

Selected excerpts from  
Charles L. Mee's Memoirs:  
A Nearly Normal Life

Within these memoirs, Charles L. Mee explains his life with polio + how his experiences shaped his artistic literary creations and theatrical masterpieces. Please peruse for amazing insight. Key points highlighted, but all worth reading.

It had never occurred to me that anything bad might happen to me. I was fourteen years old that summer of 1953, with buckteeth, a crew cut, a love of swimming, football, and comic books. I had a dog named Pat. I was a Boy Scout. I liked girls. I was just out of my freshman year in high school. This was in Barrington, Illinois, a little town, population 5,320, thirty-five miles northwest of Chicago. Where I lived in the village, you could walk to the end of the block and out into empty fields, rolling hills of tall grass; no one owned this land as far as we knew. It had little lakes where we would cut down saplings and build lean-tos and sometimes camp out overnight—no grown-ups, just the kids, boys and girls. My sister Bets, three years older than I, was one of the oldest of the kids; she was always my best friend, and with her, I knew I was always safe.

But parents lived in constant dread those days, especially in the summertime, fearful that their children might come down with polio. Polio struck suddenly, without warning, and left its victims dead, or paralyzed, washed up in wheelchairs, white-faced, shrunken, with frightened eyes, light blankets over their legs, or lying on their backs inside iron lungs—great heavy contraptions, like little one-man submarines, constantly

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shushing and hissing with the intake and exhaust of the air pressure that made a person's diaphragm expand and contract, breathing for him because the muscles in his chest had stopped working—his head and feet sticking out uselessly at either end.

Parents were crazed by this. There was no cure for polio, not even any reliable treatment. It could not be prevented. It triggered the sort of anxiety and frenzy and sorrow that have been set off in recent years by AIDS, or, long ago, by the bubonic plague. Medical researchers had known as far back as the turn of the twentieth century that polio was a virus. Later it was discovered that the virus entered the mouth, usually, traveled to the intestinal tract, and then invaded the nervous system. It was called poliomyelitis, I was told, because it stripped away from the nerves their myelin sheath, which acts like insulation around an electrical cord, so that the nerves short-circuited, sizzled, and died. They stopped sending signals to the muscles, and so the muscles stopped working. Arms and legs lay limp and useless. Some children with polio could no longer raise their heads off their pillows. Some could no longer breathe. But no one knew what to do about it.

And not everyone believed the medical researchers knew what they were talking about. There was a constant buzz about polio back then. One magazine article that summer said polio was related to diet. Another article said it was related to the color of your eyes. Kids at summer camp got it, and when a boy at a camp in upstate New York got it that summer, a health officer imposed a frantic quarantine and said no one would be let out of the camp till the polio season was over. There was a lot of it that year. The newspapers published sta-

tistics every week. As of the Fourth of July, the papers said, there were 4,680 cases in the United States—more than there had been by July 4 in 1952, which had been reckoned the worst year for polio in medical history. The final tally at the end of that year had been 57,628. Of course, none of these numbers were reliable; odd illnesses were added to the total, and mild cases went unreported. Someone said that public gatherings had been banned altogether in the Yukon. In Montgomery, Alabama, that summer the whole city broke out; more than 85 people caught it. An emergency was declared. In Tampa, Florida, a twenty-month-old boy named Gregory died of it; five days later, his eight-year-old sister, Sandra, died of it while their mother was in the delivery room giving birth to a new baby.

The rules were: Don't play with new friends—stick with your old friends, whose germs you already have; stay away from crowded beaches and pools, especially in August; wash your hands before eating; never use another person's eating utensils or toothbrush or drink out of the same glass or Coke bottle; don't bite another person's hands or fingers while playing, or (this one for small children) put another child's toys in your mouth; don't pick up anything from the ground, especially around a beach or pool; don't have any teeth pulled during the summer; don't get overtired or strained; if you get a headache, tell your mother.

Even so, kids caught it. In the big city hospitals, kids were stacked like cordwood in the corridors. Massachusetts General Hospital, it was said, looked like a "medieval pest house." Carts and wheelchairs clogged the aisles; sixty monstrous iron lungs had been jammed into one ward room. On the South

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Side of Chicago, a mother cried just to see the name above the door of the place where her child was taken: the Home for Destitute Crippled Children.

Maybe the worst trauma I had suffered recently had been my father's insistence that now that I was out of grammar school, I needed to throw away my comic book collection. But even that blow had been tempered by my mother, who interceded to rescue the "Li'l Bad Wolf" series of comics, which she said were not bad for me.

My greatest passion was football. I'd played it since I was five or six, with the certain assumption that I would be a college player, maybe a professional. The best college team in the country then was Notre Dame, and my father had a friend, an automobile dealer, who had a friend who was friends with Notre Dame's athletic director, Moose Krause. So, three times in my growing-up years, we drove to South Bend, Indiana, to see Notre Dame play. These were the days when Frank Leahy was the coach. It's hard to imagine what that name meant to a football-playing boy in the Midwest. Michael Jordan. Arnold Schwarzenegger. Obi Wan Kenobe. I remember going into the locker room before a game against Michigan State and seeing piles of hundreds of jerseys. Each player had several dozen jerseys with his number on them, and it was explained to me that these were tear-away jerseys, so that if a tackler got hold of nothing but your shirt, it would just come off in his hands, and you'd be gone. My plan was to play quarterback for Notre Dame, and I was encouraged to believe—by Frank Leahy and Moose Krause and the coaches back home—that this was not impossible.

My father didn't discourage this ambition, but he was a man who wore a three-piece suit and bifocals with thin silver

rims. He shined his shoes and put shoe trees in them every night. Handsome, dignified, graying at the temples, he was unfailingly gracious and considerate (my mother said a gentleman always considered not simply another person's rights but also her preferences), as well as short-tempered and given to sudden rage if another driver pulled out in front of him so that he had to call the bastard a stupid son-of-a-bitch. My father was a businessman, at that time a vice president of the Commonwealth Edison Company of Chicago, and he believed in the promise of technology. In those days, when Ronald Reagan appeared in television commercials for General Electric and said, "Progress is our most important product," my family agreed with him.

We had driven cross-country that summer to Colorado, where my sister Sookie, five years older than I, was finishing her junior year at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Well, Bets and my mother and I drove out; my father took a plane out and back because he was busy at the office. My mother was a timid driver. She was the baby of her family. Her older sister, Douga, had gone to New York to be an actress, and instead became one of the stars of radio, among the inventors of the early-morning talk show. Douga met and married the founder and publisher of *Yachting* magazine, and the two of them lived in a triplex on Park Avenue, just like New Yorkers. But my mother was shy and tender. And I always felt, as the baby of *my* family, that she and I knew each other intimately, without a need for words: we were always close.

It took several days to get to Boulder, driving through the cornfields and the wheat fields of Iowa and Nebraska and on into the tornado lands of Dorothy's Kansas, staying in small motels along the way. This was the first time I'd gone farther

out into the world than to South Bend, and I was excited to see other people's lives and wonder about how they lived them. My friend Dave's grandfather, Grampa Buckley, who had a seat on the Chicago Grain Exchange, used to drive out this way a couple of times a year to look at the fields. He would get out of his car and talk to the farmers, walk out into the corn and wheat and soybeans and feel the crops with his own fingers. This was how he discovered one year that the soybean crop was going to be a disaster—and the coming shortage of soybeans would drive their price sky-high at harvesttime. As he went from town to town, he would call back to his office in Chicago and say, "Buy soybeans, buy soybeans," until he cornered the market that year in soybeans.

This country, in the fifties, was the most wholesome country history has ever seen. Of course there were no drugs in schools, and no guns. For a girl to get pregnant in high school—as one did in Barrington—was a major community event. The child's father was a star on the high school basketball team, the president of the Honor Society, a bright boy with a promising future. The mother was a cheerleader, and a bright girl with a promising future. The town's consensus was that the girl should drop out of school right away to prepare for the birth, and the boy should be allowed to finish his junior year in high school and then get a job to support his family, which is what they did. When the child was three years old, the mother got a job at the checkout counter at the Jewel Tea supermarket.

Driving cross-country, across a country distinctly intact—in such sharp contrast to all the photographs of war-ravaged Europe that had recently filled the minds of growing children—a boy could be forgiven for having a sense of the ever-

lasting peace and prosperity that President Eisenhower liked to talk about. We drove through small towns that had not changed in decades. Wherever new houses had been built, they were ranch houses, with vast picture windows on their fronts. Imagine feeling safe enough to put nothing but a sheet of glass between yourself and the world. In the Middle Ages, as in most periods of history, people built homes with walls two feet thick, massive bolted doors, ironwork over the windows. But in these past ten thousand years, for a period of about twenty years, so secure did an entire nation of people feel that they opened themselves up with complete vulnerability to anyone who had a rock. This is how safe we felt we were in the fifties, how safe I felt driving cross-country with my mother and Bets.

