



**“Circus Boy  
Without a  
Safety Net”**

by

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story collection

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## Circus-Boy Without a Safety Net

**L**ucifer came to him in drag. He was disguised as Lena Horne.

C.B. went to see *The Wiz* with his family. The movie was pretty cool, by his standards, even though he thought Diana Ross was a little too old to be playing Dorothy. But the sets were amazing—the recasting of the Emerald City as downtown Manhattan, the Wicked Witch’s sweatshop, the trashcan monsters in the subway. The songs sometimes lasted a little too long, but they were offset by Michael Jackson’s flashy spin-dancing. But it was the image of Lena Horne as Glinda the Good Witch that would follow him.

She appeared in the next to last scene in a silver dress. Her hair was captured in a net of stars, and she was surrounded by a constellation of babies, all wrapped in clouds, their adorable faces peering out like living chocolate kisses. He fell in love. Ms. Horne was undeniably beautiful, with her creamy, golden skin, and mellow, birdlike features. Her movements during the song “Home” were passionate. They were at odds with shimmering, ethereal-blur in which she was filmed. Indeed, she could not be of this earth. In all

of his life in Willow Creek, NC, C.B. had not seen anything like this before.

He was in love, all right. He researched her in libraries, finding old issues of *Ebony* and *Jet*; he watched old movies that she'd appeared in, like *Cabin in the Sky*. He collected some of her records; his 8-track of "Stormy Weather" was so worn, he had to buy another copy.

But in the weeks afterwards, he began to sense that this love of his wasn't quite right. His brother and his father would tease him about his "girlfriend," who was 70 years old, and about how, when he came of an age to marry, she would be even older than that. Of how he could never have children. His brother was particularly mean: he imagined a wedding, held at Lena's hospital bed, with her in an iron lung, exhaling an "I Do" as ominous as Darth Vader's last breath. But C.B. wanted to explain that it wasn't like that at all. He couldn't quite put it into words.

Lena wasn't an object of desire, someone who he wanted to kiss or hold hands with. She was something more. She was a goddess of Beauty, an ideal. She was something beyond anything he'd ever known. She hovered above Willow Creek, an angel, looking down on its box houses that were the color of orange sherbet, lemonade, and his own robin's-egg-blue house. She wasn't someone to sleep with; she was someone to be like.

C.B. made a bedroom shrine to his goddess. Old pictures of her, protected in cellophane, marched up his wall. But the ultimate treasure lay unseen. In the unused chest of drawers in the back of his closet, he hid a Barbie doll, bought at a flea market and transformed into her likeness: painted skin, eyes blackened with a pen, stolen hair dye darkening the blond tresses. And he sprinkled lots of glitter on her dress, so it would be silver, like hers was in *The Wiz*. (This had involved experiments with several doll's dresses. There was a measure of discretion; he came up with a story about how his sick sister collected Barbie dresses, so that the store clerks wouldn't think he was strange. He ended up dunking a powder-blue dress in Elmer's glue, and dredging it in silver glitter. He learned it by imitating his

mother, when she made fried chicken: first the eggwash, then the seasoned flour).

But buried treasure sends out signals. Especially to mothers.

She zeroed in on the spot. Oh, there was some excuse about her wanting to check out the chest, so that she could sell it at the church bazaar. Lena was exposed. His mother and father met him at the kitchen table one day after school, holding his creation in their hands. When C.B. saw them, looking as solemn as they did when they watched reruns of King's historic speech, he knew something was wrong. He thought he was going to get a lecture on idolatry. Instead, he was told, in the calmest tones they could muster, that he was not to play with dolls ever again. That was that. His mother stood up, and started making dinner. His father left the room, his head hung in shame.

C.B. felt strange. They were treating him as if he were diseased. As if they'd discovered that he was freak of some kind. ("When your child reaches the age of twelve, his eyes will grow to the size of grapefruits..."). It was his brother that laid it out for him. He'd been listening in on the conversation.

