A Body Divided, 2

by Jerry Ratch

I came down with polio on September 15, 1953, a mild, smoky day drawing close to autumn outside of Chicago — which also happened to be the exact date of my parents' twenty-first wedding anniversary. Only six months later the Salk vaccine was already being distributed among schoolchildren across the United States to stem the tide of the polio epidemic that had caught the nation up in a near panic by that time. Such was the state of dread and paranoia then that when word of the Salk vaccine hit the streets, everyone saw it in those days as a near miracle.

There was an exceptionally dark and sarcastic punch line to an old joke I remember from around that time. A man, who's devastated by every sickness and disease known to humankind, is crawling up the church steps on his hands and knees to the altar, looking up at the heavens and asking: "Why me? Why me?" The roof of the church blowing off, an enormous hand pointing out of the sky and the voice booming out of the clouds: "Because you piss me off!"

Having missed that vaccine by six months, I am going to tell you right now that I would be lying royal purple in the face, and lightning would probably set my hair on fire, if I had the cheek to say that the phrase: *"Why me?"* had not crossed my mind at least once during my life. That old joke was the kind of gallows humor we came to appreciate among the crowd of kids I knew on the Polio Ward at the hospital. And what an anniversary gift this must have been for me to be bringing home to my mother and father! That smoky autumn day in 1953 was the first time that my mother's head began to literally wobble, as it went on to do throughout the rest of her life. And almost overnight my father's hair went gray.

"Your son has a fifty-fifty chance of surviving the night, Bess. He has polio." Those were the words our family doctor chose when breaking the news to my parents on that ill-starred day in

September. Our family doctor, a man with good, honest intentions, hadn't counted on the blow this kind of report could deliver to someone like my mother. In truth, he may as well have used a hammer on her. Dr. Walters caught her by the arm as she staggered and started slumping to the ground. His clipboard dropped, bouncing on the linoleum floor of the hospital while he helped to steady her.

"Oh! I don't know what happened," she said. "I got dizzy."

My mother looked around at both men, Dr. Walters and my father, as they guided her to a chair outside the door to my hospital room. I could hear them clearly from my bed.

"The physicians here at Hinsdale told me they may have to perform a tracheotomy to open your boy's throat, Otto," Dr. Walters said to my father. "If he doesn't begin swallowing pretty soon, that is. The physician in charge of the evening shift told me Jerry can't keep anything down, even plain water. Just keeps spitting it up. They're afraid he'll die of dehydration, certainly starvation, if they don't operate."

"Oh, Otto!" my mother groaned. "Why is this happening to our son?" I didn't hear my father say anything.

"What did we do wrong, Dr. Walters?" asked my mother. "Tell me!" You could hear in her voice how much the doctor had frightened her.

"Now, Bess, calm down. Let's try to take a minute here and see if maybe you can remember what Jerry was doing all summer long? Who he was hanging around with, I mean."

"Oh, there's a whole gang of them," she responded. "He's a real leader, that boy."

"Yes, but, who exactly was he hanging out with, Bess? Try to think now, were there any signs of — anything — anything unusual at all?"

"Well, let's see," she said, and there came a long pause. I can see my mother's large, frightened brown eyes in my mind, her eyebrows raised already in permanent surprise, trying to somehow

gather herself, while at the same time trying to ward off the appearance of hysteria. "Well, the first day he got that headache," she ventured hesitantly, "there was that Stephen Wellings boy the next block over, on Cornell Street," — it seemed to me her voice had gotten a tremor to it — "and Scott Yohan too. They were all three of them in Stephen Wellings' backyard. Jerry told me they had a big bonfire going. They'd spent the afternoon lighting those seventeen-year locusts on fire and letting them fly. I could smell the bonfire on him the minute he came in the door.

"Those boys were the only two he was with, Doctor, the day he came home with that darned headache. He was holding his head in both hands. That was the first sign there was that anything *was wrong.* He was perfectly normal until he came home with that awful headache. He never complains, you know how he is — until that headache of his, Dr. Walters." She went quiet for a moment.

"Anything else, Bess? Anything you can recall that was unusual during the summer? Anything wrong with any of his friends, or . . . anything you can tell me, Bess. This is important now. Try to remember."

"Well, there was little Ricky Stone over on Summit Street. His father was the one that got killed in a construction accident. He pushed another man out of the way and got killed under some iron that fell. Well, that's Ricky. Nothing wrong with him that I know of. And then there's always Andy Richards, across the street."

