

# Ladri Waits – A Play with Music

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*Book, lyrics, and music by Alan Riley Jones.*

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*Written in the mid-1990's for a "present day" setting, with flashbacks to the 1970's-80's.*

## **Synopsis**

### **Act I**

On a concert stage in Raleigh, various instruments and other equipment await the entrance of "North Carolina's own music sensation," newcomer Ladri Waits and her band. Before the musicians arrive, a mysterious man named Chap Stilman, dressed in Seventies counter-culture attire, steps onto the stage. He picks up an acoustic guitar like an old friend and begins strumming and whistling **(#1) Ladri's Lullaby**. While he plays, Ladri, a young woman about 29 years of age dressed in concert costume, steps out of a nearby dressing room and searches the stage looking for the source of the music. She cannot see Chap, but he follows her with his eyes, unable to see anything but her. She gives up her search and returns to her dressing room. He cuts short his music, returns the guitar to its stand, and exits.

Soon the musicians in Ladri's band begin to take their place on stage. Just offstage, we see Johnny Keach, Ladri's manager, waiting anxiously near the dressing room door. Presently, Ladri storms out of the dressing room, followed by an older woman, her mother Cory. The two women face off wordlessly for an awkward few moments. Then Cory exits. Johnny sees that Ladri needs a minute or two to settle down, so he signals the band to play **(#2) Bridge In the Moonlight – Instrumental**. With a few kind words from Johnny, Ladri is soon ready to start. Johnny announces her, and she strides out onstage to begin the opening number, **(#3) Running For My Life**.

During the song, Ladri envisions the various characters that have peopled her life, the ones who have helped to shape her, and who are bound up in the songs she has written. She imagines Cory who just brought her some disturbing news; Sheldon (her "Daddy") with whom she has always had a troubled relationship; her one and only high school boyfriend Telfair; Johnny the manager who takes care of her nowadays; and finally a brief glimpse of Chap who disappears almost as quickly as he appears.

The next song is **(#4) We Will Meet Again**, a gospel number from Ladri's childhood home town of Freemans Island, a little coastal community on the North Carolina coast. During this number, Ladri imagines herself back at Chap Stilman's funeral when she was four years old. Confused by the burial of a box in the ground with Chap still inside it, she wonders how he is going to get out. Finding herself alone at the graveside, she runs to find her folks, coming onto them in the middle of an argument. Sheldon voices second thoughts about Ladri, and Cory asks him what are they supposed to do, give her away? He turns and glares at Ladri in a way that makes her feel dirty and unwanted. As the hymn ends, Ladri returns to the present onto the bandstand.

Needing more time to compose herself, she asks the band to take over the next number, **(#5) *Shadow In the Sky***, a Seventies-style folk/pop song written by Chap Stilman. During this song, she wanders in her mind to a riverside setting where Chap is sitting playing a guitar and watching over three-year-old Ladri as she plays with pebbles she has found. The sound of the band fades into the sound of Chap strumming alone. She asks him to sing the "apple song" (the second stanza of *Shadow In the Sky*). Suddenly, Ladri looks at back the scene as her adult self, musing how she thought she had found this river hideaway herself. She'd forgotten that Chap had brought her there and had pointed out the bridge that would figure in a later song. All she has left of him is his guitar, some sheet music, and a blurry photograph that Cory had made of him. No longer wanting him there, she commands Chap to leave. He does so, but he promises to be back.

The band finishes *Shadow In the Sky*, but Ladri is still lost in a territory of her own. She sings **(#6) *Bridge In the Moonlight***, revisiting her feelings of being trapped on an island, unable to escape. The bridge represents her escape from the island, but even now after all her time on the road, she can't seem to find her way over the bridge to freedom.

As the song ends, she sees her high-school beau Telfair Reece at the river scene. She kicks the concert into high gear by launching into her hit number, **(#7) *Pink Azalea***. The song fades into a scene from her high school days when she brought Telfair to her riverside hideaway, wanting to share the beauty and the special atmosphere of the place. Idly, she picks an azalea blossom from a bush and tries to smell it. Not much to it, but she puts it in her hair. Telfair, though, has more intimate pursuits on his mind, and Ladri finds herself fending off his groping. Supposing that this is what lovers do, she starts to give in, until she can no longer confront this painful memory. So she orders Telfair out of her thoughts, and he leaves.

