

The Showman and the Story's Heart  
Lucy Waterman

England, 1932.

*Everyone needs a good Story, do they not?*

*Especially in the midst of turmoil.*

*If you dare, perhaps you will be granted to weave such tales.*

*For in everyone's heart resides a Story.*

*And every Story requires a heart*

*Willing to tell it.*

No one in the London Story House could have anticipated the earthquake that came rattling through the studio one fateful day. It happened during the filming of yet another Story. This Story told of a pair of lovers tragically cursed by fate to never end in each other's arms. A bit too emotional, if you asked the man behind the camera, one Ian Osborne.

But as the dramatic scene in which the misfortunate lovers were to share their first kiss, a light tremor rippled through the studio, followed by a significantly more violent quake, this one upending stationary equipment, including the filming camera, and almost causing everyone in the studio to lose their standing balance. No one knew what was happening, and panicked screams echoed through the studio. Earthquakes were an infrequent experience, and one coming on unprovoked caused panic to run rampant through the studio.

And just as soon as it began, the ground stilled, bringing with it a tense silence. Nobody dared move, for fear of triggering another surge. But once one person made the first move, Ian took it as his out to go to the back workshop to try and fix the camera that had toppled over amid the chaos.

Desperate to fix the camera before anyone, particularly his boss, noticed it was broken, Ian ran through the halls of the studio, winding around until he reached the familiar blue door marked, 'Employees Only'. He bolted inside, slamming the door shut behind him.

He placed the camera down on the table in the center of the cluttered workshop, quickly looking it over in a desperate search for if anything had happened to it when it collided with the ground. A crack in the front lens of the camera told him all he needed to know. Ian sighed deeply at the sight. He already knew that there was no spare lens to speak of in this workshop, which meant an indefinite waiting period before he could get the camera fixed and functional again.

A knock at the door startled him out of his spiral of frustrated thoughts. He sent a silent prayer to Whoever was listening that the knocking wasn't his boss, coming to fire him for letting a camera get broken.

Ian was surprised – and confused – to see an unfamiliar face staring him down when he opened the door. Hazy violet eyes, thick red curls atop their head, a healthy dusting of freckles across the

bridge of their nose; Ian didn't know anyone who worked at the studio who looked like this. "Can I help you?" He inquired.

"You wouldn't happen to be Ian Osborne, would you?" The stranger asked.

"That would be me," Ian answered hesitatingly, tempted to back away just enough to grab a tool he might be able to wield as a weapon. "And who might you be?"

"I am . . ." the stranger hesitated, as though unsure about their identity. Their eyes darted around the workshop in the silence before responding, "Well, I am Satchel. Satchel . . . Finley."

Some deeper-down part of Ian, the part that despised interaction with suspicious strangers, screamed at him to take this problem to a higher-up, someone who actually knew how to handle something like a stranger intruding on the premises. But . . . there was something oddly alluring about this individual. There was a certain innocence in their strangely colored eyes that told a story of trustworthiness, that there was no threat by their presence. "What, precisely, are you doing here?" Ian found himself asking.

"I was sent here to . . ." the look of neutrality on Satchel's face was replaced by one of confusion. "I . . . cannot remember."

"You don't remember?" This situation seemed to be spiraling further into something Ian knew he was incapable of handling himself. A stranger showing up out of the blue, with no memory as to why they were here, excepting the fact they had something to do with Ian himself.

Satchel shook their head in a negative reply. "It had something to do with a Story, though. That's all I can remember."

"Were you sent here to be employed? Or perhaps interned?" Maybe Satchel was just someone sent to the studio because they were interning and had just gotten a little lost and confused on their way.

"Perhaps," Satchel responded. "That must be it."

"There's no other good reason for you to have been sent here," Ian noted. "Unless you're some finances person here to deliver news that the studio has been repossessed or something along those lines."

"That certainly wasn't it," Satchel said quickly, so as to assure Ian they meant no ill intent. "I must be an intern."

"Right then," Ian replied, ready to go about business as usual. "You wouldn't happen to have an idea what department you're interning in, would you?"

Satchel shook their head again.

"You can intern alongside me," Ian said. "Though I cannot guarantee it will be the most *glamorous* position here."

"That's quite all right. I don't need glamorous."

Ian gave Satchel a small smile. He couldn't be quite sure what it was he was feeling, but he had a suspicion that this new intern of his would be all right.

He only couldn't imagine why he hadn't been informed of a new intern at the studio, even if they hadn't been sent to intern under him. The studio higher-ups were typically good at telling him and the other employees when new changes were occurring.

But the thing Satchel forgot to tell Ian was that there was a persistent voice inside their head beckoning them toward this exact event.