Then my mother started to gather steam. "Boy — Jerry and that Andy! He'd be lost without Andy, let me tell you. Those two have been pals ever since he was three years old and Andy was two. Jerry even gave Andy a haircut one time for a dollar when Andy had to stand up for his sister's wedding. *Oh,* and was his mother ever angry — and how! They'd given Andy two dollars, see, to go into town for a haircut—"

"Okay, okay, Bess," said the doctor, cutting her short. "Anybody else you can think of?"

"Well, not so fast, Dr. Walters," my mother said. "It's Andy's mother — she isn't all there, you know. Something went

wrong with her mind. One day she took off every stitch of clothing and walked right down the street in broad daylight. And little Andy had to go running down the block and lead her back home by the hand. Do you think our son could have caught something from her, Doctor?"

"No, Bess, no — I don't think so."

My mother, my father, and our family doctor went silent outside my door. Inside the room I was having trouble breathing through my nostrils. For some reason they were all clogged up now. I found myself having to take a breath through my open mouth if I wanted to get any real air at all, though this didn't make much sense to me. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I struggled to breathe normally through the clogged nostrils. When that wouldn't work, my mouth burst open, gasping for the air my lungs were trying to take in.

"Listen to him in there, Otto," Dr. Walters told my father. I couldn't hear whether my father made any kind of reply. I suspect not.

My mother stuck her head inside my door, listening for some time. I kept quiet. "Are you okay, son?" she asked. She hung on the word: *'son.'* This wasn't like her at all. She had never, ever called me *'son'* before. Usually she would call me: Honey. Or else, when I was bad, it was: *Jerry Allen!* With the sternest voice she could muster.

"I'm okay, mom." However, my mouth had become gummed up, and I had trouble getting the words to come out right. I struggled to say something more. I wanted to tell her something about my friend, Andy, which we were supposed to be doing the next day, but I grew confused. Instead I tried to say: "Thirsty, Mom. I'm thirsty." But really what came out of my lips was more of a weak, pasty whistle that she didn't hear.

When I tried drawing in another breath, the nose situation had gotten even worse, and I had to suck in air through my mouth.

"Maybe he's got a bad head cold," said my mother, who was an optimist at heart.

"For God's sake, Bess!" the doctor exclaimed. "He's struggling just to get air in there! Can't you hear him? That's bulbar polio. It paralyzes the throat and lungs. They're giving him a dose of the virus in order to try getting his body to react to it and build up an immunity, to ward off any further damage. Listen to him, Otto. They're going to have to do *something more immediate!"*

"Oh, Otto!" cried my mother. "What's going to happen to our little boy?"

"Bess, please now, listen," said Dr. Walters. "Did Jerry do a lot of swimming this summer?" The doctor had been reading up on the symptoms of polio because the epidemic was churning its way through children across the country, laying waste to tens of thousands already, including even adults by now, but it had gotten especially bad among schoolchildren. This really had him concerned.

"Yes, he did, Doctor!" my mother burst out. "They were swimming down at that dirty old Sugar Creek!" She was starting to get more out of control.

"Oh, Doctor," she went on, "I told him: Stay away from that filthy swimming hole — it's full of crawfish, turtles, bugs, God knows what spiders — but he wouldn't listen! They just kept going back there all the time. He's *so stubborn!* Oh, I don't know, Otto! Why couldn't you *do something* with him?"

"Now, dear," my dad's voice cracked. My father would never show very much in the way of how he might be feeling, and his voice really didn't crack with emotion too often. I had never even seen him cry, that I could remember. It wasn't in him to let loose easily. He was a man of few words, and a man with a quick temper. I'd been afraid of that temper ever since he had given me the only beating of my life once for setting fire, quite by accident, to a nearby field. The truth is, the beating was actually over the discovery that I'd been hoarding matches with which to light cigarettes. It wasn't a true beating, but rather more of a hell of a walloping all over the living room, while he held onto me by one arm and wouldn't let go. Instead he kept hitting me and hitting me with his other hand until his anger diminished. I would never forget that thrashing. My entire

backside was black and blue. I saw it in the mirror, and couldn't believe how bad things looked. And I couldn't sit comfortably the whole next week. But the fact is, I didn't quit smoking either.

Now, in the hallway outside my hospital room, I heard my mother letting out a muffled cry.

"Come on, Bess," said Dr. Walters. "Come on now. It's going to be all right. You did everything you could. He's a strong boy and he's in good hands here." Then my mother let loose and began sobbing out loud. Both of the men went silent for some time, until I heard our doctor saying, "He'll pull through now, don't you worry, Bess. It's the good thing I rushed back from my vacation though, Otto. We got him here in the nick of time."

