

Unnaturally Green



one girl's journey along a
yellow brick road less traveled

Felicia Ricci

FLR  Brooklyn, New York

ACT ONE.
THE CYCLONE



GREEN

/grin/ adjective

1. having a flavor that is raw, harsh, and acid, due especially to a lack of maturity: *a green teenager.*
2. of the color of growing foliage, between yellow and blue in the spectrum: *a green tree.*
3. simple; unsophisticated; gullible; easily fooled: *a green newcomer.*
4. fresh, recent, or new: *a green relationship.*
5. not fully developed or perfected in growth or condition; unripe; not properly aged: *a green actress.*

1. COME BACKSTAGE

I saw *Wicked* as a surly and disbelieving English major the winter of my sophomore year at Yale University. In my 19 years of living, breathing, and having strong opinions, I'd done dozens of shows, all of which were non-professional and most of which involved jazz hands. When it came to theater—or anything, for that matter—clearly I knew what I was talking about.

My parents were visiting New York from Rhode Island, loading up on shows for their semi-yearly Broadway fix, and I'd taken the train from New Haven to meet them. We had great seats—fifth row, center—and I sat sandwiched between my giddy little sister and bespectacled boyfriend, a small man who now exists as a bust in my Dating History Museum, along with other lifeless renderings of ill-advised suitors.

Alright, impress me, I thought from my seat. I want to see what this hype is all about.

(GREEN. 1. having a flavor that is raw, harsh, and acid, due especially to a lack of maturity: *a green teenager.*)

With a flourish, the show began, and in moments, I felt my tight little sophomore buttocks unclench. Soon, I was hooked: *oohing* and

ahhing at the music, sets, lights, costumes, and performers—just like the millions of fans who had come before me. Most enthralling was the green-skinned protagonist, played by actress Shoshana Bean, a high-cheek-boned goddess with belting and riffing powers that bordered on the supernatural.

Elphaba Thropp was her name. She'd been known first as a villain, as the so-called “Wicked Witch” of *The Wizard of Oz*. Now she was a heroine. Each night at the Gershwin she came to life for thousands of theatergoers. Over time, her story would become a worldwide phenomenon, proliferating into productions that played across the globe, breaking box office records—changing the world, one unclenched sophomore buttock at a time.

I watched as Shoshana tore across the proscenium, clocking the audience with high note after higher note, sailing into the vocal stratosphere, forging through each scene with mind-blowing skill.

Was she human, I wondered, or engineered to make the rest of us feel meek and unworthy? These were legitimate questions, and I needed answers.

It just doesn't seem possible!

I felt like Isaac Newton, watching his beloved gravity apple spontaneously levitate, then tap dance to ragtime music.

Soon it hit me like a (pick your cliché): ton of bricks, speeding truck, Catholic nun. Amidst my awe and disbelief, I had joined the ranks of probably every other girl in the audience.

This is my dream role!

Elphaba Thropp had won me over. She was young. Hopeful. Misunderstood.

Just like me!

Strange in appearance, unwavering in conviction, Elphaba was a heroine for those of us who, at any point in our lives, had felt different.

My next thought? (And I hope you saw this coming.)

I want to play that role.

A stirring ambition for a young English major—soon squelched by the droning voice of reason.

You could never, in a million years.



A million years later and I was back in the audience of *Wicked*, making my way through rows of velvet seats at San Francisco's Orpheum Theater, towing along my tiny new friend named Libby. With three minutes until curtain, we shimmied to the center of an aisle, wearing our all-access lanyards, and seated ourselves next to a slouchy couple and a little girl wearing a tiara. From my chair, I felt a gurgle deep in my gut.

Ugh.

I had jolted awake that dreary March Tuesday three hours before my alarm. My stomach had started to churn, like bread dough kneading itself—filled with a sticky clod of anticipation.

Gripping my armrests, I tried to relax.

“This is exciting, isn't it?” said Libby, with a little leg-kick-bounce.

“Yes,” I said, meaning no.

Libby wasn't just a spectator; she was also a member of *Wicked*'s cast. As standby (or first understudy) to the role of Glinda, when she wasn't performing she was waiting—sometimes watching the show, sometimes diddling around backstage. Still fresh in my mind was her cutie patootie performance last weekend, when she had stolen audience members' hearts as the charming, beautiful, universally adored Glinda Upland. She had been perfectly cast—a ball of glitter, with platinum hair that framed her button of a blue-eyed face, which, like the rest of her, was doll-sized.

As we burrowed into our red seats, Libby's feet barely touched the floor.

As for me?