I thought of Sookie, the eldest of the three of us children, the way Winston Churchill said he thought of his mother: "She was like the evening star. She loved me dearly, but at a distance." Sookie was glamorous to me. I'm talking about a college girl from the Midwest, but she seemed immensely sophisticated to me, and she was dating a guy at the University of Colorado who wanted to be a professional golfer. My father thought he was a bum, and I guess he was, but he was a good-looking guy, maybe a little too slick, and very cool, the way natural athletes are, with their loose-limbed, easy way of moving. I tried to imitate him.

That may have been where I picked up the virus — in Boulder, or somewhere along the road to Boulder, in Kansas or Nebraska, from a water glass in a roadside diner, or a door-knob at a motel. I don't know. No one knows. But the incubation period is about fourteen days, and it was fourteen days after we arrived in Boulder, when I was back home in Barrington, that I came down with what felt like the flu, but



not quite: an ache, a general sense of unease, a little light-headedness, that whitening out around the edges of my vision that I noticed first in the sun at the swimming pool where I was that afternoon. My lower back felt as though it needed stretching out. I thought maybe I'd pulled a muscle diving off the high board. For a while I lay beside the pool, waiting for the ache and tiredness to go away, but, feeling restless, I got up again and went home to lie down out of the sun in the coolness of the living room.

That night I had a date, finally, with Stephanie Sibley for a high school summer dance. There was to be dinner and swimming. A local country club had let the students use its clubhouse, and there would be an evening of wandering out onto the veranda, strolling out onto the golf course—like a black-and-white movie from the thirties. She had gotten a formal dress. I had rented a tuxedo with a white jacket. I was anxious about my date, but nothing else, not wanting to be sick so I couldn't go.

By the time I picked up Stevie—an older friend was double-dating with me, and drove—I was working hard to be relaxed and casual and happy. I told her I didn't feel well; I didn't want her to catch whatever it was I had. She laughed and said she didn't care. In the parking lot at the club, I felt dizzy. Entering the club, I would have felt self-conscious and out of place, intimidated by the doorman, but my attention was too narrowly focused, by now, on how unsteady I felt on my feet. This began to seem strange to me, but so strong is the dating instinct for an adolescent boy that I repressed any thought that I was sick.

A buffet dinner was set out in the club's large dining room—little hors d'oeuvres, a vast salmon lying stretched out

on the table, I don't know what. I was hungry and ill at the same time. I took something in my fingers and looked for a place to put it down. Stevie had gone somewhere. I sat down, my head between my knees.

And then we danced. A vast ballroom, all white, with a crystal chandelier, great windows on two sides overlooking the outdoor swimming pool, all lit up and alive with teenage boys and girls, and the eighteenth green at the edge of the darkness. I could hardly stand. Weak in the knees. Rubbery.

Going for a swim was out of the question. To think of it made me shiver. We went down to the pool, where some of the kids had brought out some Scotch to drink. I couldn't stomach it. I was beginning to panic. A girl was pushed into the pool with her dress on. Some boys were thrown in with their tuxedos on; others jumped in fully clothed. Much laughter. Good times. I needed to go. The fear had begun to overtake me—deep down somewhere in the reticular activating system of the brain, some danger signals were going off, telling me that this was not a previously recognized sort of sickness—but I fought it off.

Our double-dating foursome drove back to Stevie's house, which had a rec room in the basement—a private place for teenagers in the fifties, if they had permissive, not to say lascivious, parents: a cozy paneled room with easy chairs, a couch, Coke in a refrigerator, a phonograph. Elvis had only just begun to play the guitar; Bill Haley and the Comets were about to record "Rock Around the Clock." The rec room was where I had imagined, for more than a year, that I would first kiss Stevie. At the top of the basement stairs, I stopped—aware, suddenly, that I was about to fall headfirst down the stairs. Holding the railings on both sides, I took a step down.

My knees turned to jelly. The others, already at the bottom of the stairs, looked up with concern. I said I had to go home. The other boy came back up the stairs and held me while I turned around and got back up to the top. He said he would give me a ride home, but I said no, I would walk, I was fine—needed a little fresh air, that was all. I don't think I said good night to Stevie. I felt nothing so much as humiliation. This night was the beginning, and the end, of my adolescent entry into the world of sex and the transition to adult love. My rite of passage into grown-up love would have to be scattered messily through my twenties and even thirties, a moment of transition returned to again and again before I got it quite right.

They watched me go out the door and stagger across Stevie's front lawn. I was maybe fifteen blocks from home. And I don't remember the walk home well. These were small-town suburban blocks, brick and wood frame houses from the twenties and thirties mostly, some new ranch houses with big lawns both front and back; I knew just which back yards I could cut through.

I fell down many times, weaving through these familiar yards. Sometimes I thought I would not be able to get back up. Once when I fell, I stayed down for a long time, thinking I would nap and recover my strength. I was shivering. It was a warm summer night, but I had some unreasoning fear I would die of exposure. This no longer seemed like the flu, but it was not like anything I knew either. Any boy's mother or father would have recognized these symptoms right away in those days, but I was not a mother or father; I was a growing boy oblivious to the possibility that some dread disease might strike *me*.

At home, I crawled up the stairs on my hands and knees to my room, my parents calling out from their room to ask if I was all right. I reassured them. But then I couldn't stay in bed. My legs hurt so, and were so restless. I walked up and down the hall. The light went on in my parents' room. I went back to bed. Both my mother and my father came to my door. I told them how I felt—a little nausea, the relentless aching in the legs, the weakness. They phoned Doc Welch, the kind of guy in those days who made house calls in the middle of the night. He said we should meet him at the hospital. This was three or four o'clock in the morning.

My father backed the car out of the garage. I lay across the back seat, with a kitchen pot at hand in case I needed to vomit. The hospital was eighteen miles away, past farms in the countryside, past cornfields and woodlots, through the kinds of hills where we had built our lean-tos, to Elgin, a little town big enough to have a hospital, Sherman Hospital.

We were met at the door of the emergency room by a flurry of nurses and orderlies with a wheelchair—and because, by this time, I could no longer walk, I was lifted into the chair, and we made our way, this little band of panic, nurses and orderlies in their noisy, rustling, starched white uniforms, through the disinfected corridors, into the elevator, up into another, nearly deserted, wing of the hospital, and down a darkened hall to an examining room, where a single light was found and turned on, so that deep shadows filled the corners of the room. The orderlies lifted me onto a high table, and the crowd of nurses parted to let an immense red-haired woman, the head nurse, step forward, look at me lying on the table, and pronounce without hesitation: "This boy has polio."

## two

**A**ll the others stepped back, away from me; and the redheaded woman, strong as a linebacker for the Green Bay Packers, lifted me up in her arms—while the others who had touched me stepped to the sink one at a time and washed their hands.

The redheaded nurse carried me out of the examining room and back down the corridor, through swinging double doors, into the immense quiet of the isolation ward.

As she carried me into the solitude, all the while talking to me about her boys, both professional football players, and we turned left into an empty room, where she laid me in an empty bed, I understood that she was running the risk of contagion and death holding me, carrying me in her arms. A brave, heroic woman. I understood it the moment she picked me up. Mrs. Fuller was her name. Elgin, Illinois. July 1953.

And I felt a shudder of deep, deep fear; I felt an abyss open up beneath me, and, as far as I knew, there was no bottom to it; I felt awesome terror. Now the half-remembered stories flooded in on me, fragments of barely noticed newspaper reports and overheard conversations about polio outbreaks at summer camps, kids on crutches and in iron lungs. Now I understood: It had happened to me. And in an instant I got the

whole picture, that this was a matter of my own life or death; that I needed to summon up everything I had—whatever that might be—to survive. I was, in that moment, separated from the rest of the world. My mother and father and Mrs. Fuller and others might want to help me. But I had just crossed over into a world unknown to them, where they could not follow me the whole way.

Placed in bed, I was alone. Mrs. Fuller disappeared, to call the doctor, she said, to set things in motion for my care. I never saw Doc Welch, and now I supposed I'd been delivered into the hands of people who specialized in polio. In any case, I was consumed by just how sick I felt now, this combination of nausea, pain, and cold fear. The occasional nurse came and went quickly, to bring a pitcher of water or to take my temperature without a word—frightened to be in the same room with me. Several hours later that morning, my parents, shrouded in white gowns, with white masks over their mouths and noses, were allowed to come just inside the door to let me see them, to know that they were there; and then they were urged out again.

In mid-morning, a doctor I had never met came into the room accompanied by a couple of nurses and interns and rolled me over on my side, explaining to me that they needed to take a sample of spinal fluid from my back to make sure of my diagnosis. Before I was rolled over, I caught a glimpse of the needle, which was terrifyingly long; surely they had made some mistake, surely this was a veterinarian's needle, meant for horses. I was afraid it would go all the way up into my brain. Several of them held me down, and bent me double. There was not much pain from the needle; there was only fear, along with dread of the expected confirmation of polio.

- Nikos' line to Lydia

I thought: Things happen so suddenly in life, things that, in an instant, transform a life forever. You grow up thinking you can always say: no, I didn't mean that; I take it back. But this is not always the case.

With the drawing of the sample of spinal fluid, the doctor's work was finished. He could do nothing more but wait, to see whether or not I would come through. My parents, my sisters, the nurses: all any of them could do was wait.

