A Little Rascal Visits Broadway

New York City, 1960

I stand smack in the middle of the most glamorous setting I have ever seen.

Radiant lights wash a huge stage curtain in liquid gold. The live orchestra is invisible because the musicians are in the “pit.” Still, their tightly woven chords fill Broadway’s Imperial Theatre with excitement and energy. There seems not an empty seat in the house and I have the very best one: “center/center” and no more than ten rows back. It is impossible for me to sit down, even with George tapping me on the shoulder and Mono tugging at me to settle into my seat.

“Act like a gentleman,”she whispers.

I have heard the phrase so many times—and usually I comply—but not this time. I briefly turn my attention to my nagging grandparents seated on either side of me and I can tell that this time it is probably okay not to act like a gentleman. My heels rise and fall like a racehorse at the starting gate as I clench the back of the seat in front of me. I am careful not to disturb the person seated there even as my body trembles from what I am seeing, hearing, and feeling.

This is the most magical moment of my life. And I have had a few. After all, I am already nine years old.

We arrived in New York City by plane two days earlier. My mother’s parents, George and Kit (Mono) Lowman, accompany me for my first Broadway experience. However, this is not my first flight. At age seven, I flew alone from Atlanta, Georgia, to meet George and Mono in Sarasota, Florida, for a summer vacation. I endured several days of silent terror, barely sleeping the night before, thinking of all the horrors that might consume me so high above the ground. But that was then, when I was little.

On this trip, in their company, I am treated almost like an adult. The plane ride is fabulous. Great snacks are set down on the little tray before me. The descent through the clouds is a bit nerve-wracking—noisy, colorful, and bumpy. An enormous yellow cab drives us from the airport to our modest downtown hotel. A polite man, not much taller than I, wearing something like a military uniform, ushers us into a cozy suite. We have a picnic dinner in the room. George and Mono sleep together in one bed. I sleep in my own, a double—which *is* a first for me. I usually hear “lights out” from a top bunk at home. I have never been more comfortable in my life.

George finds me the next morning, peering into the street from the room’s large window, five or six stories above the hum of the city.

“Chippo, would you like to go outside?”

Quickly, I answer, “Yes!”

“Okay,” he says. “But put on your topcoat. It’s colder than you think.” I dress in moments.

“See if you can find us today’s paper, *The New York Times*,” he suggests, giving me an important mission. “Let’s find out what’s playing at the theatre.” George always encourages me to try new things, to “step up” in case he’s not around. Mono would object, or at least intervene, but she is still asleep.

It is quiet in the hallway. The carpet is thick but worn in the center. I go to the elevator and push the down button. Soon, I hear a grinding, groaning rattle and when the sound stops, the metal door opens before me. There is another cage-like restraint which the operator, also dressed in an unfamiliar military uniform with shiny buttons and wearing a pillbox hat, ushers me into.

“Down, sir?” he inquires in all seriousness.

“Yes,” I confirm, in my most mature voice. For the entire two minutes easing down to the main floor, I stand erect, silent. As the operator opens first the “cage” door and then the glass-fronted main door, I wait for his instructions. This is another first for me.

“Have a good day,” is all he advises.

I thank him and march onto a thick, intricately floral-patterned carpet. Mirrors on the walls document my passage. I ignore them, not wanting to watch myself during my daring assignment.

The lobby is as quiet as a library. At the front desk, I ask where I might find a newspaper. A courteous man directs me outside the hotel and down the street. Another polite uniformed man holds the front door open for me and points to a newsstand nearby. I have never been treated so much like a grownup. And I like it. I return to our room, paper in hand, feeling a bit taller.

The day continues to be filled with firsts. Breakfast at a deli. Walking the streets of New York. A visit to FAO Schwartz, an amazing store dedicated to nothing but fun stuﬀ for kids. Lunch at an Automat where one peers through little portals and selects individual portions on tiny plates. Passing store windows looking like museum displays. And finally, going to the theatre.

Now, I stand spellbound, bathed in orchestral music telling me an invisible story and filling the space above my head like helium in a birthday balloon. Many in the audience lean forward as I do when the house lights go dark. The glowing curtain rises quickly, revealing a busy, familiar world.

Cowboys move about, joking and jostling, with wide-brimmed hats pushed back on their foreheads. They wear jeans, vests, and high-heeled boots, with kerchiefs at their throats. Most have pistols tucked into holsters. Ladies in bright dresses fluffed up with crinolines, sporting bare shoulders and bosomy tops, taunt and tease the men who pretend not to notice them. This is the opening scene of *Destry Rides Again* and instantly, I feel part of the show.

Back home, I spend days and nights glued to our black-and-white TV in the family room watching Westerns, hour after hour, until some grownup threatens me into the bedroom I share with my little sister, Neil. Since I am two years older, I get to stay up thirty minutes later. I am a fanatic for the Wild West shows and prefer to watch them alone, sitting cross-legged on the floor with a coonskin cap on my head, cap pistol at my hip, and ready to ride. Already, I can quote lengthy exchanges from *The Lone Ranger, Gunsmoke,* and *Zorro* but my favorites are *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin* and *The Rifleman* because these shows have boys who look, walk, and talk just like me.

The *Destry* storyline doesn’t make a whole lot of sense but it really doesn’t matter. There are bad guys and good guys. I hear horses shuffle and whinny at the hitching post. And sweet-talking ladies go up and down the stairs a lot. There’s plenty of singing in this show. And there’s lots of dancing, which seems a bit odd. But at the curtain call, everybody is happy, even the villains who return on stage for their bow after being shot up outside the swinging doors moments ago.

Even though I fall asleep in the cab before we get back to the hotel, images from that night are securely locked in the vault of my brain. They point the way forward at a critical crossroad in the path to my life as a stage monkey.