I was not doll-sized, but I guess I was moderately adorable—at least more than usual. Tonight I'd taken a break from sweatpants and instead went all *Extreme Makeover* on myself, arriving at the theater in a nautical-inspired blue and white sundress with wedge boots. I'd even attempted a salon blowout, which for me meant flipping my hair upside-down, blasting it with heat, and spritzing it with every bottle under my bathroom sink. The full effect made me look like a longhaired poodle that had accidentally licked an electrical socket. But it was an upgrade from looking like my old kickball coach, with her low-slung pants, messy bun, and chin hairs.

You may be wondering why I, a woman content to look like a gym teacher, would go through so much trouble. Well, you see: I had a new job, and it was my first day.

Drumroll, please.

As of that dreary March Tuesday, despite all reason, logic, and governing laws of the universe, I, Felicia Ricci, was the new Elphaba standby in the San Francisco Company of *Wicked*.

Yep!

Me. The novice. The nobody. The nincompoop.

Was it a joke? By all accounts—no. But, if yes? I was probably the punch line.

Wicked had offered me my first professional theater contract—ever. Before then, it had been 23 years' worth of amateur hour: summer camp, student productions, workshops in basements. In college I hadn't had much formal training, but tried my best to do theater between essay writing. It was a piecemeal fling with the dramatic arts, which soon snowballed from a hobby into the beginnings of a career.

When it came to *Wicked*, I felt a bit like I'd been elected Vice President after having served exclusively on eighth-grade student council.

Seasoned actress Eden Espinosa was my Commander in Chief (or the cast's principal Elphaba) and I was next in line to take over should anything go wrong. You might also think of me as a member of the

Secret Service, “Worthy of Trust and Confidence,” enlisted to throw myself in the line of fire.

March 30, 2010—the night in question (stomach of dough, poodle hair)—was my first night on call for duty.

Four days before I’d had my only dress rehearsal, or “put-in,” when everybody else in the cast performed in street clothes and I strutted around in full costume, feeling like I’d seriously overdressed for a party. But this was a welcomed upgrade, since before that I’d been practicing the show alone, chattering away as Elphaba to my imaginary friends like a happy schizophrenic.

As Elphaba, “full costume” meant having my face, ears, neck, and hands slathered in layers of green makeup. I stared in the mirror, transfixed, as I watched *Wicked*’s makeup designer wave his wide Japanese brush like a magic wand, turning me from pallid yellow to bright emerald, as the lines and blemishes on my skin surrendered to the smooth contours of my now unrecognizable face. Next, there were wigs, one for each act, topped by a series of hats, under which there were laid two, sometimes three body microphones. Last was a green mesh jumpsuit, a skin-tight sheath for my arms and chest that was like connective tissue between wardrobe and makeup—nightmare to those who, like me, are blessed with healthy and abundant sweat glands.

When the curtain fell on my put-in, I’d earned the stamp of Approved Standby from the *Wicked* creative team. This stamp was less “100% Perfect” and more “Good Enough,” but that was all right—I knew I’d have lots more rehearsal and coaching in the coming weeks. I liked to think of myself as a little green Elphaba tree—potted with soil, but not yet pruned.

(**GREEN.** 2. of the color of growing foliage, between yellow and blue in the spectrum: *a green tree.*)

In the meantime, I would have to do my best.

The lights dimmed and a hush fell over the crowd, like we were straining to hear a secret. There was a blast of horns as *Wicked*’s opening number began, its company of Ozian villagers, swathed in clothes of unusual texture and proportion, cheering and throwing

streamers to celebrate the death of Elphaba, infamous Wicked Witch of the West.

As the sight and sound extravaganza flickered across the stage, I sank into my chair, until I was the approximate height of Libby. I rested my hands in my lap and closed my eyes.

This shouldn't be too hard, I thought to myself.

The truth? Despite my anxiety, there was no *real* reason to be nervous. Not today. Being the newest agent to *Wicked's* Secret Service, I was primed for combat—but it would be a rare and distant day that I'd take a bullet for the president.

It was even possible I would *never* play Elphaba. Between starring in *Wicked* on Broadway, then opening the Los Angeles company, talent powerhouse Eden Espinosa had racked up many years of experience before swooping into San Francisco. Since arriving last month she hadn't called out once, and each week had conquered all eight shows with Napoleonic tenacity.

This was quite rare for actresses playing Elphaba, I was told, since the role was so grueling. But Eden was a force to be reckoned with. In light of her flawless spree, when I walked into work in my nautical-inspired sundress, stage manager David welcomed me to my "first day of guitar lessons," what with all the free time I would have as standby.

Just relax.

I opened my eyes. Kendra Kassebaum, our Glinda, had arrived onstage via mechanical "bubble," descending from the fly space to walk and greet the Ozians. Libby, low in her seat, stared, entranced, studying Kendra's every move as she swept from end to end in her blue shimmering gown, as she had done hundreds of times before.