The isolation ward was well named: I have never been so alone in my life as in that bed, where I was confined for the next three weeks, feverish and contagious; where I would learn, thoroughly, the lesson of self-reliance. It was an education that would sustain me for the rest of my life—and cut me off from others so that, even today, I have to work to remember that what I learned so well was wrong, or incomplete.

And somewhere deep inside I turned tough as old leather for ten or fifteen years. Or maybe I should say, more exactly, that whatever I felt from this time on, whatever fear or loneliness or sense of abandonment or, in the days to come, whatever thought of how unequal I was to the task, whatever sorrow or bitterness, whatever sense of longing or loss—all these would be merely superficial emotions laid on top of a profound and abiding rage: to survive. No feeling was as powerful as that one. And no feeling would be allowed to get in the way of that one, to put that passion in second place.

It is true what Samuel Johnson said: that the prospect of hanging wonderfully concentrates the mind. It reveals to us, in an instant, knowledge we didn't know we had; it teaches us lessons in a moment that might otherwise have taken a lifetime to learn; it throws us onto resources we never imagined we possessed, even if we are just children. And it turns out that

human creatures are a very resilient species; all of us have reserves we hardly ever use. It turns out that we can withstand a lot of damage; we can endure a long time; our systems are immensely rugged; we are as tough as cockroaches, really.

No feeling—of fear or sorrow or loneliness or loss—was indulged if it invited me to wallow in it, linger in it, settle into it, sink in it. In the moments that the fear diminished, I could feel the sadness well up in me. But sadness is an emotion about the past, and a longing for the past had just become, for me, a luxury I could not allow myself. I had no use for sadness—sadness could overwhelm me; sadness could immobilize me; sadness could kill me. And whenever I felt it, I fought it off.

Denial is an underrated ability these days; but billions of years of evolution gave it to us for a good reason, up to a point. It allows us to keep the bad news and the overpowering feelings at a distance, and then, later on, let them in just a bit at a time, just as much as we can take, bit by bit, until we've absorbed them all without letting them overcome us. So shocking was this trauma to me that it would be years before I could let such things as sorrow flow back into my life freely.

And, as it turned out, I hadn't received all the bad news yet anyway. The virus was not finished with me. It had only started. In the next two weeks, in the summer heat, delirious from fever, I went from a healthy athletic boy weighing 160 pounds to a frightened child of 90 pounds, unable to move a muscle except for three fingers of my left hand, not knowing where it would all end.

As the neurons in my body died one by one during those two weeks, I felt relentless pain, like the pain of a tooth being drilled without novocaine, but all over my body. As though a dentist was peeling back my skin, layer by layer, exposing each

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the odd television director has been sick, and perhaps a television producer has known someone who has had some disease or other. But the plot on television is always the same: Someone is struck by something; there is suffering; it is immensely sad; the stricken person is sad; the audience is made to empathize, pity, and cry; and then—very soon, before the burden of illness becomes too difficult—there is the full recovery, the happy, vigorous return to life itself, reaffirmation, optimism, victory. No child I knew at Sherman believed it.

Of course, none of the kids, no matter how young, could bear all the tear-jerking in these stories, which they knew was manipulative and contemptible. You might think that was because they had repressed their own sadness, but that was not the case. Those who had been seriously damaged by polio or by some disorder from birth, some problem with a heart valve, or some other serious childhood disease, felt their sadness; they cried from time to time in the privacy of their own rooms. More than that, they felt, as I did, a torrent of emotions, of fear and loneliness, panic and despair, hostility and cynicism, hope, recurring hope, a crazy rage, hope returning once again when it had been forgotten, the inadequacy of being small, the anxiety that comes of being kept in ignorance by doctors, the wish to be naughty, the growing suspicion that the doctors didn't know anything anyway, the cavalier toughness of a war hero in a Hollywood movie, John Wayne's disdain for self-pity, the memory of almost dancing, the thought of escape, of flying out the window of the hospital, of sudden miraculous recovery, hopelessness, relentless boredom, unreasoning optimism, a desire to be touched if only inadvertently by a nurse, hatred for the sunshine coming through the win-

dow, longing for a visit from my mother. I felt, the other children felt, such a chaos of emotions that the weak treacle of sorrow on television seemed completely unbelievable.

Then, too, I think it is intact people who like to experience the feelings of sorrow and loss and bitterness over and over again—and who always ask injured people about these feelings, to conjure them up and experience them vicariously. Intact people like to see stories about people who lose something, are filled with deep sorrow, and recover—and to see these stories over and over and over—I suppose because they are afraid for their own bodies and seek constant reassurance. But once your body is broken, you no longer need those reassurances, or, maybe, no longer find them so reassuring. And meanwhile, so many other feelings come to vie for attention—new, previously unimagined emotions, of astonishment, for example, at the condition we found ourselves in, of wonder at how suddenly and completely our lives could change; of immense awe at the power of nature to turn on us and knock us right out of the park.

For those of us who were not showing some marked recovery right away in the first few weeks, polio would not be like pneumonia or a broken leg, where, after several months, the difficulty disappears. No one recovers from a serious onslaught of polio—just as no one recovers from diabetes or multiple sclerosis or schizophrenia or AIDS or so many other illnesses. Some people recover partly, or for a while, sometimes even for a long while; they are given a reprieve, allowed to resume a nearly “normal” life, with some residual damage that is more or less vexing. The damage that has been done is incorporated into their life; if it is something more than

minor, it alters their life, is knit in to everything they do, shapes their careers and marriages and partnerships and relationships with their children. They come back from the original onslaught, and then, some years later, discover they must recover again, and then yet again—until recovery really is out of the question; they come to the end of their life recognizing that damage is finally inescapable in life. If they live long enough, everyone comes to know that there are no simple, made-for-television triumphs in life, no way of isolating trials and recoveries from the rest of their life, setting off sickness in a separate compartment, getting over it and going on. Their final coming to terms, their triumph, if it comes, always takes longer, is far more complicated, and is far more profound.

And meanwhile, if they become writers, they begin to notice that even the way they form a sentence and tell a story is affected by who they have become. I find, when I write, that I really don't want to write well-made sentences and paragraphs, narratives that flow, structures that have a sense of wholeness and balance, books that feel intact. Intact people should write intact books with sound narratives built of sound paragraphs that unfold with a sense of dependable cause and effect, solid structures you can rely on. That is not my experience of the world. I like a book that feels like a crystal goblet that has been thrown to the floor and shattered, so that its pieces, when they are picked up and arranged on a table, still describe a whole glass, but the glass itself lies in shards. To me, sentences should veer and smash up, careen out of control; get under way and find themselves unable to stop, switch directions suddenly and irrevocably, break off, come to a sighing inconclusiveness. If a writer's writings constitute a "body of

- Charles Mee explains his writing beautifully

work," then my body of work, to feel true to me, must feel fragmented. And then, too, if you find it hard to walk down the sidewalk, you like, in the freedom of your mind, to make a sentence that leaps and dances now and then before it comes to a sudden stop.

as is likely to happen with incessant propaganda, some of it stuck. Maybe there were indeed borderline cases where, 'whether you ever walk again is *up to you!*'" And then, when he had recovered some of his abilities, Le Comte wrote, "I should have been exhilarated . . . [but] I was only depressed. The road ahead was longer and rougher than my worst imaginings, the mirror at the end of the parallel bars [where he held himself steady on his feet to learn to walk again] hopelessly distant; and reaching that—sometime in the fifth month—would only be the beginning of the beginning."

Joan Hardee came out of an iron lung at last, able to breathe on her own, and then—having taken this immense step toward recovery—saw how far she was in fact from normal life, and despaired. "I knew that I would not die, and could not, even though I wished it. I slumped into a great depression with no positive wish or will about anything."

At some point Larry Alexander realized that, in fact, he would never walk again, no matter how hard he fought, that nothing could be done for his "helpless flesh and bone," but that, even so, it had to be "kept alive, nursed and cared for the way a baby is cared for." He slipped into a deep depression; he lost all interest in reading, talking, therapy. "I had no grip on life, no logical reason to go on living. You'd be better off dead."

And there are other stories of those who were left bedridden for life, who didn't make it, who couldn't overcome their disabilities no matter how hard they tried, who lived on in iron lungs and never came to feel courageous and accepting about it. But their stories aren't available to us—because they didn't know how to tell them in a way that could fit the way the culture said the stories should be told, or because no one

wanted to hear them, no one wanted to publish them or put them on television. In 1961, a survey was done of 806 people with long-term disabilities from polio: 29 percent of them could not feed themselves; 31 percent could feed themselves only with assistive devices; 83 percent could not get dressed by themselves; 32 percent could not write; 40 percent could not get from bed to wheelchair without help; nearly 50 percent could not propel a wheelchair by themselves. For many people, as Paul Bates has written, "Having polio is to be forced to do nothing, for there seems to be nothing you can do; to have polio is to stare at the ceiling; to have polio is to do nothing for yourself; to have polio is to fight with a disease which would, if it could, rob you of the ability to do anything, presenting you with each twenty-four hours as a barren waste with no choice but to endure them."

