

# Put a Tent Over the Circus

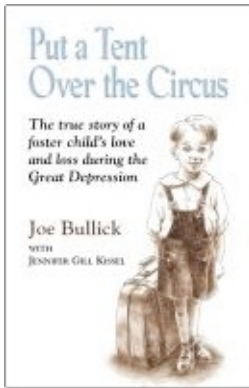
*The true story of a  
foster child's love  
and loss during the  
Great Depression*

**Joe Bullick**

WITH

JENNIFER GILL KISSEL





*Put a Tent Over the Circus* is the true story of a boy's life as a foster child in Pittsburgh during the Great Depression. Joey's mother, a single Catholic girl, struggled to give him a home, but in desperation places him in foster care. Joey is torn by his devotion to his mother and his love for the Fitzpatricks and life in the blacksmith shop. When tragedy strikes, Joey experiences the true power of love.

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## Chapter 1

### Going to the Fitzpatrick House

The car jolted to a stop with a rattle and a cough, and Joey peeked over the side of the rumble seat, blinking away sleep. New smells mingled with the smell of the exhaust—smoke, and apple blossoms, and an underlying smell that he couldn't quite place. It was like sweat and leather boots and dogs all mixed together, not unpleasant but not familiar either.

The man in the driver's seat climbed out of the car and reached into the rumble seat to lift out a battered suitcase. "Well, Joey," he said, setting it on the ground. "You're home."

They had driven on a long and winding road the whole way from Pittsburgh, and Joey felt very far from any place he had ever called home. He scrambled over the seat and jumped down from the step, his scuffed shoes making tiny puffs of dust on the dirt drive. He felt Harry's big, calloused hand rest gently on his shoulder as he gazed around. A white house sat off to the side of a big, sloping yard that was shaded by couple of big oak trees. Around part of the yard there was a fence that enclosed plenty of mud but not much grass. To the far side was a short little building with big white double doors that could have been a garage.

Joey looked up into the man's kind Irish eyes and swallowed a little lump in his throat. *I am almost five years old and I am brave*, he thought. He thought about his mother and when he might see her again. The thought made his lip tremble a little, but he bit it and determined not to cry. He looked at the big white house in front of him, hoping to see the screen door swing open. *Where is Katherine?* he wondered. He studied the porch, where a rocker waited quietly for someone to sit and rest. He gazed at the clouds reflected in the attic window and at a white lacy curtain in what must be an upstairs bedroom. It was a friendly house, Joey decided, but a strange house all the same. He shuffled his feet and

looked at the ground. He didn't know exactly what to do. Harry had called it home, but Joey, with his suitcase at his feet and no mother waiting inside, felt very much like a visitor.

He wasn't sure if Harry meant for him to go into the house, so he stood still, looking to the pasture and gardens beyond the house. Somewhere far away he heard cars on a highway, and closer by he heard a strange snorting noise. He sneaked a peek at Harry, who didn't seem to be alarmed by the sound. In one of the tall, leafy trees some birds hid in the branches, chirping. Joey squinted against the sun and peered into the leaves where something was rustling. Two birds swooped out and flew across the yard, diving after one another in a game of chase. He watched them flutter and dip over the trees until they were dark specks against the blue sky.

Finally, there seemed no place left to look. Joey's gaze rested on the small building across the yard from the house. Wheels and pieces of metal leaned against its outside walls.

Harry noticed him looking. "My blacksmith shop," he said, "where I make shoes for the horses." Joey didn't reply. Harry reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pouch. He dipped his fingers in and scooped out some chewing tobacco and tucked it inside his cheek. "Do you like horses?" he asked.

Joey thought for a moment. He wasn't sure how he felt about horses, because he had never seen a horse, except in pictures. In pictures they were graceful and strong, and sometimes cowboys or soldiers or noble knights rode them. And if Harry with his laughing eyes and kind smile liked horses, well...

Joey nodded. "Yes," he said.

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Joey had liked Katherine very much when his mother had taken him to meet the Fitzpatricks; she was tall, taller than some men he knew, and very pretty, with long dark hair, and her smile made him feel warm and safe. Now as Katherine hurried down the lane and

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bustled up the steps to the front porch where he sat waiting in the rocker, that familiar warmth came back. Her housedress was light colored and had little yellow flowers sprinkled on it.

“Would you like to see the house?” she asked, taking his hand. Joey nodded, and together they went inside to explore. The smell of baked bread filled the warm, sunny kitchen where pretty curtains hung on the window. The sitting room, where the heavy curtains were drawn, was dim and quiet, and Joey wondered if the chairs were soft or firm and if he might fall asleep in one on Sundays after church.

Katherine began to lead him down the basement steps. The darkness was quick and overwhelming and the sooty smell of coal made him crinkle his nose. The steps had no backs, like the ones at the last house he had stayed. Those kinds of steps had monsters hiding under them, monsters that would reach out and grab your ankles and...

He stopped halfway down and turned to go back upstairs, pulling on Katherine’s hand. “It’s okay,” she said. “You’ll see, there’s nothing but a furnace and a barrel of apple cider.” Joey’s eyes adjusted to the light coming through a dusty window. Sure enough, a big coal furnace hunkered down in the corner of the basement near a bin of shiny black coal. In the last house there had been one too; in dim cellars, they looked like hunchbacked beasts. A barrel sat off to one side, and wooden shelves lining the walls held rows and rows of glass jars. Joey wondered what was in them.

Joey felt Katherine’s warm hand squeeze his. He straightened his shoulders and thought, *I won’t come down here alone, but with Katherine, I am not so afraid.* “May I have a drink of that?” he asked, pointing to the barrel. Katherine laughed. “Not that,” she said. “How about root beer instead? There’s some in the kitchen.” Joey nodded quickly, glad for a reason to leave the dark cellar. They went upstairs and she poured him a glass, and the root beer tickled his nose and throat and tasted woody and sweet.

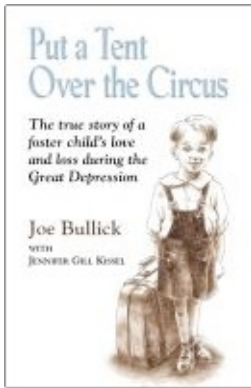
Through the house they wandered, stopping in every room so Joey could inspect and explore, until they got to the attic, with its sloped rafters and smells that made Joey think of mothballs and old books with brown-edged pages. Katherine could stand up straight only in the center of the room, because of the sloped ceiling. The attic was dry and hot and Joey found it a little hard to catch his breath, but it seemed like a wonderful place to hide and make adventures. “If you’re here long enough,” Katherine said, “this might be your room. But for now you have a room downstairs, near Harry and me.”

That evening, Joey slipped a long nightgown over his head and climbed into his new bed. He lay back on the pillow and pulled the cool sheet up to his chin as he watched Katherine move about the big room, her long, black hair shining in the lamplight. He could barely keep his eyes open, he was so tired from his long and exciting day, but at the same time he felt he might not be able to sleep. He had so many worries and questions. Finally, Katherine sat on the edge of his bed.

“Joey, this is your new home,” she said, her voice soft and kind. “What would you like to call me?” Joey gazed at her and thought for a while. He thought about his mother and how she had said she would see him before too long. He wanted his mother very much, and wished she was there to tuck him in. His eyelids began to feel heavy. *Katherine will tuck me in, he thought, and I’ll see my mother soon.*

“Mummy,” he said at last, closing his eyes. “Mummy Fitzpatrick.”





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