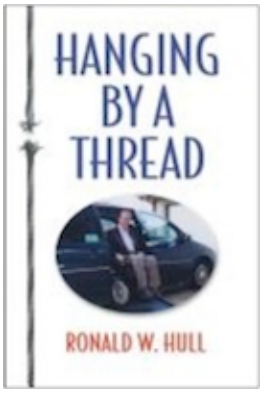
HANGING BY A THREAD

RONALD W. HULL



Ron Hull was paralyzed during spinal surgery in 1963. Able to walk with atrophied hands and arms, a hand splint enabled Ron to write and return to college with help from a rehab program. Ron's life changed dramatically but he was determined and, with good grades, got a fellowship to Stanford and a job in industry. A doctorate and 45-year career in higher education while the paralysis and discrimination continued to increase is his story.

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Introduction

Once, I visited my younger brother, Tim, while he was in college. He generously gave me his bed for the night. His idea of decoration was to hang the grille of his junked '69 Austin America from the ceiling by fishing line. The grille hung directly overhead, its sharp corner pointing at me like a Sword of Damocles. No matter how I changed my position, I couldn't seem to get safe from the thought of that line breaking and the grille spearing me in the face. I didn't sleep much that night.

Now, it is I hanging from the thread. And I don't sleep much thinking of it breaking and my body falling into that numb nothingness that comes with a lack of communication between the brain and the body, that point where I will still think, but be unable to act on the thoughts.

This is not a heroic story of overcoming great odds. Rather it is the story of one man's efforts to try to lead a normal life when an accident changed its course.

It may have begun before I was born. I was an identical twin. My brother Roger and I came from the same egg. We may have been joined at the spine as we developed, causing a deficiency in my neck structure as we separated some time before birth. Whatever it was, it was not obvious as I grew up. Our mother was only seventeen, so our birth that cold December day in 1942 was not easy. My brother was born with a concussion, and I suffered from scarlet fever and pneumonia before I was four. There was that time at two when Roger and I didn't know that tipping over beehives would be a problem. I don't remember, but my teenage mom and little friend, Rags, took the brunt of the bees' rage. Still, I grew and thrived, with

a few childhood setbacks caused by several bouts with measles, influenza, and almost chronic winter colds. I managed to lead as normal a childhood as one can when you're a "cute" twin, considered to be a "brain" by your classmates. I did take books home for show but never did any homework. I'd just drop the books off, and then head out to play the faddish games our gang was constantly into.

I was the dominant one. To overcome the stigma of *cuteness* fostered by dressing alike and being the center of feminine attention, I was always exploring the limits of my physical ability and taking my brother into dangerous territory.

One time when we were seven, I watched Roger try to outrun a pickup while crossing Sixth Street. He lost the race and was knocked down and out. After an ambulance ride and stay in the hospital for his second concussion, Roger was okay. They said he darted out between parked cars, but I saw him run down the street when the truck didn't stop. But, just like the crowd around Roger as he lay unconscious on the lawn where the driver had carried him from the street, nobody believed his brother, a *kid*. It was only when I ran down the block to get our dad that I got anyone's attention. I had to stay home with my little sister while my dad rode with Roger in the ambulance to the hospital.

I was small, and slow to develop. But I compensated by taking almost any dare and priding myself in my speed, agility, and endurance. Until I was eighteen, I never got a stitch, or even a bad cut. Except in Cub Scouts, while Sumo (I didn't know what it was—we just did it) wrestling squatting on a gym floor, I fell backward, stuck out my left arm and broke it above the elbow. I wore a metal splint that was easy to bend, and the break took a long time to heal. Later, in high school, I would break my left wrist. Both breaks healed quickly and I seemed indestructible. That would change, as all things eventually do.

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Reach for the Stars

I wanted to be an astronaut. I don't know when I decided to seek that goal, but somewhere in the '50s I found out that I was smart, fearless, and resourceful—a natural leader who aspired to do something great with my life.

To me, riding rockets would be as easy as riding bikes, driving cars, and all the other things I'd learned to do on the first try. I knew I was different from the other kids, but I didn't possess any special talent for math, sports, music, or anything else that set me apart. Still, many times I pulled together my resources and excelled where I wasn't supposed. I remember learning to ride my bike without hands, like a unicycle. This is no great feat, but I made it more interesting. We lived in an urban neighborhood with sidewalks, driveways, alleys, and narrow yards. I worked out a path all around the neighborhood that I could ride without hands and avoid all the curbs, holes, bumps, and other obstacles that would force me to grab the handlebars. I worked in a spot where I would pull up to a stop sign, stop, look both ways, and then take a right turn. I could do this regardless of pedestrian or car traffic, never putting my foot down or touching the handlebars. No other kid could do it, but I could ride for hours on that course without stopping. At family outings, we all showed off feats of physical prowess. My father could hang from a bar by his toes. When my foot muscles proved too weak to do that, I learned that I could hang by my heels. No one else I knew could do that. The high point was when my uncle filmed me one time, hanging upside down from my heels, smiling

and waving, ever ready to duck inward if I should fall to avoid breaking my neck. I never fell.

I loved to climb and climbed every tree in sight. I enjoyed challenges and learned to climb where there were no branches by hugging the trunk like a bear. I respected trees and didn't damage them like other kids did, carving and cutting on them. We never nailed steps on a tree or built a tree house. Trees were living and growing and I just wanted to use them to get high for a moment. The trees must have respected me because I never fell from one. But then, I knew my body, and though I'd take a dare, I never tried anything that I couldn't do. By the time I was a teenager, I'd developed a technique that impressed the competition. I'd climb a young sapling twenty to thirty feet tall. By the time I'd get near the top, my weight would begin to get too heavy for the tree. By picking the side I was on and how high I climbed, the tree would bend to my will, usually to a clear spot without branches from other trees. The trunk would bend slowly at first, and then speed up as I headed toward the spot I'd picked. As the trunk bent horizontal I'd swing my legs free and hang from my hands until I gently reached the ground. Once there, I'd let go of the trunk and the tree would snap back into place, its top whipping back and forth, a little ruffled, a little over-stretched, but none the worse for wear. I especially liked this type of climb because the climb up was fast and easy and I didn't have to climb down. It sure beat sliding down a rough trunk, skinning up the insides of my arms and tearing up my jeans.