Returning to the bandstand, she interrupts the high-energy performance of *Pink Azalea* to start up a new song improvised on the spot, **(#8) *I Wore a Pink Azalea***, a slow blues number mourning her loss of innocence. The song fades after the first stanza as twelve-year-old Ladri knocks on the door of an imagined mobile home belonging to Sheldon. He is staring at a football game on television, having no interest in talking with her. But she keeps after him, wanting to know if he had left home because of her, because she was the little bastard girl, a constant reminder that Cory had cheated on him. He snaps at her that it wasn't like that. When she calls him "Daddy," he barks, "Your Daddy's dead. Might be best you not come around here anymore."

She returns to the bandstand and finishes the blues number. At the end, the band picks up the peppy refrain of *Pink Azalea*, but Ladri cannot join in. She sets down her guitar and leaves the stage. The confused band members look to Johnny for guidance, and he signals them to take a break. Meanwhile, Ladri has bypassed her dressing room, and exited even further offstage. With the band providing a somewhat forced upbeat ending, the first act comes to a close.

## Act II

As intermission winds down, the musicians gather backstage. They find a page of sheet music (*Ladri's Lullaby*) that Ladri had dropped there at the top of the show, and they pore over it working out chord progressions. Johnny peeks into Ladri's dressing room, only to find it empty. No one seems to know where she is. Ladri wanders in, having gone for a walk. The musicians return to the stage, and on cue Ladri joins them ready for a fresh start, **(#9) *Nothing On My Mind***. She seems in better spirits now, but as the song comes to an end, the memory of Cory breaks in from just before the concert, telling her, "Sheldon's dead, honey." Ladri's fragile composure shatters again.

Ladri wanders back into her memories, this time to her high school days. She sits in a school yard strumming her guitar (Chap's guitar, which she still plays in concert), working on the song that will be next on the concert. Telfair stops by sweaty from running, and teasingly starts up a conversation with her. He wants to know if they can partner up on an English paper. Ladri agrees, and by the time he runs off to baseball practice, they've clearly got an attraction going. Now she and the band start in on **(#10) *One, Two, Three***. The clapping interlude of this song recurs as she wanders from memory to memory. First, she remembers back to a day when she was six years old, the day Sheldon had finally had enough and walked out on Cory and Ladri. His parting words make Ladri think that Cory has done something to push him away. From that time on, Ladri is increasingly alienated from her mother, blaming her for all the troubles that seem to have come her way.

This scene blends into the dressing room scene from just before the concert. Cory had resorted to showing up at Ladri's concert because she didn't know any other way to find her. Her phone calls and letters go unanswered. "I never thought I'd have to buy a ticket to see my own daughter." She brings news that Sheldon had died about a month ago. She also gives Ladri the sheet music to *Ladri's Lullaby*, which Chap had written, but which had gotten mixed into Sheldon's things when he moved out. Their conversation turns into a familiar argument, with Cory begging Ladri to come home, and Ladri saying she'd already crossed that bridge. Ladri voices her well-worn accusation that Cory's cheating had driven Sheldon away. Cory finally realizes that she needs to tell Ladri the whole truth: she had never cheated on Sheldon, because Sheldon knew about it. He was in on it from the start.

Interrupting this scene, Ladri flashes back to the school yard. This time Telfair passes by with barely a word, until Ladri blocks his way and forces him to tell her why he hasn't spoken to her lately. The English paper is done. He's had his way with her. And now he's done with her. He's helped himself and moved on. But Ladri won't let him go until he explains why he picked her. He could have any of the "cute little ponytails" in school. Why her? "Because you were easy!" he tells her. All those cute little ponytails want to put their claim on him, but just try to touch one of them and see what happens. But Ladri? She was easy. Her solitude and inexperience had left her vulnerable to predators like Telfair.

In her mind, she sees Johnny at his offstage vantage point watching over her. She senses that he has feelings for her, but she is unwilling to be hurt like that again. "Don't you know me better than that?" the imaginary Johnny asks her. Why does he take such good care of her? She promises to ask the real Johnny, over a beer after the show maybe.

Then the interrupted scene of Sheldon's leaving finishes, and Ladri is truly lost in the past, as the clapping interlude of *One, Two, Three* comes to a close. At this point the guitar player breaks into her reveries to ask if she's in this concert or not. She tells him to play something. "What?" "I don't care." So they take out the newly found sheet music and begin playing **(#11) *Ladri's Lullaby (Reprise)***. As she starts to object, a vision of Chap intercedes. She wants to acknowledge him as her father, but she doesn't know enough about him. Chap reminds her that Cory knows. Cory is the only one who knows him anymore. He points into the audience. "Ask her." She peers into the darkness trying to see Cory. She sends him away again, and again he promises to be back.