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I lay on my back, strapped into the cradle of chromium bars surrounding my hospital bed. They had taken away my clothes and dressed me in a skimpy gown. My right leg, sticking out from the blanket, was growing cold in the night air. From the hallway I could feel a small wind that blew in occasionally over my toes. A spot in my lower back still burned from the deep puncturing it had taken earlier during a spinal tap at the first hospital I'd been taken to in Elmhurst, before they rushed me over to Hinsdale Hospital in an ambulance. There was an upside down bottle of amber liquid which hung from an apparatus above the bed, with a tube running down to my left arm where they'd taped a long needle into a vein. In order to get this apparatus to keep working, they'd had to strap the left arm to a small stiff board. I'd immediately developed the habit of shaking everything free from my arm, which had begun to annoy the doctors there.

I became aware of the smell of something like the odor after a thunderstorm. They had a purple lamp that glowed like a grill, emitting something into the air, the same kind Dr. Walters had in his office. I tried moving my neck, which had grown more and more stiff during the day. Hours ago it was still possible to easily

turn my head and think nothing of it, like any normal day, but by the time it had reached sundown, it was a near impossibility to accomplish this anymore. I remembered earlier in the afternoon turning my head on the pillow to look at the yellow poplar tree outside the hospital window, whose leaves shimmered as they caught the light of the sky. But all I could do now was lie still with the color of autumn dripping into my veins.

As I lay there I recalled the thrashing my father had given me because of the field fire I'd started when I was younger. I had offered to go get some matches I was hoarding — trying to make an impression on the older neighborhood boys, who were friends of my brother — so that a whole gang of them could light up a pack of cigarettes in a vacant field down the block. The hoard of matches was up on the roof of our garage. I made the mistake of admitting all this after the fire chief came to our house to have a long talk with my father. One of the boys had apparently pointed the finger at me as the source of the matches after the field burned down.

I myself had started smoking when I was six years old, in order to be tough like my brother Herb, who was twelve at that time — to keep up with him. Whatever it was that he did, I felt I could do because he was my idol and my excuse in everything I did. I always tried acting older than I was. The smoking had started not with real cigarettes at first, but with dried brown corn silk we younger boys gathered from a farm two blocks away from my house, down by Sugar Creek. We'd roll the dried corn silk in newsprint, which burst into flame with each puff you took, creating a burning sensation along the inside of your mouth and throat. We called them: *El Stogies,* and *El Ropoes,* because they tasted something like burning rope.

The whole gang of us younger kids would light up these things in a tree fort we'd built in my backyard. When all of us lit up at once, the whole tree became consumed in a cloud of smoke because of the way these concoctions burst into flame, until my mother came running out the back door, yelling. We'd be up in the tree fort rolling around on our backs in dizziness, smothering the

laughter and gasping dryly for breath, pretending to be like our older brothers — and trying to pretend at the same time that we weren't even up in the tree at all — as if she couldn't really hear seven or eight boys crammed into this fort in our cherry tree, coughing and giggling, stoned on corn silk, and trying to put out the flames on our Stogies.

Now the voices got louder out in the hallway at Hinsdale Hospital, and I could hear Dr. Walters continuing to lecture my parents. Once again he brought up the subject of the doctors at the hospital performing this procedure called a tracheotomy on my throat.

"Trach...e...a..." My mother had some trouble with the word. I could hear Dr. Walters plainly taking a deep breath, to summon up the will to keep on with her. He wasn't a patient man by nature.

"Tracheotomy — Bess — it's a tracheotomy. They make a small incision in the throat to get around the paralyzed portion of the neck, to get fluids and food down in him. They insert a tube that goes directly into the stomach."

With that news, I heard distinctly the retort of my mother as she sucked in her breath and groaned: "Oh, dear!"

Oh, shit! I heard myself saying.

But Dr. Walters labored on. "He's having trouble getting a real breath, Otto. Listen to him in there. The floor doctor said they may have to bring in an *Iron Lung* to help him through the night, if it gets any worse."

Early that morning, as soon as he'd seen my condition, the first thing our family doctor did when he came to our house, was have me try touching my chin to my chest. To my surprise, I couldn't do it. Immediately he wrapped me in an Army blanket, still in my underwear, and hurried out the door with my feet dangling, without shoes, just socks. "C'mon, Bess, grab your purse. I'm taking this boy to Elmhurst Hospital for a test." That was all he'd said. The doctor didn't even try calling an ambulance, but instead rushed me and my mother to the hospital in his own car in order to perform a spinal tap

— to confirm his suspicion that I had contracted the dreaded disease: Polio.