My first try at swimming was at the local YMCA in midwinter. I remember being very cold and unsuccessful on my first tries. I finally learned to swim when I was seven at the city pool in Wausau. I had almost no fat, so I couldn't float. Roger and I would go down to the pool, pay ten cents to enter, and spend the afternoon diving. I would dive into the two foot end of the pool, never touching the bottom except with my hands, and glide to where the water was about four feet deep. I would end up standing up to my chest in water. So, I learned to dive and swim under water first, and always found it more comfortable than trying to stay afloat. At nine, we took lessons, and I learned enough to swim twenty feet and pass the test. With enough ability to finally swim in the deep, ten foot, end of the pool, my first day out I headed for the high diving board. Since I didn't like the struggle to stay afloat, my time at pools was spent doing flips and other dives, and swimming great distances under water. I practiced holding my breath until I could stay under water for up to two minutes. Since I wouldn't float, even with air in my lungs, I enjoyed scaring people by swimming to

the bottom and lying there, relaxed, until they became concerned that I was in trouble. Or I would enter the pool in a busy spot, swim under water to a distant side and sneak out, while observers couldn't see where I'd gone. It was fun to sneak back to where they were sitting and go to the pool's edge again where they'd seen me disappear into the water.

We started picking beans when we were nine. In July and August, Roger and I would meet school buses and cars at the school playground, ride fifteen to thirty miles to green and yellow string bean fields, and then pick beans for the farmer all day. Depending on the quality of the beans, I could pick 70 to 90 pounds in a day. We got paid up to 3 cents a pound and were happy for it. Although I usually picked more than Roger, I was envious of the 15 and 16 year old girls who often picked over 100 pounds. Finally when I was 13, the beans were especially good one day and I picked 105 pounds, not enough to beat the big girls but more than ever before. Then, one day that summer, the farmer offered a 50-cent bonus for the most beans picked. I tried my best that day and picked 100 pounds, more than anyone else, and proudly took home $3.50 for my ten-hour workday. Mom had us put the money in the bank in our savings account. It helped buy school clothes in the fall.

Bandura proposed a theory of single trial learning. Through experiments with monkeys and babies, he observed that only humans and monkeys possess the ability to learn a set of complex psychomotor motions by observation and imitation, and then repeat them in one try. Without lessons, that's how I learned to ride a bike, dive, water ski, and many other things. I built up a repertoire of psychomotor skills by the time I was nine or ten so that I could just do things that others required lessons to learn. From an early age, I stood on the seat behind my father and watched him drive. So, at the age of nine, when he let me drive his '54 Ford out in the hay field, I already knew how to drive. As I "soloed" my first time out, I waved at my grandfather when I passed him on his tractor. I had no difficulty with the car, but when I returned from my tour, I overheard my dad being chastised for, "...Letting those kids drive!" I had to wait after that until I was sixteen and had completed Drivers' Training before I got behind the wheel of the family car again. I tried hard enough in Boy Scouts to earn merit badges in swimming and life saving, but it wasn't until I took a required swimming course my freshman year in college that I learned how to swim. The instructor, Mr. Johnson, a strict disciplinarian who was also the athletic director and a sports legend, told us that no one would pass the course without learning to float. I tried and tried, but never floated. But I

learned to swim. I left the course with an "A" and a new found sense of security in the water.

I hadn't let that bother me though. My mind always seemed more mature than my body. By the time we were fourteen, Roger and I were Explorer Scouts and spent a week at the wilderness explorer base on the Flambeau River. Part of the week was canoe training and a two-day, sixty-five mile trip down the river. It had rained a lot and the river was nearly at flood stage. We had a wet, wild ride, and water flew high over the bow many times as we dove over five foot drops, but we never swamped. I learned to avoid rocks and dangerous spots that would swamp or wreck a canoe. It was cold and wet and hard work, but we weren't afraid of the river. Our worst problem was sunburn.

The next summer we joined an elite group going to the Quietico-Superior wilderness area, a region of thousands of glacier-created lakes and rivers as primitive as it was when the first French voyagers came there in the 1600s. Our group consisted of an adult leader and six scouts in three canoes. Roger and I were the smallest, weighing in about 80 pounds each. One scout who was a year older and more mature-looking was elected the group leader. The guys paired off. Since our canoe was the lightest in the water, we got a rider and the heavy food pack. A route was charted that would take us in a loop extending 97 miles over six days. The first portage was the toughest, because we had never carried a seventy pound canoe before, but the food pack was a ninety pound killer too. Somehow, I managed to prop the canoe up against a tree, get under it, lift it to an unsteady balance on my shoulders, and walk unsteadily the hundred yards of rocky, sometimes muddy, trail to the next lake. Roger complained of the agonizing weight of the food pack. By the end of the trip the food pack was light and Roger was able to carry the canoe, unassisted, over a five-mile portage. I was proud of him; I couldn't do that.

The adult leader insisted that we rise at 5 am each morning. Most of us were reluctant to get up because we had spent the night in scout issue tents without mosquito netting. It was August and quite warm, and the mosquitoes would come up in clouds and attack us most of the night and sometimes during the day. Crawling down into our sleeping bags worked for some, but it was too hot and exposing hands or faces resulted in numerous bites. So, I came up with a solution. I dispensed with the tent and placed four tall stakes in a square pattern at the head of my sleeping bag. I put my spare wool blanket over the stakes, making a small tent over my head. It was still too hot, and the sound of thousands of mosquitoes buzzing

just overhead above the blanket was unnerving, but soon everyone was following my lead. The adult leader had a pup tent with netting, so he didn't have problems sleeping.

Each morning was a race to see who would lead and the others would paddle way ahead. But both the adult and chosen leaders, capable of carrying their canoes and packs quickly over portages and paddling to the lead, got us lost the first couple of days. After that, they gave me the map, and I navigated from the physical characteristics of the landscape for the rest of the trip. We never got lost again and made good time with my estimates.

Starting so early and pushing so hard resulted in everyone stopping to rest about 2 pm. They literally fell out and went to sleep when we arrived at the chosen campsite. No one wanted to cook supper, so I took it upon myself to cook the meals. After I gathered wood, built a fire, and cooked a meal, they would get up one by one, and eat. We saw much evidence of bears, especially among wild blueberry patches. But we were spared a confrontation, perhaps because food was so plentiful for them that time of year.