In the dressing room, Cory relates how she, Sheldon, and Chap had been the best of friends when they were young. (Chap plays and whistles *Ladri's Lullaby* as an accompaniment to this scene, just as at the start of the show, and Ladri comes out to look for the music as before.) Cory tells Ladri that she and Sheldon had wanted a baby, but then they discovered that Sheldon was sterile. So Ladri could never have been Sheldon's daughter. About that time, they learned that Chap was dying. He too wanted a child before he died, but he had always been too much of a loner. So Cory came up with the idea, and Sheldon encouraged her. They presented the idea to Chap, for Chap to father the child with Cory, and Sheldon and Cory to raise it. Though dubious, Chap agrees. And so it was done.

Having told her the story, Cory tries to comfort her daughter, but Ladri can't "flip like a switch." She will need time to work through what Cory has told her. With questions still looming she returns to the stage, only to find the vision of Chap blocking her way. He holds out the guitar to her, and as she takes it he points into the audience as before. As she peers into the darkness again, he leaves, and she steps up to the microphone.

She begins improvising **(#12) *Someone Else's Daughter***, an upbeat transformation of *Ladri's Lullaby* with words that help her work through the remaining quandary: her real father died before she knew him, her supposed father ran away and now he has died too. She can pick up whatever pieces remain of Chap by asking Cory. And if that's not enough, she'll just fill in the blanks and be "daughter to myself."

The music segues into the final number, **(#13) *Finale: Bridge In the Moonlight (Reprise)***. During a pause in the finale, she addresses Cory (wherever she is sitting in the audience), "Let's you and me and Johnny go get us a beer." And with the transformed rendering of *Bridge In the Moonlight*, contrasting with the accompanying counter-melody of *Shadow In the Sky*, the finale comes to a triumphant end.

== END OF SHOW ==

## Story Chronology

The story is told during the show in non-sequential stream-of-consciousness order. Here are the significant story events in chronological order, given a 1996 setting for the “present day” concert.

1967: Cory and Sheldon Waits want a child, but they learn that Sheldon is sterile. Their friend Chap tells them he is dying, and his only regret is he never had a child. They hatch a plan that Chap will father a child with Cory, and that Cory and Sheldon will raise the child as their own. Anna Galadriel Waits is born, called Ladri for short.

1970 (age 3): Ladri spends time with Chap at the riverside, and he sings one of his songs *Shadow In the Sky* to her, letting her strum the guitar strings as he forms the chords.

1971 (age 4): Chap dies. At the funeral, Sheldon voices his doubts to Cory over his role as father to Ladri.

1973 (age 6): Sheldon moves out. His parting words make Ladri think it is all Cory’s fault, and a rift begins to form between mother and daughter.

1979 (age 12): Ladri drops in on Sheldon at his mobile home, finding him typically unwilling to talk with her. When she calls him “Daddy,” he flares up, “Your Daddy’s dead! Might be best you not come around here anymore.”

1983 (age 16): Telfair Reece, scion of one of the moneyed families on the Island, begins to pay attention to Ladri. She takes him to her secret riverside hideaway where he makes a groping pass at her. In her inexperience, she feels obligated to give in. Afterwards he won’t have anything to do with her, the “bastard of Freemans Island.” He had only had his way with her because he knew she would be easy. Ladri vows never to be hurt like that again.

1996 (age 29): Ladri sits at a bar table with Johnny Keach, her manager, sipping beers. She is unwilling to talk about her painful past. He reminds her that the upcoming concerts in Raleigh and Richmond will be especially crucial, now that she’s beginning to attract attention in the right places. Johnny is obviously smitten with her, but she is afraid to let her defenses down after her experience with Telfair.

Concert night: Cory shows up backstage unexpectedly, and a volatile discussion ensues in Ladri’s dressing room. Cory brings news of Sheldon’s recent death, and gives her the sheet music to *Ladri’s Lullaby* that she’d found while cleaning out Sheldon’s things. She finally tells Ladri the full story of her origins, hoping it would heal the rift between them. But she only stirs up feelings Ladri has no time to resolve before going out on stage.

During the concert as each song dredges up memories of the past, Ladri manages to place each remembered scene in perspective, as well as to hold an imagined conversation with the image of her vaguely remembered father, Chap Stilman. By the time she improvises the new song, *Someone Else’s Daughter*, she is well on the way to resolving her issues. The concert ends with her finally ready to assimilate what she can find of Chap, and identify as “daughter to myself.” Her invitation to Cory to join her and Johnny for a beer signals the first step in her long journey to mend the relationship with her mother, and to open up to Johnny.