

BEDS

Everything leads me back to my polio days now. Last week I drove to a used bookstore on back roads to pick up a biography of Jonas Salk. I noticed a junky antique store, pulled over, pattered through. An old piece of furniture was chained to the store's side porch—a hospital bed from upstate, where there had been a tuberculosis sanatorium long ago. It was oak and painted a darkish green. The works that made it go up and down were cast iron, and they were painted green too. The springs were spiraling. I fell in love with the bed and bought it.

The next morning, Memorial Day, I woke at six to meet the fellow who delivered the bed in his pickup. He unloaded it, I gave him a check, he left. I dragged the hose out, filled a pail with soapy water, scrubbed the thing down, and let it dry in the rising sun. The foam mattress in the basement just fit. I put a rose-colored sheet on it and dragged the bed under the maple tree. The day was just beginning.

Lying on this not-just-any bed brings me back to how full of motion the world was as I watched it from my polio bed. Everything

but me seemed to be moving. I was immobilized in New York, high up on a hospital ward overlooking the East River. I was horizontal, covered in plaster, couldn't get out of bed, couldn't sit, couldn't walk. I was flat. I had a view of the river, and what I did was watch.

I watched boats pass from morning to night. I watched smoke billowing out of huge smokestacks, cars heading south on the FDR Drive, cars heading north, a helicopter flying across the sky, a jet carving a diagonal line across the blue as it took off from LaGuardia, boats moving, water moving. I watched the river's current.

One day I was looking out the window when a submarine surfaced right in front of the hospital. It was sunny, I'm sure of it, and slowly the sub rose from the water. A bunch of uniformed sailors appeared on deck. Airy and light, it was the sight of victory.

From my bed, I would look out the window across the river to Queens as morning came. It would be barely dark. A light bulb would go on in a window and cast a sweet orange gleam—artificial, antiquated. I'd wonder about the person who turned the light on—why were they getting up so early, where were they going? I always had them going. They'd be going and I'd be watching.

It's taken me decades to walk over to my desk, sit down once and for all, and write about what happened when I was a ten-year-old girl with polio.

Here I go. It's November. It's 1953. My family is living in the well-to-do village of Larchmont, New York, on Long Island Sound. I'm in fifth grade.

For lunch Mom makes me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich cut in the shape of a house. When I'm done, instead of heading back to school, I go lie down on the bed in the TV room.

I'm resting, which I never do. I don't even feel like watching TV. Look. There's one leg up in the air. My leg, I keep looking at it, I like looking at it. Maybe it hurts. Maybe it feels rusty or something. I'll say it hurts, and maybe I can stay home this afternoon. I don't want to give that book report.

My knees are skinned. When I was little, I used to sneak down near the beach with Jimmy Keenan. We liked to climb up on the roof of an old brick garage, jump off onto the ground. Sometimes my knees got scraped, and my legs got bruised.

I like my legs. I don't know why. They're just legs, but *just legs* is great. I like the bones of them, how they join. Some people talk about legs that are particularly long. My mother's are particularly bony. Mine aren't particularly anything.

I just swallowed, I *noticed* I swallowed. Just did it again. The back of my throat feels small and getting smaller.

I looked at the clock a few minutes ago. Now I look at it again, but the minute hand has hardly moved. I can hear my baby sister fooling around outside.

I better get up, I've got to start back to school. Today is going so slowly. I wait for minutes to pass. Look at the clock. Ow ow ow—my leg does kind of hurt. But after school, Patsy and I are going to bike to Flint Park.

It's the next day. The doctor comes into my room. He helps me sit on the edge of my bed. He opens his black bag, takes out a rubber mallet. Tap. He taps my knee. My leg does not move.

In the hospital, all I wanted to do was go home. People said, "Do this, do that," and I had to do it.

"Time for hot packs," a nurse would say.

“No. I want to go *home*.”

I'd sleep all the time, wake up not knowing what day it was, not knowing if days or hours had passed.

Everyone was talking. Talking in the hall, nurses talking, doctors talking, visitors. I hated that sound.

Footsteps in the hall—are my parents here? I'm burning, my body's hurting, I'm nothing, a blank buzz of sleep.

“Strawberry milkshake,” I said to my father. When he brought it, I couldn't stand the smell. The pink made me sick.

One day I asked for a book. The nurse said, “Wait a minute.” She came back with an Archie and Veronica comic. When I tried to hold it, it dropped.

“Darling,” my mother wrote to me in the hospital three months after I got sick.

I just heard the GOOD NEWS—you are standing and getting into the wheel chair alone.

I know this made you happy as it did me. Honey, this is another important hurdle you've jumped. I have a hunch (unofficial) you are on the homeward stretch.

Try very hard honey.

Well so long. I'll see you Sunday—I can't wait either.

Your Ma