the rain. How could he have lost track of it, forgotten it entirely? But of course he knew the answer to that and his mind turned to thoughts of Ginny and how he would explain...*should* he explain....and if he did, what then?

---

Ginny cleared the breakfast dishes from the table, the sound of forks clinking against plates breaking the quiet that fell upon their house this particular morning. It was dark and the air felt thick and damp...rain was coming. Her father stared out at the heavy grey clouds from his chair beside the window. He seemed troubled, just as Thaddeus had seemed yesterday, and as much as Ginny wanted to ignore it, she felt a growing unease.

"Wonder how much we'll get," she said, wringing the soapy water from her dish rag before wiping the crumbs from the table.

"How much?"

"Rain. It certainly looks as if it's coming. The way it's been saving up for weeks, it's bound to be quite a downpour. Perhaps Thaddeus and I will talk to Mr. Hempkin about letting Molly sleep in the stables tonight. I'm sure he wouldn't mind. I suppose, being a rhinoceros, Molly is quite used to sleeping out in the rain, but I have to imagine she'd enjoy a nice dry bed of hay to a cold puddle in the field."

Ginny prattled on, trying her best to make conversation and lighten the mood that hung as heavy as the rain clouds over their house this morning. But her father wasn't listening. As he stared out the window, thoughts of long ago, of happiness and heartbreak, tumbled through his mind and he knew it was time to tell her. He reached for his pipe and, pulling a pouch from his pocket, filled it carefully before tamping it down, striking a match and placing the flame over the bowl. As he drew in, the strands of tobacco glowed orange and he tasted faint hints of cherry and vanilla in the smoke.

“Ginny, come sit with me.” He moved to the sofa and patted the empty space beside him.

Ginny wiped the last plate dry and placed it back in the cupboard. Smoke curled from the end of his pipe and filled the room with a sweet aroma that reminded her of childhood and the bedtime stories he used to tell her. It was a cozy, warm scent that made her feel safe and happy and she smiled at him as she walked over to where he sat. Pulling her bare feet up under her skirt, she hugged her knees and curled up next to him on the sofa. The uneasiness that started to take hold in the pit of her stomach yesterday was growing, although she didn't know why.

“Ginny, dear, there's something I need to tell you. Something I had hoped I'd never have to tell you, sweetheart... but I'm afraid the time has finally come.”

The uneasiness turned to stone and sank in her stomach, taking her heart along with it. The grey sky outside grew darker still and for a moment she thought of Thaddeus. Ginny closed her eyes and swallowed hard and then, taking a slow, deep breath, she braced herself for her father's words. She opened her eyes. There was no one she trusted more than this man who had cared for her so unselfishly all these years, the man who looked at her now with such love in his eyes and such sadness on his face. Ginny reached out and touched a finger to her father's lips.

“No. Please don't,” she whispered, knowing somehow that the words he was about to speak would forever change things.

He took her hand and kissed it gently, holding it in his own. As he looked at her, he was reminded of her mother's beauty and how it had been impossible not to love her despite the heartbreak. He would have done anything for her, just as he would...as he *did*... for Ginny.

“Ginny, dear, I had hoped this day would not come, but it has, and I can no longer be sure if keeping the secret is to protect your heart or my own.”

Despite the sinking feeling Ginny had in the pit of her stomach, there was an equal measure of excitement bubbling somewhere deep within her. The allure of a secret tantalized her. The arrival of Thaddeus had been the first real excitement in Riverbend in as long as Ginny could remember. His tales of traveling the world had both sated and stirred her thirst for adventure, and now that a secret was upon her father's lips she could not deny her fascination. Ginny's longing for the thrill of discovery had always troubled her father and he did his best to channel it in constructive ways, leaving her feeling both deeply loved and slightly disappointed. It was exactly this confliction that had prompted her to try to stop her father from sharing the secret that so obviously pained him. But it was too late for that now...the telling had begun.

Many years ago, in the nearby town of Knollwood, a young Jonathan Lane pined after the beautiful Abigail Hester. She was a free spirit with long blond tresses that trailed behind her as she ran through the wildflowers in the field just outside of their village. He would sit upon the stone wall at the edge of town and watch her run and spin and giggle and laugh, delighted by the butterflies that fluttered on the summer breeze.

