

## **Polio**

**Sharon Jarrett**

---

### **1946**

Every so often, a woman dressed all in black would stop by our house in the early evening. She would not stay long. I thought these women looked tall and elegant in their black dresses. They wore a strange hat as well, one made out of a white, stiff-looking wire-grid material that was shaped somewhat similarly to a nurse's hat. The most fascinating thing about them was the clear red droplet hanging from the front of the hat's peak. It looked as if it was made of glass. I didn't know who they were or why they looked so strange. They never smiled or spoke to me and I concluded their visits meant serious business. Although I thought they looked stunning and exotic, they scared me---those dark, mysterious women.

Something else I found fascinating, as well as puzzling, was a small white booklet placed in our living room. It was made of cardboard with circular indentions in it, and sometimes there would be dimes pressed into the indentations. I never saw money just lying around the house, and those tiny, shiny, silver dimes, all lined up in perfect precision in those mysterious folders, were an endless source of fascination to me.

What I didn't know was that we were in the midst of a polio epidemic, and although I didn't make the connection at that time, those women dressed in black represented the March of Dimes. They were delivering and picking up contributions of dimes to help fight the polio epidemic. Folks didn't have much money but they were willing to do their part---and I'm not sure the booklets were always full.

The March of Dimes was organized in 1938 by President Roosevelt in response to the polio epidemic. The very worst epidemics were yet to occur in the 1940s and '50's. Polio was one of the greatest dreaded diseases of the 20th century. It became a scourge, strangely enough, because of the trend toward cleaner living. When children weren't so scrubbed and disinfected they developed immunity to polio early on. The polio epidemic raised great fear because it sometimes crippled and killed children. There was no cure and no one knew who or where it would strike next. Sometimes, it paralyzed the limbs. Sometimes, it paralyzed the chest. Sometimes, those affected by it died. It was a parent's worst nightmare.

### **1947**

It was 1947. I was five years old that year and I was feeling sick. I never minded being sick back then because I was always pampered when sick and generally got pretty much whatever I wanted when I looked so pathetic. That day Mother made a bed for me on the davenport in the living room then went next door to a neighbor's house to use the phone to call the doctor.

Dr. Trumaine came to the house carrying his little black bag. In those days, a sick patient couldn't be expected to come to the office, and besides, the doctor might be out making a house call anyway. Mother said Dr. Trumaine was the best pediatrician around but I didn't like him even though he always smiled and talked to me. He called me the little "Swift Girl," because "snell" meant "swift" in German. But he always made me very uncomfortable. He had a large head, and his head would never stop shaking. My mother told me it was because he was born with "water on the brain" and she would

always add that he wasn't able to be a surgeon because of his shaking.

I remember Dr. Trumaine examining my eyes very intently. I still have a very clear picture of my parents standing next to him, side by side, and I will never forget the look on their faces when Dr. Trumaine said to them, "She has polio." I didn't understand what that look meant; it was a look I had never seen before, but I knew it wasn't good.

My next memory was the hospital. I was in a crib in a very large room full of other cribs with lots of small children in them. And I remember the hot packs. At the time, it was the most advanced treatment to place damp and hot wool army blankets (sometimes one on top of the other) on the patient's back, at least for those with polio of the spine.

### **Waiting for the *fizz* to set**

While everything else has faded into the mists of time, there are two incidents which still stand out, ever present, like scenes from an old movie. One was the day they gave me a 7-Up to drink. I liked 7-Up and I knew it was important for me to drink more liquid. It was a special treat for me, especially with a mother who was a real stickler for healthy eating. I wanted to drink it, *but...* I had to let it *set* for a while. I hated the *fizz* of the carbonated water in my nose and throat, so I always had to let it set for a while in order to get rid of the fizz before I could drink it. They didn't leave it there for very long before they just came in and took it away. I *tried* to tell them that I was going to drink it, but I had to let it set for a while, but they wouldn't *listen* to me.

The next thing I knew, they were trying to force a needle into my arm. I fought like a tiger. I didn't need a needle in my arm. I was just going to let that 7-Up set for a while so it wouldn't *fizz*. I tried to tell them, but they would not *listen* to me.

They must have called for reinforcements because suddenly there were a lot of people all trying to hold me down. I tried to tell them that I just needed to let the 7-Up set for a while, but they would not *listen* to me. Then, they tied my hands to the crib bars so I couldn't pull the needle out, and a stone-cold, silent woman sat in a chair inches from my crib, just watching me. I tried to tell her that I only wanted to let the 7-Up *set* for a while. If they would just let me do that, then they could take the needle out and untie my hands, but she would not listen to me. She never spoke a single word to me and just sat there watching me in silence. That was when I realized *no one* who was going to listen to me. There was no one who cared about what I had to say. They were going to do whatever they wanted *even when they were wrong!* I finally just gave up because I knew nobody cared what I thought or said. They thought I was just a little girl who didn't know anything, so I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

When I woke up, the needle and the restrains were gone, and the stone-cold, silent woman and her chair were gone. It was a brand new day and even though I kept hoping for another 7-Up, they never brought me one.

### **The terrible breathing machine**

When I felt well enough to be up and about, there was a young nurse who made me some little slippers made out of paper towels. She took me to visit a young man who was in an iron lung. He couldn't look at me directly because he was lying on his back facing a large, round machine, but he could see me through a rearview mirror mounted just above his head, and I could see his face in the mirror as well.

His entire body was stuffed inside of this huge, ominous machine that wrapped completely around him and held him tightly around the neck. Only his head and face were visible. It was a terrible machine that *breathed*--with a life force of its own--sucking, in and out, and in and out, with his entire body trapped inside of it. He smiled and tried to talk to me, but I just stared at the floor. I was terrified. I wanted to get as far away as possible from that dark, horrible, noisy, breathing, sucking thing. What if it could it even suck *me* in as well! It didn't take long for the nurse to realize that this had not been a very good idea and she quickly took me back to my bed. I could tell she was disappointed in me because she wasn't fun and chatty anymore.

When I was home again, I was amazed to find a small mound of stuffed toys and lots of well-wisher cards just for me. I had been sick before but I had never had this level of attention. I couldn't believe my luck! There were gifts from people I didn't even know, just strangers who knew my father from work. *I loved it!* I certainly didn't want to question any of it just in case it might make those people realize how unnecessary it all was. And what if they changed their minds when they found that out? And what if they decided to take back all of those wonderful toys?

What I didn't know at that time was what really big deal polio actually was. I didn't know anything about the fear, the hysteria, and the hopelessness that was associated with just that one little word--*polio*. And I certainly didn't have a clue as to what a very fortunate little girl I actually was.