If a girl spends her life in an iron lung, we want to hear how she triumphed over it, how she became a deeper, better, wiser, more profoundly philosophical and transcendent person for it; how, in fact, it was almost a wonderful advantage to spend a life in an iron lung, because of the insight it yielded. We like success. We can't bear failure. We don't want to hear about it. I don't. I can't bear a story of failure—unless it ends tragically: a person dies; it is immensely sad; we mourn, we recognize our mortality; we grieve for human destiny; we feel pity and terror; we are purged; and then we forget the person, and we get on with our lives. But for a person to linger forever, as so many do, never recovering, never coming to terms with his fate, to fail, to become a lifelong invalid, unable to care for himself, incapable of rising to the daily challenge of futile effort, overcome by bitterness or despair, needy of public assistance, homeless, good for nothing but to provide a

living specimen for young interns being trained in the emergency rooms of inner-city hospitals to practice on—this is unbearable; depressing; a daily reminder of just how vulnerable we all are. We don't need it. We don't want it. We hope we will never find a use for these stories.

There is something to be said for this willful ignorance: We don't need to learn how to fail in our lives; we need to learn how to succeed. We don't want to identify with failure, to rehearse failure, to feel comfortable with it, to get good at it. We want to rehearse success; we want to know what qualities of character are needed for triumph.

The notion that any problem can be solved with will, determination, and ingenuity certainly helped build the strong, powerful nation America had become by the time I got polio. It continues to inspire successful, expansive business enterprises and individual lives. It helps people get through the day. It sent my father out to work every morning with the feeling that his efforts were going to be rewarded. It gave a lift to his spirits, an energy to his life, a faith in the future, and he worked hard and happily in the sustenance of that belief.

And yet the refusal to recognize the possibility of failure, the refusal to accept the tragic nature of life and the knowledge that all problems do not have solutions, all this came to constitute more than a mere metaphysical error in America. It produced an entire subculture of denial and shame, where failure cannot be admitted, where those who cannot succeed must apologize and take the blame, where a vast network of institutions has been built to hide the millions who cannot pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, a culture in which failure is swept under the rug, where death is denied, where we undertake extravagant attempts to fix the unfixable in hospital

operating rooms and in sovereign countries such as Vietnam, and where those who object to this must feel themselves judged to be wanting, to be neurotic, losers, not quite good Americans, not quite psychologically robust, needing a change in their diet, their vitamins, their aerobic conditioning, their meditation techniques, their outlook on life, where we know to say of someone who doesn't go along with the program: Well, of course, you know, he's been psychologically damaged.

This culture made me feel, as a boy, that I needed to keep my chin up, reassure my parents about how well I was doing, never be sad, look to the future, be optimistic, perform a *cando* persona even if I felt no connection to it. It made me live a lie, confuse myself about who I was and what I felt and how life was for me. I was disoriented, with no guideposts that seemed reliable or even sane; I had to adjust to a world I thought was crazy. I learned to lie to my parish priest and my football coach and my parents, who didn't seem to know, or couldn't bring themselves to admit, the truth they saw before their very eyes.

As a country, America was forced in the 1960s to acknowledge, in part, the limitations of its wonderful, robust mythology—to take more the tragic view of life that many other, older nations have come to live with, to recognize that some things cannot be done, some things cannot be fixed; that at some moment, even if it is only in the final moment, everyone is crushed by life; that in the end, we don't come through life as we hope to, richer and stronger and smarter; in the end, no matter who we are, we are all completely shattered and consumed by life.

And yet, meanwhile, in truth, we all still need a little denial to get through our days.



One little boy, seven years old, with both legs in heavy steel braces, asked his Little League coach if he could play that year. The coach, thrown off guard, said all the positions were filled that season but he should think about playing the following year. The boy told his mother: "I'll be playing with the Little Leaguers next year."

H. C. A. Lassen, the chief of the department of communicable diseases at Blegdam Hospital in Copenhagen in the early 1950s, believed that patients who were being successful at denying the gravity of their condition should not have their hopes shattered by telling them too much about their odds for full recovery: It is, he said, "practically never too late for the patient to realize he is a respirator patient for life."

Really, even the story of Franklin Roosevelt was not one of *physical* triumph. As Kathryn Black has pointed out, Roosevelt tried "massage, saltwater baths, ultraviolet light, electric currents, parallel bars as supports [for walking], horseback riding, an electric tricycle, exercises in warm water and cold water, osteopathy, and every manner of muscle training. He exercised in the morning and practiced walking in the afternoon [for seven years]. Despite all that effort, time, and expense, he never managed more than a few tortured steps supported by braces, a cane, and the strong arm of someone else. In fact, he never even stood up, except for speeches, receptions, and military reviews."

President Roosevelt, many years after he had had polio, still told his family and friends that he was expecting to recover completely in another couple of years.

quite able to reach down to get the trousers over the brace-encased leg, I would lose my balance and fall to the floor in a heap of metal and textiles.

The brace, which had seemed such a wonderful triumph of outdated technology when I first got it, had come to seem an ugly encumbrance. It did no real good. I couldn't put any weight on my left leg in any case, since the muscles in that hip were too weak to support me, so all the brace did was to keep my knee from constantly buckling even when no weight was put on it. I worked hard to develop the muscles in my left thigh so that even if I could not get my leg strong enough to hold my weight, at least I might develop enough strength to keep the leg straight when I stood up, and leave it to the crutches to bear my weight. I worked attentively at that on my visits to Mrs. Jones, until, just before Christmas, I was able to keep my knee straight and fake walking on my left leg; I took off my leg brace and got around with just my two crutches. To be out of the brace was wonderful; what was even more wonderful was not to have to wear the ugly shoes in which the brace needed to be anchored. I was able to wear the mark of extreme coolness for adolescent boys in the fifties: white bucks. My sister Sookie gave them to me when she came home for Christmas.

Now I found myself practicing standing, not just standing so I wouldn't fall over, but standing like someone who is cool, whose body has natural grace. Of course, since my body didn't have natural grace, I overcompensated: I stood too nicely. I stood like a ballet dancer waiting in the wings after a performance to see if anyone intends to compliment him. My aesthetic was way off.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to be beauti-

ful is to be "attractive or impressive through expressing or suggesting fitness, order, regularity, rhythm, cogency, or perfection of structure." A whole organism, as the physician Eric Cassell has written, "is not whole in merely the biological sense." Every life, as Cassell says, has a sense of wholeness or correctness, of fitness and cogency, that is made up of the remembered common past of the family, of the web of friendships and relationships, of expectations and hopes for the future that inform the present, of the unconscious dreams and fears, of the continuously rewritten autobiography we all carry with us in our minds; and all of these are subject to damage. The loss of an expected future, the location for hope, can be shattering. Illness damages our aesthetic sense of our lives—and that is a source of suffering as much as any physical pain. The aesthetic whole of a life must be reconstructed if a person is to regain a sense of coherence.

Sookie knew this without ever reading Eric Cassell. She got me a Scotch plaid beret, and then a red vest, and then gray flannel trousers, a plaid bow tie, a rep stripe silk tie, a handkerchief for my jacket pocket. While I was rebuilding from the inside out, she rebuilt from the outside in.

Or not rebuilt, but built almost from scratch: What was wanted was a new person, because the old one would never be restored. Somehow, at this time, I found I could no longer avoid the knowledge that I suppose I must have absorbed the moment Mrs. Jones said I could leave the hospital: I was released because not much more could be done for me. With a sudden shock, I realized she had abandoned me. To be sure, she had done it gently. She had sent me on into the world with her affection and support, telling me—to ease the separation—that I must continue to come back to the hospital

from time to time for therapy; but she meant that from now on, I must make my own way. And I must not expect much more improvement in my physical progress.

These bits of news—that really I would never go back onto a football field, that really I had reached a plateau of recovery, that really I was to be crippled the rest of my life—I had managed to space out the recognition of this news over some period of months. But their cumulative weight bore down on me now so that I felt a dull ache of despair. More and more, it was an effort to get up each day and raise my spirits high enough again to carry on. Each day I had to talk to myself, to negotiate with the boy who wanted to call it quits, give up, grow bitter, be cynical, withdraw, lash out; to wreck what was not already wrecked so that all that was around him would correspond to some inner truth of his life. Each day I had to say to that boy, You're still alive, you're lucky, you have a loving family, good friends; what did you think, that life would be a free ride? You're not so bad off; have some sense of perspective. Look at all you still can do. Use your anger to fuel some ambition; you have privileges and comforts and possible futures that millions of others would give an arm and a leg for.

Most of this psychological warfare I conducted on my own. As Josephine Walker, who got polio some years before I did, wrote, "nobody discussed it. . . . My parents did everything for me that was needed physically. . . . They were in total denial about the fact that there was an emotional component to this. And so they pretended, after a while, like it didn't happen, other than the fact that I needed—you know—a little bit of medical help. People didn't talk about the implications of it for my life. They just kind of let me go."

I first returned to school electronically: American Telephone and Telegraph had just developed a two-way speaker system that could be activated over a phone line. These days we call it a speakerphone. I had what must have been one of the first ones. On my desk in my bedroom was a device about the size of a bread box, with a speaker and a button I could press when I wanted to speak. At school was another such box that picked up the voices in my classroom and, when I pressed the button at my end, broadcast my voice to the room. My friend Jim carried the box from classroom to classroom for me, and so I began to attend my classes in the winter.

