

## A Piece of My Mind

# Brad Missed the Miracle

I forgot my umbrella, so I'm dodging raindrops while walking to the reception. Dr Salk, the guest of honor, an old man now, has returned to Ann Arbor to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Salk vaccine trial. As I near the Clements Library, I no longer think about the rain or my wet feet or the umbrella in my closet.

The day I first learned about polio, my mother sat on the sofa, crying, the newspaper folded beside her. I clutched my doll Judy, sporting the haircut I had just given her. I was 5 years old and afraid. I had never seen my mother cry. Sometimes she laughed, or hiccuped, or yelled at my older brother, but she never cried. Cautiously I edged toward her. She pulled me into her lap and wrapped her arms around me.

"Remember that boy named Brad who lives next door to the Hendersons?" she asked. I knew Brad. He was in second grade with my brother.

"He's very sick," Mother said, her voice like the wind in a graveyard. "His daddy works for the paper and wrote a story about Brad's sickness." Her fingertips tapped the newsprint.

I still wondered why Mother was crying. To me, sick meant a runny nose and a cough or a teaspoon of sulfa or vomiting in the car on the way to Grandma's—nothing worth crying about.

"He has polio," she said, her voice splintering. She took a deep breath and said that Brad couldn't walk any more. He couldn't hold up his head, or even breathe, so he needed to stay in a machine called an iron lung that breathed for him.

I knew, then, down to my bones, that polio was very bad.

"Come on," my friend Janie called across the lawn. We were 8, and on our way to the school playground, hoping to find lost cat's-eyes and steelies behind the marble pits. We had taken a short cut, through the lilac bushes beside the Hendersons' house. I had stopped.

"Come ON," Janie whined.

"Wait a sec," I whispered, lingering amid the lilacs, awed by the eerie sounds pulsing through the fresh spring air.

A window in Brad's house was open, its pale blue curtain flapping over the sill. A rhythmic whish-whoosh-whish-whoosh puffed from inside—his iron lung. Without it he would die, like our cat Sophie, who was buried under the willows.

I discovered that if I jumped up, I could get a glimpse of the white curved box with the shiny metal doo-dads on top. I tried to imagine Brad inside that machine. Maybe it was like the time my big brother stuffed me in a cardboard carton full of leaves, or like Sophie in her boot-box coffin—dark, lonely, and scary.

"Come on!" Janie yelled.

"Hush," I whispered, jumping up to glance in the window one more time.

I caught up to Janie. "Did you hear it? Brad's iron lung?"

"Who cares?" pouted Janie.

It was our first day at Benjamin Franklin Junior High. Janie and I walked to school, giggling, wiggling, nervous as if at our first dance. We headed for "The Girls' Door," as my brother called it, his ninth-grade voice crackling with disdain.

Under the band room windows, a woman pushed a wheelchair up the wooden ramp that snaked gradually upward. Her arms stretched to the chair handles, her body bent at the waist, her eyes gazed at her shoes. A boy sat in the chair, his head dangling in the woven straps from a stainless steel rack. I stopped, riveted to the cement by the sight of Brad. My Uncle Bill, who worked at the Finley Foundry, had welded the metal head contraption. I had never seen it before. Know-

ing that my uncle built it made me feel connected to Brad, a kind of responsibility, something keener than mere curiosity.

A wheel of Brad's chair caught on a knothole. The woman pushed harder, rocking the chair forward until the wheel lurched free. Brad's head bobbed in the straps like a cabbage in a string shopping bag. I clamped my eyes shut, terrified that Brad's head would rip off. I wanted Brad to hold his own head up. I wanted my Uncle Bill to build something else so Brad's head wouldn't swing so much.

When I was a sophomore, our high school basketball team played in the regional finals. After hundreds of promises, I was allowed to drive my mom's car to the game. I eased the Plymouth into a parking space. We bounced, shoulder to shoulder, behind the line of cars, heady with our team's success, the silky spring evening, thoughts of boys. Near the end of the lot, three young men stood beside a huge, dark green Cadillac. As two of them leaned into the back seat, a third stationed himself behind a wheelchair, a stainless steel rack arching high over the seat. The two guys emerged from the car with a mound suspended in their outstretched arms. They pivoted in unison, and deposited Brad in his chair. One of the boys was Dave from my brother's debate team. Dave pulled the woven sling under Brad's chin, which was squished flat from years in the harness, and snapped it to the loop on the other side. Brad's body writhed in his chair—was he trying to get comfortable?—his head dangling from my Uncle Bill's rack.

Brad said something. Dave leaned toward him, to hear better. When Brad spoke again, Dave reared back with a hearty guffaw, and punched Brad on the shoulder.

"That lucky duck," murmured Janie.

"Who?" I asked.

"Brad. His folks bought him a car so Dave and the guys can drive him around town."

Six months later, I was lounging on the sofa in front of the television set, sipping a Pepsi, reading *Antigone* for my English class. The local news announcer described a Kennedy for President rally at the courthouse. He then said, "Brad S----- died last night at the university hospital, following an operation to stabilize his spine."

Brad was gone. What would happen to his wheelchair? The green Cadillac? An aching sadness folded over me.

Inside the Clements Library, I stomp my damp feet and shake the rain out of my hair.

I move through the crowd and help myself to appetizers. Dr Salk stands in the center of the room, a sprightly, elegant man with a big, toothy smile, thinning white hair, and California sun-kissed skin. Reporters mill and cameras flash as he shakes hands with the president of the university and the national director of the March of Dimes.

In front of me, a handsome graying woman strains to see above the heads. She is carefully balanced on Kenny sticks. Brad would have been about her age, both of them born a few years too early. She turns her head. A glow spreads across her face as she listens to Dr Salk recall the day 40 years ago when he announced to the waiting nation the success of the polio vaccine. No more would worried parents forbid their children from going to parades and swimming pools in the summer. No more would boys like Brad sleep in iron lungs and go to school with their heads dangling in harnesses. No more would little girls grow up to lean against the wall at the prom or stagger down the aisle at their weddings on Kenny sticks. Now, 40 years later, we've almost forgotten all that.

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