

Finalist, Fiction

Sometimes If You're Lucky
By Sharon Frame Gay

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Sometimes, if you're lucky, and everything falls into place, magic happens. For me, it is the nights when the stars are so bright, that they shine through the windows, and if I am placed just so, I can see them reflected in the mirror above my eyes. Oh, how hopeful they look, like flinty chips piercing the night sky, dancing so far away, such endless possibilities.

I look up into the silvery length of mirror and smile. Stars are meant to be looked up to, our faces pointing towards the vast Universe. So many times, I see the world upside down, but the stars remain where they are supposed to be. People come to talk to me, and I find myself staring into their nostrils, the bags below their eyes, the jiggle of fat beneath their chins as they waggle with words. Some days I make a game of it. I'll stare straight up into their faces, trying to visualize how they really look. Then, I'll turn my head sideways and see them when they take a step or two away, and gauge how close my guess was. Were they handsome? Fetching? Better upside down?

I'm content and warm and dry for the most part. Once in a while, my diaper seeps through before the caregiver, Molly, has a chance to change it. She is filled with apology then, her large brown eyes distressed as she looks down on me. I smile back up at her. What does it matter, in this great big universe, if I get wet? How does this small thing factor into a lifetime of such sorrow, such pain, and yet such grace.

There are switches by my hands, little switches that can turn off this, turn on that. A remote control for the television, though I seldom watch it. I prefer the music of Mozart and Bach rather than canned laughter all hours of the day. I prefer nothing canned. Because, that is what I live in. A can. A big, silver bullet of a machine that has kept me alive now for over 60 years.

The rest of the world has passed by. Effortlessly, it seems. When I crane my neck and peer out the window, I see dozens of people scurry by, their legs and arms swinging

with each stride, heads often bent and thrust forward as though a great wind were blocking them. Children skip. Oh, how I remember skipping! For just one moment when you skip, you are completely off the ground, weightless, flying, before touching down with a sneaker, or a scuffed brown shoe. To skip is to moonwalk in heaven.

Polio is such a strange word. Sounds like polo, a bit, but it certainly doesn't involve horses or mallets or balls skimming the surface of a field. Nowadays it is merely an annoyance, something children grimace about when they get a vaccination. A little pinch that comes and goes, and is rewarded with a lollipop. Oh, to have been able to get a vaccination and escape this armored castle that holds me hostage in its grip.

Before polio chased me down and tackled me, I was an ordinary little girl. Susan. That's the name I answer to, although inside myself I have many names, such as Princess Light and Audrey and Daisy. Names I make up when I play stories in my head, which I do all the time. Back before the Iron Lung, I played horses and hopscotch and rolled down the hill in my backyard. I climbed trees and swam, and even rode a pony a time or two.

Then polio skulked into town, a dark cloud hovering over the country's best and brightest. The children. Daring to ride on the breeze and infect us with droplets from its open maw, capturing us in the very dawn of youth, and carrying us out of our homes in baskets, or hobbling in braces, or, for a few chosen by fate, placing us in the great Iron Lungs that dotted the world like huge silver bugs, swallowing up children and never digesting us. Like Rapunzel, we were kept prisoner, waiting in near sleep to be rescued by our Prince Charming, or the Grim Reaper himself.

At first, I was frantic. I was only nine years old, feeling so sick that I could not take a breath, and snatched away from my family as though somehow this was all my fault. The hospital ward was littered with us sick children, staring at each other, wide eyed, or cowering under the covers, crying for our mothers, our fathers.

There were so many of us in the big city hospital. Children who were laughing and jumping rope one day, almost paralyzed the next. A lot of children died. But a great deal survived, hobbling past my bed, on their way home, legs in braces, or arms withered,

leaning on their family as the ward door closed behind them. I waited for my turn. My turn to leave that narrow, sterile bed and gulp the autumn air in great breaths, walk through my own front door, lean down and pat my dog, Sandy, and sit on the grass in the backyard, weaving the blades between my fingers, smelling the earth beneath me.

But my time never came. Within weeks, I was loaded into the massive Iron Lung, face up, as the machine did the breathing for me, as it loosened the wheezing in my chest, the incredible pressure I felt lifted, and replaced by the clanking and sighing of a mechanical mother, now forcing me back into her womb and holding me tight, defying gravity, protecting me from my own respiratory system.

I was a child, and children find ways to cope. At first, it was almost pleasant once I got over the initial fear. I felt better. Everybody was kind. My parents brought me milkshakes and teddy bears, radios and pretty ribbons for my hair. I spent my days playing stories in my head. I was a princess, or a horse trainer, a crime solver, a bride. It took me several years to figure out that I would never be any of those things, particularly a bride. No man would hold me into the night, give me a child, come home from work weary and leave his briefcase by the door. There would be no dances, or football games, nor awkward fumbling in the back seat of an old sedan. There would only be the rustling and the sighing of the great Iron Lung, as it folded me into its metal breast, and suckled me with air.

As the decades went on, I was able to leave the confines of my carapace each day, poking my head, then my entire body out of the machine like a turtle, craning my neck. I was placed in a wheelchair with a respiratory machine and pushed around the hospital, and later, my home, feeling the air swirl around me, joining the world for an hour or two, my legs dangling like a puppet as we swept down the hallways. Therapists worked with my hands and legs, and even once or twice they put braces on me, and I stood and walked a few paces. It felt so odd to be upright, as though a leaf had fallen off a tree, then tipped on to its points like a ballerina and walked across the forest floor. Although I was heavily encouraged by my family and doctors, I felt awkward and strangely vulnerable outside my shell. Breathing wasn't nearly as comfortable as it was in the Iron Lung. I had to struggle more for breath, and it frightened me. I hid my anxiety, though,

as I didn't want to appear foolish, but when I was placed back in my machine, I felt immense relief and something akin to freedom. How odd, I think, that the very thing that holds me hostage grants me the only comfort I have ever felt.

I long for a man's touch, or the ability to run across a meadow, and in my dreams, I do. I wake up sometimes aroused and frustrated, or winded, ripe with excitement. But then I hear the regular, steady breath that comes from my machine, and I know it was only a dream, as I pound at the metal in my anguish, tears running into my hair.

"How do you cope"? so many ask. "How can I not"? I answer back. For this is all I truly remember. This is all life gave me. Life reached into her magic bag and granted me this. It was the coin I was given to spend. And I cannot resent nor feel left out. It simply is. I leave no footprints on this earth, but my breath mingles and tangles with all living things. For I am just as important, and just as inconsequential as everybody else.

Sometimes, when I am lucky, and I am placed just so, the stars reach out from the mirror above me and invite me to join them. I dream that someday, when I have spent all the breaths God has given me, that this machine, my Mother Ship, shifts into a rocket, shattering reality, and the window panes, as we aim for the moon. We break through the barrier of the atmosphere, into a Universe where breath does not matter, where I can dance among the constellations and see them all, face to face.