THE LAST SUMMER OF POLIO

Our teacher, Miss Breskin, told the class that a girl in an iron lung would be visiting the school. She would come to every classroom -- inside the iron lung, of course, because she couldn't breathe outside of it -- and we would be able to see her up close.

Could we talk to her? one of the boys asked. Miss Breskin said she didn't know but that we would all have to be very polite to the poor girl. Part of the piled-up hair on top of her head broke loose and fell over her forehead as she emphasized the "very." She was tall and angular; some of the boys called her Miss Breasts-kin, although she didn't seem to have any.

Everybody in the class knew about polio and iron lungs, and I personally knew two girls who had gotten it. One was my best friend, Rita Johnson. Early that summer her mother called my mother with the news. My mother, in tears, came in to my room to tell me.

Because of polio you couldn't go to the beach, or downtown to shop at Field's or Carson's, or even to a movie or anyplace else where there were crowds of people. I think I was reading "Little Women" that summer, and for the most part I was content to stay inside and lose myself in it.

My mother cried and said how terrible it was for poor Rita and her poor mother, but I could tell she was mostly afraid I might have caught it from her even though for the last two weeks Rita had been visiting her grandmother in Tennessee. Rita's family had moved to Chicago last year from a place my parents called Appalachia.

At her grandmother's house, Rita woke up one day with a stiff neck. Everybody knew a stiff neck was bad. Sometimes I woke up in the middle of the night and sat up in bed and moved my head around, up and down and side to side, to make sure my neck hadn't gotten stiff while I slept.

But Rita's neck was stiff, and the next thing you know she was in the hospital and her mother and father were flying to Tennessee to be with her. My mother didn't know too many other details because Rita's mother was calling long distance and it was too expensive to talk very long.

Later it turned out that Rita had a kind of polio that you either recovered completely from or died. She recovered and was back in school that fall, perfectly normal.

The other girl was named Marion Halter. Her outstanding characteristic was that nobody liked her. She had wild red curly hair that she was always trying to smooth down and a large mouth and she talked and laughed loudly. I wasn't friends with her so I didn't hear about her getting polio over the summer, but when she came back to school she wore braces on both legs. They made a clanking sound when she walked, and it was louder when she tried to run. Everybody still thought she was obnoxious and the braces didn't make kids like her any more than they had before.

I observed this carefully, because I didn't think kids liked me very much either. I was skinny and tall, and boys, and some girls, teased me and called me stringbean. Somewhere in the back of my mind was the idea that if I ever got polio I would be more popular. But when Marion Halter came back to school with braces on her legs I realized it probably wouldn't make any difference.

Miss Breskin talked about polio for several days before the iron lung girl was supposed to visit our school. Whenever she did she mentioned how important it was to wash your hands. Maybe the girl in the iron lung hadn't washed her hands every time after she went to the bathroom (some boys laughed when Miss Breskin said "bathroom") and that was why she gotten sick.

When I told my parents about this one night at dinner they said they didn't think it was true, although they agreed that washing your hands after going to the bathroom was very important in a general way. Dr. Miller said you caught polio from another person, so even though polio season – summer – was over they still didn't let me go to the movies or the Museum of Science and Industry, where I loved to see the exhibit of baby chicks hatching from their shells right in front of your eyes.

My mother didn't think it was a good idea to have the girl in the iron lung come to our school. "Why do they want to frighten the kids like that?" she said, plopping a tuna casserole down in the middle of the table a little harder than necessary, for emphasis.

"Oh, they won't be frightened. They're not babies. They're in sixth grade. It'll be interesting for them to see it," my father said. He always brushed off the things my mother worried about. When I woke up one day with a sore throat my mother was sure it was polio. My father said it was probably a strep throat, and that was what Dr. Miller pronounced it to be when he came to the house.

But I had been a little worried too. I knew a sore throat could mean you were getting polio. I had read a story in the Daily News called *The Ten Warning Signs of Infantile Paralysis*, which they explained was an old-fashioned name for polio. At different times over that summer I was sure I had each one of them.

Polio was the main thing I was afraid of, but there were others. One was the boiler room in the basement of our apartment building. When I was younger my father took me there to show me how the furnace worked. He was always interested in finding out how things worked. My mother said he should have been a scientist instead of what he was, a writer of radio shows.