"They think you're a faggot."

When he got to his room, the walls had been stripped. Everything of Lena was gone. The walls looked like he felt: exposed.

He didn't eat dinner that night. They didn't call him to the table.

He popped an 8-track of *The Wiz* into the player, and put the giant earmuff headphones on. Lena sang softly: "If you believe in yourself..."

C.B. snatched the tape out of the player. He unspooled the brown ribbon, until it lay in curls on the floor around him.



C.B. had a Voice. That's what everybody at the church choir said. He felt it, too. His chest would fill with warmth, the spirit of sound. And when he opened his mouth, all of that warm feeling would come sliding out, like a stream of maple syrup, rich and sweet. It

would circle over the church. He could feel it soaring like an angel, over Willow Creek, notes raining down on the box houses the colors of mint-green, bubblegum pink, and pastel violet.

He convinced himself that he was singing to God. All of the ladies with their wiry hats would come up to tell him what a wonderful gift he had. For a while, he gained the pride and trust of his parents. Sort of. At least of his mother.

His father grudgingly gave him respect for his voice; but his father must've known that singing didn't really undo all of embarrassment he'd caused when he failed at various sports. Having a musician son was a poor substitute for having a normal one; but it would have to do.

Within the tiny whitewashed church, he was safe from the worst of himself. The Devil—or Lena—was imprisoned, locked away. Her smoky vocals couldn't slip in between the glorious notes of hymns. Her fabulous gowns were safely replaced by neutral choir robes.

He jumped through a hoop, pleasing the Lord. C.B. thought of God as a great ringmaster, and Heaven as a circus-dream of angels and tamed beasts. The dead could trapeze through the stars, and see the little marble that was Earth below. But first, you had prove yourself worthy. Jump through this hoop, ringed with razors. Now through this circle of fire... C.B. knew that his life would be a dazzling and dangerous tightrope performance from now on. One slip and he'd fall into a Hell of naked boys and show-tunes. The church was his safety net.

Another bonus of singing was the admiration of the congregation.

C.B. was an average student. He struggled through math and science, tolerated history and English. He didn't have any friends. Regular kids tended to avoid religious kids. Since that was his disguise, he was a loner. He avoided the actually religious kids himself—he felt that if anyone could see through his charade, they could. They would sniff it out like bloodhounds. Everyone was at a safe distance. And the holiest of music surrounded him like a shield.

He felt the most secure, when the Devil heard him sing.

He came in the form of the music and drama teacher, Mr. P. Mr. P traipsed into town in loud colors. He wore banana yellow jackets, pink shirts, and bow ties as large and comical as a clown's. In a way, he matched the colors of Willow Creek's houses. His skin was dark and smooth, like a Special Dark candy bar. He had large glasses that magnified his sad-clown brown eyes. And his hair was a mass of wild and wet Jericurls. His lisp reminded C.B of Snagglepuss, the cartoon lion. Like Snagglepuss, Mr. P was prissy and aristocratic, given to fey and archaic phrases.

Word got around school that C.B. could sing. He'd fastidiously avoided anything to do with the drama and music department. First of all, he reasoned, they played secular music. He sang for the glory of the Almighty. But the real reason was Mr. P. A whiff of his spicy cologne in the crowded school hall made him cringe; Mr. P's loud, theatrical laugh when he was a lunch hall monitor could set his teeth gnashing.

It was around January when he was approached. He left the lunchroom, walking right by Mr. P. (who wore a suit of lime-green, with an electric blue bow tie), when he was stopped.

Mr. P. spoke his name.

"Yes, sir?"

"I heard that you can sing, child. How come you haven't been around the chorus?"

"I... I guess that I've been too busy. With school. And church." He invested the last word with an emphasis he hoped wasn't lost on Mr. P.

But Mr. P flounced right by the Meaning, with a pass-me-my-smelling-salts flick of his wrists. "Nonsense. I would just love to hear you sing. Can you stop by the music room sometime this week?"

