

A Body Divided, 1

by Jerry Ratch

"Polio?" people 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.

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.

"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

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.

* * *

To back up a little, it was in August, just before I'd caught polio, that our family went on our last yearly vacation. Things were still normal for me that month. As we did every summer, we hitched our little two-wheeler Airstream trailer to the back of the Buick. This time we drove all the way down along the Mississippi River until hitting New Orleans. Then we turned east and traveled along the Gulf Coast to Florida.

Of Florida itself I have no real memory. But this trip in particular stands out now in my mind from all the others we'd taken until then, partly because that was the very last vacation we ever took. That was because my mother grew concerned for what she conceived of as my frailty, after the polio took hold of my right arm. She didn't want me to be away from physical therapy treatments for too long.

Right after we came home from that vacation — and just before my encounter with the polio virus — my father made trick shots from our trip by splicing two sections of film together, film taken that summer on his new toy, a Kodak 8 mm moving picture camera.

One minute there he was, standing in the middle of a Florida grapefruit orchard, holding an enormous yellow grapefruit. He tossed the grapefruit into the air, and the next second there were two. Then it went back to one. Then two again. He would toss the one grapefruit up, and when it came down there was suddenly one in each hand. It was miraculous, I remember. Nobody else in the area had bought one of these movie cameras yet, so they hadn't seen anything like it — and they came flocking to our house after we came back home to Villa Park.

Overnight, my father became a minor celebrity. He got an enormous kick out of this. I recall having to sit through hours of him running that stretch of film over and over, while my brother and I sat in the stuffy, overheated living room forced to watch. They had guests over, one after another, showing them the tricks. The adults would sit around drinking highballs and laughing themselves silly, until the time came for them to weave out the door and try their best to drive back home without running something over.

It was three years later, however, when I was about twelve, that I suddenly took a much closer interest in that sequence of home movies, after rediscovering the reel of film at the back of my parents' closet. I zeroed in especially on the perfectly normal little boy of nine, playing in the waves coming into the beach at Fort Lauderdale. Perfectly normal, that is, to anyone else but me. I watched, mesmerized, as this completely happy kid frolicked, with two normal arms, in his tight little muscular world, throwing himself time and again against those pallid waves rolling in off the blue Atlantic Ocean.

Over and over I replayed that sequence to myself in seclusion, in a blind-darkened room in the middle of the afternoon. I would creep into my parents' bedroom closet and haul out the

projector. I taught myself how to set the whole thing up. There was some difficulty getting the reel affixed to the spindle and twisting on the wing nut that kept it in place, because normally it took two hands to accomplish this maneuver. They hadn't simplified these things at the time. But I figured out that I could nudge things with my right wrist, or even my elbow if need be, not being able to grasp anything with the fingers on my right hand. Sometimes I would put pressure to things by shoving or by leaning against them with the weight of my body.

If necessary, at times I would take off my shoe and put my toe up against an object, although this was a little awkward. This was not something you'd want to practice in public, so I tried getting by as best I could without the removal of a shoe. I tried, as much as I could, to make things appear normal, and took to stuffing my right hand into my pocket as I'd seen some ex-military men do.

And the reality is, I became somewhat fixated on that particular stretch of film from our Florida vacation. I'd go over the entire reel, feasting on every image it contained of the normal life a family might have, as if I were peeking through a crack in the curtains, like a voyeur, at the life of somebody else. My brother, who was six years older than me, was caught forever there, heaving his guts out over the side of a small open boat that my father rented with an outboard motor on it. My dad wanted to give us a taste of deep-sea fishing. But once you got out a little ways, the Atlantic could be a powerful ocean. We weren't 150 feet offshore before my brother went for the side and hung on for all he was worth.

I had to admit, after all the arm pounding I'd taken during my youth from him, I got some small amount of pleasure out of this particular sequence in the film. I played it a few times in reverse, then forward again. The vomit would rush up out of the ocean and back into his mouth, then back into the water. Ugh, it was awful.

Well, it was amusing for some time to see this. Then it wasn't that amusing anymore, and it made me sick instead. And I would speed forward past that part, only slowing down when I came to the section where I could feast upon the images of myself.

Because, in truth, that was the part that really attracted me the most.

It was that little nine-year-old boy sitting in the bow of the boat, looking straight ahead out toward the sea swelling in front of him, holding on firmly to the gunwales with both good, strong, capable arms. In the darkened living room as I sat there — how bitterly I came to envy that boy. How beautiful it was to see him there, his light brown hair being blown back in the wind. And how much I came to lust after the normal, salty taste of life.