In the boiler room we met Emil, the janitor. He spoke with an accent, walked in a bent-over way and was always smiling and showing large front teeth. His face seemed redder than other people's, and I imagined it was from being near the furnace so much. He and my father had gotten to be friends and sometimes played cards together along with some other men who lived in the building.

Emil showed us how he opened the door to the furnace and shoveled coal inside. The furnace was a kind of little room with metal walls in the middle of the much larger boiler room, and it glowed with orange flames and gave off a roaring sound when Emil opened the heavy door. He picked up a shovel and dug it into a crate filled with coal, then threw the black chunks inside. The orange fire turned white in the middle and bits of ash flew up into the air and floated outside the furnace, near where we were standing.

I stepped back behind my father. What if Emil decided he didn't like little girls, picked me up and threw me into the furnace? He seemed like the kind of man who would do that. But no, my father would never let him.

Emil handed me a piece of coal as we were leaving. He said you could grow crystals on it. I had already grown them with another piece of coal and a special solution my father bought at a magic shop. I didn't tell Emil that but took the coal and thanked him politely.

I never went into the boiler room again. But there was something else that frightened me – a picture, as silly as that sounds. It hung in the window of a dry cleaners I sometimes went to with my mother. In the picture, an old-fashioned-looking woman sat

in front of a big mirror with jars and bottles of perfume and makeup spread all around her on a dressing table.

When you looked at the picture long enough it changed and became an enormous skull that was as big as the woman and her mirror and dressing table. It had a title underneath: “Vanity.”

One day I pointed it out to my mother. She seemed like she had never noticed it, even though it was hanging prominently in the window of the dry cleaners. This cleaners was in an old neighborhood that used to have nice shops, but now they were going out of business one by one and being replaced by cheap shoe stores and beauty parlors and a Woolworth’s. I heard a neighbor tell my mother that that was because of the people from Appalachia moving in. I hoped that because of this we might go to a different dry cleaners so I wouldn’t have to see the picture.

“That’s called a trompe l’oeil,” my mother said. She explained what that meant and made me pronounce it. “When you get in high school you can take French,” she said, as if the French word that described it, and not the picture itself, was the most important thing. The picture didn’t seem to frighten her the way it did me or even to hold her interest. I tried not to look at it from then on when we went to that cleaners.

The day the iron lung was due to arrive at school I woke up during the night again. I thought my neck felt stiff. You could still get polio, I knew, even though it wasn't summer anymore.

I sat up in bed and imagined what would happen if I really had a stiff neck: how I would call my mother and she would call Dr. Miller, and he would come to the house in the middle of the night. By that time I wouldn't be able to move my legs. I had read in the newspaper that that was the way it happened. My mother would be hysterical, screaming and crying, and my father would be trying to calm her down, saying I probably didn't really have polio after all. I fell back to sleep sitting up like that.

The girl, whose name was Alice, came to our room in the middle of the morning. You could hear her – or rather it, the iron lung – out in the hall before she arrived. It was like the sound of a person breathing, only maybe 50 times as loud, and I thought it was the worst, scariest sound I had ever heard, as if a monster or was right in the room, breathing.

Alice, who was around our age, was lying flat on a kind of table with wheels. Most of her body was inside the iron lung, a round greenish-gray metal apparatus that reminded me a little of the round metal garbage cans they had everywhere at Montrose Beach, where we used to go in the summer before polio came along. At the same time it looked a little like what I imagined, or had seen in pictures, a submarine must look like, with some round window-like things on the sides and a mess of tubes and dials all over.

You could only see Alice's head, sticking out of the iron lung and propped up on a pillow with a mirror over it, held by a metal arm, so she could see what was going on

around her, I suppose. She had curly blond hair and a dimpled smile and seemed very cheerful, although I couldn't imagine why she would be. Maybe because she hadn't died, Rita said when we discussed it later.

There was a nurse with Alice, a squat woman in a white starchy uniform, and another woman whose function we never knew. Alice wasn't in our room for very long. The nurse and the other woman wheeled her in and positioned her so her head faced the class. She had to turn to the side to look at us.

"Class, this is Alice," Miss Breskin said. "Can you say hello to her?"

