

A Body Divided, 6

by Jerry Ratch

6

When I finally went back to school in the fourth grade, after coming down with polio, my classmates were very welcoming, though I couldn't go outside and run around like them yet at recess or lunch time. That would come, just not right away. But it was the sensation of the crossovers happening inside my brain that has not left me, even to this day. It was an internal feeling of electrodes popping inside my skull when I attempted to make my left hand hold a pencil correctly, after being right-handed for so long. Then to somehow coerce that untrained left hand to write in a straight line — having to internally force my will into a hand unused to even holding the pencil in the first place, let alone trying to write my name.

Almost immediately my good left hand began to tremble under the pressure. The handwriting that came out of this unwieldy club of a hand was tantamount to something that would come out of a kindergartner. It was the handwriting of a five year old at best — and worse, I was aware that everyone around me could see it. There was no way to hide something like that. They'd look at what I had put on the paper, and then they would step back and take another look at me. I had become a freak in their eyes. My own friends and classmates, who thought they knew me so well.

Right after I'd gotten out of the hospital, my teacher had come to my house nearly every day after class. I'd managed to keep up pretty well with the actual subject matter at home. But neither of us had even considered what it was going to be like staying abreast of the others in my class with anything close to normal speed in writing. It felt like one group of muscles inside my head were arm-wrestling with another group of muscles. And I could feel my will alone trying to bull its way through this predicament.

As I sat at my desk struggling to get the lines between the letters to connect without billowing outward into huge comic balloons, at the same time out of the side of my eye I could see my classmates laying down their pencils one after another, until I was the last one. I sat there still struggling with the looping scrolls in front of me on my piece of paper. In a rage I began crumpling up one page after another, unable to comprehend why I couldn't force some sort of order or discipline over my good hand. I would position the dead weight of my right hand at the top of the paper in order to hold the page in place. Again and again I would start into the practice.

Before entering the hospital with polio, I was used to being near the top of my class in most subjects, so this was a totally new experience to me — not being able to keep up. It was humiliating. I might as well have taken off my shirt to let everybody see the devastation that had occurred to my right arm. Meanwhile my classmates went on with the next assignment, and the next. It got more and more frustrating as I fell further behind. I kept prodding myself inside: *'Come on! Come on! Speed up, will you?'*

When the others ran outdoors for recess, I stayed inside. It was winter now, and very cold out. My right hand was already losing its normal muscle tone. It had begun getting skinny. And the cold seemed to be able to eat right into the bone, without the natural protection of the muscles. From the tall schoolroom windows, standing beside steaming radiators, I would watch the boys forming into teams. They would gather snow off the ground without hesitation and make snowballs. They ran, throwing at one another and at the girls, who ran away screaming from them. On the way home from school I bent down and tried to clump the snow on the ground with my left hand to make a snowball. That didn't work. Then I tried packing a fistful against my leg, but when I went to throw the miserable creation, it fell apart a foot away from me. Finally I learned how to pack snow against the base of my right hand, against the wrist basically. But unless the snow was really wet, it made for a pretty unprofessional snowball, incapable of damaging anything.

I learned to avoid anything smacking of an upcoming snowball fight. For one thing, I was having a considerable amount of trouble keeping a glove on my right hand, since there weren't the necessary muscles to grasp with anymore, in order to keep the thing on. An ordinary fur-lined glove would slip right off the hand and fall into the snow. I didn't want to appear in public with a clip at the end of the sleeve like a three-year-old with his mittens pinned to his coat. So, the whole thing became pretty discouraging.

All of this put me at an added distance from my peers, who would go out at a moment's notice, packing and throwing snowballs at girls or passing cars or at stop signs. They never, even once, had to stop and think about it. It was all in the course of growing up in a normal manner. I myself had once been a part of this crowd. In fact, I'd been their leader.

But none of this was as bad as what would become the real problem for me. It was when I attempted throwing something substantial with my good, left hand — that was when the real shocker occurred. I had never, ever before thrown anything with that hand. I'd been a right-hander by nature, and a pretty decent pitcher too, when it had come to baseball. Trying it with my left hand, I couldn't figure out whether you threw over your shoulder or in a side-slider manner. And I didn't have the natural follow-through. To my utter amazement, I now threw exactly like a little girl.

In the long run I would learn to throw a very fast and hard lefty side-slider pitch. But for now I came to the realization that my baseball career had been wildly interrupted. What was I going to do the following summer, when everybody on the block was out playing baseball? I couldn't stay indoors for the rest of my life. I had never been the type to sit on the sidelines, just watching.

So, in the spring I let myself be talked into participating in a track and field event at Ardmore School. This would turn out to be a real pivotal point for me — the kind where you realize for a certainty that you are not one of the crowd anymore. It was like waking up one morning and discovering that I had committed a mass murder. I was now on the outside of society, looking in.

At nine years of age, I had never even heard the word: "Miscellaneous." When they said that was the name of the event I'd be running in, I thought, well, it must be the name of some single teacher. Miss Elaine E. Ass. Or something like that. I didn't stop to think that I'd be reduced to running in an event in which they couldn't figure out where else to put you. Only the slowest, most clumsy, most uncoordinated of kids would end up running back and forth across a field of grass in an event like this — *while carrying an egg in a spoon!* If you let it drop, your team would be out of the competition, and people would get real angry with you. Even the worst spastic understood how important it was to keep an egg balanced inside the spoon and not let it drop.

