

**SHORT
CIRCUS**

*“Never underestimate a child’s ability
to get into more trouble.”*

—MARTIN MULL

SHORT CIRCUS

by Stephen V. Masse

Good Harbor Press

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

SOMETIMES THERE'S JUST way too much stuff on TV, and the constant Technicolor rush can get you restless. When you're in that sort of funk, the best answer is to grab a lively book and go off by yourself and read. I must admit that as a boy, I wasn't the best reader in the library. As a matter of fact, the only time you'd find me in the library was when my mother made me go. But when I did find a good book, you couldn't get me out of it. I hated those books to end! And sometimes I'd find a pen and some paper, and try to write a sequel.

I hope *Short Circus* is one of those books for you. Readers who come from Massachusetts may recognize some of the places in this story. You may even think you see yourself or a friend in the pages ahead.

There was a temptation for me to get a *Short Circus* website going with contests and games, but what will you have to talk about with your college friends in years to come, if you don't get out there and do fun stuff like building forts, and making up your own games, and learning to play an instrument, and visiting people on their front porch, and

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learning to swim, and snow tubing, and a hundred other things? Nothing, you'll just become some boring college student who spends all day on the Internet, eating Cap'n Crunch in front of the computer, and surfing for the next game or contest while everybody else is out having fun and wishing you were out there with them. Make an interesting life for yourself, so you'll have great stories to write or tell!

One more thing. This book is about a boy and his Big Brother. Big Brothers Big Sisters is an organization which matches children ages 6 through 18 with mentors in professionally supported one-to-one relationships. Big Brothers Big Sisters does not officially endorse this novel, but I do hope that many boys and girls who would benefit by having a Big will find an abundance of new volunteers because of this book.

Stephen V. Masse

*Dedicated to my favorite teachers,
Fiore and Susan Masse,
and to all teachers everywhere*

PART ONE

SUMMER





IT HAPPENS EVERY YEAR. When I got back to school this week Mrs. Landon, our new composition teacher, told us to write five pages on what we did this summer. I told her I could write a book. She said that was fine, why don't I try? At first I thought she was joking, but then she asked me, "What's your name?"

I thought I was going to get in trouble already. "Jem Lockwood," I said. "Really Jeremy, but – "

She was nodding her head and smiling. "Oh. I read some of your compositions from last year. You seem like the type who could handle the challenge." Some deal I just got myself into. What she doesn't know is that last spring it was easy to write compositions. I got a broken arm in February, and most of the time I couldn't find any good outdoor stuff to do. It was a bad fracture, and I had to go easy for two months. Nobody believed I could break my arm just by a basketball, but that is how it happened. The

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ball was flying around the gym like crazy, and someone from the other class whipped it real hard and hit my upper arm. I heard the bone go crack, and it looked like I had two elbows. I almost threw up when I looked at it, but I guess it hurt too much. Two other kids did throw up, so it must have looked pretty gross. Someone said I swore when it happened, but I don't remember.

When I got to the hospital, the nurse grabbed my arm and squeezed it to feel what was wrong. She didn't believe me when I told her it was broken. Some people never believe kids anyway. She looked pretty shocked when the x-ray showed the bone was completely in two, and that the reason the basketball broke my arm so easy was because I had a bone lesion. They had to operate, so I have a scar. My mother was nervous and crying, but the doctor told her there was no cancer, and I would be back to normal after it healed.

Now that my arm is as good as ever, it will be kind of hard to find time to write. Mrs. Landon said she's going to give me an A if I just keep on writing everything about summer. So every night before I go to bed, I write down a few things.

Most of the time when I'm not in school or doing stuff for my mother, I'm out riding my green racer with my friends. Or riding someplace in Jesse Standish's old red Chevy. Jesse is my Big Brother. He looks like somebody on television, and he has a moustache. And he has a girlfriend named Andrea.