"Hello, Alice," we all shouted in unison. Then Miss Breskin said we could ask a few questions. These had been rehearsed the day before, when Miss Breskin told us sternly that there were to be no questions about going to the bathroom. A few of the boys laughed.

Does she have to be in the iron lung all the time? Charlie Hughes asked. No, she can be out of it for a few minutes, but then she has to use a breathing tube. Will she ever be able to breathe on her own? This was my question. Answer: Maybe, because doctors make miraculous discoveries every day. How does she do her schoolwork? She has a tutor who comes to her house and gives her lessons every day.

The woman who wasn't the nurse answered all of these in a slow, pleasant voice kind of like Miss Breskin's. Then it was time for Alice to go to the next class.

She waved as she was wheeled out and I thought I heard her say “bye now” in a squeaky little whisper. But the breathing noise was so loud you could hardly hear anything else.

Ahhh-ooo. Ahhh-ooo. That was what it sounded like, in and out, in and out, a thousand times louder, in my ears at least, than the el train that ran a few blocks away from our building, the siren of the fire engine going down the street, the jackhammer the construction workers used to dig up the street when they were repairing the sewers. It was a monster breathing – no, it was just breathing, with no one and nothing attached to it, not even Alice. That was what was so scary about it. Just breath going in and out of nothing. The world breathing.

Twice in the next week I dreamed I was in the iron lung. I didn’t remember much about the first dream. In the second one I felt my body lying there and an enormous weight pressing down on it, making the breathing sound. Then there were other people in the room, lots of them, and I was in the furnace from the boiler room, burning. I woke up with my heart pounding.

The next week in class Miss Breskin told us there was going to be a trailer set up in an empty lot at Sheridan and Buena with Alice and her iron lung inside it. People could donate money there to an organization that helped to find a cure for polio, she said. They could also go in and offer Alice encouragement because her life was so difficult. The trailer might be there all winter so they could collect a lot of money to cure polio. None of the kids in class seemed very interested in Alice any more.

I was stricken, though. That empty lot was on my route home from school, and now I would have to walk past Alice in the iron lung and hear the terrible breathing sound every day. It would reverberate all over the outdoors from the trailer, I knew, and pound in my ears all the way home. At least with the picture I could turn my head away if I had to walk past it. I was going to have to figure out a different way home.

In the mornings I wouldn't have to pass the iron lung girl. My father drove me to school on his way to work, and usually two other girls who lived on my street, Rhonda and Carol, met us in front of my building and rode along. Sometimes, if he didn't have to get in to work early he would take our little wirehaired terrier, Pepper, along.

Pepper would look out the window and bark comically when he saw other dogs on the street, and Rhonda and Carol would take turns trying to hug him and talk to him in baby talk. Having Rhonda and Carol go along kept the fact that my father drove me to school from seeming too babyish.

In the afternoon, though, my father was at work downtown, so before this year my mother had picked me up from school, briskly walking the five blocks to our apartment while I lagged behind with other kids, none of whose mothers were along. This year we had a big fight about it and I told her I was too old for her to be walking me home from school. I cried and sulked, and finally she talked to Rhonda's and Carol's mothers and made the three of us promise never to walk home alone.

Now I decided to find another route home from school and see if I could persuade Rhonda and Carol to go that way too. They didn't seem to care one way or the other about passing the girl in the iron lung, and I would never tell them how much she

frightened me. One night at dinner I started asking my parents about different streets in the neighborhood to try and figure out my new route. I pretended I wanted to know what street a certain popular candy store was on.

My mother seemed suspicious, and I realized too late that the candy store question was the reason. There were several of these stores in the neighborhood, and my mother probably thought I wanted to go to all of them. She didn't like me to have candy because of its cavity-producing qualities.

"Why are you asking all this about different streets?" she said. "You're not going to start going around stuffing yourself with candy like those O'Brien girls, are you? That's not what we give you an allowance for, you know."

My father came to my defense. "I think it's good that she wants to know about the neighborhood," he said, ignoring the candy issue. "She's growing up and her world is expanding." I liked what he said, but I didn't feel very grown up.

Finally I worked out an alternate way to get home, and I didn't care if Rhonda and Carol wanted to go with me or not. Part of the route took me parallel to a big cemetery, which was separated from the sidewalk by a high concrete wall. Strange old twisted trees grew inside it. There were a few places where there was no wall, just an unfinished-looking wire fence. Walking by the cemetery, even in the places without the concrete wall, didn't frighten me at all, but Rhonda and Carol didn't like it.