This device had only one drawback. When the teacher asked me a question and I started to answer, if I cheated by opening a book the damned device broadcast the sound of turning pages. I had to learn to let up on the button whenever I turned a page and then push the button when I resumed speaking so that my page turning was done in silence. In this way, even though I had missed the early part of the semester, I was able to answer questions as well as anyone who had not missed any school at all. My teachers pretended they

didn't know I was doing this, and my classmates enjoyed my delinquency.

After a few months of school in this way, and with continuing practice at walking and the purchase of a backpack for my books, I was ready in the early spring to go back to school every day.

Here's what school was like. From the pages of the Barington High School student newspaper, the *Broncho*, that my mother saved for me, I am reminded that this is the world I longed to re-enter, and these are the lives I envied:

Betty Johansen likes college weekends, convertibles, gray Buicks, senior parties, potlucks, and slumber parties. Betty's hobbies are telling jokes, giving parties, and doing plays.

Donna's ideal men are Jack Webb and Bugs Bunny, and her favorite songs are "It Had to Be You," "Side by Side," and "Bunny Hop."

Cis Buckley likes Ike, weekends, senior parties, and Phi Delta. Steak is her favorite food. Cis's unusual incident was breaking a bed out at Lorrie's. Among her favorite songs is "Why Don't You Believe Me?" Her aim is to go to college, preferably Northwestern. Her advice to underclassmen is: "Study now, because you can't learn it all in your senior year."

Bill Jepson is the only boy on the cheerleading team. He likes cheerleading, square dancing, world history, lunch, "I Love Lucy," and Monopoly. He dislikes grammar and onion soup. His aim in life is to be a peanut picker in Mongolia, and his ideal woman is Dagmar's grandmother.

Yvonne likes Ray, football, Ray, basketball, Ray, Lincolns, Ray, track, Ray, cheering, Ray, food, Ray, music, and Ray. "Tenderly" is her favorite song. To graduate, earn a mint, and

have thirteen kids (twelve boys and one girl—a football team, one sub, and a cheerleader) is her aim in life.

Nancy Mac likes hotrods, house parties, weekends, Florida, drive-ins, and custom cars. She dislikes school, parasites, nosey people, and people who gossip! Her favorite foods are hamburgers, Cokes, french fries, pot roast, and fudge. Among her favorite songs is "Why Don't You Believe Me?"

Bill Carter's favorite music is Rachmaninoff's Concerto No. 2 in C Minor and the Cincinnati Syncopated Garbage Can Bounce.

George Heiland likes hunting, women, hotrods, women, money, and women. His biggest dislike is people who won't believe his car will turn 110 in 60 seconds from a standing start.

In this world, the highest virtue was perkiness, and its close relatives: cheerfulness, chipperness, and bounciness. The first hula hoop went on the market in the fifties (\$1.98 each), and the first Barbie doll; NASA asked for applications from anyone who wanted to be an astronaut; the United States Patent Office granted a patent to Bertha Dlugi for bird diapers; and the most popular activity on college campuses was to see how many guys could fit into a single telephone booth (the record: significant portions of thirty-four guys at Modesto Junior College, with the booth lying sideways on the ground).

The normal diet was the same that would turn up several years later as the list of pantry items Elvis made sure were on hand "at all times, every day" at Graceland: hamburgers, Pepsi, hot dogs, peanut butter, Spearmint and Doublemint and Juicy Fruit gum, and brownies every night.

An open letter from the cheerleaders to the editor of

the *Broncho*: "What did you think of last weekend's games, or didn't you see them? Well, if you didn't go to the games, you can shake hands with half the student body, they didn't go either. Some of the kids, or rather a lot of them, when asked whether they went to the last game, said, 'Oh, I had a date,' or 'I didn't have any way to get there.' Sure you had a date, but what's wrong with going to a basketball game on a date? As for not having a ride, you can always ask around and find one, that is if you really want one. . . .

"If the team thinks that the game is important enough to play, then the student body should think it important enough to attend and show their school spirit. We've got a terrific team, one of the best around here, so why do we hesitate to get out and support them? To have top teams, we've got to have a winning student body that wants its teams to come out ahead. In order to do this, we all must get out to the games, and above all, cheer the teams on to *victory*."

Here is my classmate Bill Dow's poem "America":

*Many people from many lands  
Are living here as one.  
They work together, learn together  
For them living is fun.*

*This nation of ours is a powerful one,  
It's known from shore to shore.  
But as it grows, as everyone knows,  
Cooperation is needed even more.*

*Rivers, valleys, mountains, plains,  
Make up our beautiful land.*



*America is a wonderful place,  
Made by God's own hand.*

From the column of the Inquiring Reporter: "What do you think of our President-elect?"

Sandra Tate: "I think Ike will make a wonderful President and is the man our country needs."

Mary Beckhart: "I think he's great!"

Judy Gould: "I think it was great."

Bob Goldman: "I personally think Stevenson was more informed, but I wish Ike all the luck he needs."

Peter Devereaux: "I feel that President-elect Eisenhower will be compared with other great presidents such as Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington. Now the men of college and high school age can be secure that the leader of our country will do everything possible to end the terrors of war. At least you can call America a unified democracy."

Jerry Jahnke: "I go Pogo!"

From the Karousing Kid: "Greetings Friends: Hey, you kids, what's the trouble? You sure turned out to be a dead bunch this week. Hardly any parties or anything. . . . There's one peppy group in the school and that's the team. Those were really swell games last week, weren't they? Just because they're so good is no sign to stop cheering them on. Be sure to come to the game this weekend."

Jim Tuohy wrote a letter to the editor of the *Broncho*:

"It is extremely doubtful that Senator Nixon did anything morally wrong in accepting over \$18,000 used as an expense fund during less than two years he has been in the Senate.

"Although all elective officers accept contributions for campaigns, this is the first case of actual salary subsidy brought

to public light (there are probably very few, if any, others). . . . Many of the Republicans' charges [against the Democrats] of corruption [gifts to President and Mrs. Truman of a deep freeze, a mink coat, and other items] are the same sort of thing that this Nixon affair is—things that aren't really corruption at all. . . .

"The expense fund incident is further evidence that men in high, honorable, and responsible positions are woefully underpaid. A Senator, for example, can hardly be expected to maintain two homes on \$12,000 a year. . . ."

Of the girls graduating from high school, Katherine McCain hoped to be an English teacher and get married; Mary Walbaum hoped to teach in elementary school and become "a faithful PTA member as the mother of sixteen students"; Donna Schmidt wanted to swim and play tennis and work in a hospital or nursery school with small children; Muffy Motter wanted to go to Florida and Nassau and then take courses at Briarcliff Junior College; Karen Twerdahl hoped to study liberal arts at Northwestern, have a job on a newspaper, and then get married; Merrie Press hoped to be a model for a couple of years before getting married; Joanne Peters hoped to study liberal arts at Illinois Wesleyan, get married, and have twins; Judy Kensel hoped to become a commercial artist and "marry after college, maybe"; Betty Blaydes hoped to have a career as a research chemist.

This is what they learned from the textbook they studied in their home economics course:

women's  
textbook  
example  
home ec  
~~example~~

1. Have dinner ready: Plan ahead, even the night before, to have a delicious meal—on time. This is a way of letting him know that you have been think-

ing about him, and are concerned about his needs. Most men are hungry when they come home and the prospects of a good meal are part of the warm welcome needed.

2. Prepare yourself: Take 15 minutes to rest so you will be refreshed when he arrives. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people. Be a little gay [in the fifties this meant happy] and a little more interesting. His boring day may need a lift.
3. Clear away the clutter: Make one last trip through the main part of the house just before your husband arrives, gathering up school books, toys, paper, etc. Then run a dust cloth over the tables. Your husband will feel he has reached a haven of rest and order, and it will give you a lift, too.
4. Prepare the children: Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces if they are small, comb their hair, and if necessary, change their clothes. They are little treasures and he would like to see them playing the part.
5. Minimize the noise: At the time of his arrival, eliminate all noise of washer, dryer, dishwasher or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet. Be happy to see him. Greet him with a warm smile and be glad to see him.
6. Some Don'ts: Don't greet him with problems or complaints. Don't complain if he's late for dinner. Count this as minor compared with what he might have gone through that day.

7. Make him comfortable: Have him lean back in a comfortable chair or suggest he lie down in the bedroom. Have a cool or warm drink ready for him. Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soft, soothing and pleasant voice. Allow him to relax and unwind.
8. Listen to him: You may have a dozen things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first.
9. Make the evening his: Never complain if he does not take you out to dinner or to other places of entertainment; instead, try to understand his world of strain and pressure, his need to be home and relax.
10. The goal: Try to make your home a place of peace and order where your husband can relax.

The idea now was to find out what *I* could and couldn't do in every way for the rest of my life.