She would ask him to join her for walks in the woods; he always declined and reminded her that the woods were forbidden, urging her to come back from beyond the stone walls that marked the town's border. He was fascinated by her and in love with her exuberance, although it frightened him a little, and Abigail appreciated his kindness and the sweet way he tried to protect her even though she didn't feel the need for protection. As they grew older, they remained fast friends – their differences precluding a love relationship as Abigail explained to him. She had plans of adventure in faraway places as soon as she was old enough to leave home on her own, which would be soon, she'd told him.

And then one day, the clouds came...enormous and heavy and grey and seeded with raindrops that would soon descend in sheets and collect in puddles the size of small ponds in the streets of town. Abigail, her clothes soaked through, knocked on Jonathan's door and took his hand and pleaded with him to join her in the field. She loved the rain...loved to dance in it and let it shower over her, washing away her cares and renewing her soul. His attention was drawn to the way her sodden dress clung to her ample breasts, defining them and making it hard for him to refuse her. But Jonathan did not think it wise to go out in such weather and invited her in for tea instead. She kissed him on the cheek and he watched as she ran barefoot toward the edge town.

The next morning, Abigail knocked again on Jonathan's door, this time with news to share. A stranger had arrived in the field last night, his carriage appearing suddenly in the rain. Had she not been there to see it for herself she would not have believed it possible. One minute she was alone with the field to herself, the next he was there, the rain plinking and plunking off the tin roof of his carriage. Seeing her out in the storm, he opened the carriage door and invited her in. He had a kind smile and was as eager for company as Abigail was to learn his secrets and she had spent the night hearing of faraway lands and travels beyond her wildest dreams. She took Jonathan to meet him and, just as she'd said, he was a kind and friendly man. The three of them spent the next several days together, although Jonathan was there more to keep an eye on Abigail than for his own enjoyment. She hung on the stranger's every word, and, encouraged by her attention, he shared with them his secret. The stranger told them how he traveled with the rain...through time and over great distances, to all the places the rain had ever fallen. He could no more control his travels than one could control the rain...he came when it came and stayed until it fell once more, until the drops touched the tin roof of his carriage causing it to shudder and shake and disappear into the clouds. And by the time the storm would pass, he would be someplace else...where, exactly, he never knew until he arrived. Abigail was awestruck and captivated by his tale and Jonathan was unable to compete any longer for her attention. The stranger and Abigail spent their days together and, fearing the rain would come unexpectedly, Abigail began to sneak away after dark and spend the nights with him as well. She spared no parts of her charm and beauty convincing him to take her along when the rains returned and, being young and foolishly selfish, he agreed.

And so, when the clouds grew grey and heavy once more, she returned to the field, intent on leaving with the stranger. In her excitement, Abigail shared with him the news she had planned to save until she was sure...that she was pregnant with his child. The stranger, having traveled alone for so long, was both shocked and delighted

at the prospect of a family. But as the air grew thick and damp, he grew quiet and his mind wandered. Abigail, too distracted by thoughts of the adventures that lay before them, barely noticed.

The clouds gathered in number and the sky grew dark, but still the rains did not come. Abigail became impatient and the stranger suggested she take a stroll through her beloved field while they wait; a final farewell to the wildflowers and butterflies that had brought her such joy, for there was no guarantee she would ever see this place again. The field had always held a special place in Abigail's heart and she lost herself in it again that afternoon. When finally the skies opened and the rains fell, Abigail found herself at the far end of the clearing. The drops were big and fat and fell quickly, obscuring her view of the carriage. She ran towards it as fast as her legs would carry her, faster than she'd ever run before, but it was of no use. The rain plinked and plunked off the tin roof and the carriage shuddered and shook and by the time she reached the spot it had been...it was gone. Heartbroken, she lay down in the field and clutched the earth and sobbed as her dress soaked in the rain and puddles formed all around her.

