

A Body Divided, 4

by Jerry Ratch

After surviving the first night in the hospital, I was put into a shared room to save on expenses, and to make room for the deluge of new cases that were coming in, and that was when I made friends with my roommate, Tommy. He was a boy about the same age as me, nine years old, who'd been struck with a far more severe case of *Paralytic polio*. He couldn't move anything on his body except his head. Tommy was thin to the extreme and had a sad, desperate look in his eyes, and he'd been given a long Greyhound Bus of a wheelchair by his parents, so that when they came to visit him they'd be able to get him out of the room more.

Tommy's parents seemed frail. They stood by amazed at everything while with great caution the nurses strapped their boy into the elongated device. This allowed him to remain horizontal, apparently making it easier for him to breathe. At least that was the official excuse they gave for the need to keep him strapped in that position. I think the reality was that the people on the hospital staff were afraid he would tilt to one side or the other when taking a turn, and he'd tumble right out of an ordinary, upright wheelchair. Tommy didn't have the ability to control anything at all from the neck down. In truth, even the neck muscles gave him trouble. So, if he were to be placed in an ordinary wheelchair and started slipping in one direction or the other, he'd automatically keep on going in that direction with the force of inertia, like a sack of sand.

Once their son was strapped in, Tommy's parents would timidly ease the horizontal wheelchair, nearly the size of a gurney, out of the room. I'm sure in their minds they were being adventurous with their boy, while at the same time they had him swathed under layers of hospital-issue Navy blue wool blankets and he was nearly suffocating. But inevitably there was a scare of some

sort before they had ventured very far down the hall, and whether real or not, they would meekly return with Tommy flopping his head anxiously back and forth on the makeshift pillow. He'd be sweating liberally and moaning like a beached sea lion. The look of pain on Tommy's face at the realization of his predicament was hard to look at.

That was when he came to understand that his new roommate, Jerry, was nowhere near as bad off as he was. In fact, any weakness in my leg had disappeared immediately, the only problem being my dangling right arm. Once Tommy saw that I could get out of bed and walk around in a normal manner, he started pestering me to push him up and down the halls of the Polio Ward when his folks were gone, with him laid flat out on his back in his extended wheelchair. We did this cautiously at first, after the manner of his parents — but shortly we began to accelerate things.

Following a few timid days of getting to know one another, before I knew it he was laughing the whole way as I sped along with him strapped to the gurney-like device. We'd get that horizontal wheelchair going at a good enough clip in the long stretches of the hallway that a tuft of Tommy's hair stood back in the wind we created. After we'd both gotten a little bolder, Tommy would laugh especially hard when we started cutting the turns real tight, occasionally taking off chunks of plaster from a corner. The more stuff flew off those corners, the more reckless became his wild, desperate laughter.

"Faster, Jerry," he gasped. "Can we go faster?"

Tommy couldn't be away from his *Iron Lung* for more than about half an hour. We kept that in mind, and we were therefore always in a rush. He wanted to get in as much life as he could during those thirty minutes before they hooked him up again, wheezing, to his Machine. That was what they called any machine meant to extend life — just a Machine. As anonymous as possible. You gave yourself over to the Machines. Tommy's was the infamous *Iron Lung*, and the truth was he couldn't live without it.

But that machine gave me, personally, the absolute willies. I'd have unimaginable nightmares listening to its deep, exaggerated breathing. It looked like an enormous stainless steel tin can, into which they would slip Tommy. They'd secure rubber devices around his body to seal him in, like a deep-sea diver's suit. His skinny legs hung out at one end, his head out the other. He slept on his back only, without the luxury of being able to turn over or sleep on his side. So of course, the occupant of one of these huge cans couldn't help but start snoring at some point during the night, as if the noise from the actual tin can itself wasn't bad enough. On and on it would drone, moaning with all the mechanical poise of a contraption invented by the Acme Company out of a Disney cartoon.

This device may have been responsible for keeping Tommy alive, but at the same time it subconsciously created a horror show inside my dreams. There was one nightmare in particular that has come back to haunt my life in later years, because it actually turned out to become a cruel reality, and that was the nightmare about my brother's death. I'll probably never be able to forget a dream like that as long as I live. And on top of everything else, it was brilliantly illuminated inside my mind as if in Technicolor!

Holes were being blown right through my brother Herb, huge round holes, from a cannon that was trained right at his chest. Over and over they set off this cannon against his chest, and with those round holes you could look right through him as in a cartoon. I saw blue sky on the other side. Then there was the horrendous noise of the cannons — Boom! Boom! Boom! — over and over, which seemed to go on all night long. Also, Tommy himself had achieved dizzying heights with his snoring. It embarrassed him when I mentioned it, but we both knew there was nothing he could do about it if he wanted to survive.

After my first night in that room, sleeping with the *Iron Lung* going right beside me, it took the doctor bending over me early the next morning, shaking me hard, to bring me up out of the immense hell of the dream I was in. I didn't know where I was when the doctor took hold of my leg and shook me, almost violently. I was

scared. They hadn't even told me Tommy's name yet, but had installed me in the bed next to him as he lay there sleeping inside this enormous, breathing and releasing, breathing-releasing, stainless steel Acme Company apparatus.

I didn't say anything about my nightmare until my mother and father came for their visit that morning. I had no idea where an image like that may have come from. I didn't hate my brother — he was my idol and my inspiration. He had even saved my life once, pulling me up by the hair from the bottom of Lake Michigan when I was five or six, after a wave had knocked me over and the undertow kept me pinned to the bottom. I'd already begun taking in water. Herb reached into the water and grabbed my hair, dragging me up on shore and pumping the water out of my lungs like a professional lifeguard.

