

A Body Divided, 5

by Jerry Ratch

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Physical therapy was on the agenda every morning, first thing. A nurse would come to my room from the basement floor where they did physical therapy. She'd wrap me in a blanket and put me into a wheelchair, even though it was obvious I didn't need one to walk. But it was on her list of instructions. She'd wheel me in the wheelchair down the hall, covered with two or three wool blankets, past the nurses' station. Down we'd go in the elevator to the basement where they kept these giant stainless steel whirlpool tanks, which were constructed in the shape of a cloverleaf, or a gigantic cross. These were early Jacuzzi's. They would take off my pajamas and dress me in a skimpy white loincloth. It was always cold in that hospital. Then two nurses would lower me into the nice warm whirlpool bath. There was a platform to sit on, which they would adjust to keep your head above the level of the water, and an apparatus with ropes attached so that you could recline. Then they would turn on the jets.

It was magical how this would feel with the jets blowing warm bubbles all over my body. Nevertheless, nothing magical ever came of this exercise in the way of improvement to the muscles in my right arm. Every now and then I would witness that strange, weak arm come floating up out of the mass of bubbles all by itself, as if it were detached from my body and had a mind of its own.

One physical therapist in particular had been assigned to me. She tried every maneuver she knew to get some of the muscles to start working again in my arm. She did her best, but I can remember them getting more desperate around there at one point. I knew they had reached their wits' end when they started soaking my

arm for half an hour each day in a deep, arm-length cylindrical tank filled with a pungent-smelling concoction of boiled cloves and tea.

I'm not sure who actually thought up this form of pseudo-witchcraft, but I do know that this foul-smelling practice followed me home after I left the hospital. I would pull my arm out of this soaking tank after a full half hour. I remember staring at the shriveled, dark-stained fingers, still unable to move. Each time they removed it from that tank, the arm seemed to have grown smaller. It began to feel like a foreign object that was even further removed from my body, if I could only somehow figure out a way to detach myself from it, but I couldn't get away from it. It began to take on the appearance of a piece of ancient mummy they had unearthed somewhere, and it started making me sick to look at it.

It seemed to keep getting smaller. Or possibly the rest of me kept right on growing beyond the point where it had stopped. But the fact is that the muscles had already begun their steady retreat from disuse, known as atrophy. Well-meaning physicians or no, there seemed to be nothing anyone could do about it, because once the nerves were gone, there was nothing left to instruct the muscles to move. They had simply stopped all movement, as though they'd already been told they were dead.

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I remember one day especially at the hospital, when my parents brought me a gift. It was the best gift that a scared nine-year-old boy could be given — trading cards with pictures of automobiles that had come out during the year. My father handed me one that had a picture of a two-tone blue 1953 Buick Roadmaster Sedan. It was one of the longest, sleekest cars I had ever set eyes on. But what was more important than anything else was that those little trading cards allowed my mind to focus on something outside of the sick bed I was trapped in.

"We just bought one exactly like this Buick Roadmaster, Jer," said my father that day.

"Really? You're not kidding?"

He was smiling broadly.

"Same color and everything."

"Two-tone blue? Tommy!" I said. "You've got to see this. It's a new 1953 Buick Roadmaster, light blue over dark blue."

My parents moved to one side so the little emaciated boy lying on his back, out of his *Iron Lung* for now, could turn his head and see the trading card. I leaned over on my dead arm, and with my left hand extended the card toward his face. All Tommy could do was move his head. It was a real exertion to roll his head in my direction, and there it would stay for some time until he made an effort to roll it the other way.

"Light blue over dark blue!" he said. He had to have glasses on to see very well, so I think most of what he was seeing was a blur. "Like pure air over pure water." His eyes rolled up in his head.

After my parents left, we got Tommy strapped into his horizontal wheelchair and went off down the hall. This time however, Tommy told me to take a turn into a huge room I had never been in, around the corner, across from the nurses station. It was something we had just whizzed past before. I pushed Tommy's long narrow wheelchair through the opened doorway into the room. It was about the size of seven or eight rooms put together and had beds stationed all along the walls, separated by white curtains that could be drawn closed around each bed for privacy.

"Hotsy tots, another Nazi!" yelled one of the boys who was a little older than the rest, a teenager in his late teens, whose bed kept tilting up and down 30 degrees each way, in order to keep the breath flowing into his paralyzed lungs. His name was John. He could never get off that bed. He was the first to greet me — "Hotsy tots, another Nazi."

The others in the room let out a roar. Nurses would come into the room and pull the curtains around one bed at a time for privacy. The quiet, patient voice of the nurse would start up, imploring the kid to move one limb after another. Inevitably there

came the sound of moaning. Finally there would be tears, the caught breath behind a sob, the anguish at not making any progress.

"Okay, that's good," the nurse would say.

The curtains parted. On she went to the next bed.

"How are we today?" she'd say, as if she had just arrived that minute, bright and fresh.

This room was reserved for the pretty much hopeless cases, and for those whose parents simply couldn't afford a separate room of their own, or a double. They were forced to share their humiliation.

John, the fellow on the bed that tilted up and down constantly, never made it out of that room. I learned that he died in his sleep while I was still at the hospital. They came in one morning and found his corpse being tilted up and down 30 degrees.

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I remember the look of terror and desperation on Tommy's face the day my parents came to take me home after my forty-five day stay at the hospital. My mother whipped out a cap, something she had bought just for the occasion of going home, insisting it was freezing out, and that I put it on my head so I didn't catch pneumonia. It looked something like an aviator's cap, but with fur at the ears, like a bunny. She looked at me, and I saw Tommy watching me. I was exasperated. I did not want to be seen in public wearing something like that.

"I don't need any hat," I said.

"You do too," she said. "It's almost winter."

"It is not. It's not even Halloween yet. I can't wait to go out for Halloween!"

"You're not going out for Halloween, young man!" my mother said.

"Why not?"

"Dad!" she appealed.

"I'm going out for Halloween, and that's that," I said.

"Now, Jer," said my father. "Not so soon. You were really sick."

"You gave us a scare, young man," my mother added. "The whole neighborhood has organized to go trick-or-treating for you. They're each bringing an extra bag for you when they go out. Everything's been arranged."

"But I'm okay," I pleaded, looking to my father in appeal.

He shook his head, and my face fell. I saw Tommy watching me real close.

"Well, I'm going out," I stated. I looked down. My mother placed the cap on my head, and I pulled it right off. "I'm not wearing this," I said.

"Oh, Dad," said my mother, "will you please do something with him?"

"Come on," I said. I started walking out of the room. "So, long, Tommy."

That was when we went down to the parking lot and she tried strapping the cap to my head again. With my good left hand I tore it off and threw the thing to the ground. Then I waited for my Dad to do something about it, but to my surprise he didn't.

To my mind it was definitely overkill. But also, I didn't want to be reminded of the grim situation with my right arm. I wanted to be treated like anybody else. To be bold, to be more like my brother, and go bareheaded against the wind. More than anything, I wanted to be considered normal. **Just normal** — that was all. Anything less than that seemed, well, grotesque to me. I didn't have the faintest idea what a great expectation that might be, trying to be normal again after what I'd been through.

It wasn't until a year later that I learned my roommate Tommy never even made it out of Hinsdale Hospital at all, and you didn't usually get such high expectations out of a place like that.

