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We know
books



Galinda

A CHARMED CHILDHOOD

GREGORY MAGUIRE



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PART ONE

Make-Believe

A girl in her attic aerie, doing herself up in slats of dusty summer light. "Licorice, these ribbons aren't a toy, I'm trying to get them to hang straight. You stay where you are. And don't even think of scratching your sister. No one wants to see your claws. Mama has to get ready for her class. Listen to Mama when she's talking to you."

Queen Licorice yawned, her teeth like tiny fish ribs. Boredom a sign of status. Salmonella, snug next to her, flailed her salmon-colored tail. Crimped by a run-in with a ferret, her tail raised a permanent question mark. This identified the orange tabby as a dolt, perhaps unfairly. She hadn't yet shown signs of a feverish intelligence. Still, she was young. You never know.

"Stop peering at me. You're making Mama nervous." Galinda glanced in the mirror. The listless ribbons, stubbornly off-center. She pivoted a shoulder, waiting for that fleeting blush of satisfaction.

She wasn't going to get it downstairs. Mumsy was out, off and away with the fairies. Papa was pacing the ground floor, impatient to get his luncheon launched. Grandmama supervised the rolling out of the crust. The new kitchen girl was approaching it all wrong. "You have no feel for it," the old woman told Dyra. "Your mother failed to train you properly. You have to roll on the *diagonal*. Put your shoulders into it if you want to break up the lard. Lead with your dominant hand."

The girl looked unglued at the reference.

"The one you *write with*," said Grandmama.

"I don't write. I'm from the orphan stables," replied Dyra. In

the corner of her mouth she was worrying a hank of hair. Her hair smelled of the smokehouse. "I en't had training from nobody."

Grandmama rapped a wooden spoon upon the hob to underscore her annoyance. "Proof that ignorance begins at home."

Galinda's father swooped into the kitchen, sampling tidbits. "I always thought it was corruption that begins at home," he said, pinching his mother's bum. Grandmama turned to slap him, but affectionately. Her hand made a floury cloud upon his cheek.

"I'll box your ears yet, Highmuster Arduenna, see if I don't."

Her son brought out his old joke. "I learned about life at my mother's knee and other low joints."

"I object. However shrewd you are, that's all me, not some other floozy."

"Will the meal be ready," asked Highmuster, tapping Dyra, but softly, upon the side of her head, "with this hard-shelled walnut doing the scut work?"

"I got thoughts enough," huffed Dyra, bearing down on the rolling pin but looking as if she'd like to scatter her boss's brains with the business end of it.

She was still learning the place. It was her first week and she'd never seen the like. The kitchen had been jury-rigged into the crankshaft chamber of the old mill. Everything happened around the central column, whose massive gears had stopped for good. Tea towels and an apron hung from the teeth of the lateral cog, while platters of cooked meats and breads were laid out along the upper millstone. The defunct tin hopper hung from the beamed ceiling; in the last five years no grain had been fed into it from the upper floor. The floors kept to antiseptic standard, though the rough stone walls were beaded with steam damp. Failing to catch much of a breeze, a row of windows hung open against the ceiling.

Grandmama checked on the honey-egg cake. Cooling down nicely in its bain-marie of well water, it smelled like fresh laundry.

They could hear Galinda tripping lightly down the back steps,

all but kicking the kittens ahead of her. That entitled Queen Licorice, that aggrieved Salmonella. Galinda's only apparent retinue. She was a fluster of pretty impatience, that child. She arrived at any doorway prepared to deliver a full sentence, an opening line, as if conversation was always stalled until she sailed into the room to initiate it. Though her grandmother was speaking, Galinda overrode her in a fluting voice. "Today's my dance day. Who is taking me?"

Her father loped out of the pantry to check the table settings. What had been the oat crib now passed for a dining salon.

"It's the next stage of tryouts," said Galinda. "I just *have* to make the cut. The three bestest will become Team Tennery at the quarterfinals. I can't miss today's lesson. If we win the quarters, then it's semifinals at Frottica. You *know* this, I tell you *every week*."

Grandmama sniffed. "Oh, look, the Princess of the Pirouettes. Don't aim too high, you'll just fall farther. Mind the pudding, you're about to twirl into it."

