Chick Midway

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The August morning air was a simmering stew that fed my senses. The stench of recently dropped manure mingled with the aroma of funnel cakes as they danced in vats of sizzling grease. Generators droned an accompaniment as Bantams and Rhode Island Reds declared the official start of another day. I was 19, a week shy of my sophomore year in college, and spending the day working along side my grandfather at the Iowa State Fair.

From my earliest recollection, my maternal grandparents didn’t fit into the conventional roles typical of their generation. Rejecting familiar kinship terms, we grandchildren were instructed to always call them by their given names, Nyna and Les. Like nomads, they spent most of my childhood motoring around the country, condensing their lives into a pick-up topper and twelve-foot travel-trailer. Their livelihood was dependent on shopping center grand-openings, county fairs, and petting zoos. My grandparents were like “carnies,” minus the tattoos and rough language, and on a smaller scale. Nyna and Les were the creators of the Renquist Chick Midway, a one-of-a-kind business on wheels.

Even at this early hour, the air barely retained a hint of the overnight cool-down. The dew that clung to trampled blades of grass would soon evaporate under the intense sun, only to reappear later in the form of oppressive humidity. With a high temperature predicted to be in the 90s, I dressed in my favorite tattered cut-offs and the briefest tank top I could wear without embarrassing my grandfather. Climbing into the truck cab, I greeted Les in his creased khaki pants and inhaled the scent of starch that lingered in the crisp collar of his white dress shirt. For me, the outing was a diversion; for him, it was another day of work.

In his younger days, Les had been in charge of outdoor advertising for the Sargent Feed Company, an ag-based business that supplied livestock supplements to Midwest farmers. As a promotional gimmick, Les fabricated a small merry-go-round from scrap metal, steel rods, and chicken wire, and then painted it in glossy primary colors. He outfitted the ride with a menagerie of china figurines from Woolworth’s Five and Dime, along with some animal-shaped salt and pepper shakers that mysteriously disappeared from Nyna’s kitchen. To each figure he attached a small plastic feed tray, like those used in birdcages, and a wire mesh platform. When motorized, the merry-go-round would slowly rotate. Chicks, just a few days old, would quickly learn to hop aboard for their meals, entertaining anyone who stopped to watch.

We arrived at the Grandfather’s Barn before the fair gates opened to the public. The panorama from its hilltop location included acres of fairgrounds below us with the Des Moines skyline a distant backdrop. From our lofty van-
tage point, the fair was transformed from a sleepy village to the hub of bustling activity. Colorful seed caps publicized the brand loyalty of veteran fair-goers. Eager 4H exhibitors groomed their livestock, anticipating the show ring and its potential rewards. Smoking tractors merged with the parade of red wagons, baby strollers, and pedestrians. The distinction between vendors and their customers became blurred.

Les wasted no time entering the barn to check on his brood of noisy hatchlings. Amazed at the ruckus created by such a tiny chorus, I trailed behind, my sandals slapping a hollow rhythm on the worn, oak planks. Before me stretched twenty-four feet of table, draped in a candy-cane striped bunting that brushed the floor. The Renquist Chick Midway occupied its entire length, having expanded over the years to include a ferris wheel, low roller coaster, and attractions featuring toy cars, boats, and airplanes. Model train tracks meandered through the wood shavings at the base of the miniature rides and disappeared into a canvas-covered tunnel. Following Les’s lead, I refilled empty water dishes, replenished feeders, and swept away loose bits of bedding. Just before the first visitors arrived, we moved the chicks from their overnight quarters. Warmed by heat lamps, they spent the night huddled together in reinforced cardboard crates, awaiting their liberation. Like children at a carnival, the chicks swarmed the rides in a flurry of commotion and noise. They stopped only briefly to shake out their wings or scratch instinctively at the bottom of the pen for a phantom morsel of food.

Traffic through the barn was light, but steady. Our location so far from the main thoroughfare meant we were either someone’s destination, or they sought the barn as a cool refuge from the crowds and heat. The century-old building was home to a variety of baby farm animals, so our chicks had to compete for attention with curious lambs and chocolate-eyed calves. However, as soon as our midway’s colorful rides reflected in a child’s eyes, the other exhibits were momentarily forgotten. Tugging on shirttails or slipping away from a parent’s grasp, the youngsters were captivated by the downy creatures that were living out a child’s dream: unlimited amusement rides with no tickets required. While Les engaged passing farmers with debates on our chances of getting some rain, I fielded questions from on-lookers. “How old are they?” “Why don’t they fly away?” “Don’t they get dizzy?” “How do you tell the boy chickens from the girl chickens?” I answered as best I could, with a reassuring wink from my amused grandfather. By noon, in spite of my urban upbringing, I thought of myself as quite the poultry authority.