"No, sir. My course load is pretty full..."

"Any study halls?" (His sss's grated on him).

"Not this semester," C.B. lied.

"How bout after school? Just 15 minutes or so."

“Uh, this week’s not too good, cause I, uh, have to help my dad with some chores.”

Mr. P smiled, revealing gums as pink as deviled ham. He touched C.B. on the shoulder.

When he left the cafeteria, the nutmeg smell of the cologne tickled his nose. It wouldn’t leave him all day.

That Sunday he was to sing a solo section of the hymn, “His Eye is on the Sparrow” during the distribution of the Host. Before he walked out on stage with the rest of the choir, he did a customary scan of the audience. Mr. P was there, in the pew behind his mother. His heart leapt into throat. But then, of course Mr. P would show up. The Devil can’t resist stirring up souls in turmoil.

In the church basement, over fizzy punch and stale cookies, Mr. P lavished praise over C.B.’s voice, how pure it was. His mother was beaming beside him.

“Why, Mrs. Bertram—”

“Imogene, please.”

“Imogene, when I heard that he had a Voice, I just had to investigate. It exceeded my wildest expectations.”

C.B. kept his eyes firmly trained on the linoleum.

Snagglepuss continued: “I am casting parts for the spring musical. I’d like your son to try out.”

His mother clapped her hands.

“I can’t act,” C. B. interrupted. He could see where this going; he had to cut it at the source.

“You don’t have to act,” (darling, he heard Mr. P add subliminally) “you just have to perform. And you’ve got that down pat.” (Honeychile).

His mother pestered him into trying out for the spring musical, which was *The Music Man*. C.B. had enjoyed the movie, and found that he couldn’t resist the temptation. It was too much. He felt Lena stirring in him. She whispered in his sleep. One night she came to him. She wore her sparkling fairy queen dress. Her chocolate star babies were grinning behind her. The only thing different about her

this time was that she was in black-and-white. She'd occasionally ripple and sputter out of existence, like an image on an old television set. He took this as her blessing.

*I won't give up going to church, so I'll be safe.*

He landed the role of Professor Harold Hill.

The play ran four nights and a Saturday matinee. It was a success. The last performance earned him a standing ovation.

But in the back of his mind, there was always the issue of Mr. P. The jocks and class clowns of the school would always be whispering about him. They called him the Black Liberace. "Hand me the candelabra," they'd say when he passed them in the hall, or "I wish my brother George was here," in mincing voices. C.B. felt himself slipping. Movie posters of *West Side Story*, *The Fantasticks*, and *The Sound of Music* competed with the camouflage of his mother's hand-stitched prayer samplers and collected Willow Creek football bulletins.

The worst was gym class. He refused to take showers. But that didn't stop the boys from making fun of him. As they emerged glistening and nude from the showers, they would faux caress and grasp one another.

"Yeah baby, push it in harder!"

"Stab that shit, sweetie."

"Oh daddy, be my butt-pirate tonight."

He knew they were directed at him.

Summer came, and C.B. immersed himself in church activities. He became an aide for the church-sponsored camp for kids. He sang every Sunday, declining solo parts. It was a sacrifice that God might notice.

For the fall assembly, Mr. P put together a show comprised of songs from musicals. C.B. sang lead for "New York, New York," and "Send in the Clowns." He bought the house down. Basking in the light of adulation, he was mindful of the rot that hid behind and beneath Willow Creek's façade of cheerful acceptance: a hate that corroded the aluminum siding covered in pastel icing.

Church ladies in floral hats: “Mr. P, he’s so, you know, theatrical. You know them theater folks.”

And the antics of the locker-room boys.

Mr. P approached him for the lead in the spring play.