"Quarterfinals, semifinals, finals, finals, finals, the finals, the finals, I need to make the *finals*," sang Galinda. "It's not until Shiz that the Princess Tiara is awarded. That's what she's called, not Pirouette anything. I do have a chance at it, some say." She struck a pose with her hands behind her back and her left foot turned out. She bent her left knee a little more. There. That lifted her right hip and resettled her shoulders.

For no clear reason Licorice hissed and swiped at Salmonella. Salmonella backed up, looking appalled, even shocked. Though this sort of behavior happened six times an hour, Salmonella couldn't get used to it. Slow learner.

"We've got a feast to slap up, so you'll have to organize transport for yourself," said Grandmama. "Ask Old Ibbison. But don't pester your father, you gluey little glowworm; he's keyed up."

"Papa," called Galinda, who didn't listen closely. Or maybe she did. It was hard to tell with her. "Papa?" She tippy-toed past

the broad farm table, looking weirdly fussy today with fancy Dixxi House china and glimmering flatware, and she followed the big man into what passed for the receiving hall.

Her father was plucking ornamental baubles out of the arrangements of cedar boughs. Grandmama had gone overboard. "It's dance day, Papa." Galinda punctuated her announcement with a caper on one pointed toe and a little kick-knee-kick from the other foot. Affecting nonchalance, she patted the skirt Grandmama had run up for her. It was intense, a deep blue-green finished with black piping.

Highmuster tumbled the bibelots into a drawer. "Too much frou-frou. We're confident enough not to need to be showy. Don't try too hard or you give yourself away. Sweetie-pea, what do you think?"

Galinda cocked her head to one side. "I'd add some ribbons around the top of the tubs. Bows on both sides."

"That's a bit girly."

"Well, you asked me, and I *am* a girl."

"But we don't look desperate. That's a house rule."

"Papa, we're not *desperate*." Galinda put her knuckles against her top teeth. "The bows would look fancier. Can't we be fancy? Are we rich or are we poor?"

Her father grinned sideways at her. "You tell me."

"I don't know, that's why I'm *asking*."

"We're complicated."

Galinda shrugged. Complicated was too much trouble. "I need to go to my dance class, Papa. It's day two of the tryouts!"

"I can't help you today, littlest. The superior honking cheeses arrive in an hour. No wives, thank Lurline. Bother one of your brothers. Or Ibbison."

He rubbed the top of her head, but in an absent-minded manner. Galinda had seen that vacancy in her father's behavior often. But she didn't think about it much. Little interfered with the sealed

globe of her own private Essence of Galinda. Which was like a bespoken perfume—it announced her and it completed her at the same time. If her father's hand rested on her head, she could think about his hand, but when it withdrew, she'd waft on, forgetful, even oblivious. She was eight.

Her first memory, near as she could work out, was of shame. The old house, before everything happened. Mumsy having people in. A moment of charity for bereaved gentlewomen. Cupcakes with blue sprinkles. Some spilled cider. Some rich old ladies smelling of pomander and old-lady paper-breath. "Here is our little Galinda," said Mumsy. "Galinda, this is Widow Lenth. And this is Widow Porthia. Say hello."

Galinda did. "Little Galinda," said Widow Lenth, with a sigh.

"So charming," said Widow Porthia, dabbing her eyes with lace froth. "How do you do, little Galinda?"

Galinda did a little dance for them, that's how she did. She didn't speak much because she had a baby lisp.

Then, arriving late, in came another old bag. "This is Widow Chenia," said Mumsy. "Be polite, now."

Having appreciated the applause, Galinda said, "Hello. My name is Widow Galinda."

They all laughed. It was the best moment of their afternoon, better than her dancing. Galinda fled and refused to come downstairs to say goodbye.

At bedtime, her mother said, "You're still crying? You were absolutely endearing. They *loved* you."

"Then why did they laugh?"

"You called yourself a widow. That's a person whose husband has died. My friends this afternoon have no husbands."

Well, neither did Galinda, so she didn't really follow. But sometime shortly after that Robbery came on a social call and stayed on. Apparently, everybody needs a husband, or a somebody.

Robbery,” she called up the stairs, “I have to get going. Mind the kittens.” She needn’t have bothered. The kittens, scared of the ferrets, rarely followed Galinda out the door. Robbery did not reply.

