

Excerpt from “After the Cure”

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On an autumn morning in 1949, over a bowl of oatmeal, my mother, Carole, then 7 years old, started feeling ill. She begged my grandmother to let her skip school and return to bed, and in a rare turn my grandmother acquiesced. A first-generation German American, my grandmother had survived the Depression. She knew how to pull flavor out of the cheapest cut of meat, she saved pennies for special occasions in envelopes, and she believed only an actively vomiting child should skip the wonder of public education. My aunt, just 3 years old, couldn’t believe her sister’s luck. She dipped her spoon into my mother’s abandoned bowl and finished the extra helping of cereal, and then she scuttled off to the small bedroom that the two girls shared. My mother lay in fetid darkness, curtains drawn. “Get Mommy,” she said meekly. “I’m really sick.”

A fever bloomed through my mother’s body to fight the invading virus, but the poliomyelitis had already taken hold in her central nervous system. Her limbs ached and then atrophied, and by evening my mother could move only her eyes.

She was ferried by ambulance from her rowhouse in East Baltimore to Kernan Hospital for Crippled Children, where she remained pinned to a bed in a ward with other paralyzed girls, some so ill that an iron lung breathed for them. In 1949, researchers were still confirming how many strains of the poliomyelitis virus even existed. Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin were years

from releasing their inoculations. Meanwhile, polio had spread to epidemic levels in American cities, felling mostly children. With no known prevention or cure, national headlines trumpeted the fearful news: “Polio Panic” and “Polio’s Deadly Path.” My mother had become so terrified of the disease in the months before she got it, she later told me, that she once leaped behind a bush to hide from the family of a sick child.

Parents were allowed to visit the polio ward only on Sundays, a rule that my mother believed was meant to keep the children from getting too homesick, but that was more than likely in place to help contain a highly contagious disease. It was a rule my grandfather couldn’t abide. My grandfather — who worked at the American Can Co. — conceived of a plan. He smudged kohl on his face to approximate a beard and stained his lips cherry red. He donned a patch-covered suit, sewn by my grandmother, and transformed into Mr. Nobody, a hobo clown in the vein of Red Skelton. He was a natural-born entertainer trapped in a factory job. My grandfather drove an hour across town in his late-model Plymouth, a luxury bought in the flurry of postwar optimism and before the polio came, and he sang and entertained the kids at Kernan so that he could sneak extra time with my mother. Every time he left the hospital, he later admitted to my mother, he vowed to God: If my daughter walks again, I will dedicate my life to those in need.

After months of staring at the ceiling, my mother had strength enough to sit up. Slowly, she left her bed. One year after she arrived, my mother limped out of Kernan. A few months later her frail legs managed the length of a church aisle at her cousin’s wedding, a flurry of rose blossoms in her wake, and the guests shed tears for more than the bride. (My grandfather kept his promise. He volunteered in hospitals and nursing homes until his death at age 85, and those efforts earned him a citation from the governor of Maryland.)

This is where my mother's version of her story stopped — at the happy ending. Her account, delivered when I was young, had the polish of myth. Neat and contained.

Except that's not where my mother's story ended, not really. Yes, my mother walked again. She even danced ballet to minor acclaim. But my mother never fully inhabited her body again. She never relaxed back into the animal joys of her fragile human casing, never dived after my brother and me into the salted ocean on summer vacation, or felt the wind in her hair as she coasted next to us on a bike ride down the hill near our house. The world was fraught with calamity, my mother understood, and she refused to be caught unawares. The moral of my mother's story isn't that of miraculous recovery. It's that polio, the thing she feared most in the world, had found her, and it paralyzed more than her body.

I've spent much of my life trying to understand that paralysis. My mother was not an easy person, at times distant and cold, at times nose-close and seething. We understand attachment theory now — the ways in which parental bonds, or the lack of them, inform our adult selves. We become who we are in the sun, or the shadow, of our parents' attention, and we carry the seeds of that early experience in our bodies. A story took root in me at a young age: Something was wrong with my mother, and by extension, with me. We were tangled up in one another, the way so many mothers and daughters are. I wanted nothing more than to fall into the effortless affection of two people who loved one another unguardedly, and I believed that if I could save my unhappy mother, I might save myself, too.