The doctors at the hospital would come into my shared room to examine our progress early every morning before our parents arrived, so they could appear to be keeping a close eye on us. The doctor in charge of me was a real big wheel around Hinsdale Hospital, from whose scalpel I had barely managed to escape my first night there. I never could read the name he had monogrammed above his lab coat pocket. He said his name, but he mumbled it and I didn't catch what he'd said. It was Dr. Dremel, or something like that. Our own family doctor had pulled strings and somehow managed to retain this man, why, I don't know. I really think that this head physician's only concern was to try figuring out how to get a knife in me.

When the man shook me out of my horrific nightmare, I looked all around, uncertain where I was for a minute, and it was then that I realized it was the enormous, harrowing, mechanical breathing sounds emanating from Tommy's *Iron Lung* that had been in the background of my nightmare the whole night, while they were setting off cannonades in the dream through my brother's midsection. The doctor had me sit up in bed.

First he extended his right hand, as if to shake hands with me. I made a gesture to respond, but all that happened was a rise in

my right shoulder. I leaned forward as you sometimes do when you go to shake someone's hand. He bent down and took my right hand in his hands, turning it over several times, back and forth, looking at the palm, looking at the back of the hand, inspecting it like a piece of beef. He seemed mesmerized, as if he'd never seen this before, but of course he had.

He made a fist. "Go like this," he said.

I tried making a fist with my right hand. Nothing happened. I could feel a real furrow spreading across my brow.

"Go like this!" he said again, as if maybe I hadn't understood him the first time. I looked up at the big man with his white hair and yellowed mustache, then down at my right hand. First I squeezed my left hand, which curled into a perfect little fist. Then I tried it with my right. Again, nothing. Nothing moved. The dead fingers lay there as though they hadn't paid any attention whatsoever to the distinct command I was hearing inside my own brain: *Move, for God's sake!*

I looked up at the doctor, then down at my hand again: *Move, damn it! Move! Before they cut me!*

But it was no use. "I . . . I can't," I said.

The big man snorted. "I don't want to hear you use that word, young man: *Can't*. There is no such word as *Can't*. I want you to try again. Now make a fist, like this."

He showed me how to make a fist as though I had never seen one. I want to tell you right now, I was no stranger to fists. I'd seen plenty, and coming right at me too. And I'd raised my own two fists to fend off the blows, more than my share. Dr. Dremel, or whatever his name was, curled my fingers over into a fist with his own fingers. "Like this!" he commanded.

Okay, for God's sake! I thought. *Okay!*

I exerted myself to make my right fingers move, but the life they had once known without even thinking about it, had been driven out of them somehow. Now they lay there like pink useless little bananas.

"All right," the doctor said. He put my hand down on the bed and took my face in his hands, directing me straight at his face. "Do this," he said.

He put one finger up to his lips, forming his lips into a whistle. "Can you whistle, young man?" He extended his finger and put it against my lips to be sure he had my undivided attention.

"Sure," I said without hesitation. I had taught myself how to whistle years before, and was proud of my ability. On the way to and from school in the second grade, every day for one whole year I used to practice until I had it down cold.

But when I formed my lips to whistle, all that came out was air. Air and more air, and not a whit of musical sound. What the hell was this? I thought. Not a whistle — only air now?

Tommy watched silently from his bed, like a bird that'd been shot and lay on the ground, which could only watch things with an uncanny finality.

I was astounded, and scared. Then I started feeling indignant about it. It was like somebody had stolen something from me. Where the hell was my whistle, for God's sake? My beautiful whistle. I knew songs. I could imitate birds and lure them toward me, inquiring. How could I, overnight, have lost my beautiful melodious whistle? I used to whistle like a robin at dawn. This was near insanity, I thought. Something was really going wrong in this place.

This hospital was beginning to terrify me. I didn't know what else was going to be taken away from me next, and I felt a sense of desperation starting to rise in my chest, as though I were filling with helium. I wanted to let out a scream, but didn't. I held in the need to scream, deep inside of me. It really wanted to come up to the surface too. But didn't.

The doctor left, and then it was time for visiting hours. We heard the parents coming down the long hall, stopping at various doorways, the inevitable, tentative voices, saying: "Hello. How are you today?" Or else something like: "Hi, sweetie, how are we doing today?"

One by one they would disappear into the hum of activity, until footsteps kept coming and stopped outside our own door. There was always a pause before anyone's parents came in. And then my parents came into the room.

I couldn't wait to tell them the first day after my nightmare about my brother. "Mom, Dad, where's Herb? Is he okay?"

"Sure he's okay, honey," my mother said. "Why?" Her brown eyes seemed huge, like an owl. My father's hair had turned half gray overnight.

"I had this terrible nightmare about him. But . . . but is he all right?"

"Yes, he couldn't come this morning because he's at work at the gas station, so Dad could come here with me."

"I want to get out of this place," I said.

"As soon as they say you're ready, we'll take you home, honey, don't worry."

"They took away my whistle."

"Oh, now, honey," she said. She rushed to the side of my bed and took my right hand into hers. Curiously, she began massaging it, looking only at the lifeless hand, while her head wobbled back and forth with her determination to make things somehow work again. "You're going to be all right, don't you worry. The doctors said!"