Galinda was on her own. So what that her father was distracted by his stupid lunch. Her brothers could usually be found hanging around the barn stalls.

Before the family had picked up the old millhouse property at distressed prices, due to the millstream running dry, the stables had housed four or five horses. Also carts for carrying grain to market. Though the ruined miller had taken his horses with him, he’d left the crummy carts, and her father now used them in his own commercial enterprise. A few new horses, when not away on overnight expeditions, shuffled and huffed in stalls reeking with ammonia.

Today the old place was largely empty—only a few carts and carriages in their bays. Some of the horses were cropping the meadow across Cold Shoulder Road. Several more loitered inside the barn. A few pigs on the lower level grunted in approval of life. The grunts from Galinda’s brothers—the bigger pigs upstairs—were more sardonic. They weren’t yet old enough to be sprouting chin hairs like the other pigs. The eldest was called Ham, which was fun. Hammidge. The other two were Pordock and Baxton, naturally known as Pork and Bacon.

When she hallo-ed their names into the summer gloom, they kept snorting and laughing and didn’t reply. She segued her voice from clarinet to piccolo.

"Papa told me to get one of you to bring me to my dance class! Ham! Pork! Even you, Bacon! All of you or any of you, I don't care who it is. I can't miss my class or I'll lose my chance to get picked for the team."

Pork called, "Demoted from a butterfly to a stinkbug."

"I'll send Robbery up there to pinch you if you don't look smart," replied their sister. "I have to get going or I'll be late. This is *very important* to me."

Ham was the one who caved. He swung down from the loft with his shirt open and sleeves rolled up, exposing his nearly beefy forearms as a farmhand might. "Ibbison can't do it?"

"Old Ibbison is nowhere, and Papa is fretting over his luncheon guests. They'll be showing up pretty soon. I don't know why Mama has to go on a sightseeing tour this week, with so much going on."

"You've answered your own question," said Ham. "She doesn't want to be associated with Papa's campaigns. He's strategic, but so is she. It's better for them both if she's out of the picture. Don't try to figure it out. Come on, if we're going let's go. You on board, lads?"

Pork said, "We'll keep watch here and report what we find, Corporal Ham." Bacon just grinned and pounded a paradiddle on a beam.

"At ease, Private Pork. And Drummer Bacon."

Ham collected the least resistant nag from over the way and harnessed her to the smaller cart. Galinda insisted on climbing up top with him. He said, "All ready? Is Robbery coming?"

"No. She's so nervous today. She feels like she's going to throw up. I told her to stay and watch the kittens. It's just me."

The wagon lurched along the back drive that pitched at a sketchy angle to join the road toward Tennery. Their village was one of a dozen outposts ringing the provincial seat known as Frottica, a place Galinda was determined to see this year, at last. Because not only would she qualify for the Tennery Team, but they would also go the distance. Home, quarterfinals, semis,

and then? . . . But she kept quiet about it as they rumbled along. At least they were on their way. There was a trick between being pushy and being needy. She was still practicing how to get what she wanted.

But she'd managed it. She'd slipped out from whichever of her father's latest campaigns was being set in motion. On her own way despite company coming.

She took note of herself. She felt like a yellow candy flame in the middle of an edible rose made of icing. She wanted to stand up and be seen, but Cold Shoulder Road was hardscrabble hill. No one nearby to notice. Ham didn't count; he was chewing on meadow grass and humming a tune without a meter. Oh well. She sat with her hands in her lap, a porcelain study of an ambitious child.

Galinda didn't know the names of fabrics, but this confection made her happy. Grandmama had outdone herself. A simple country thing. Cut from a coverlet rescued long ago from the old house. Vaguely floral but with little conviction as to actual species. In black, teal, and cream.

The attached skirt rippled in bevels that made Galinda think of fondant. Imperial fondant. She sensed these things—she couldn't articulate them. Her vocabulary was barely north of barnyard, given the family's circumstances. But she ran her hands along the pleats, adoring the effect. The girls would love it. They would hate it. They would seethe. She was so beautiful. Though Robbery might killjoy it and say that Galinda was actually ugly, that she could only *act* beautiful.

Still, Robbery had stayed home, so Galinda had to think that for herself.