Jesse first became my Big Brother last November. My mother thought I was getting too tough, only she said rest-

less, and she kept calling the Big Brother Association to find out if they had somebody for me. Every time I got hurt or got in bad trouble, she would call them. She called three times the day after I smashed up my old bicycle when my friends and I were having a crashing derby. But the Big Brother people said all they could do was put me at the top of the listings, and hope somebody would choose me. I was sort of scared to have a Big Brother, because I thought I might get some kind of Army guy who would be mean and bossy. On the first visit, I was so scared that I didn't even go to the door with my mother. She called me into the living room and everybody sat down kind of stiff. I could smell some cologne. The case worker introduced Jesse to me, and he shook my hand just as I realized that I wasn't breathing, and I sucked in a big breath real loud. But Jesse started sneezing at the same time, and my mother hurried to get a box of tissues, so by the time everybody was back to normal again, Jesse and I were looking at each other and smiling. After the case worker left, we went for a walk around the neighborhood, and Jesse said he was sneezing because of the case worker's shave lotion.

Jesse helped me fix the smashed bike, which I still have. Then at Christmas he gave me the green racer. It used to be his, and he took such good care of it that it looked brand new. I'm pretty careful of it. I wouldn't even let my brother Chris use it when I had the broken arm. He has his own ten speed, anyway. For a brother, he doesn't look much like me. I have blond hair and green eyes, and he has dark brown hair and grey eyes, and he always has to wear glasses so he can see. Plus, he has a little wine stain

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on his forehead and temple, so sometimes when I'm really mad at him I call him rash face, and he calls me tumor. He's two inches bigger than me, so I don't call him that too much. I still like to have crashing derbies, but I only use the old bike for those.

My friend Peter Folkman got in an accident just before school got out in June. Peter is the same size as me, only he has brown hair and brown eyes, and he already wears size 9 shoes. We were having a jumping contest on the dirt trail, which has a perfect bump built in. We were using bikes and motorbikes. You start off at the top and go as fast as you can, but one at a time, and go over the jump. We mark where the bike lands, and the one who goes farthest wins.

Bob Medeiros took the first jump and landed way far. He only hangs around us once in awhile now, because he's fourteen and has mostly older friends. Then my brother Chris went speeding down and jumped almost as far and nearly broke his glasses. Peter was next. He was using his cousin's Coolster DB-216 dirt bike. He thought he was going to be Johnny Blaze, that's what he said. He jumped up on the dirt bike and just sort of blurred away. When he went over the jump he went to the side a little, and the next thing we all knew he was going through the air sideways.

He let go of the dirt bike, but it didn't let go of him. He smashed into a tree and the bike kept going and hit a big boulder. Peter didn't even scream, he just stayed quiet through the whole thing. We all ran to him. The front wheel kept spinning around and around, and that was the only noise. Peter's whole face was bloody. I was afraid he was dead, and I started to cry. Some of Peter's tooth was in

the tree, Bob saw it. Bob jumped on his bicycle and ripped off to the Lisewskis' house to get an ambulance.

Peter was in the hospital for two days. He beat me for accidents that time. And while he was in the hospital, he missed out on a trip to the USS Constitution that Jesse had planned for us.

If you knew Peter's father, you'd know it happened to the worst kid it could have. He said Peter never should have been on a motorbike in the first place because he's only twelve, and he had no training or helmet anyway, and so even if he wasn't in the hospital, he would still miss out on the trip with Jesse for punishment. Plus, he had to pay his cousin for the damage. Peter's mother kept worrying about his face. Now it doesn't show a mark from the accident, not even a missing tooth because it was a baby tooth he lost in the tree. Only he has a lisp because the new tooth isn't all grown in yet. Jesse says that will go away when the new tooth grows in. I think Peter's tooth is permanently stuck in the tree.