The way we were traveling put us behind schedule. One day the wind was to our backs and we were on a thirty-mile long lake. I lashed a mast in camp. Everyone laughed at my crude attempt at sailing as they took off, way ahead of us. I rigged a sail made from a tarp. By holding the mast up with my feet in the front of the canoe, and holding ropes tied to the bottom of the tarp, I sat back and caught the wind while Roger ruddered with a canoe paddle in the rear. Soon, we overtook the others. The adult leader called us over, had us lash the three canoes together, put up another mast and a poncho for a second sail. We were off for a wild ride as the wind and waves increased. We had to lash canoe paddles together to keep them from bending to the breaking point as our tri-hulled sailing machine raced the shoreline. It was exhilarating and tiring, and when the cool wind blew away the mosquitoes, we slept well that night, dreaming of the thirty miles we'd made without paddling.

About the half way point of our trip, we camped with another group on a rocky island. We caught some fish and our leader cooked them. There was a cliff on the island and we started to use it to dive the thirty feet or so to the deep water below. I remember having to dive way out from the slightly sloping outcropping to avoid hitting rocks below, punching the water with a tremendous blow to my hands and head, coasting deep into the cool, clear water, swimming down twenty feet or so until it was dark, and

then, without reaching bottom, swimming upward to the light of the surface. At one point I was standing on the edge watching someone below when one of the guys, I don't remember who, jokingly gave me a push. I couldn't dive from that place so I turned toward him. My feet slipped off the edge and I fell. I caught the ledge with my chest and outstretched arms and a chill ran up my spine. I remember yelling at the guy about how dangerous it was and pictured myself mangled on the sharp rocks below. We had no radio, and it was three days hard paddling to the nearest road. It was no place to be hurt. I didn't tell the leaders what happened, just told the guys not to horse around on those dangerous rocks. Except for sunburn, numerous mosquito bites, paddling blisters, overstrained young muscles, and an insatiable desire for hamburgers, we returned uninjured and better men. I knew I that I thrived on the opportunity and adversity the wilderness presented, and that I could lead, even though I had to accommodate those who were more experienced, older, or physically stronger.

In the beginning, I'd also wanted to be an architect. There was no conflict in my mind that I could be an astronaut and an architect, too. From an early age, many of us in Wisconsin had heard of Frank Lloyd Wright and we wanted to create a new modern world where vehicles and homes would burst the bounds of tradition and emerge into an image created by Buckminster Fuller, Walt Disney, and Werner von Braun. From grade school through high school, I expressed my desire to become an architect. It was safe and respectable. No one in our immediate family had gone to college, so architecture as a profession seemed to be more like a far off dream, unattainable without a special talent, or the backing necessary to enter a school like Wright's. I was good at drafting and, more important, I did well in all my studies: English, math, physics, and chemistry. Still, I possessed no special talent or accomplishment that would catch the eye of a good school or sponsor. Instead, by the end of high school, I was eleventh in a class of 129. I won a small two-year Kiwanis Club scholarship. I was advised to attend a small technical college where I was assured a good education and a good job after four years. College also provided a draft deferment most young men my age were seeking from the Vietnam War.

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The First Accident

The summer of '59 when we were sixteen, my brother and I were unable to get a summer job except as raspberry pickers for a local grower who had some plots in the middle of our town. We didn't start working every day until mid summer. Before that, we did some fishing in local streams and swimming in the afternoons.

The city pool was unheated and it was usually mid June before I could stand to stay in the shockingly cold 60° water very long. Our friends would stake out a warm bench in the sun where we could dry off between sessions of jumping or diving off the high and low diving boards. I perfected a single back flip and a forward one and a half off the low board. I also got pretty good with a lay out single flip off the high board, landing feet first with my toes pointing downward. I would slip all the way to the bottom, and then push off to whatever side of the pool I was headed. One day, in the middle of the flip, I decided to end the dive in a cannonball, hoping to surprise everyone with a big splash. Instead, the momentum created by bending at the waist brought me too far over, and my arms never made it to beneath my knees. I landed still rotating, my chest, face, and arms slapping the water's surface. My arms went numb and my face and chest burned in pain. I swam toward the ladder, but I couldn't feel the motion of my arms or the water against my skin. It was a strange thing I'd never felt before, but one I would come to expect and live with. The feeling soon returned to my arms, but my face and chest still stung from their violent slap with the water. I sat out for a while, maybe fifteen minutes, contemplating what I'd done wrong with the flip, and then I returned to the water.

About two weeks later, we were at the pool again, and joined by friends from our class, John, Wayne, and Jeff. We had developed an active, fun

game that we called "Dibble-Dabble." We played Dibble-Dabble by "burying" a Popsicle stick in 4 to 5 feet of water, and then finding it. All the players stood at the edge of the pool at the 5-foot level. The player in possession of the stick would dive in and, by swimming around near the bottom, try to "hide" where the stick was released. The stick, once released, floated slowly upward, invisible until it got close to the surface. The players on the edge would watch for the stick where they thought it was released. At about 3 feet, the stick could be seen, and the players would jump or dive in to grab it. The turbulence caused by so many people going in and out of the water made the stick hard to grab. Once a player grabbed it, he would swim to the surface and shout, "Dibble-Dabble." Everyone then would climb out of the pool and the player in possession would dive in and bury it again. No one kept score but everyone wanted to get the stick more than the other guy.

The game was very physical, and that kept us warm on cool days, but we purposely avoided hitting one another as we rushed in and out of the water, relying instead on strategy and skill in placing and catching the ever-elusive Popsicle stick. But collisions were unavoidable as each one of us vied for capturing the stick the most.

I was a good player, often jumping or diving to where I expected the stick was placed and relying on my underwater vision and swimming ability to find the stick before others saw it from the surface. This time I saw the stick and jumped in with my fingers outstretched as I slid rapidly to the bottom. The stick had eluded my fingers and was nowhere in sight as I crouched on my feet on the bottom for a moment. Then, I decided to propel myself upward to the edge of the pool where I would pull myself out in a single motion and reenter the game from above where I could see the stick again.

As I pushed off the bottom and started to straighten up, I entered a strange world where my mind was clear and thinking but my body was floating without feeling. My head was above water and I was slithering like a snake to the side of the pool, up over the edge, and to a bench about ten feet from the pool. While sitting on the bench, still amazed how I got there without moving a muscle, feeling came back to my limbs in the form of shooting pain running up and down from the tips of my fingers and toes, through every muscle to my shoulders.