Here's what I couldn't do:

play football  
play baseball  
play basketball  
run the high hurdles in track  
run  
jump  
dance

Here's what I could do:

fifty pushups  
fifty chinups  
walk the length of a football field and not trip on the  
grass  
carry plenty of books and papers in a backpack  
tell jokes  
read and write  
go up and down stairs standing up, holding the banister  
hold both crutches in one hand, take hold of the banis-  
ter of a stairway in the other hand, and swing down  
three or four steps at a time, keeping up with the  
other kids on the stairways in high school  
have a sword fight with my crutches—tossing one to  
another boy, holding on to a banister in a school  
stairwell, and having at each other with the thrust  
and parry of fencers  
throw my crutches down a carpeted flight of stairs, and,  
holding on to the banister, lower myself abruptly to  
the stairs, and, seeming to fall headfirst (sliding on  
my stomach really), fling myself down the stairs in a  
horrifying clamor of thumping flesh and rattling  
crutches, turning round and round as I went down  
to the bottom, so that, although in time all my class-  
mates knew I could do this and the shock value was  
gone, they would sometimes ask me to do it if their  
parents were home and were still among the naive  
do square dance calls—especially singing square dance  
calls—for the high school exhibition square dance  
team, which often went out on trips to other high  
schools to put on shows, which meant traveling and

getting to spend time with the girls on the team  
(Suzy Harvey was on the team)

act in high school plays such as *The Ghost of Gramercy Park*, in which I played a ghost of a wounded Revolutionary War soldier, and *The Little Foxes*, in which I played the wheelchair-bound husband of the dreadful Regina, and thus escape into other realities, try new personae, and show off to girls (Suzy Harvey was in the casts)

accompany my pals to the local dump to find a toilet bowl to place at the stately entrance of the suburban headquarters of the American Can Company  
get together with a few guys one evening and take food coloring out of the kitchen cabinet and dye our hair green and blue and red and yellow

with my buddies, steal three cannon from the local cemetery and deliver them to the front porches of the town mayor, chief of police, and, naturally, principal of the high school, leaving a note signed in the blood of one of us that the South would rise again

Maybe the cannon episode was not such a bright idea—I mean, compared to the others. Whether we quite consciously registered the fact or not, we pulled the cannon prank the night before Memorial Day, when many of the town's citizens, including the widows and children of men who had died in World War II, marched to the cemetery for the annual commemorative ceremony. The school authorities by now knew who the incorrigible pranksters were and called us in; we confessed, were put on trial in our local civil court, found guilty, and sentenced to a year of probation, during which a

THIS LIVES  
in Big  
Love

It was not possible to say: Well, my life is no longer normal, or no longer quite normal, or the idea of normal must be extended somehow to include the life I am now going to live, or who cares what is normal, I'm going to make a unique life, I'm going to embrace my difference and explore it and throw myself into a life like you've never seen before. No. It was simply assumed I would have a normal life.

The idea of the normal, and of its desirability, had been so deeply ingrained in me that I couldn't simply drop it—any more than high school girls could drop the standards of normality and desirability for a woman that they had learned in their home economics class. And yet the realness of my deviance from normality was so palpable, so present in my body every day, that I couldn't deny it. I've known other people—smarter, quicker, more robust than I am—who were able to just choose one or the other of these alternatives, the normal or the abnormal, and get on with their lives. Either one is a good choice, but I couldn't take either: both held me in such a grip. I remained suspended between the two, trying to work out some third way.

On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I was normal. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, I was a deviant, pulling pranks, driving fast, harboring the wish that I could bring the whole world down into wreckage. On some days I mixed the two: a veneer of normality with little outbursts and eruptions of delinquency. On Sundays, I rested, because this performance was exhausting.

I flailed. Sometimes I performed an intact outer self because it was what I wanted—to be normal and robust and optimistic. And sometimes I performed this self because it seemed the thing for a healthy person to do, and it was what

others wanted of me. Some days I tried to find my own true path in life. I ran toward normality, and at the same time away from it, trying to pass for normal, and feeling it to be a lie.

In short, I had become a politician, living two lives at the same time. And so it seemed natural that I should run for office. And I did. I ran for president of the student council, and won. So then I ran for the presidency of the Northern Illinois district student council, and won. I was good at performing a public persona. So then I ran for the presidency of the Illinois state student council, and lost. The chat going around the caucus rooms was that I was foxy, trying to pretend I was someone I wasn't. They didn't know who I was or who I was trying to pretend to be, but they didn't like it.

Then, too, my project of compensation—using my mind and words and arguments in place of the strength of my body—was not always a happy choice. I found that sometimes I could unleash a cutting sentence in an argument. Or better yet, if I needed, I could conduct a Socratic dialogue in history class, speaking not just in sentences but in whole paragraphs, and bully others with a form of logic they had never heard before. I had never been a bully, and I knew it was wrong to use knowledge in this way. It dishonored the knowledge, and it tainted my relationship with it—and, for sure, it was not a good way to be liked, either. But still, sometimes I couldn't help myself. And if I'd had a day of feeling especially unequal to my classmates for one reason or another, if someone really crossed me, I could cut his heart out.

Through all this, Jim was my most loyal friend, the most loyal friend I've had in life, bringing me the Kinsey Report in the hospital, carrying the speakerphone from classroom to classroom, bringing my school assignments back and forth to



school for me. He couldn't keep me honest; that was too big a job for anyone. But he did sustain me as I floundered. He came over to my house to visit almost every evening after he had had dinner. It became my mother's standing joke: Oh, here's Jim, it must be dinnertime. And Jim would be offered a chair and would sit down and eat a second dinner. He was, at that time, a six-foot-tall sophomore basketball star, on his way to six feet four in what seemed only a matter of weeks. In fact, he was growing so quickly that, sometimes, he would be taking the basketball down the court, with no other player within yards of him, and suddenly he would fall to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs, having tripped over his own fast-growing feet.

It was because of his friendship and loyalty that my own first forays out into the world that winter and spring had been to basketball games. The car could be pulled right up to the door of the gym, where the polished floors were even smoother than those at the hospital. In time, after the games I would go to a party at someone's house.

By the time I could drive a car myself, I was independent again. Suzy Harvey and I began dating. She was a cheerleader, which is to say, she was not only pretty and energetic and popular, she was also the mainstream.

These were the official qualifications for a good cheerleader, according to the *Broncho*:

1. A pleasing personality
2. A good personal appearance
3. Imagination and resourcefulness
4. Organizing ability and leadership
5. Ability and control of the body

6. A commanding voice with volume
7. The desire to cheer for the team, not for personal glory
8. At least average ability, scholastically
9. Willingness to devote time to further the squad
10. Character which reflects well upon the school

Suzy took me into the mainstream with her. She had a sexiness and vitality, a brightness and enthusiasm that was life itself. I don't know what I brought to her, but she brought a lot to me.

Gail Bias, the girl who had reconstructive surgeries, said that when she was a teenager, she didn't want to go to a school dance, because of her limp, because everyone stared at her. It was easier for a boy. Suzy and I went to the junior prom. I wore a white summer tuxedo jacket. Suzy wore a white off-the-shoulder dress with a thousand crinoline slips underneath it, white satin shoes with little straps at heel and toe. She had very short hair then, and a long, smooth neck, like a young swan. We danced. That is, she moved with me. I had figured out how, with one hand on her waist and my other hand steadying myself by holding my own hip, I could stand and move a few steps without my crutches. She let one arm rest lightly on my shoulder, one hand took me lightly but supportively at the waist, and we moved together to the music.

be stabilized. In time, possibly the left knee could be made immobile, so that the whole leg from hip to shin would be rendered a sturdy post. My mother and father asked me if I thought I wanted to do this, and I said I wasn't so sure; they never raised the subject again.

"At some point," as Daniel J. Wilson has written about boys and girls recovering from polio, "in every case, constraints appeared. The extent of the destruction became apparent; progress in recovery slowed and came to a halt."

And at some point, as Fred Davis has written, "the paralysis must be accepted as a given and efforts made to work around it or to compensate for it; it cannot be done away with."

## eighteen

I fled into my own mind, and I discovered there the deep pleasures of solitude, the pleasures hermits must know, a world cut free of all physical limitation, a world where, in the imagination, anything is possible, a world where all bodies are equal, where the mind can take flight, and where it can find a quiet place for solitary reflection.

And I discovered the pleasures of books, of reading quietly by myself, able to travel effortlessly, swiftly, anywhere in the world, to the deepest inner passions, to the furthest reaches of abstract ratiocination. I came to love not only the experience of reading, but the touch of books, the lusciousness of a beautiful binding, the grace or boldness or heft of typefaces, the swirl of a decorative device at the heading of a chapter, the discretion of the page number placed diplomatically in the corner, present if one wants it, making itself tactfully invisible otherwise—perfect butlers, these page numbers are—the smell of a new book, the alarmed crack of its binding if you open it too violently, the curve of its pages if you lay the book gently open on a table. This is why people say the Internet cannot replace books, because we are of a time when people came to love books the way they love human flesh and grass and trees. Each one of us, at one time or another, discovered

in books our most secret selves, that part of ourselves the world despised or couldn't understand, some tender or vulnerable part that found companionship only in a book, and so we fell in love with books and can't bear to part with them. There is love of another person, and there is love of books. These are the two great loves of life. Anyone who has ever felt like an outsider knows this.