“I think you’d be perfect as the Cowardly Lion in *The Wiz!*”

C.B. told Mr. P he’d consider it. That night, Lena and her entourage appeared before him. And he was Icarus, tempted by her beauty. If he flew too high, she would supernova, and scorch his soul as black as the void surrounding her cherubs. He was a tightrope walker, and Lena was the spirit who watched over him, waiting to push him off, waiting for him to fall.

He could not ignore the sign that God had sent him. This was temptation.

He declined Mr. P’s offer, claiming that he had to focus on his grades that semester, if he was to go to college.

C.B. did the right thing. But there was no sense of liberation.

Danger lurked, a phantom image just behind his eyes when he slept at night. He imagined Glinda turning into the Witch, snarling in frustration.



Manhattan spread out before him, glitzy, dirty, and labyrinthine. The architecture was as alien to C.B. as the Emerald City was to Dorothy. He was thrilled and terrified at the same time. There was no warmth, no open spaces like there was in Willow Creek. The buildings were naked and thin, and met the challenges of gravity head-on. The houses of Willow Creek were humble—modestly clothed in cheerful fabrics. C.B. wasn’t so sure that he liked it. The crowds, the hurried pace, and the anorexic qualities of the landscape rejected him. The unending gray color oppressed him.

The Willow Creek Community College glee club had performed in a drab little church just outside of Harlem. C.B. swore he could hear rats skittering around the eaves. The nasty hotel the glee club stayed in had water stains on the ceiling, and the beds were hard and tiny. There had been a drunk sleeping in one of the chairs in the hotel

lobby, his overripe smell and loud snoring filling the space. The hotel staff didn't seem to care.

Still, it had to be done. He had to test himself, to see once and for all if the Devil still lived in him. New York City was the perfect place to "experiment" without anyone knowing.

The first step was to ride the subway to Greenwich Village. He moved to the smelly hole in the ground. Its mouth was wide and yellow. He remembered the monsters in the subway in *The Wiz*. Trash cans with gnashing teeth, pillars that detached themselves from the ceiling and chased people around. What he found was a whole less interesting. The concrete floor in the subway was dirty, covered with gray lumps of long-forgotten chewing gum. He glanced down one of the platform tracks. Fearless brown and gray rats scuttled, each holding some treasure in their claws—a crust of Wonderbread, a squashed pink jellybean. C.B.'s skin crawled.

His train howled up to the platform, and the breaks squealed to a halt. He entered a drably lit car, with sour-faced people crushed next to him. He took a seat next to a blind man. The door clapped shut. His rattling trip began.

About three stops later, two men entered the subway together. Both of them wore black leather jackets, and had long beards, like ZZ Top. One man wore a tight leather cap on his head, while the other had chaps encasing his pants. When he turned away from C.B., he could see the two pockets of his ripped Levi's spread out like countries on the globe of his butt.

C.B. felt excitement wash over him. He allowed himself this one night. He had to know what he was giving up for the Lord. He stepped off the tightrope and tumbled into space.

Christopher Street was his stop. C.B. spilled out of the train and into the warm spring night. The first thing he noticed was that the Village wasn't as crowded and squashed together as downtown. There were no tall buildings. The sidewalks were thronged with people. Men, dressed like GQ models prowled the street. C.B. looked down. He made a decision; and looked up again. *I'm tumbling.*

He felt vertigo.

Cafes and bakeries spun past him. C.B. wandered into a bookstore. The atmosphere was thick with tension in here. Heads hunched over pornographic magazines glanced up then turned back to pictures of naked men spread-eagled and airbrushed on glossy pages. C.B. cautiously crept up to the magazine stand. He picked up a magazine, called *Carnival of Men*. He began trembling (tumbling).

The model's face was vacant. His body glistened and reflected the studio lights. His genitalia were objects: huge, flesh-colored fruits. Hairless and smooth. C.B. flipped the pages of the magazines. He found another picture, where a model spread the cheeks of his buttocks wide open. In the valley he created, he revealed the puckered rosebud of his anus.