Hinsdale Hospital became the center in the area for this unfamiliar disease, and that was the reason they next rushed me over to Hinsdale in an ambulance, with the red lights going and a siren. It made me feel important at the time. Cars had to stop at intersections to let us go through. I remember thinking to myself: This is unreal— it's so cool! — though they had just punctured my spine, creating a searing pain that evaded even a local anesthetic. Polio wasn't a new disease, by any means — Franklin Delano Roosevelt had gotten it bad in his legs and tried his best to hide it from public view — but it was certainly an uncommon disease, until it came sweeping across the country like a plague in the summer of 1953. Hinsdale, Illinois, about fifteen miles west out of Chicago, seemed to be the center of an especially hard hit area for some reason that nobody could figure out. The whole thing had come on so fast it had everybody scrambling for a solution, including Dr. Jonas Salk, working away feverishly in his laboratory.

But plainly what Dr. Salk came up with a scant six months later, wasn't soon enough for me. Like everyone else in my hometown of Villa Park, I had never even heard of polio — terms like *Bulbar polio* and *Paralytic polio* — and I had no sense whatever of how the onset of something like this might possibly change the direction of my life. I thought of it as a temporary diversion, something that would soon pass over, and I longed to get back to my old friends in my neighborhood.

Now I lay on my back staring at the mysterious apparatus surrounding my hospital bed. I'd only been admitted to Hinsdale Hospital just that afternoon. I hadn't been there one whole night yet, but it seemed to me already like I'd been trapped in this white cube of a room for nearly half my life. It would be forty-five full days and nights before they were finished with me. I would leave this place in nowhere near the same condition as I had entered.

I lay there trying to regroup, struggling to understand what was happening to me, even as I wanted to picture myself

running out the hospital doors into my father's idling Buick Sedan, or into my brother's hopped-up 1946 Chrysler. *Running* is not how I would describe the way I actually left that hospital, which was on the day before Halloween, when my parents bundled me up against the fall wind to take me home.

But that would be later. Right now from my hospital bed, I could only see the shadows of my mother and father, which seemed to be swaying against the open door to my hospital room, nodding as they listened to our own family doctor urging them to give very serious consideration to letting the physicians put a gash in my throat in order to insert a tube with which to feed me. It gave me the willies, trying to imagine what they would actually be doing inside of me, when their knives began sinking under my skin. Then having to lie there with what amounted to a gill in the side of my throat, lying on my back in a cold, unfriendly hospital room like a fish out of water.

They were out to scare the crap out of my mom and dad, I thought, so that they could cut into me while my parents were distracted. I tried to make it seem like things weren't so bad. I kept trying to hold my breath for long stretches of time, before my mouth would burst open again for air. But my mother let out with a sobbing moan that really scared me now, deep inside.

"The good news, Bess," Dr. Walters said, "is that your son will never have to go to war. And he'll probably be ambidextrous, once the use of his right arm comes back."

I tried moving my right arm, which lay at my side like something that didn't belong to me personally. I didn't take much notice at first when nothing was happening on that side. It made no sense why this weight had been stationed on the bed next to me, as though something heavy had temporarily been placed on top of my right side. It didn't occur to me that something could go wrong on the inside of my arm itself.

"Ambi...dex...?" my mother wanted to know.

Dr. Walters breathed out heavily. He was losing patience. Honestly, the man could be outright grumpy. He wore steel-rimmed

glasses, and his hair was cropped close to the skull in the manner of a grizzled old Marine, trying to look more athletic and younger than his actual years. He'd had to cut his vacation short when this happened, and I think it made him more sour than usual, which was plenty sour as it was.

"Ambidextrous, Bess, for God's sake!" Dr. Walters growled. You could hear him purposely breathe out now, then check himself. "It means he'll be able to throw a baseball with either hand. Either hand!" he emphasized. "He'll be better off than he was before!"

For the rest of the long night ahead, inside my ears those words would come to repeat themselves as though stuck in a loop. *"Better off than he was before . . . Better off than he was before."* Then for some reason they left.

I felt terribly alone and abandoned lying on my back in the darkness, looking all around me while this unbearably weak fluorescent light leaked through the open door from the hallway. I lay shivering. At the same time it continued to burn along my punctured spine, while I tried to force my frightened imagination away from those strange, barren words: *Iron Lung.*

Baseball! I managed to think. I'll soon be swatting home runs over the high wires in Andy's back yard again. Halloween's coming up pretty soon, I thought. We would go out trick-or-treating, and raising hell. The purple grapes would be getting ripe by now. We'd go out robbing gardens. Already I was beginning to savor the taste of those hanging bunches of grapes in my mouth.

Iron Lung! I thought. No — Impossible: *Iron Lung! No! Impossible!*