Imagine. There was once a time, before the late Middle Ages, when hardly anyone read. Or, when they did read, they read out loud to one another, so that the experience of reading was a social event, and no doubt an event that had its distinct pleasures, but not an event where one could sink into one's own thoughts for as long as one might want, let the mind go off on a path of its own without being called back to the shared ideas of the society. The social historian Philippe Ariès has written that the " 'privatization' of reading is undeniably one of the major cultural developments of the early modern era."

Silent reading, Ariès says, "radically transformed intellectual work, which in essence became an intimate activity, a personal confrontation with an ever-growing number of texts. . . . It made possible a more personal form of piety" and a more personal form of thought. Private reading "paved the way for previously unthinkable audacities."

Montaigne thought of books as a refuge. "When at home," he said, "I turn aside . . . to my library . . . which I like for being a little hard to reach and out of the way."

Montaigne's library, Ariès said—but really every library—is a place from which one can see without being seen, which confers a kind of power in addition to its other pleasures. The eye can take in shelves of human secrets at a single glance—

all of them available, all open to the one who knows where to find them. Here is a chance to know all the human heart without the constraint of supervision, telling us what we may or may not know or feel or think. There is no correct feeling in a library: rage, remorse, pity, hope, love, all these things can be deeply felt, with no one saying to us, "Get over it."

I had no library, no study, but I had bookshelves in my bedroom, and that became my refuge. I spent time with Montaigne and Shakespeare and the Greeks; we spoke as equals—if not in talents, then in interests and passions. There is a wonderful, voluptuous painting by Jean-François de Troy called *Reading Molière*. A man sits at the center of a group of five women. Another stands just outside the circle. They are all dressed in gorgeous early-eighteenth-century silks and velvets. The men have those telltale ruffled lace cuffs that come down onto their hands almost to their fingertips, signifying that they were unable to do any labor at all—even the labor of holding an ink pen—except for the labor of thinking and conversing. The women, whose dresses of Chinese silk, with embroidery work of flowers or of stars deep in space, are themselves whole worlds of mysterious allure. The man at the center of the painting holds a book from which he is reading, and the women are all lying back languidly in their chairs as though they had all just made love all afternoon. This is a social reading, not the modern private affair, but it conjured up nicely the sort of group—in slightly different dress, and from different epochs, and, often, with a different ratio of the genders—that I sometimes conjured up in my imagination in my bedroom on an afternoon, all of us together, from different times and places, enjoying one another's company.

Reading books of magic, like Prospero did, was once the

paradigm for all reading, according to Ariès; it was an activity that almost had to be done in private, and that "conferred upon the reader a dangerous power." Certainly I noticed that my father, a devout Catholic, had come to worry that I might happen upon a book that was listed on the church's Index of Forbidden Books.

My Virgil in this descent into the world of books was Alan Peshkin, a history teacher who was the faculty adviser to the student council. As the council's adviser, Mr. Peshkin was obliged to become my adviser when I was elected president of the Northern Illinois District student council. The district council's monthly executive committee meetings took place in Chicago. So one Saturday each month, Mr. Peshkin and I would drive down to Chicago. And the very first time we did this, Mr. Peshkin asked me, after the meeting, if I would like to go with him to a secondhand bookstore. There were many secondhand bookstores in Chicago, Mr. Peshkin said, and he knew where the best ones were. He made his invitation in the tone of voice and with the manner a teacher might use if he were offering cocaine to a student, or sex. I understood, when I said yes, that we were about to enter some other realm together.

When we arrived at the bookstore, he gave me ten dollars—to get me started, he said; if we came back, I should bring my own money. I asked him what books I could buy. He didn't understand the question. I meant could I buy history or philosophy or biography. He said, "You can buy anything you like." I felt almost faint.

He told me I should not waste big money on the standard works I would need for my basic library. You could find old

copies of Plato and Aristotle for a dime or a quarter. I should save the big chunks of money for the more unusual purchases, for some rare or new volume that might cost as much as two dollars.

A. J. Liebling, a young man when his father sent him to the Sorbonne, tells in the book he wrote about the experience, *Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris*, that his father gave him a monthly allowance adequate to survive on, but not so generous that he could live extravagantly. And, Liebling said, he thought that it gave him the perfect means to further his education as a gourmet. He never went to classes; he spent his time eating in restaurants. And because his funds were sufficient but limited, he was faced constantly with such choices as whether to splurge on the truffles and drink a cheap wine or sacrifice the truffles for something less expensive and have a really good Bordeaux or Burgundy. He felt it forced him to be a connoisseur in the way that either too little or too much money would not have.

The same principle operated in my book runs with Alan Peshkin. I put together a remarkable library over the months. We brought back one or two boxes each month; each month's haul contained the current bargains in dime and quarter immortals, along with some lesser works, minor histories of the Renaissance, biographies of less than essential figures. I traveled in my reading from the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle through most of Western philosophy, and then to history, and at last to biography—from the realm of pure thought back to the world of daily life.

Along the way, I stumbled upon things that seemed to have been written for me. By purest chance, I found Georg



Büchner's *Woyzeck*—the play that Büchner left unfinished in his desk drawer when he died at the age of twenty-three, a play whose scenes break off suddenly in midsentence, where bits of scenes occur out of place, inexplicable things happen; a play composed of chunks and shards, broken pieces, raw, awkward, clumsy, with events crashing into one another without reason or cause; a shattered world, fucked up and roughhewn. As I would see some years later, many directors take this play and try to fix it. They remove the chunks of broken, pointless scenes; they make a more logical order of what remains, they put in transitions from one moment to the next, they smooth it out, they make it “work.” In short, they kill it. From the first time I read it, I loved it: it felt to me exactly like life itself, with all its anguish and ruin and love—not like the well-made plays I saw in high school productions, or later in professional ones, even plays that present themselves as modern or avant-garde but really reduce themselves to the same standards of good play-making, the same pre-existing rules of normality and goodness by which I am judged and found wanting. Well-made plays feel hostile to me, as though they would suffocate me. Büchner left me free to make a whole life from ruins.

I was drawn strongly, too, to histories of the Renaissance. I wasn't conscious at first of the reasons I found the Renaissance so fascinating, but I came to think of it as my special epoch. It had followed hard on the heels of the Black Death that swept Europe in the fourteenth century, and it could be seen as the world's recovery from a dread disease into a new life. It had drawn people's attention from heaven to earth, from the powers of the divine to the immense powers of the natural, from the realm of the ideal to the realm of the real, from old things of value to new things of value. My effort to

understand and embrace the Renaissance was in some way an effort to embrace life itself, my own rebirth.

My father was mildly positive about all this book buying, even though he sensed that it was taking me away from him, until the day he noticed I had brought home a copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and then he exploded. Did I know this book was on the Index? What was I thinking? He would call Alan Peshkin and ask him what the hell *he* was thinking. Certainly this was the end of my book buying. Why did I want to have anything to do with this filthy book anyhow?

Somewhere, instinctively, I think I felt if I simply gave in to my father about this, I would be giving away my only chance for a feeling of strength and freedom in my life.

I said I didn't think it was filthy.

He said it was on the Index.

I asked him whether he knew what it was about, whether he had read it.

He said certainly not, it was on the Index.

I said then he didn't know what was objectionable about it, maybe nothing was, maybe something had been hundreds of years ago but was no longer, and someone had just forgotten to take it off the Index.

He didn't think so.

I left the room in anger and hopelessness.

He subsided. I heard him talking to my mother, gradually calming down.

I kept the book.

We hardly ever spoke of books again, not for twenty years.

I remember hearing a conversation once, about why so many Irish people become writers. One of the people in that conversation said: Oh, well, you know the only book most

Irish could afford to own was the Bible, and then the English forbade them to have Bibles in their homes, so they always knew the word was valuable and immensely powerful.

And although I couldn't play football and basketball, I discovered that I could write about them with real sympathy and passion, and so, without ever meaning to, I became a writer.

I became a writer before I had any plan about it. It felt good, and so I kept doing it. I wrote about sports for Barrington's weekly newspaper, and I found I liked putting together a sentence that moved and worked as well as a jump shot.

Here was something I could do with my head. And the page was, as they say, a level playing field. There I could be as good as anyone else, and maybe even better. After I had written about sports for a while, I tried short stories and poems.

Now and then I would tell my friends that I might become a writer. And sometimes someone would reply: "What do you have to say?"

I had nothing to say; it was just something I could do sitting down. It wasn't until years later I realized that writing is not about saying something, it is about discovering something.

! discovery happens each time  
I encounter Big Love, he succeeded!

In the years after college, I threw myself into life with an urge to have all of it that I could. Simply proving that I could return to high school and get through college was not enough. As Leonard Kriegel wrote of his own recovery from polio, "The man who is 'successful' at creating a life out of the after-effects of disease . . . discovers that he must sooner or later fight against an inflated notion of what it is he has achieved. When a mutual friend praised Franz Rosenzweig's courage in living with the pain and suffering inflicted on him by a long struggle with cancer, Freud, doomed to undergo the same long struggle, is reported to have said, 'What else can he do?'"