The others were still engaged in the game. No one knew that I was hurt. And because I hadn't cried out or showed any signs of injury, acted in disbelief when I told them that I was seriously hurt and urged me to rejoin

them in the game. Only Wayne showed any sympathy with what I told him, and sat with me while the others played on. It was the beginning of misunderstandings about this kind of injury that has plagued me ever since.

I don't think I ever played Dibble-Dabble again, at least that afternoon. Instead I sat there and felt sorry for myself, watching my brother and buddies play as my arms, hands, legs, chest, and feet suffered thousands of needle-sharp pricks of pain. This strange pain they could only see on my face, but not feel themselves. It was impossible for them to understand what I was going through.

I know now but I didn't know then that at least one of the fourth or fifth vertebrae in my cervical spine had been fractured. I believe that as I pushed off the bottom, one of my buddies saw the stick and jumped in. I believe that a foot or two below the surface, his heels hit me in the neck, causing the injury as I pushed up and he came down. While no one ever admitted to hitting me, I believe I know who did it. Perhaps, in the heat of the game, he actually doesn't remember the blow, or thinks he hit the bottom.

Later, when I refused to continue to play, Roger began to agree that I was hurt. We bicycled the usual two miles to home. I had no trouble doing that. After a couple of nights having difficulty sleeping because my skin kept having that prickly pain, especially against my sheets, my mother sent me to a doctor. The doctor was an osteopath and a distant relative who had a clinic in town. He took x-rays, gave me an "adjustment", and told me that if I took it easy, the pain would go away in a couple of weeks. It did.

Years later, I learned that the x-rays showed at least one hairline fracture and that the adjustment, a procedure used by chiropractors to stretch the muscles and ligaments of the spine by force, could have increased the injury I already had to ligaments, muscle, cartilage, bone, and disk. Fortunately, I didn't feel any worse after the adjustment, but I often wonder about the strange code of medical ethics that prevents a doctor from showing an intelligent sixteen-year-old his own x-rays. But then, withholding information from a patient is safer if there is misdiagnosis. No repercussions or malpractice if the patient never learns the facts.

George and Ron (bareback) sailing Lake Agnes at 16. Three canoes lashed together with sails made from a poncho and tarp. 1958

I lettered in wrestling, track, and Cross Country (right) in high school

4

College Bound

I forgot the injury and got on with my busy life and my junior year of high school. Besides a heavy load of college preparatory classes, Roger and I both joined cross-country, wrestling, and track. Then, to earn spending money, we worked setting pins in a bowling alley four nights a week. We went to football and basketball games most Friday nights, hunted with our buddies on Saturdays and Sundays, and attended a youth church group on Sunday nights. We had to give up Explorer Scouts, but turned our attention to driving and dating on the few free nights we had. This heavy schedule was good for my grades and me, but it turned out to be hard on Roger.

In late October, we went pheasant hunting in the snow one Saturday. We crossed a storm-swollen icy stream up to our waists and were frozen, soaked, and miserable by the time we got back to the car. By Monday night I worked but Roger didn't. We both had developed bad colds. During gym class, one of the football players threw a basketball at Roger from the stage. His reaction was slowed by his cold, and not knowing that the ball was thrown to him, he failed to protect himself and the ball hit him in the chest. After that, Roger started experiencing chest pain and claimed that it was a broken or cracked rib from the ball. That Saturday we traveled 150 miles to a state cross-country meet. The car was overheating so the coaches turned off the heater that they thought was the source of the problem. Roger didn't run because of his cold and sore ribs, but I did. The ground was frozen and it was snowing lightly. After a mile or so running in thinclads, I was

burning up on the inside from exertion and freezing where my skin was exposed. We didn't know about wind chill in those days, but I didn't react to the telltale sign I got either. As I ran full speed down a long hill on the golf course we were running, each stiff-legged step hammered my spine as I hit the frozen ground with as much cushion as I could muster with my foot's instep extended and my knees slightly bent. The numbing pain that hammered through me was excruciating. I didn't finish well and I didn't know that those shocks were different from what the other runners were feeling.

It was very cold going home. By the time we got there, Roger was doubled over in pain. Dad took him to the hospital. With one lung full of fluid, and the other half involved, he nearly died that night. We missed the telltale sign. The pain in his chest was pleurisy and not a cracked or broken rib. He carries scarred and weakened lungs as a legacy. In December he had to undergo major surgery to remove heavy scar tissue from his left lung.

In his weakened condition, even with a good recovery, Roger was no longer an identical match, pound for pound, muscle for muscle, from that to measure my strength. With our attention drawn to him, it took me longer to read the signs of my own condition.

And they were many. While I handled pins and sixteen-pound bowling balls with ease at the bowling alley, the first hint of weakness came in wrestling. Early in the wrestling season, the coach dropped in on a local country bar and caught the entire varsity above my weight class, mostly seniors, drinking beer. The coach kicked them all off the squad. This gave me more opportunity, even though there were still seniors at my weight. I was still learning all I could about wrestling, especially leg moves like the figure four and grapevine, and I was very good at takedowns. Still, I lacked the upper body strength to hold my opponents and the neck strength to get me out of trouble when I landed on my back. I thought that I just lacked muscle maturity, but the signs were already there. I lost some big matches that spring, but figured I'd do much better in my senior year. By turning to leg moves, I was already compensating.

The first meet of the track season was an indoor one at Stevens Point. I was a developing pole-vaulter and 440 yard sprinter. In my sophomore year, I had reached 10' 6" pole vaulting and hoped to make 13 to 14' by my senior year. My 440 times had been about 60 seconds, but I always felt that I could do much better. The pit for pole vaulting was filled with sand instead of the usual wood shavings. The runway was dirt instead of the usual cinders and the field house lights overhead were more distracting. We

didn't have a field house so our track was still snowbound. I had only practiced in our gym, so I spent a lot of time practicing that night before the meet. I was having trouble turning and pushing off after clearing the bar with my legs. One time I fell headfirst and broke my fall with my left hand. I felt a sharp pain in my wrist, but shook it off as a muscle pull and continued to vault.