Ian knew he wasn't going to be able to get any more work done since the camera was, for the time being, irreparable. So, that was how he found himself outside the studio, with a blank page and pencil in hand, and with ideas that refused to come to the surface of his mind. He glared down at the sheet, willing a Story idea to come to his mind and growing increasingly frustrated when one did not.

The door behind him swung open, revealing Satchel stepping outside. They held a rusted nail in their hand, presumably from the workshop inside, and gently pushed the door closed behind them. They took a seat on the step right beside Ian, mere inches separating the two of them.

"That workshop inside," Satchel started, closely examining the antiquated nail as though it was a valuable artifact. "It's quite the messy room. But I suppose that's to be anticipated, since fixing things is messy. *Healing* is messy."

Ian looked up from the page. He noted Satchel had a curious glint in their eye as they observed the object. "That's . . . oddly profound," he noted. "Strange, but profound."

"Isn't that what a Storyteller is supposed to be?"

"Well, yes. But Storytellers typically leave the profound wording and realizations for the pen and paper, rather than spoken in casual conversation."

Satchel turned their mysterious gray-purple eyes on Ian, that glimmer of some unidentifiable emotion still present. "I understand that. But why not talk about the little things they recognize in life?"

Ian shrugged. "I can't be sure. But it's certainly the methodology I follow when writing."

"So are you a Storyteller?" Satchel inquired.

Ian chuckled lightly. "I wish I was," he said. "I've always worked behind the scenes to make others' Stories reality, and I've wanted to make my own Story, but I'm not a true Storyteller."

"Why not?"

"Well, right now, it's because I can't seem to think up an idea for a *good* Story."

"Maybe I can assist," Satchel offered. "Perhaps I can help you think up a good idea."

"Oh, that's not necessary," Ian said quickly. If he was being honest with himself, he *did* have ideas for Stories. It was just a matter of him deeming most of his ideas as 'too vague' or 'underdeveloped' or even 'bloody garbage'. He didn't like other people interfering with his Stories, and he barely knew Satchel. He couldn't just suddenly trust them with his less than desirable ideas. "Truly, I can manage alone."

But Satchel still peered over at the page he held, seeing it still sat blank and begging for a Story to be written on it. "I suppose we can work with this," they said. "Did you have any ideas as to what sort of Story you want to tell?"

But Ian couldn't focus on Satchel's question. As soon as they'd gotten even closer to him, he felt more than the gentle warmth of another person sitting beside him; a deeper, more exuberant feeling surged through his shoulder where Satchel had settled their face to look at the page,

followed by a million or so Stories rushing through his mind, some he recognized as his own and some he couldn't place where they could have come from. He flinched away from the close contact with Satchel, instantly cutting off their connection. An unwanted warmth remained burning across his face.

"Are you alright?" Satchel asked immediately after he jumped away from their touch.

"Yes," Ian replied, dumbfounded what on earth that feeling was, and why some of it persisted despite him cutting the contact. "I believe so. I just . . . did you feel that too?"

"Feel what?" they replied.

"That- that *surge*, of Stories! Did you not feel it?" He internally begged that he wasn't going mad. He felt that rush of Stories; he was sure of it.

Satchel looked down at their hands, the look on their face shifting to one of confusion. "Do you suppose *I* triggered it? Whatever the feeling was?"

"I'm not sure. I did feel it after you touched my shoulder. But Stories can't be . . . telepathically shared . . . can they?"

Satchel continued staring at their hand, looking intently as though that would decipher this mystery. "They shouldn't be," they said. "But I don't understand why I would be able to."

Ian was silent for a minute. "I should probably go," he said. "The studio will be closing soon anyway." He stood up, brushing invisible dust off his clothes. "Do you have a flat anywhere nearby?" He asked, turning to Satchel.

They hesitated for a moment before shaking their head in a negative reply. "I can't remember," they said. "But I suppose I could stay here, at the studio."

Ian chose to ignore the confusion in his mind at Satchel's comment that they couldn't recall where they lived. "No, you can't," he argued. "We must close the studio at some point in time, and I doubt the others would be happy that someone was insisting to remain here all night."

Satchel's face shifted into something more serious. "I . . . don't think I can leave," they said, their tone mysterious. "I have to stay here."

"What are you on about?" Ian inquired, his desire to know what was going on only slightly greater than his frustration at not knowing. "What do you mean you *can't leave*?"

"I feel this pull, this . . . this relentless begging, to stay here. Like I'm forbidden to go anywhere else."

Ian's frustration was now an ember, only moments away from sparking a fire. "That's impossible," he stated. "There is no possible way you can't leave the studio. And how can you not even remember where you live?"