At a certain point, as Kriegel says, "What seems to me to have happened . . . was an almost instinctive recognition that I had to will myself into being, that I had to kind of will a self, to create a self. And I think that's the *one* gift, if that's the word, that one can take from polio, or from a disease like it. What I wanted, above all else, was to be able to define who I was . . . and . . . what I finally realized was that I wanted to live on my own terms . . . but that I'd also do the things I'd been told I couldn't do, like I would *travel*, I would marry, I would have children, I would—you know—live."

But each recovery we make in life only reveals the next complication behind it. As Arnold Beisser has written, his "relationship" with his disability evolved, not unlike a marriage. Beisser thought the last stage of his recovery was "surrendering with dignity and grace, or embracing the new life" as though he had chosen it. But then he discovered that this "last" stage was "not necessarily either final or complete." One does not achieve grace and then live forever after on a serene, unchanging glide path of bliss. Life continues to change. New things surface; old wounds hidden by bigger wounds show up

then for some years I paid the rent and sent children to college by writing books of American diplomatic and political history; and now I have a life in the theater, writing plays and taking the train up from New York to Brown University a couple of days a week to teach playwriting.

I tell my students: I like plays that are not too neat, too finished, too presentable. My own plays are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns, careen into each other, smash up, veer off in sickening turns. That feels good to me. It feels like my life. And then I like to put this chaotic stuff—with some sense of struggle remaining—into a classical form, a Greek form, or a beautiful dance theater piece, or some other effort at civilization.

Recently, I have come again and again to take the text of a classic Greek play, smash it to ruins, and then, atop its ruined structure of plot and character, write a new play, with all-new language, characters of today speaking like people of today, set in the America of my time—so that America today lies, as it were, in a bed of ancient ruins. Plays filled with song, dance, movement, beauty, heartache, a world that feels good, exciting, real, familiar, like home, like the high drama that life really is, like the real world, plays in which I know that I come at last to feel not the insistence of some standard of normality, but rather the true acceptance of life, and of the grace and peace that follow from that. The Greeks took no easy problems. They put on the stage a world of unspeakable anguish, of matricide and fratricide and patricide, and then they refused to blink. They looked into the abyss of human life and human nature with open eyes and understood that the thing to do is to feel life as it is, in all its anguish as well as its aspirations, its missed opportunities and its savored beauties,

READ this  
All— so amazingly  
descriptive and  
connects fully to  
Mee's styled  
Big Love

never to falsify it, never to pretty it up; but rather to look at it bravely, unflinchingly. In the sheer steadiness and clarity and courage of that gaze will you achieve real understanding of the complexity of life; and from that come acceptance, grace, and enduring peace. The greatest blessing you can have in life is to live long enough to take it in.

My own feeling of acceptance and peace came finally, I think, from the Greeks, but it took me more than forty years after Maude Strouss's gift of Plato to understand it.

These days, wherever I am, as I make my way down the street with a crutch and a cane, I am taken as a natural friend by every derelict on the street. Every bum in New York says hello to me. I'm hardly ever asked for money, and then only as a peer. Often I stop and chat. On some streets, I have regular friends. In fact, all outsiders automatically consider me one of their own—all those who live, in one way or another, on the margins. And it's true. I am one of their own. We share some kinds of knowledge and feelings that don't need to be spoken; we understand one another with a look, a moment of stopping and connecting with one another's eyes. We feel comfortable with each other; I'm grateful to be among their company. All over the world, I am recognized as an insider by the outsiders. So I feel at home in the world.

True enough, when I walk down the street I need to watch my feet on the sidewalk to make sure I don't trip and fall; I can't look too much at the landscape, or the other people on the street—and that cuts me off a little from the world. And when I am standing and talking to someone, if I need to shift my weight to keep standing it takes that much extra concentration in addition to giving full attention to what another person is saying. This is why old people "forget"—because

they never heard it the first time, because they can't hear or because they were trying to concentrate on not falling down while it was being said to them. And this is why sitting in a café with a friend or two is, for me, as it was for my father in his later years, one of the best ways I have of being out in the world. I can forget my body, the way other people do most of the time. I'm smarter sitting down than I am standing up.

I'm told by people who have had a leg amputated that it takes years for their nervous system to recognize the absence of the leg. The leg might be gone from the hip down, but the foot still itches, or the knee hurts. And this phantom limb diminishes only gradually over time before finally disappearing. For myself, to this day I have never had a dream in which I walked with crutches; I've never had a dream in which I was disabled in any way; in my dreams my body is as intact as it was when I was fourteen. I can't often take the time, but when I can, I love to sleep ten hours a night, sometimes more, and catch some extra dreams.

I still have moments of frustration and anger. I find it constantly amazing that after all these years on crutches, they still don't seem natural to me; my inner sense of what is normal is still what it was when I was fourteen. The expectations of what it will be to have a normal life are embedded so early in life, and so deep. In some senses, I haven't adjusted a bit. And I am still followed always by my shadow self, the boy who was overcome by polio, undone by it, enraged by it, exhausted by it, who wants to give up. This boy, full of complaints and irritations, too tired to go on, too overwhelmed by the difficulties, resentful of the unfairness of it, too angry at being unable to run up stairs or play basketball with his kids, envious of others, bitter, frightened, this boy sometimes still wants to

quit. And there are still days when I have to talk him into going on, sometimes several times a day.

In truth, the victory of Salk and Sabin over polio was incomplete and prematurely announced, too. In the United States, polio had nearly disappeared by 1960, and it was eradicated in most of the industrialized world soon after that. But it raged on in the rest of the world—there have been millions of cases in the past several decades. In 1988 the World Health Organization announced a campaign to eliminate polio by the year 2000. In 1995, more than 80 million children were immunized in China in a single day; more than 300 million children were immunized that year in fifty-one different countries. And it now looks as though the World Health Organization will meet its target of eliminating the last vestiges of polio within a few years of the year 2000. Today, there are perhaps 300,000 or 400,000 polio survivors still living in the United States, and probably more than 10 million in the rest of the world.

A few years ago, when I was making a cup of tea in the kitchen one day, I fell suddenly to the floor and broke my knee. I couldn't quite understand what had happened. I had only turned slightly—as I did a dozen times a day—while I was standing at the kitchen counter. And yet it seemed that my whole delicately rigged system of compensatory muscles and balancing maneuvers had given way all together. I went down like a sack of rocks.

As I soon learned, this event was the announcement of post-polio syndrome, a gradual loss of strength that begins thirty or forty years after the original onslaught of polio, this time in slow motion—and with a cause, and an end, that no one knows.



with my life at the same time. With me, post-polio syndrome seems to be not so severe, and its progress seems fairly slow. And, let's face it, I've had a lot of practice at this sort of thing by now. I've come to see that sorrow and loss and regret and life and pleasure do not need to crowd one another out. And, really, this time around, this loss of powers seems not so much to set me apart from the rest of the world as to knit me in with others, with the aging that eventually overtakes us all. This is the common lot. And, I think I can contemplate it now with almost perfect equanimity—which is to say, with a fairly normal sense of dread and rage and bitterness and frenzy and despair at the prospect of losing strength and dying—and go on to luxuriate in the present. I'm glad to notice that I feel such a longing for life.

I'm in love with Laurie. We are living together in an old brownstone with a garden in the back of the house. I write at home at a desk in a little room just off the kitchen, a cup of tea always close at hand. On my bookshelf as I write, within reach of my hand at this moment, is a copy of Plato's *Symposium*; on one shelf are a dozen history books that I have written; and somewhere here are the dozen plays I've written. On the wall to one side of my desk are framed photographs of scenes from my plays: a man standing amid burning ruins atop an upended bed, a man in a full-length wool khaki coat standing on a floor of open books, an old woman with a baby in her arms gazing out the window of an abandoned building, a woman in a blue satin slip dancing through a gold house made of sticks. Propped up just next to my desk lamp is a little framed note that my eldest daughter Erin, now thirty-five years old, wrote to me when she was a small child: "dear dad I love you oh Dear oh dear I love love love you, love From

Erin." On the wall just above the desk is a collage of photographs that my son Charles, now twenty-nine, made when he was in high school: photographs of the woods in autumn, inscribed with the legend ". . . and those castles made of sand melt into the sea, eventually." Elsewhere is a program from my young daughter Sarah's dance performance last year, when she was twelve, a dance of a girl with her violin that she choreographed herself; and, leaning against a few volumes of the classical tragedies of Eurpides, is a painting by my daughter Alice from last year when she was eight years old, a smiling face with sunglasses, floating in the sunny blue sky, surrounded by white clouds.

Laurie and I do some gardening. In the afternoons, we go out to Roberto's café and drink coffee and tea. We sleep through the night in each other's arms. We lie in bed in the morning in each other's arms. We hold each other a lot; we just hold each other. We make love a lot. I hope it lasts forever. Maybe by now I am able to forget myself and think of Laurie, of my children and my friends, set aside my own concerns as no longer the most interesting drama in the world, turn my feelings outward to embrace life. I am no longer interested in recovery or restitution. You don't recover from the events of life, you take them with you, you knit them in, you grow with them and around them; they become who you are; they are life itself; how else my life might have been is unknowable; and the truth is, I wouldn't change it for any other.