A couple of times I persuaded both of them, then once just Rhonda, to walk home with me the new way. Carol, especially, hated walking by the cemetery. She said there

could be ghosts there. I tried to tell her there were no such things as ghosts, but she didn't believe me. So I walked that way by myself, without telling my parents, of course.

One afternoon I was going past the unfinished-fence part of the cemetery, where trees grew close to the sidewalk, and a man came out from behind one. I thought he looked a little like Emil, then I realized it was Emil. He didn't work in the building any more, but I had seen him a few times in the neighborhood. Once when I was with my father, going out to buy milk at a store around the corner, we passed him on the street, and he and my father stopped and talked for a few minutes. My father liked to talk to people. He said they gave him ideas for characters on his radio shows.

Now Emil stood next to the fence with the bent-over posture I remembered and called out to me. "Ruthie! How is your father?" With his accent it sounded something like "How vees your fadder?"

I don't know if I answered him, or what I said. He came closer to me. His pants were part way open and he seemed to be holding a piece of himself in his hand. I knew what it was, I suppose. I might even have gotten a glimpse of my father's once or twice when I was younger and walked into my parents' room while they were getting dressed. They weren't prudish that way.

Now, with a motion that reminded me of the way you throw a yoyo, Emil reached out with his other hand and grabbed my wrist, not hard enough to hurt, and drew me closer. He pulled my hand towards him.

"Touch it," he said. "There, it won't hurt you. See?" He plopped my hand down on something that felt warm and a little wet and held it there. I looked down, and I

couldn't help thinking of the smoked whitefish my father sometimes bought at a deli for Sunday evening supper, with the head and coppery skin still on it.

"Remember that piece of coal I gave you?" Emil said after a few seconds. He didn't wait for me to say anything, just let my hand go, then turned around, to zip up his pants, I suppose. Then we walked away from each other in opposite directions.

When I got home my parents were in the midst of a crisis. Pepper had grabbed a man's pant leg in the elevator of our building, torn his pants and bitten his leg, although not hard. The man was demanding that my parents buy him a new suit; otherwise he would report Pepper to the authorities. That meant our dog would have to be quarantined for rabies for two weeks.

My mother was crying; she said that Pepper, sensitive creature that he was, wouldn't last two weeks in a cage at the vet's. I started crying too and picked Pepper up and hugged him hard, not letting go even when he got squirmy. I almost forgot about the incident with Emil. For the rest of the evening my mother and father kept going over different scenarios about what might happen to Pepper.

In the end they bought the man a new suit and gave him a hundred dollars besides, and Pepper didn't have to go into quarantine. I never told them about Emil, and didn't think very much, or at all, about what happened. It seemed to me something that belonged to the world of grownups, like the TV shows my parents watched after I went to bed or the cocktails they drank, sometimes fishing out an olive or a maraschino cherry for me.

For the next couple of days Rhonda and Carol and I walked home together by the cemetery. Carol said she was tired of kids calling her a baby because she believed in ghosts, and I said if she walked by the cemetery it would prove she wasn't a baby. She was nervous, though, and kept yelling at me and Rhonda to walk faster and stop dawdling.

Then on Saturday I was driving to the public library with my parents when we passed the corner where the iron lung girl was. I tried to look out the other side so I wouldn't have to see her, but my mother said, "Oh look, that trailer thing is gone. I wonder where they're exhibiting that poor girl now, like she's a circus freak or something." I turned my head just in time to catch a glimpse of the empty lot with its scraggly carpet of brown clumps of grass and weeds. Trailer, Alice, breathing sound gone.

Rhonda and Carol and I went back to walking home the regular way, but sometimes we still walked by the cemetery, Carol leading the way and turning around every few minutes to get us to go faster.

I saw Emil one more time, when my mother and I were walking Pepper. He was on the other side of the street, and he and my mother waved to each other. Later that year, as soon as school was out for the summer, we moved to Evanston, a suburb of Chicago. My parents said the schools were better there.

That summer was the last one when we couldn't go to the beach or the movies. Before we went back to school in the fall everybody got the new polio shot. My mother kept saying over and over what a miracle the vaccine was. None of us ever got polio.