It was here that Jonathan found her the following morning when he had gone to the field to see if it was true; if, in fact, the carriage had disappeared with the storm, taking with it the love of his life. She told him everything that day, and although he knew he could never be all she wanted, that she would always long for more than he could provide, he promised to take care of her forever and to care for her child as their own. They were soon married and, in the hopes of lifting her spirits, he moved them to a new town called Riverbend. It was not far, but far enough, he hoped, to seem a little like an adventure and they settled into a life together as the friends they had always been. When the baby came, Abigail loved her dearly and for a short time life was sweet. But eventually, her wanderlust got the better of her and she took to sitting in the field at the edge of town whenever the rains came... waiting. The townsfolk talked of her, of course, but none knew the real reason behind her peculiar habit. Abigail desperately wanted her life in Riverbend to be enough. She wanted to feel for Jonathan the way he felt for her. But more than either of those things she wanted that carriage to return and take her to the faraway places she'd dreamed of all her life. Each time the rains came she waited. And each time a little more of her spirit faded away until she was as grey as the clouds themselves. And finally, one morning, lying prone in the field after a storm, the disappointment and heartbreak more than she could bear any longer, she took her last breath, closed her eyes and left her life behind.

Jonathan kept his promise easily, having fallen in love with their daughter the moment she'd been born. He was saddened by the loss of Abigail but he had their daughter to think of now and she deserved a life of happiness...children shouldn't have to grow up in mourning...and he was determined to make her life a good one. He was the best father he knew how to be and as much of a mother as he could manage and little Ginny brought great joy to his life. She had the spirit of her mother, free and wild, and fearing where it may lead, Jonathan did his best to redirect it. But it was who she was and he loved her despite the worry and simply hoped that she could find the happiness in Riverbend that her mother never could.

"He's your father, Ginny. And the rain is coming."

---

Ginny sat in stunned silence as the words floated freely in her mind, jumbled and out of order and disconnected from their meaning. She had been absorbed in the adventure of the story, only half attaching its truth to her own reality. Her father sat beside her, quietly waiting as the pieces fell together in her mind. Was she grateful to this man who sat beside her, or angry with him for keeping the truth hidden all these years? She wasn't sure. Emotions flooded her, conflicting and numbing her, as thoughts spiraled in her mind.

A knock came at the door but neither Ginny nor her father moved to answer it. It came again, more insistent this time, and Ginny heard her name called from the other side.

"Ginny. Ginny it's Thaddeus."

The room grew darker as the clouds outside the window thickened and a branch scratched at the window as the wind picked up and swirled outside. Jonathan stood up and moved toward the door, pausing briefly to steel himself for the moment when Ginny's eyes would see another man as her true father for the first time. But as Thaddeus stepped inside, Ginny ran past them and out the door, leaving the two men alone in the house together.

"Let her go," said Jonathan. "She needs time to put it all together."

"Time, unfortunately, is one thing I'm lacking at the moment, Jonathan. I'm assuming you've told her."

"Rain's coming. I waited as long as I could. She deserves better than Abigail...she deserves to know you're leaving without her. It killed her, you know. She never got over it. I even moved her away and *still* she'd wait out in that damn field for you every time it rained. Waiting for you crushed her spirit and broke her heart and left nothing of the young woman she once was. I won't let you do that to Ginny."

"I made a mistake...a terrible mistake that I've lived with ever since. I know that and I own that mistake and I've searched for them in every place and time the rains have taken me, hoping one day to find Abigail and our child again -- to apologize for my selfishness and beg their forgiveness. I just couldn't bear it, Jonathan...the thought of loving them then losing them. There's more to it than you know. I've been at this a long time...a very, very long time."

"If you're looking for forgiveness, Thaddeus, you've come to the wrong place. She is my daughter as much as she is yours, more so in my eyes, and I won't stand back and watch as she suffers the same fate as her mother. You've worked your way into her heart, just as you did with Abigail, winning her over with your tales of adventure and your kind smile. But what you do isn't kind...wetting their appetite then leaving them hungry for what they can't have. I thought this time might be different and I foolishly thought I owed it to Ginny to let her get to know her true father. But I see now that



she knew him already...the man who tucked her in and read her bedtime stories; the man who kissed her scraped knees and taught her about life and love and trust; the man who has been there for her throughout it all...*that* man is her father...and he is not you.”

“It’s true. I owe you a debt of gratitude, Jonathan, for what you did for both Abigail and Ginny. I’m grateful for the life you gave them and the love you showed them. I don’t want to take that from you, and I don’t want to hurt Ginny. She deserves...” Thunder rumbled in the distance, reminding the men of the urgency of their situation.

