

from: A Body Divided

by Jerry Ratch

When I came back home, after coming down with polio, everything had changed for me. I'd been gone for forty-five long days and nights. But it was Halloween, a time very nearly sacred for children in the Midwest, and it brought out the charity of the whole neighborhood. It was really something. I felt this tremendous upwelling of pride, because somebody had organized the entire block to go out trick-or-treating — to beg extra candy from each door for the crippled nine-year-old kid who had just come home from the hospital.

"Polio?" they wondered. They asked: "Is that contagious?" Nobody knew. It was 1953. The epidemic raged on. Children in some towns were being made to stay indoors during the polio season for fear that the disease was airborne. It was putting an unnatural strain on childhood. And it would be another half a year before the miracle cure of the Salk vaccine hit the streets.

"They wouldn't have let Jerry out of the hospital if it was contagious," their parents reasoned. "But you never know," they would say. "Better keep the kids away. Sure, it's okay to collect a little extra candy for him, that's only natural — but maybe that's it. We'd better not go taking any chances."

It was the first time that I didn't get to go trick-or-treating up and down the block in my hometown of Villa Park, which was twenty miles west of Chicago. It used to be the most favorite night for children in those days, because we got to experience the feeling of near independence. And then too, it was the very last taste of fall with that sweet, empty smell of yellow leaves crushed underfoot.

We would go throw ourselves into enormous, raked-up piles of leaves, dreaming about full bags of candy that we were going to collect — for nothing — just for dressing up in a costume and knocking on doors. Although, the truth is, in our crowd we stayed out way past dark with our buddies, and didn't dress up in

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costumes at all. We went out and created small amounts of trivial mayhem, smashing pumpkins, waxing car windows, and still we'd go up and knock on every door, expecting our share of candy. It was understood, and even tolerated around there, that we would act a little on the devilish side on Halloween.

However, now things had utterly changed for me, and all I could do was savor the memory of the year before. I remembered coming home the previous year with the seeds of old tomatoes pasted all over my jacket. We had gathered rotten tomatoes out of backyards, to retaliate against two guys who were pouring water down on the heads of trick-or-treaters from the upper window of their house.

After someone had gone up to their porch to ring the doorbell, buckets of water came pouring down out of the attic window. The sidewalk was lined with kids with mushy tomatoes in their hands. When the order was given, we let fly at the highest window. Thunk, thunk. Tomatoes hit the front of the house. Some hit the windows. Then it came — the howl that we were waiting for. "Ah, Jesus!" we heard. "Oh, Christ! Aw, man, there's — there's crap all over me!"

I was right-handed then, and I had a pretty good throwing arm. I knew I'd landed one up there, because I'd seen it going straight up at them.

But the year that I came back from the hospital, I didn't get to go out on the rounds with my buddies. I lay instead on the couch in our living room. Now and then throughout the evening the doorbell would ring, and my mother went to the door with candy for tiny kids in costumes with their parents in tow. My mother would look over at me to see how I was doing. As it grew later, it slowed to a few older boys from another block, out by themselves without costume. Then it stopped altogether.

After awhile I heard voices out in front, and the doorbell rang one more time. It was the parents of everybody from my neighborhood. They showed up en masse at the front door after the night of candy collecting was through, and they presented these

extra bags — all for me. There were three shopping bags full, the kind with handles on them, chock-full of the stuff. Miniature 3-Musketeers Bars, Milky Ways, whole Clark Bars wrapped in orange. Tears sprang out of my eyes. I was overwhelmed by this show of generosity.

The kids on the block, even a few from the next block over, hovered in a crowd behind their parents, trying to get a look at me. Some of them waved, but no one would come in. I waved back at them awkwardly with my left hand, not with my right anymore.

"Steve," I said. "Hey, thanks. Scott, Steve! Come on in."

"Uh, it's late," they said. "We gotta get back and count our haul. Hey, good to see you're back!" they said. They waved, and then they disappeared.

Doctors had given anyone who'd been in contact with me some sort of test, and a shot. So when I came home from the hospital, everybody was a little wary. It's only natural to be worried about your child getting something. They could clearly see what the disease had done to me. Everything else had returned pretty much to normal, except for my right arm and hand, which lay lifeless on the couch beside me.