I don't think I made 9 feet that night. Things were worse in the 440. I got off to a good start, leading the pack. But, by the time I reached the fourth corner, I'd run out of gas and finished last. My consolation was that a spectator, a teacher whose twin sons were younger and "stars" for their ability in the 100, 220, and half mile, said, "You have the best form of all the runners." Intrinsically, I knew I had the best form, but I couldn't figure out why I couldn't push on past the pain in my tightening legs t o win.

My coach told me to have my wrist checked the next morning if the swelling didn't go down. It didn't, and X-rays showed that I had a green break in a small bone. The wrist was in a cast for twenty days. I continued to run and returned to pole vaulting late in the season, but I never regained the momentum of my sophomore year. I blamed my "weak" left arm and wrist to the two broken bones. I would continue to use that as an excuse for the next three years.

The summer after our junior year, Roger and I started working in a mobile home factory. The work, building wall framing, was not heavy. But it was fast-paced and we drove hundreds of eight-penny nails a day. My right wrist and arm were noticeably strengthened by all the exercise, but Roger, in spite of his weakened condition from his bout with pneumonia, continued to beat me in all contests of arm or wrist wrestling.

My senior year I did well in cross-country, but not as well as I expected and wanted. One teammate, a junior whose chest had been crushed when he was run over by a loaded hay wagon at thirteen, continually beat me when it came to the "kick" past the two-mile mark. Roger and I had quit riding our bicycles to school. So one night after cross-country practice, I accepted a ride for the two miles we usually walked home. As I got in the car my right thigh knotted in pain. I was told that it was a "Charley Horse". I had never heard of a Charley Horse or experienced a muscle spasm before. It was another sign that would become very familiar.

In wrestling, I was the "old man" now. But, I had to "wrestle-off" with my twin brother to make the team. Roger was too easy to beat, and I regretted that we were in the same weight class. He caught pneumonia again before Christmas, and never returned to practice. It was a relief for

me because I hated to be pitted against him in his weakened condition. I did have a rival though. He was a strong sophomore whose older brother was a fellow senior in a lower weight class who had finished high in state tournament competition. We had to wrestle-off before every varsity match. By this time I was relying on my knowledge and agility rather than strength, and won half the wrestle-offs by using the grapevine or figure four. I learned how to arch my back and strengthened my neck trying to avoid being pinned by stronger opponents like him. It was undignified, but I avoided the worse indignity of being pinned. We shared the spotlight and both earned letters, but he got the big matches and got to complete in the tournaments. I taught him every thing I knew, and, two years later he was State Champion at 127 lbs.

When track season arrived, I couldn't pole vault well enough to make the team. Several times I was first out of the blocks and led the pack in the 440, only to tighten up in the home stretch when I should have won with ease. I blamed my pole-vaulting performance on my weakened left arm. My 440 performance was blamed on my starting out too fast and not "gutsing it out" in the stretch. My coach put me in the 100 yard dash to resolve the pulling-up problem, but even though I was usually first off the starting line, sophomores beat me at the tape.

That summer before college was spent working twelve-hour days at the mobile home factory so there wasn't much time for me to think about why I was failing in sports. I was making good money, enjoying my free time with my brother and other friends, and looking forward to college in the fall. We decided to visit a grade school friend, so went to see him one Sunday. Our friend lived on a lake and had bought a boat. He had water skiing gear and we spent the afternoon skiing. He didn't have a slalom ski, but after jumping the wake and other maneuvers, I tried a one-ski trick where I would bend my knee and lift one ski off the water while I slalomed across the wake with the other ski. I wasn't paying attention because the trick was quite easy. I let the front of the ski I was holding up drop, and, when its tip entered the water the sudden drag caused me to lose my grip on the rope as I cartwheeled forward violently.

I ended up floating in my life vest, numb from the neck down, just like the earlier swimming accident. I got into the boat with shooting pains in my arms and legs and decided not to ski any more that day. A little while later I changed my mind and skied for a half hour straight just to prove that I was only temporarily hurt. I didn't try that one ski trick again; I don't recall ever doing it again.

My freshman year in college, I went out for wrestling and track. Before that, I got my first stitches. One Saturday we were free swimming in the university pool. I enjoyed cannonballing one of the bigger football players who was twice my size. I would leap from the side or spring board and splash him thoroughly as he tried to swim away. To get even, he tried to get me too, but I would dive under water or dodge his splash. One time after he had missed, I started to swim away. He came up from the bottom and his head struck me in the chin. The force of the blow didn't knock me out, but it put my teeth through my lower lip. We went to the emergency room where I got stitched up, and then we stopped for hamburgers on the way back to the dorm. My lower lip felt like a ball of raw meat from the inside. The hamburger went down easily.

In college wrestling, I relied entirely on my leg moves and the strength of my neck. On the mat my opponents would easily pull away from me, so I specialized in takedowns and escapes that led to high-scoring matches. I often lost. In the weight room, I could easily squat lift or leg lift 350 lbs, more than some of the football players. My biggest concerns were weight control, colds, and my ears. I limited my diet and liquid intake to the point of dehydration. Over the Christmas Holidays, I reached 145 lbs. I wrestled that season at 130. I caught colds easily, and found "hitting the mat" caused painful sinus headaches. Large doses of vitamin C tablets helped eliminate the colds, but my ears presented another problem. Four years of punishment without headgear caused painful swelling. I decided to quit wrestling.

I don't remember much about that track season except that I didn't win anything and decided that I wasn't going to be a college athlete. My grades were good and I was participating in many activities, so I didn't miss sports and the time they took.

That summer I got a job as a draftsman for Praschak Machine, a local company that made concrete block machinery. The chief engineer had a drafting machine that I never used. Using a T-square and triangles, I became quite proficient at machine drafting.

It was a heady time to be in college. As freshmen, Roger and I had participated in the boycott of a local hangout that had refused to serve Black football players. At the alternative, a country bar for some reason called Alcatraz, we learned a new dance, the twist, and how to crowd the dance floor. There was a feed sack on a stage bearing a target from some turkey shoot, and one night a skunk under the floor made the place uninviting to all but the local regulars. In spite of this we mobbed the place on weekends and I became quite good at the new dances that seemed to be

invented weekly. John Kennedy was president and we were going to the Moon. I wanted to be a part of everything: the Civil Rights Movement, the end to the Cold War, and the Space Program. I wrote to Christopher Craft, administrator for NASA in Houston, asking about working with the astronauts. He wrote back that I should get a good education. In spite of being in a school that didn't stress academics, I intended to.