Meanwhile, Ginny rummaged through boxes and trunks inside the tin-roofed wagon searching for what, exactly, she wasn’t sure...something to answer all the questions now inside her head, to ease the hurt inside her heart. When her fathers reached the field, they found her sitting on the steps of the wagon, a tattered, leather-bound journal on her lap. She looked at Thaddeus with eyes full of knowledge and painful understanding but said nothing. She stood and leaned close to him, placing her hand over his heart and then on tip-toe she placed a gentle kiss upon his cheek.

“I can forgive,” she said, “but I can’t forget.” Her long hair blew in a tangle around her face as the wind kicked up, announcing the arrival of the storm. The clouds, now dark as soot, hung low and lightning cracked the sky, releasing fat drops of rain that plinked and plunked upon the tin roof.

---

A thin twist of steam rose steadily from her tea cup, the morning air crisp and fresh around her. Ginny sat on the porch gazing over the field as the wildflowers woke and stretched toward the sun and the butterflies climbed to the highest stems to fan their wings and dry them of the morning dew. As a young girl, Ginny liked to run through a field much like this one...run and spin, arms out to her sides, laughing and giddy until finally she’d lie down and watch the sky twirl as the dizziness faded away. Her spinning days were long since past now, and she wondered what had become of that field. She hadn’t seen it since the summer of her father’s passing when she buried him there, next to her mother. Perhaps a new town had sprung up in its place, or perhaps the edges of Riverbend simply crept out further and further over the years until finally the town swallowed what remained of the field. There were so few wild and wide-open spaces left in the world now it seemed.

A gentle breeze blew past, rich with the scent of lavender from the field, sending a little shiver up Ginny’s spine. Cinching her robe a little tighter, she stood up and went inside to dress. Ginny stared into the full length mirror in front of her. She recognized the reflection, although it was not the image she carried of herself inside her head. In her mind’s eye her skin was pink and supple and taut, her hair brilliant and full of bounce. She wondered what the mirror would reveal if her body carried the full weight of all her true years. Time is relative and she hadn’t exactly traveled through on a straight path.

Even after all this time she still hadn’t figured it all out; in fact, there wasn’t much more to understand than what she’d learned in that journal all those years ago...or

was it yesterday...sometimes it was hard to tell. It didn't matter though...the gift or curse of longevity had been passed on and with just a snip from the tin roof that day before her fathers reached the field, Ginny claimed the means. She still remembered the first time she used it, years later, sitting beside her father's grave in the field as the rains came. Afraid at first, she held the small square of tin in her outstretched palm as the sky opened up above her. It wriggled in her hand and she closed her fingers around it, grasping tightly as it shook harder, sending tremors down her arm and through her body. It didn't hurt, but she was scared and considered letting go as she felt a pull emanating from her middle, oddly disturbing and thrilling all at once. And then everything went white and she realized that somewhere along the way she'd closed her eyes. She still felt the rain as it trickled through her hair and ran down her face, but the smell of the earth was different and she opened her eyes to find herself sitting at the top of a mountain very far from home.

Reaching up, Ginny rubbed the small tin pendant that hung from the chain around her neck as she thought of all the places she'd seen since then. All the people she'd met. All those she'd loved. It had been hard...allowing herself to love in spite of the loss she knew would come. Ginny had promised herself she'd never hurt anyone with her choices if she could help it, and so, when she loved, she stayed until the end and she never regretted a single one. That's not to say there were not sacrifices and hard decisions made along the way. Her wanderlust precluded motherhood, she knew that much, and there were no guarantees that the next adventure would be worth giving up the one she was already living out.

But it was time for a new beginning now. She could feel it sure as she could feel the air changing around her...the wind picking up, pushing the clouds close together in the darkening sky. Ginny slipped off her shoes and walked barefoot out into the lavender field, the thunder rumbling in the distance as the last few birds took cover in the old oak tree at the corner of the house. It wouldn't be long now. The clouds were heavy and grey and moving closer still. Now low in the sky, they spilled their bounty upon the earth. Ginny stood, her arms outstretched, threw her head back and closed her eyes as she waited for the drops to touch the small square of tin upon the chain around her neck, giddy and ready once again for adventure.