



How We Lived

I should tell you that I'm writing this on a typewriter, if you can believe it. We found it in the attic. A typewriter is a machine from a long, long time ago, back when they used to have nickelodeons. It's threaded with a ribbon soaked in ink. When the typewriter key smacks the ribbon, the letter prints on the page. I don't know what I'm going to do if the ribbon dries out. It's pretty faint already. So if you turn the page in the middle of a sentence and there's nothing after that, you'll know the reason. It won't be because I got lazy and didn't want to finish the story!

Back in the time of nickelodeons and typewriters, more people went to the circus. They didn't have TVs and computers and other modern kinds of entertainment, so when the circus came to town, it was a big event. The travelling circuses were different in the olden days. Back then, animals per-

formed. There were dancing bears and elephants balancing on balls and tigers that leaped through flaming hoops. Then the SPCA said it was cruel. I have to say I agree. I'm glad that the circus has changed.

Mr. Fudge has been in the business for most of his life. He was full of stories about his "animal relatives," as he liked to call them, and his camper walls were crowded with pictures from the early days. In one, Mr. Fudge posed with a bear in a tutu. I felt sorry for the bear. (How would you like to wear a dress?) In another, a lion sat on Mr. Fudge's chest while he fed it an ice cream cone. He said that lions prefer strawberry. I don't think lions are meant to eat ice cream at all, or live in cages. They should be free. When I told Mr. Fudge this, he said, "You're right, Nicky, of course. But those days? Those were the days!"

We only had two animals in our circus: Mr. Fudge's white rabbit, Sir John A. Macdonald, and our Coco. Coco is a chihuahua, a small, difficult-to-spell dog with bulgy eyes.



People sometimes ask us if her collar is too tight. It's not. That's just how she looks. I wish we could set Coco free, but she'd only come back.

Also working in the olden-days circuses were people with unfortunate health problems. They had to put on costumes and sit in cages under embarrassing signs like THE BEARDED LADY or THE FATTEST WOMAN ON EARTH or TOM THUMB. Mr. Fudge had pictures of these "relatives" too. One was Sal-Sally. Sometimes Mr. Fudge would lock himself in his camper for hours, crying, "Just make up your mind! I'm begging you!" Saggy and I would peek in the window and see him talking to the picture of Sal-Sally he kept by his bed. I thought he was aski

her to make up her mind whether she was a man or a woman, because in the picture she wore a skirt on one leg and pants on the other. She had long hair on the skirt side, and short hair and a beard on the pants side.



“That’s not it,” Mom told me. “He’s been asking Sal-Sally to marry him for years. He won’t say yes and she won’t say no.”

We didn’t make fun of any people in our circus. One time we did put Grandma Jack in a tent and charge a dollar to see her, but it wasn’t because of her size. If we had been that kind of circus, Saggy and I would probably have had to sit in a cage under the sign VERY SERIOUS CHILDREN. Saggy and I didn’t perform, though of course we know lots of tricks from having been born into a circus. The Fantastic Flyers were basically a few acrobats plus Mr. and Ms Toots, Coco, Bruce the Strongish Man, and Mr. Fudge — who did magic tricks as well as being the impresario. (That’s an Italian word that sounds better than master of ceremonies.) Grandma Jack sold tickets, popcorn and candy floss. Sometimes a fire breather joined up, or a sword swallower. For a few weeks last summer we had the Lees.

Every year we followed spring, heading north from a town in Texas called Canadian, where we spent the winter in a mobile home park. We would tour through Oklahoma and Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas, then over the border into

Canada for our summer tour of the prairie provinces — Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Every week we would stop in a new town. Mr. Fudge said prairie people, Canadian or American, were the last great circus-goers. He said they didn't know *how* to boo. Come fall, we would cross the border again and head south once more. The year before last, though, Mr. Fudge didn't stop to put on shows on the way back. He said people didn't seem as friendly any more, but Mom and Dad thought it was really that Mr. Fudge was tired. He's seventy-eight years old.

We had our own little camper. These days, if you pass through our town in Saskatchewan, you'll know our house right away because it's the last one before the wheat begins, and you can see the camper in the backyard. Glued all over it are plastic animals and toys and mirrors, what Grandma Jack called "gewgaws." Most of them come from Pink Pelican Popcorn, though we bought a souvenir in every town we performed in and glued all those on too.

Inside the camper there was barely enough room to swing a chihuahua. I know this for a fact because once, for fun, Mom and Dad took Coco by

the back legs and tested the expression out. Coco usually rode on the dashboard, under a pine-tree-shaped air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror. (We got the air freshener because of the Coco smell.) At night she slept on the dashboard too, while Saggy and I shared the bunk above the bench that opened out into Mom and Dad's bed. We ate at a small table that folded up to make room for the bed. There was a tiny stove to cook on and a miniature fridge. We had to wash ourselves and the dishes in the same little sink. (Though not at the same time!) Now and then we went to camp-





grounds and paid to use the showers. On hot days the whole circus would stop at a lake and jump in to get clean.

The few cupboards we had were so crammed, mostly with costumes, that we had to warn each other when we were about to open one. "Ladies and gentlemen! The management is not responsible for injuries sustained due to impact with the

flying stuff!" Then, like a Jack-in-the-box, shoes and wigs and ruffled collars would burst out.

Life wasn't so bad, I guess, except for all the driving. You see, I get carsick.