One day in the early spring of 1963, Roger and I were working on drafting machines in an open lab. Always competing, Roger said that I was operating the drafting machine wrong. He showed me that I should be rotating the drawing edge knob with my left hand, leaving my right hand free to draw. While I was moving the drawing edge around the board with ease, when it came to rotating it to the 30 and 45-degree positions, I was using my right hand to assist my left to rotate the tool into position. He said, "See, the reason you can't do it is that you don't have any muscle on the back of your hand!" He compared his left hand to mine and he was right. His hand was filled in with muscle, while the tendons on the back of mine, leading to each knuckle stuck out from the hollow spaces between them. We compared right hands and they were okay. Suddenly it dawned on us why I always lost to him in arm and wrist wrestling. There was something wrong with my left hand. We didn't talk about it again that spring but it would come up again that summer.

A President's Commission on Physical Fitness had determined that America's youth were not physically fit. President Kennedy recommended walking as something almost everyone could participate in. He liked fifty-mile walks. Soon, walking fifty miles became a fad. An enterprising student at our college set up a walk from Menomonie, where our school was, to Eau Claire, the next, larger city with rival, Eau Claire State, and back, a distance of fifty miles. As a warm-up, his group walked twenty miles to a nearer town the Saturday before.

I was working on a term paper when the walkers came back into town that first Saturday. The paper was the best that I'd done, describing a closed ecological environment for interstellar space flight. It was a subject potentially interesting to scientists, engineers, and architects, but not necessarily to my Expository Writing professor. My graphic of the closed system was especially good, but I remember having trouble finding adequate source material in our library. I also remember having trouble with the "a" on our ancient Royal manual typewriter. I got cramps using the little finger on my bad left hand, and had to "force" the a each time I typed it.

Roger and our roommate, Bob Kraiss, had delayed their papers that were due the same time as mine. We all went to our second story apartment window to watch the walkers pass. I remember asking Bob what was going on and he told us that they were preparing for a fifty mile walk the next Saturday and that he was going to participate. My brother and I decided to join Bob on the walk. I turned in my paper early and made some preparations to walk further than I ever had before.

On Friday night I put together a lunch of sandwiches, cans of pop, and Hershey chocolate bars that was light and full of energy. The lunch would be carried out to us each hour by cars, so I planned to eat lightly all day and drink plenty of the pop. At the last minute, Roger and Bob backed out, claiming that they had to finish their papers that were due Monday morning.

Saturday morning at 6 am, nineteen of us showed up at the starting point: eight women and eleven men. I felt alone without my friends, and just watched the others talk about their new hiking boots and their plans for the walk. I was wearing my well-worn black high top "tennies" that my mother bought at J. C. Penney. The talk of expensive hiking boots by Seniors I didn't know was a bit intimidating, but I felt comfortable in those old shoes and knew they wouldn't bother me. I was worried though about a former track teammate who was tall and in good shape. He was a good half miler and I expected him to set the pace. The men did most of the talking, but I knew the women were going to have to be reckoned with too.

Everyone took off at a pace that belied a fifty-mile journey. I didn't want to tighten up so I settled into a fast, comfortable walk of about four miles an hour. After about two miles, I started passing some of those who started off too fast. Among them, the track star was limping, complaining of shin splints. I never saw him again, but he did finish.

It was one of those beautiful clear May days, when the sun and the pavement were not too hot, ideal for the walk. Most of the route was on lightly traveled County Road E with only an occasional speeding car and the hourly relief car with my cache of goodies. I started walking with a freshman girl from New York. She was athletic and tough, and annoyed me by wanting to "track it" down every downgrade. I would jog a bit, trying to avoid that jarring that came from running straight-legged downhill on pavement. I spent a lot of time catching up, but eventually we settled in to just walking.

There was a restaurant at the twenty-five mile point. Most of the walkers had not prepared adequate food for the walk, were hungry, and

stopped to eat. We waited a half hour for some of them to eat before heading back. We started walking with a guy who had worn loafers. He had huge blisters on his heels and soon had to drop out at thirty miles. The ones with new boots all developed blisters and other foot problems and followed suit. I had to stop at about forty miles with my own foot problem. My little toenail on my left foot was too long, and, after miles of walking, started to dig into the toe next to it. I was lucky. Instead of having to stop in pain, I just sat down under a tree, took off my shoe and sock, broke off the offending toenail, put my sock and shoe back on, and resumed walking. By forty miles, we were walking with the lead couple. The woman said that she had to rest, and dropped back. The three of us walked on, my companions slowing and complaining. I was starting to tighten up badly, so I wanted to walk faster to stretch my legs. I wanted to walk on in with my newfound friends, but they wanted to rest. I knew that if I rested, I would have to ride in. So, I took off alone, leaving them resting their weary, sore feet under a tree. Walking faster again, I felt good, but it was strange walking alone on the main highway into town against the sun in the late afternoon. People coming into town who could see that I was tired and looked in need of assistance offered me rides. They knew nothing of the walk. I waved them off. I did stop for a few minutes to talk to a local radio reporter who tape-recorded an interview with me by the roadside. I was impatient and anxiously wanted to head on in. I'm not sure what I said, something about eating right and staying in shape, but I never heard the interview on the radio. Others told me they did.

I arrived at the starting point about 5 pm, eleven hours after we started. No one greeted me. After a half hour, the school photographer came by and we rode out in his car to see where the others were. They were strung out for twenty miles. The two I left under the tree arrived at about 6 pm and the others came straggling in after that. Finally, one woman, with the help of two cyclists carrying lights, was the eleventh and last one to finish. In all, six women and five men finished the walk. That day, I learned who was the toughest when it came to the superiority of the sexes.

Although I was dead tired, I couldn't sleep that night. If my feet hurt, I didn't know it, but every muscle in my legs cramped and knotted in pain. To add salt to my wounds, my brother and roommate skipped across the street as we left for church the next morning, forcing me to limp after them in pain.

That afternoon, I claimed my reward. The Rendezvous Bar offered a free large pizza with the "works'" to all who finished. It was my first pizza

with the works and a bit overwhelming. Of course, my brother and friends helped me eat it, and my stomach hurt too much to eat much of it. My fellow walkers who finished and earned their own free pizzas were not there, all too sick and tired to accept their reward.

