



Bonnie Levitan

The Polio Virus visits Gary Lane

It was August 1951 and I had just turned 11 years old in July. It was a hot, sultry, humid evening in our Detroit suburban townhouse on Gary Lane. Air conditioning was unheard of in people's homes so we did not yet know what we were missing. The air hung heavy and oppressive, but everyone just had to deal with it. My pregnant mother, new stepfather, my three-year-old sister, and I had just returned from a driving trip to Scranton, Pennsylvania where we met my stepfather's side of the family. Being from a divorced home was still pretty unusual in 1951... I remember my teachers always felt sorry for me and turned me into "teacher's pet". In hushed tones, they would say that I was from a "broken home". One teacher, out of misguided sympathy I am sure, said that I did not have to learn my multiplication tables because it was probably too hard for me. Thanks ... I still do not know them!

Now it was bedtime and I was not feeling very well. My mother noted that I had a fever, but she was certain it was from the long automobile trip and assured me I would feel better in the morning. Climbing the stairs to the bedroom was exhausting and I discovered my aching muscles would not allow me to climb into the upper bunk where I slept. My mother never made much of our childhood complaints, so true to form; she again assured me I would be better morning. "Just go to sleep" she admonished. Since no one in our house was ever very sick, and despite that currently I was feeling very, very sick, I accepted the explanation quite readily. All night I was so hot, but being a child, I assumed it must just be the weather. I never realized my temperature was rising ... I just thought I was hot ... very, very hot! My solution was to get a Life magazine, and put it in the freezer and then put it on my face.

Actually that was very resourceful, as Life was an oversized magazine with a slick, glossy cover, which chilled very well. Eventually morning came, and my mother was now in some distress, as her prediction that I would be better was obviously not happening. Things were definitely not better! Again she took my temperature and it must have been very high, but without saying a word to me, she went to speak with my stepfather who was preparing to go to work. She told him she thought that I should go to the doctor. Now once I heard this, I know this must be something pretty big as we seldom went to the doctor ... We generally took care of things at home, as was the custom of the day. Upon hearing my mother's report, he agreed that a visit to the doctor was in order.

The doctor was a woman names Dr. Zolliker ... I remember the visit well! In 1951, a woman doctor was almost unheard of and additionally she was a specialist, a pediatrician! In 1951, no one went to a pediatrician unless you were very sick or very rich. I knew we were certainly not rich ... far from it! That just left one option ... I must be very sick. During the exam, the doctor asked me to touch my chin to my chest. I could not do it as my neck was so stiff and painful. As my mother watched, dead silence enveloped the room! Finally Dr. Zolliker spoke and she told my mother it looked as though I was coming down with polio, but directed that I be taken immediately downtown to Children's Hospital for a lumbar puncture to confirm her diagnosis. My mother never mentioned this moment for the rest of her life, but I am sure she was gripped with terror.

I was beginning to slip in and out of consciousness, due to the high fever, so I do not remember the trip down to Children's Hospital, but I do remember arriving there. The halls were crowded ... some stretchers were in the hall with patients on them. I took my turn waiting on the stretcher in the hall for what seemed like an eternity. Finally I was wheeled into a small examining room, where I was placed on my side and rolled into a tight ball by staff members ... I could not see if they were male or female. I was rolled so tightly that I had trouble breathing and it seemed to take a long time to get the needle into my spine and extract some fluid for testing. From a child's perspective....10 seconds in that position is too long!

The experience was definitely both painful and indelibly printed in my brain. I do not remember much after that as I slipped into a coma for about eight or ten days while the virus did its damage.

I felt quite hazy as I began to regain full consciousness. I found myself in isolation and when the attending nurses did enter the room, they wore long white gowns covering their entire body, head covering, gloves and a mask. I believe the gowns were cloth...they had to remove them and bag them as they left the room. One of my first memories is looking from my bed, across the room into a small, circular window in the closed door. There, on the other side of the door were both sets of parents...mother and stepfather and my father and his new wife, all vying for space to look through the window back at me. At the time, my father had been called back into the military because of the Korean conflict. He was stationed at Fort Custer in Battle Creek, and I knew it was not easy for him to get off the base to come see me in the hospital. We could not speak to each other...the door and window was too thick and I was too weak anyway. Things were still very hazy to me...I thought I must be dreaming...had I died and gone to heaven...where was I? In 1951 divorced parents never got together...at least mine didn't. A divorce was a divorce! Future contacts were only when necessary, they were brief and had an air of formality about them. A white-robed nurse was in the room with me at the time, and she explained where I was and why all my parents were there. She said, "You are a very sick child." On that note I think I went back to sleep.

When the full extent of what had happened to me became evident and all the assessments were finished, I was completely paralyzed from the neck down.

In my original admission papers, which I obtained from Children's Hospital, when the diagnosis of polio was determined, I was then referred to in said papers as "it". One doctor wrote, "It should be sent to Farmington." Well, "it" did not go to Farmington, "it" went to Sister Elizabeth Kenny Rehabilitation Hospital in Pontiac. I went through a long, sometimes painful rehabilitation for about 6 months or more. After being released from the hospital, I returned weekly for outpatient therapy for some time, and my parents were instructed on how to give me home therapy. I hated my exercises! Once, when I voiced that complaint to one of my doctors, he said, "If you do not do these when you get home, you will be old, crippled and stiff by the time you are forty." That was the wrong thing to say to me...as a child I did not tell him, but privately I thought you were old, stiff and crippled by the time you were forty anyway, so why bother to do the exercises? Upon discharge from the hospital, I used crutches that came up to my elbows, with a piece of leather around the elbows...they were called walking sticks.

But rehabilitation and recovery is a whole other story. I made a miraculous recovery but there were things I could never do again such as run and stoop and even as a young adult I took many falls. I owe all I could do in my lifetime to Dr. Ethel Calhoun and her staff at the Sister Kenny Hospital. They achieved a miracle with me and I will remain respectful and grateful for all their guidance and expertise until the day I die!