"Because I can't remember who I was!" Satchel said, standing up so they were more level with Ian. "All I can recall is that I did not exist one day, and suddenly I'm here! I don't know how I got here, why I'm here, or why I can't seem to be able to leave the studio. I'm sorry it all sounds like madness to you, but it's the truth."

Ian looked at Satchel like they had gained another head. "I . . . I need to leave," he said, turning and walking away from them. "I don't understand why any of this is happening, but I refuse to have any part of it."

Satchel, desperate for Ian to stay – and unsure why – started running towards him. “Ian, wait-” was all they were able to say before they collapsed to the ground, unable to stand upright. Like invisible strings had them tied down.

Ian heard the sound of a body colliding with the pavement behind him, and he turned around to find the sight of Satchel, facedown and unmoving. Instantly concerned about what happened to the other, he bolted over to their side, his previous frustration evaporating quickly into alarm. “Satchel,” he said hesitantly, trying to not let panic get the best of him. “A-are you alright? What happened?”

No response.

He looked around for anything or anyone to help, realizing the two of them were a distance from the studio. He glanced down at Satchel. Maybe what they had told him was true. Maybe they truly couldn’t leave the studio.

But if that was the case . . . who, or *what*, was Satchel?

Ian decided to not dwell on that question, instead sliding his hands under Satchel’s form, lifting them from the ground and carrying them back toward the studio.

Satchel awoke gradually, misty violet eyes opening back up to the world slowly. They couldn’t be sure where they were now, but a dulled silvery light bore down on them from above. When they looked up, they found a glass dome, the dark night sky lightened by a full moon, staring down at them.

“It is quite the sight, isn’t it?” A voice nearby inquired. Satchel turned around to find Ian, the man they had been sent to, looking up into the filtered night sky, sitting beside them. His plainly colored gray-green eyes had a faint glint of wonder in them. He turned his attention on Satchel before saying, “Are you alright now? That sounded like an unfortunate fall you had earlier.”

Satchel nodded. Something inside them screamed at them to say the words they’d been meaning to say since they arrived. “Look, Ian, I apologize for what I said before. The truth is-”

Suddenly, a thunderous earthquake rattled the room, the force enough to shatter the glass dome overhead. Ian ducked away from the falling shards, while Satchel stared up. A bold light, beyond the moonlight, burned down on them. More tremors rumbled, the intensity of them growing until it felt as though the world was going to lurch off its axis. A chilled air blew through, threatening to sweep up anything of a light density.

Satchel looked away from the light and over toward where Ian had fallen to the floor. They felt like they were being beckoned, *forced*, toward the light, and the further they moved away from it, the more they felt their heart slowly shatter. Still, they fought against the forces and toward where Ian was.

They had truth they needed to speak into existence before it was all over.

“Satchel!” Ian called out as the other struggled their way over. “What . . . is . . . this?!”

They hesitated a second. They weren’t ready for this to happen. “Ian,” they said, needing to yell to be heard. “I’m so sorry for everything. The truth is . . . I *am* a Story. I cannot say how I

came to be in this form, how I am my own person, but I am the personification of every Story you have ever desired to tell.”

They were grateful when Ian didn't look at them with disbelief in his eyes, only pained understanding. The only question he voiced was, “Why?”

Satchel hesitated. “Something inside you broke. A Story can only stay restricted for so long, before it takes its own form and rebels against reason. Too many Stories have waited to be told. I'm only sorry it had to be like this.”

That's when Ian noticed something wrong with Satchel's form. They were too translucent, their solidity fading. He looked down to find he could see Satchel's heart inside their chest, painful fissures cracking the surface. “And now you're disappearing.” He said, already knowing the conclusion.

Satchel nodded. “I'm sorry,” they said, tears spilling down their face. “I can't exist here forever.”

Ian shakily reached toward them, his balance still unsteady due to the rippling quakes continuing to shake the space. He placed his hand against the side of their face. “That's quite all right” he said. “We don't need forever.”

He leaned forward, gently pressing his mouth to Satchel's. A million Stories blurred between the both of them, a million desperate dreams and hopes that this moment could last into infinity. They both knew they would hold onto each other for as long as they possibly could. They would stay in this moment until the world collapsed around them, until there was no ground to hold them. They refused to let any force separate them until there was nothing left.

And it was with a rushing cold breeze their temporary euphoria became forever.

This time, it was meant to last.

*This is the danger in Stories.*

*No idea remains forever.*

*Some disappear, while some are chased into existence.*

*But sometimes,*

*If you have hope on your side,*

*A knock will sound at the door of your heart,*

*And all your greatest dreams*

*Will wait there for you.*