My paper, turned in early, got lost, but when the professor finally found it again, earned an "A".

The summer of 1963 was a busy one. Roger bought a 1935 Ford three window coupe that had been chopped and channeled, with a dropped front axle, Z-ed frame, and a 1949 Cadillac overhead valve V-8 engine. We paid $100 for coupe and it needed a lot of work. I bought my father's ‘57 Ford Fairlane 500 back from a local schoolteacher who had had it for a couple of years, and had the engine rebuilt. They no longer needed my drafting skills at Praschak Machine, so we went back to work at the mobile home factory, Rollohome. Early in the summer I started dating a secretary for the school superintendent. Doris was a recent high school graduate with no immediate plans for college, but intensely interested in marriage. She was engaged to the guy she dated before me, but ditched him after our first date. I was surprised when she asked me to marry her that very first date. Her directness caught me off guard. We dated steadily, but I wanted to finish college before assuming the responsibilities of marriage.

The ‘35 hot rod consumed much of my time. Working on and under that old car gave me a sense of accomplishment, and time to think that I relished. It was the kind of summer that should have gone on forever. I had been on the Dean's List four straight semesters; my father and mother were both working making good money. My grandmother shared a little trailer beside our house and helped my fifteen-year-old sister take care of our twin four-year-old brothers. I had a girlfriend, a great brother, a car to drive, and a car to play with. The summer of ‘63 was as close to Camelot as I got. It was a point of great beginnings. I wasn't sure what, but it marked the major turning point in my life. As the Kennedy family would suffer, so would mine. And through our unrelated suffering, we would struggle to regain that wholeness we once knew in summers when anything was possible.

Sometime that summer, Roger told my mother of the weakness he had found in my left hand. When we compared hands for her, she became concerned, and asked me to go back to the osteopath to try to see what was wrong.

I went to Dr. Middlestadt again. After examining me, he gave me an adjustment and determined that my weakness might be a muscle disease or a spinal problem caused by having one leg longer than the other. He gave

me a series of niacin shots to improve my circulation, asked me to wear a lift in one shoe, and ordered me not to lift more than five pounds. Finally, my mother, dissatisfied with the diagnosis and treatment, asked him to refer me to the local clinic.

The Marshfield Clinic was associated with St. Joseph Hospital, had many specialists, and was considered to be second only to the Mayo Clinic in the entire region. Just before I went back to college, I got an appointment. The neurologist who examined me took one look at my left hand and immediately said that I had neurological damage. He took muscle tests. The grip test was the most telling. He said that a man of my age and stature should have a grip of 250 lbs in each hand. I could only squeeze 175 lbs with my right hand and 50 with my left. Clearly, something was wrong with my spine. He introduced me to a neurosurgeon, Dr. Salibi. Salibi wanted to do further tests in a hospital. When he learned that I was going back to college soon, Salibi said that he would schedule the tests for me at St. Joseph Hospital over the Thanksgiving break.

1935 Ford Coupe in October 1962, a year before I destroyed our work.

5

The Accident Before the Accident

The fall of 1963 I had renewed concern for my future. I went to the career office and took the Strong Interest Blank. Later, I learned that the Strong Interest Blank was very valid and reliable for determining a person's interests, especially over time. The Interest Blank did this by comparing a person's interests with those of specific professions. My highest interest aligned with those of jet pilots, followed by chemists and production managers. What is significant is that my highest interest was not the same as an architect, and that my interest in being a teacher was quite low. From time to time, thoughts of these results would haunt me. But then, I decided to abandon my plan to go on the graduate school in architecture and instead focus on industrial technology and production management. The last thing on my mind was training to be a jet pilot in the Vietnam War, but at least two of my classmates did. One from my hometown rode home as a passenger in my car many weekends, became a Marine pilot after graduation, and died over Vietnam leaving his wife and child behind. The other, a math whiz and rival in physics classes, I don't know what happened to.

That fall, I was enrolled in an auto mechanics course. By the end of September, I brought the 35 Ford to the shop for repairs. I had been going home every weekend to see Doris. That weekend, Doris and the girlfriend of another freshman student, John Loveland, who left his car at home in Marshfield and rode in my car decided to come to Stout instead.

Friday night the girls arrived early in John’s car. We toured the campus and arrived where the street dance would be, as it was turning dark. No one

was there yet, so I suggested that we take a ride in the hot rod, parked nearby, outside the auto shop at Frykland Hall. I had just tuned it up and was interested in how it would run on the road. I picked a route that would lead out of town on a road where I could "open it up," then take a narrow, steep and curvy road back into town, a circuit of about seven miles that I'd taken the hot rod on a couple of nights before.

We drove west out of town, across the river and up a grade that would lead to top of the hill about three miles to the road I would take to the right. It was a smooth, wide asphalt state highway, with wide shoulders, and almost straight, perfect for testing the power of the newly tuned Cad V-8. I accelerated from the start, and we were laughing and talking as we enjoyed the exhilaration of acceleration. About two miles out and eighty miles an hour, John, in the back seat yelled, "Watch out!"

I saw a black or gray panel truck pulling into my lane from a street that angled onto the highway from the right. It was a ‘50s model Chevy panel van with one taillight and no signals. The driver, a 16 year old, said later that he pulled out because my low headlights were “dim and appeared far away.” I think he probably never really looked but just pulled out onto the highway.

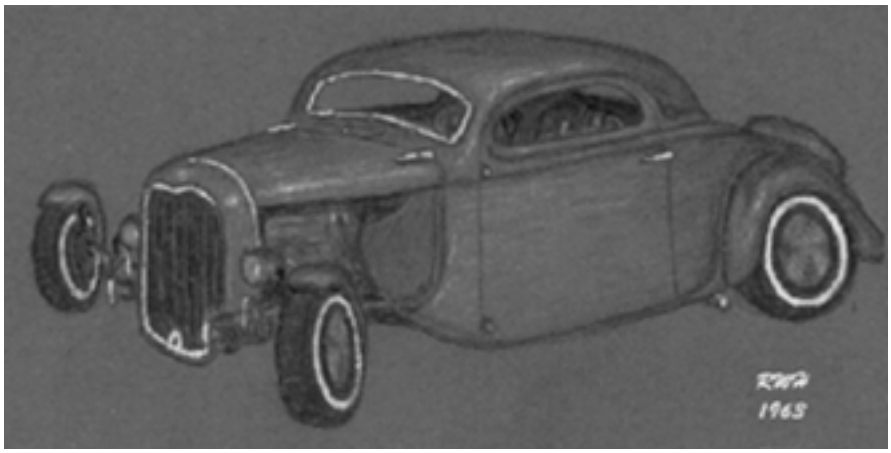
I hit the brakes and clutch with all my might. As the weight of the heavy engine and four passengers shifted forward, the rear of the light car came off the pavement, putting all the braking on the front tires. The car drifted to the left and I could not control it. We slid across the oncoming lane in the face of a terrified woman in an oncoming car. Fortunately, we continued off the road to the left with the rear of the car catching up on the left. Soon, the car was sideways and still going more than fifty miles an hour as we slid across the shoulder to the darkness of a steep down slope beyond. As the rubber reached the heavy grass of the bank, I said to myself, "Don't catch.... Don't catch...!"