That’s not a claim I could have made years earlier. All I knew then was that their legs looked like chow mein noodles and their inquisitive beaks could peck faster than I could pull my hand out of their pen. The smell of ammonia, saw dust, and warm feathers permeated the room and shadowed me when I left.
It was the surrogate mother in the corner of my grandparents’ basement that really got my attention. Even new episodes of Lassie couldn’t lure me away from the incubator with its warm, maternal radiance. I watched it for hours, anticipating the first irregular cracks in the perfect shells. I silently cheered each chick’s struggle to emerge from its seamless armor. Embarrassed by their nakedness, wet feathers pasted to their saggy, pink skin, I was relieved at their transformation to buttery yellow tufts of cotton candy softness. Caught up in the miracle, I never considered what the chicks’ future held once they grew too large for the midway. All I needed to know was that they were sent to live on a farm, and replacements would hatch in three weeks.

By late in the day I had gulped numerous cups of lemonade, hand-squeezed with pulp, seeds, and sugar granules suspended in its tangy potion. I wanted relief from the sweltering Iowa weather and from the lethargy that blanketed the fairgrounds as the temperature soared. The animals alternated between slurping from their water buckets and lying motionless in their stalls. The chicks’ manic movements slowed until sundown. Only persistent flies kept up their normal routine. Positioned between the open doors and a single oscillating fan, I absentmindedly fingered my humidity-frizzed hair, detouring the drops of perspiration from their path down my back. Drifting between thoughts of packing for school and visions of mint chocolate-chip ice cream, I didn’t notice an older woman and young girl enter through a side door.

“Excuse me. Excuse me miss?”

“I’ll have two scoops,” I almost replied before fully waking from my daydream. Instead I scrambled to my feet, ready for a repeat performance of my now well-rehearsed monologue on the chick midway. Only the standard questions didn’t come.

“I was wondering,” the woman gestured toward our display, “if it would be possible for my granddaughter to hold one of the chicks?” Sensing my hesitation, she continued, “I wouldn’t normally ask, but it’s her first visit to the fair. The sounds and smells are all fascinating to her, but it’s so hard for me to describe how things look. If she could just feel for herself …”

It was only then that I noticed something different about the child. Pigtailed head tilted to one side, concentration and delight mixed in her expression. One hand protectively held by her grandmother, in the other a slender white cane. As the realization of her disability slowly registered on my face, Les stepped in to rescue me, a trembling chick in hand. He nodded in the direction of the girl and passed it to me.

“My name is Jan,” I started, kneeling to her level. “Would you like to hold a chick?”

Eager hands answered my question as she reached in the direction of the peeping. I carefully placed the feathery ball in her cupped fingers and watched
her face ignite with pleasure. "This must be how it feels to hold a cloud." She wasn't bothered by the wiry legs and feet. Giggles escaped her lips as the chick repeatedly pecked at her palm. Bringing it closer to her face, the girl gently held it to her cheek to feel its rapid heartbeat. She breathed in the animal’s scent and grazed the fluff on its head with a kiss. Then she handed it back to me with a "Thank you."

“I’m ready to ride the merry-go-round now grandma, just like the chickens. And then I want a corndog!” I stood and watched as they headed in the direction of the midway before returning the good-will ambassador to its flock. Just then I caught Les wiping something from his eye, and I smiled as he neatly folded his handkerchief and returned it to his hip pocket.

It was only a few seasons later that Nyna and Les retired from the fair circuit. The rides were showing years of wear, as were my grandparents. They continued to travel, but at a much more leisurely pace. The Chick Midway found a new home in the rafters of their garage.

I rarely make it to the State Fair these days. Navigating around the knots of people being schooled in the latest features of the George Foreman Grill is not my idea of fun. But when I do go, I have my priorities: freshly squeezed lemonade, warm funnel cakes dusted with powdered sugar, and a ride on the merry-go-round. The Grandfather’s Barn, with its fresh coat of white paint, keeps its paternal watch over the fairgrounds. The road to it seems steeper now, but it’s worth the climb, just to see how far I’ve come.