Minutes later, Eden dashed onstage, front and center, a green halo surrounding her from head to boot, showing us all, especially me, what it meant to be a star. Soon it was time for her first song, "The Wizard and I," which involved all kinds of high, gutsy belting, second only in difficulty to one other Elphaba song, "Defying Gravity," which happened at the end of Act I.

Eden was every kind of confident, infusing the role of Elphaba with a passion that had, for years, made audiences thump their Playbills like Holy Bibles. I'd spent hours scouring YouTube for bootlegs of Eden, each of which gave me full-on body tingles. I'd even studied her performance for inspiration before my own *Wicked* audition.

Now I'm her standby, I thought, in a daze.

I sighed conclusively, feeling myself calming. With Eden at the helm, there was nothing to worry about. If the Big Day ever arrived, I'd have loads of time to practice.

No, not today.

Finally Eden was in the home stretch of the song, singing about the breadth of her limitless future, crossing downstage to center, reaching her arms from side to side. She planted her feet, winding up for the vocal finale.

Then, it happened.

There was a wobble, a momentary *blip* in the stream of sound. She slipped slightly under pitch, and there was a grating noise rising in her throat. After taking a deep breath, she forged to the final note, a C above Middle C—which rests smack in the middle of female singers' *passagios*, or vocal breaks. It seemed that Eden had something in her throat—phlegm or a swollen gland—that kept tripping up her cords.

I shifted in my chair.

"Don't worry," whispered Libby, "she's got it."

Midway through the note Eden's voice stopped completely, like a phone line that had suddenly gone dead. The orchestra raced to the end of the underscoring as Eden swung her arms over her head, a choreographed gesture to mark the end of the song. As she moved through the silence, spinning with momentum, her prop glasses flew off to stage left, a peg bursting from the self-destructing machine.

Instantly the lights changed and the orchestra cut away, as Eden strode to stage left, scooping up her glasses.

Ending its momentary calm, my stomach had begun to braid itself into a Challah loaf, twisting and turning, bubbling with the ravenous yeast of anxiety.

Was Eden sick? Or was it a fluke?

According to *Wicked*'s sequence of scenes, she would have to stay onstage for two more songs. Then, once she exited, she could decide whether to continue performing or—

The unthinkable!

I was gripping my armrests, like a passenger on a nose-diving airplane. How many minutes before I hit the ground?

Speak words of comfort to me, Libby!

“Maybe you should take out your phone,” she said.

“What?” I hissed. “Are you serious?”

“Just in case,” she said.

No, not today.

I looked up. Eden was gone.

And now a lecture excerpt from Life Lessons 101, a class I keep flunking and having to repeat.

LL101: You can't always plan. The universe may intervene.

Apparently, I'm supposed to accept this fact—that the universe can do whatever it wants. Kind of like how my mother would steal into my childhood room and rearrange my books and toys against my will.

“When you're on your own, you can have everything the way you like,” she'd say.

When will that day come? I always wondered.

That night in the Orpheum, in the red velvet seats, an incoming text from the stage manager buzzed the answer: *no, not today.*

David: 8:40 PM hello there – come backstage – she is not sure she is going to stay in. we will know more soon

Oh my God.

I hustled from the audience through the “personnel only” doors, saying a silent prayer that I'd either:

A) Not actually have to go on.

B) Not actually have to go on.

There really was no second option.

My gait was stiff and hulking, my lanyard swinging back and forth from my neck, a pendulum ticking toward my worst fate. I followed

Libby as she scampered ahead with tiny rapid strides through the stairwells and crossovers.

Just breathe.

We emerged at the left end of the upstage curtain, steps away from Eden's dressing room, where I saw stage manager David speaking in low tones to our company manager. They spun around to face us, their expressions contorting into broad, unflinching smiles, which was especially alarming to see on David, who reminded me of a wax figure.

I tried to speak, but formed less an English word than the sound of a dying pigeon.

Libby stepped in. "What's the deal?"

"You're on!" David said to me, his smile so big it practically looped around his neck.

"Oh, right," I said, as all of my body went numb.

"I told you stuff like this happens," he said.

"No, you said, 'Welcome to your first day of guitar lessons.'"

He ignored this.

"You've got fifteen minutes before we're sending you on."

David knocked on Eden's door and together the four of us swept in, where we were greeted by many others: the wig guy, the makeup guy, the Elphaba dresser, and Eden herself, still in costume, spraying liquid vocal coat into her mouth.

"Sorry about this, girl," she said to me.

"Oh, no problem," I said, because it was opposite day.

Even so:

Worthy of Trust and Confidence, I will do my duty!