The race was run in relay. When my turn came, I had only to run the length of the field with the egg balancing on the tablespoon. It seemed easy enough. I could accomplish this, I thought. I didn't even have to really concentrate on something this easy. I figured it was beneath me, so what did it matter? I was still in the habit of seeing myself the same as before. I'd spent most of my time watching my buddies racing in the full track relay, cheering them on — I who had been used to, in the past, being right out there running with the pack. I used to be able to run like the wind. I was really fast. Now I wasn't quite so fast — and at any rate, didn't want to exhibit myself so plainly running along with my right arm dangling by itself, as though it were off in a different race of its own. I didn't want to appear to be so out of control.

Nevertheless, I had agreed to run in the "Miscellaneous" race with a goofy egg balanced in a spoon.

But I didn't get half way down the field before my egg popped right out of the spoon. I stopped in amazement and bent down. With my good hand I tried desperately to edge the broken white pieces of shell back up onto the spoon, while my right arm hung in its sleeve at my side. Broken yolk had slopped over the outsides of the eggshells. I heard the crowd grow quiet as I kept nudging pieces of shell onto the spoon. I sat down in the grass and looked up from the mess. I looked at the distance left to go to get to

the other kid in the relay line who was still waiting there for me. It was cold out, and I could feel the wet grass on my legs, coming up through my gym shorts — and that was when I realized this was going to be my last shot at any kind of sporting event for some time to come.

The only thing I would do now was go home and begin pitching a solitary tennis ball against the garage door — until with my hard lefty side-slider pitch I could bring the ball to within a one foot strike zone more times than not.

And that was what I did.

I went on to become a minor-minor league pitcher. A pretty good one, at that. I would hold the mitt trapped underneath the armpit of my right arm, having just enough muscle left to hold it tucked up there, and with my left hand I would throw the ball as hard as I could. I'd either throw strikes, or I'd hit the mostly right-handed batters square in the back. They were afraid of my speed. After the pitch, I would reach up under my right arm and slip the baseball glove onto my left hand to field the ball. If I caught anything, I'd drop the glove with the ball on the ground, stoop over, and throw the ball with my left hand.

I grew to be pretty fast about it. Pretty good, as I said, but not quite good enough to make it to the little leagues like some of my friends. When I tried out for that, I watched the coach just shake his head before motioning for me to go sit down on the bleachers. He didn't even have to say the word: "Next!" Everybody understood. Those with two good hands had already hopped up to take my place.

* * * * *

Overnight I had lost my youth. But since I was still only nine and my arm looked like a nine-year-old's arm, people didn't notice much at first, until I tried running. Or if I was introduced, and they went to shake my hand. I soon learned to cross over and extend my left hand for the handshake, though it confused them when I extended my left hand like that. It was an awkward thing. A

bewildered hesitation showed up on the faces of the people I'd met. They'd look down at my other hand and not know what to say. They just kept staring at where the right hand was supposed to be.

As I began to grow older, people would notice immediately the difference if I ever took off my shirt — or if I wore a short-sleeve shirt — because the arm and the hand were still like the hand of a young boy. And there it would remain while life went on. It never grew older along with the rest of me. To forestall that moment of recognition, that vision of the fact of my difference, I took to wearing only long-sleeved shirts, and stuffing my right hand into my pocket. I decided not to always go around wearing my heart, so to speak, on my sleeve. I was standing at a crossroads in my life without even knowing it, or understanding that I was at such a crossroads. Nobody at the age of nine or ten years is fully prepared to recognize such a thing.

I went into a depression. My parents could see it, and they decided they would try to do something. They said I could have a choice; they were prepared to go out and buy me one of two sets. The choice was mine and only mine to make — it was either a magic set, or a chemistry set.

I went with the chemistry. I went inward instead of outward. Maybe it would have been better if I had gone with the magic. Instead, as it turned out, it was bombs. Now, if you think about it, this is not such a heavy-duty choice for a one-armed boy. There may have been one or maybe two one-armed magicians throughout history, but I wasn't in a hurry to break some sort of record, exhibiting my disability in front of the world. I chose to go inward instead. Truthfully, that has made all the difference.

When they brought home the chemistry set, I opened it up right away, but then didn't touch the thing for several months, mainly because I didn't know what the hell to do with it. There were small brown bottles in there with red screw caps, labeled things like: Sulfur, and Potassium Nitrate. They gave you a set of instructions. They let you in on such things as the secret to making blue ink, pretty unexperimental things of that nature. Within the

first fifteen minutes I grew bored. I meant to do something with what was left of my life. I wanted desperately, all of a sudden, for my life to achieve meaning of some sort.

This was a pretty adult decision to reach at the age of nine. But all of a sudden I knew for a certainty that I wanted to invent new things. I wanted to make discoveries that would change the world. I wanted to unlock the mysteries behind nylon, and so forth. But I had also begun developing another side of myself that I didn't fully understand, and maybe still don't fully to this day. And that was a side of me that tended toward anger and self-destruction.

It didn't take long before I obtained a book with a formula for gunpowder. After chemistry and bombs, came model airplanes. A harmless enough hobby, one would think. This ought to have been a calming and peaceful way to soothe a soul that was swirling inside with an unspoken anger at God, and at the Self.

Ought to. But didn't.

The pent-up explosive that was now packed into my little heart was a true phenomenon to behold when it would erupt, as it inevitably would — taking out the frustrations at not being able, for instance, to hold a tiny, delicate piece of balsa wood with my right hand in order to apply model airplane glue to it.

As simple a procedure as that could become such a disaster that in a total rage, after putting together nearly an entire airplane, I would plunge a hammer through its paper wings and balsa-wood body. In a final rage I would stomp the thing to smithereens under my feet, because it became impossible to hit and smash everything with a narrow, ball-peen hammer. And I grew fierce in my determination to smash every last part that had been painstakingly assembled. My feet became weapons of destruction. With my feet alone, I could have killed.