GARY FAGIOLI HANGS around with us a lot more now. Fagioli means beans in Italian, but his father said around Naples, people call beans fazool. So sometimes we call him Gary Fazool. He's twelve but everybody thinks he's ten. He has platinum blond hair that is so silky he doesn't need to comb it much, he just shakes his head and it all falls into place. A sad thing happened to his family in May, and that was, his grandmother died. My mother made Chris and me get dressed in ties and jackets to go to the funeral,

even though we aren't Catholic. Jesse came along, too. He said Gary's grandmother was very special. She only went up to the seventh grade in school, but she ran a household and brought up six kids. She was really nice to us kids, too. Whenever we went over Gary's house, she would give us brownies or Rice Krispies treats which she made with Amaretto, or she would ask us if we wanted a sandwich, only she called it a sangwidge.

Gary is a lot better with us now than he used to be when he was littler. His mother got a new job, and she lets Gary do more things, which is good because we were afraid Gary would not grow up to be tough like us. Now he gets in trouble, which I think is good for him. One day he threw a rotten grapefruit at Joe Pepitone because Joe is a bully and sometimes used to hit Gary at school. Joe Pepitone ran after Gary, but Gary is fast and he got away. Only a week later, Gary had an ice cream cone and he was walking with Peter out of Brigham's, and there was Joe Pepitone. Joe grabbed Gary and made him lose the ice cream off the top of his cone, right on the ground. Gary took a nutty and picked up the ice cream with his hands and mashed it all over Joe Pepitone's jacket and shirt, only Joe Pepitone beat him up for it. But Gary didn't care too much.



BY THE END OF THE week when Peter got out of the hospital, we had a big plywood board set up at the bottom of the Lisewskis' hill and we were having jumping contests again. This time we didn't use any motorbikes, just our old

bicycles. It was the first time Gary joined us. He only went over the jump once, and that was after everybody else did it about ten times. I was starting to get lucky again. I won six times out of twelve, and Chris won four and Peter won two. Gary was lucky he even made it over the jump.

Then we were just hanging around talking, and this big blue pickup truck came driving up real close to us, and stopped. A guy charged out and went stalking right up to Chris and started yelling at him. "You kids stole my plywood and you turned it into junk!"

We were pretty scared, because it was the grouch who works at the Family Diner. He doesn't like kids much. Chris said, "I'm sorry. We found it next to the dumpster, so we thought it was trash."

So then he grabbed Chris by his arms and said, "Well it wasn't trash, and I don't like it when people rip off my stuff. So just keep out of my stuff!" Then he got back in the pickup and drove away really fast and spun up a bunch of gravel at us from the wheels.

Chris had squeeze marks on his arms, and he was rubbing them. "What a freak of nature," he said. "Sorry, Mister Anger Management, we borrowed your stinking plywood and you bust both my arms. I should call the police."

"Just forget it," Peter said. "Then we'll get in trouble for taking the board."

"Yeah," Gary said. "Maybe we should just borrow his pickup truck and drive it straight off the Oak Mount cliff."

We all tried a few more jumps over the plywood, only this time we put wicked skid marks on it. Then we brought it back to where we found it, and put it exactly next to the

dumpster again. We decided that we would have jumping contests every day in summer, unless there was something else exciting to do, like if Jesse was going to take us someplace.

Another lucky thing for me this summer is that I had my paper route, which got me pretty good money. My mother says we're probably the last paperboys in the nation. Soon there will be no more paper routes for kids, only for adults with cars. Most of the big city newspapers got rid of paperboys before I was even born, and now some are completely closing down because more and more people are getting their news from the Internet. But in our city, we have paperboys and papergirls from all races and nationalities. There's one papergirl named Lashonda who does a small route from her wheelchair. At the *Daily Times* banquet, Jesse said it felt like Disney's "It's a Small World" came to life right here. I was afraid I would lose the paper route completely when I broke my arm, but the kid who took it over quit, because his family was going away for the summer. I make about thirty dollars a week, and even paid for most of my school clothes. The only thing bad about the paper route is that sometimes you miss out on the things your friends are doing. *The Daily Times* comes out in the afternoon on weekdays, and morning on Saturday, so that's when I have to deliver.