Inside, everything was unfamiliar; Eden's clothes, makeup, humidifiers, and souvenir paraphernalia were scattered about the room, and I wasn't sure how to make my first move without toppling the figurative Jenga tower. Instead of heading anywhere with purpose, I did a kind of side-step to the center of the room, like a polite, disoriented crab.

Kathleen, the Elphaba dresser, spoke first.

"Here are your undergarments and leotard."

As I grabbed them, I wondered if I was supposed to change in front of everyone, as a kind of spectator sport, but decided to retreat into the adjacent bathroom as Kathleen called out to me,

“You’re running on mid-Emerald City, so it’ll be the black dress with kneepads. And at least we’ll avoid the quick change!”

“Right!” I yelled back, as if I knew what she was talking about.

The bathroom was cramped, but spacious enough for a swift clothes-off, clothes-on maneuver. Thanks to years of performing in under-funded, under-staffed, and under-rehearsed amateur theater, I had become awesome at multitasking under pressure. In peak form, I could vocalize in modulating scales while also curling my hair, brushing my teeth, shaving my legs in the sink, and texting between one and five people.

I emerged from the bathroom seconds later, fully decked in the most unflattering ensemble possible: opaque black tights rolled all the way up to my bust—like charred casing on an overstuffed hot dog—black knee pads, black lace boots, and a black bra. If you saw me out of context you’d think I was preparing for some kind of dominatrix roller derby.

The makeup designer spoke next, in dulcet, soothing tones. “Have a seat,” he cooed.

I plunked down in the makeup chair, ready to surrender to the engulfing swatches of green.

“Here, take this brush and start painting your hands and neck,” he said.

“Okay,” I slurred back.

God. Look at me.

It was near impossible to perform this hand-eye coordinated task while floating outside my own body, but I did my best, watching the wig guy in the mirror as he joined in the spectacle, coiling my poodle blowout into pin-curl loops, pressing them down onto my head, while I slathered myself in green like a preschooler who’d been told she could paint on the walls.

In a flash I was transported back—back to my first brush with spontaneous theater disaster—which happened during an elementary school production of (no joke) *The Wizard of Oz*, when my hand-sewn Cowardly Lion jumpsuit fell apart onstage. Right after “If I Only Had the Nerve,” as I was confessing fear of my lion’s tail to Dorothy, the damn thing came off in my hands, dangling from my feeble fourth-grade grip, like a furry, lifeless snake. Committed to staying in the moment, I turned to Dorothy and shouted, “You killed my tail!” at which point I threw it at her. This set a precedent for the rest of my theater stints: if anything went wrong, my right brain would just take over, without my consent, and dictate that I would do something—anything—to keep the action rolling. This happened again during a high school dance recital, when I forgot the entire second half of our jazz routine and so started free-styling as 1970s John Travolta. The other girl was stunned and stopped dancing completely, which meant that in the end everybody thought *she* had messed up—and that our choreographer had really weird taste.

Tonight, I wondered, horrified, would John Travolta make an encore performance?

And all of Oz was stricken with Saturday Night Fever.

Stage manager David asked if I had any last-minute questions—*any last requests?*—then next assured me everything was going to be fine, which of course was a lie. I said something back to him, but I have no idea what it was—I was too busy thinking, “I hope I don’t get the hiccups and start farting uncontrollably,” which guaranteed that this would, indeed, happen. Even worse, for the life of me I couldn’t remember if I’d warmed up my voice that day—and, holy crap, I wasn’t sure I could even *sing* the damn part!

How will I ever be able to do this?

There were supposed to be hours more rehearsal before I’d ever go on. What happened to more practice? What happened to more coaching? What happened to pruning my Elphaba tree?

Universe, you’re such a pain in my ass!

I'd been painted, primed, and preened, and the hydra that was my assembly team dispersed so that I might stand at full stature, dressed in black from head to toe. There I stood, frozen, the final frame in my own version of one of those evolution posters, in which the chimp becomes the human. The Felicia had become The Elphaba: newly-green skin, pointy witch's hat pinned to her rather large head—a head that should have belonged to someone else—someone older, wiser, and better equipped to rescue a multimillion dollar musical.

Just breathe.

Somebody handed me a water bottle, so I gulped. Somebody handed me green glasses, so I put them on. Through the dressing room monitor playing live audio I could hear we were minutes from the swap—the moment when Eden would run off stage and I would run on, hopefully without anyone in the audience noticing.

We began our trek to the wings. Every image whizzed by, like scenery past a runaway train—with green-tinted windows. Though surrounded by people, I felt so inconsolably alone, trying to ignore the clamor of voices in my head. I needed to release myself from the stronghold of self-doubt and become someone else entirely.

To become Elphaba Thropp, brave and uncompromising.