

GET UP

It was a clear, cool morning, the kind that Ohio enjoys in October after the summer has used up most of its energy. I sat in my newly adopted wheelchair, having much earlier ignored my breakfast. The tray sat imperfectly located on the sterile metal end table beside my bed. The wheelchair made it possible for me to get around in the nursing home, but it was a constant reminder that I couldn't walk anymore.

I'd had a stroke. It sounds clean and simple, but when it happened I was completely surprised and unable to comprehend what had happened. I'd fallen, and really couldn't figure how to get up. I had with some difficulty crawled near a phone and pulled it down off the table. I had called a friend, and early in the conversation Tom realized something was very wrong.

Hang up and dial 911, he told me. I did as instructed and quickly the squad arrived. I was embarrassed and thankful at the same time. The next several days were filled with doctors and needles and nurses, and the result of all of their testing and prodding was that I was no longer in charge of my life. They all seemed to be driving and I felt like a boat hooked up to a pickup truck. I was going places, but I had few choices about the destinations.

After the test results were in, I was told about my stroke. The difficulty I had with speaking should get better and my face should quit feeling like I'd had a monster shot of Novocain. The paralysis on my left side was more difficult to evaluate. They (the doctors) suggested living in a nursing home for some time and concentrating on physical and occupational therapy. I later redefined those little pastimes as "torture by toys." I worked for hours each day, attempting to re-teach my body to do the things I expected of it. It rebelled.

I worked hard at the therapeutic tasks I was assigned, but for weeks I was unable to bounce a balloon or feed myself with my left hand. I had never been a fast runner, but I missed plain old walking. The therapists were relentless and optimistic, but my own moods changed often. I would get mad, laugh at myself, and then pout for hours in my room. I complained about the food, the noise in the halls, and about everything that didn't complain back.

One day I got a package in the mail. My brother, Brian, had sent books, a card, and a bunch of other neat stuff. After I looked at each item, I kept digging. At the bottom of the box was a tumbler package with three racquetball balls. *Go play*, was his order. Play? Did he realize how terrible life had become for me? Play? I couldn't walk! I should forget all of that? The answer was *Yes*.

I wheeled myself outside, holding one of the balls with my bad hand and pushing the wheel with the other. I wheeled up in front of one of the buildings and looked at it. Play. Go play.

I threw the ball at the building and it bounced back at me; I caught it with my good hand—easily. What if I forced my bad hand to try to catch the ball? I looked around, and saw no one who might make me feel embarrassed if I missed it. I tried it. The ball bounced past me. I retrieved it and tried again. I missed again, but the hand that behaved as if some alien marionette maker controlled it

came close to the ball. I played for what seemed like hours.

That evening I sat alone after dinner, thinking about the future and worrying that I was perhaps permanently reassigned to a nursing home. I was in my 50's and not ready. I'm sure no one is really ready for the human junk pile. The television in my room didn't help. It only showed people who were still more or less in control of their own destinies. It made me feel insignificant.

I again got out the box I'd received from Brother Brian. There was a book about baseball players in it. They were baseball players I'd cheered for in my youth—Mantle, Feller, Jackie Robinson and more. I read for a while, until the book fell in my lap while my mind picked up on other baseball stories from my youth.

... I was playing in Little League again. I was wearing the gray and red wool Fibreglas uniform I had been so proud of. I'd never been a great Little Leaguer, but good enough to make a good team. I remembered my teammates and how great we looked in those uniforms. Some of us had black rubber-soled baseball shoes and some wore the white high-top Chuck Taylor All-Star sneakers.

I could almost hear the "crack" of the wooden bat hitting a baseball. I could almost smell the sweet aroma of disturbed sod that I casually knocked out of my cleats with a tap of the bat. The pitcher wound up and fired a fastball down the middle, and I missed it. With my eyes shut, I could hear the parents in the stands—some rooting for me, some yelling for a strikeout. The next pitch came at me and I swung—a bit late—but I hit it. The ball bounced to center field as I got to first base with a single. A smile curled the edges on an older man's lips as I savored the memory.

Either Frank Sheldon or Vic Fink hit the next pitch clear out to the snow fence in center field. I took off, running at my best speed. As I rounded second base I was supposed to look at Mr. Foote, the third base coach. I didn't. I turned my head to see where the ball was and tripped, falling flat on my nose. I was lying in the dirt base path and everything else was moving and yelling. The only thing I heard was Mr. Foote yelling: "*Get up!*"

I got up. As sometimes happens when kids play baseball, the ball got away. As I got to third, Mr. Foote was wind milling his arms: "*Go! Go! Go!*" I went. I raced for home plate, this time trusting my coach to tell me the thing to do. I ran as fast as I could and about ten feet from the plate, I slid. The ball came out of the catcher's glove and bounced harmlessly toward the fence.

I scored. Whoopee! I jumped up, covered with dust that couldn't conceal the smile on my dirty face. My teammates yelled and congratulated me like I'd hit a home run. When I calmed down a little, I sat down on the bench. Mr. Pitcock, Tom's Dad, was one of the coaches and he sat down next to me. "*Good hustle,*" he said. I reminded him I'd fallen down like a wounded buffalo out by second base. "*Doesn't matter,*" he reprimanded me. "*Nobody notices when you fall down unless you don't get up.*" We won, and celebrated with a Popsicle as the memory faded away . . .

I was back in my room in my wheelchair. It was dark out and security lights illuminated the courtyard beside the building. I looked out, still relishing having scored a run so many years ago. I

heard the squeak of the rubber-soled shoes of a nurse walking down the hall as I wheeled my chair outside and into the courtyard. I had the blue rubber ball in my hand.

I heard it again in my head—“*Get Up!*”

I struggled with that chair and my headstrong leg as I stood, holding onto the chair. I heard my brother’s admonition as well: *Go play*. The ball made a “fwoop” sound when it hit the wall and bounced back at me. I annoyed some people that night, but I wasn’t embarrassed anymore.



photo by Brenda Ackerman