If C.B. had been white, he would have been flushed as pink as Snagglepuss.

This is what it felt like, to give into temptation. What his mother hoped to destroy with church, what his father wanted to suppress with sports. The ground of Hell was fast approaching; it seethed with naked men and serpents. C.B. stayed in the bookstore, looking at magazines, for at least an hour. He was tempted to buy one of the magazines—this might be the only chance he got for a long time. But, then there was the chance of discovery, like his shrine to Lena. And it would be a visible souvenir of his shame.

He left the store empty-handed. The sky above the street was the sludge of sepia and purple-black, with the stars erased. There was a hint of humidity in the air.

He wandered the streets for an hour or more, putting off his eventual goal. He saw sophisticated men and women dressed in black. There were people with hair in colors of mint-green, daffodil yellow, and bubblegum pink. They wore safety pins through their ears, and some of them had white makeup on their faces, and tattoos on their arms. They were the clowns of hell. C.B. tried walking by them without gawking. He saw a shop that sold sex toys. He was too

chicken to go in, so he looked through the windows, staring at the various tools and instruments of pleasure.

Finally, C.B. steeled himself. A couple of blocks from the Christopher Street stop he'd exited, there was a bar where men swarmed like bees. The name of the bar was the Big Top. He took a deep breath, stepped inside.

It was dark and crowded. Men perched on stools, sipping drinks, or clung to walls, gripping the nozzles of their beers. It was the sort of aggressive, ridiculous stance that the boys in the locker room mimicked. Others prowled the spaces between in cutoffs and T-shirts, leaving trails of perfume behind. The walls of the bar were paneled with some dark wood and wainscoted in a thick, red vinyl with large buttons on it, like the inside of a coffin.

Willow Creek was a dry county, and his mother didn't drink. His father did, but C.B. had little experience with alcohol. He went up to the bar, and asked for a rum and coke. The bartender wore an open vest. His chest was as smooth and built as those in the magazine C.B. had seen earlier. The bartender nodded sullenly, and gave him a full glass of rum, and colored it lightly with the soft drink.

C.B. looked at the drink doubtfully. He tipped the bartender, and wandered to the second room, which lay behind a black curtain.

He passed through, expecting a backroom, like he'd heard about. Darkness, smells of sweaty close bodies, groping hands. Instead, he slipped into wonder.

The room was decorated like his circus dream of Heaven. The walls were covered with paintings of elegant Harlequins and court jesters, their faces regal and dignified, not silly or sinister. One of the painted jesters wore a checkered garment of green and pink, and on the points of three-pronged hat were pansies, instead of the customary bells. There was a small stage at the end of the room. A circus dome capped the room, so you couldn't see the ceiling. A silver balloon rose from the back of each chair.

A man in a tuxedo walked to the microphone set up in the center of the stage. He waved C.B. to a table. When he'd taken a seat, the MC spoke:

“Tonight at the Big Top, we are proud to present the vocal stylings of the beautiful Lena Flügelhorn!”

The lights dimmed to spectral blue as a figure made her way to the microphone. She wore a dress of stars, her hair pinned up in some gravity-defying coiffure. A single white spotlight pierced the stage. The golden skin was a miracle of foundation. The likeness was uncanny, save for a huge Adam's apple. An invisible piano started the familiar chords to “Home.”

And C.B. tumbled, plummeting to the floor of Hell. But the voice—resolutely male and tenor, yet somehow imbued with the essence of Lena—came and blew his poor body upwards, towards the star-babies of Heaven. C.B. found himself singing.

As he fell (or rose), C.B. felt Lena swell with him in. She rose up and held his hand. Lucifer—or Lena was there for him, as God had never been. If this was Hell, it couldn't be all that bad. It was beautiful here. A celestial circus of fallen stars. At once, C.B. recognized the anemic heaven he strove for, and rejected it.

Lena Flügelhorn's song ended, and with it, a chapter of C.B.'s life.