But both front and rear left wheels dug into the soft dirt beyond the gravel shoulder. The car lurched downward to the left, we stopped momentarily, and then it was airborne, and rolling rapidly. It seemed like a long time before we touched ground again, but when we did, we rolled and rolled, and the hood and trunk lids flew up and both doors flew out. I was hitting the roof in one instant, and then the seat the next. I remember reaching up and out of the open door and grabbing the roof to keep from flying up and down. Suddenly, I sensed that my arm could be cut off if the door closed, and I pulled it in. At that point, I was forced out the door, my left knee caught up under the dash against the door as my face was pushed

into grass and dirt and the car rolled one last time about three feet above me. It landed on its wheels and rolled backward to a stop at the bottom of the ditch. Its headlights were still shining on me. My left knee hurt, but I got up and yelled if anyone was hurt. John and his girlfriend in the back seat yelled back that they were OK, and I quickly found Doris lying on her back on the slope, head down. There was blood on her forehead and she said that she couldn't move her legs or arms.

There was a college bar nearby. Suddenly, there were a hundred people milling about. I don't remember an ambulance, but we all went to the emergency room. My friend had a badly bruised ankle. His girlfriend received a stitch on her eyelid. Doris received a couple of stitches for a head cut and a split finger tip, and some painkillers for her many bruises. I got eight stitches above my left knee for a puncture wound from the bottom edge of the dashboard. We were all very lucky.

We didn't get to the dance. Instead, I had to tell Roger that I'd totaled his car, and we drove my friend's car the 100 miles to get the girls home. For all its violence, I don't recall any injury to my neck in the wreck. Instead, my girl took a week off so that her bruises could heal and her finger could heal so she could type, and the rest of us returned to class Monday morning. Two months later, I was paralyzed.



My rendering of the completed car, to be painted a violent violet

Roger, Judy, Tom, Tim, and Ron. Christmas 1962

Third from the right, I wrestled and ran track my freshman year.

6

The Second Accident

The neurosurgeon's office called and told me that Dr. Salibi wanted me to check into St Joseph's Hospital Sunday night. Stout was strict about the "no cut days" before holidays, so I had to get special permission from the Dean of Students to take the entire Thanksgiving week off for my tests. I was ready to go into the hospital, feeling a bit sorry for myself.

Early in November, Doris was a bridesmaid for her cousin. I couldn't attend the wedding because I was finishing replacing the fender on my '57 Ford. When I got to the reception I sat with her parents, but she was with the wedding party and sat next to the best man and brother of the groom, a submariner, stationed in North Carolina. She left with him. A week later he returned to base and I heard that they were engaged. She wasn't the only friend I lost. I soon found out how fragile friendships are.

Early that week, I had the tests. The only one I remember was the myelogram on Monday morning. Dr. Salibi and a neurologist were present. They placed me face down on a cold x-ray table. Then, after deadening an area in the small of my back with Novocain, they explained that they were injecting a heavy radioactive dye into my spinal fluid. They tilted the table downward, allowing the fluid to flow along my spine toward my head, observing its progress through a fluoroscope.

The doctors were saying, "That's a good one!", and stopping to take x-rays, so I knew they had found something. I didn't know that they didn't know what it was they were looking at until later that week.

I had to lie on my back in bed for 48 hours. I was told that air bubbles introduced into my spinal fluid when the dye was removed would cause terrible "myelogram headaches". Later, I would have the displeasure of experiencing them. It was hard for an active 20 year old to stay down, but I dutifully avoided getting up, even to urinate, and felt no headaches as my reward.

On Thanksgiving morning, my parents and I met with Dr. Salibi. He explained that the myelogram showed pressure on my spinal cord, but he couldn't tell what was causing it was without surgery. He said that it could be enlarged disks, bone spurs, or a sac of fluid from the earlier injury. Or it could be a tumor. Salibi considered that unlikely. We agreed to go ahead with the surgery, even though it meant that I wouldn't be going back to school after the holiday. Not until after Christmas. The surgery would take that long to heal. I remember him telling us that there was always a chance of paralysis, especially if it was a fluid sac or tumor. And death... I chose to ignore that prospect, but some would choose the freedom of death over the prospect of life confined to a body that does not move or function without help. I don't know what my parents thought, but I focused on enduring the pain of surgery so that I could return to school in a couple of weeks with the problem in my neck fixed. Since I never had experienced paralysis, I considered it a problem that I could overcome with healing and physical discipline. I was wrong.

I had a sinus infection so the neurosurgeon postponed an operation until he was assured that antibiotics had cleared it up. In the meantime, I explored the hospital, waiting for time and treatment to clear the infection and a date of surgery. I had a semi-private room. My first roommate was a German farmer in his 70s who was also a legendary deer hunter. I had hunted with gun and bow several seasons without seeing a buck I could shoot. I admired and envied these old timers who always got a deer, year after year. He was having a colostomy reversed. The year before, he had shot a deer, and then, without help, had tried to drag it back to camp, and in his words, "Busted his guts." He told me that he had a deal with his doctor to wait until after he got a deer this year before he would come in to have his colon reattached. He bragged that he never missed shooting a buck. In fact one year at his favorite stand he said that he shot six bucks and then waited for members of his hunting party to come by and tag them. This year, he got his buck the first day so he could get his operation over with.

I hung out in the patient lounge, playing pool with myself and watching television. I don't remember exactly when Jack Kennedy was shot. I must

have been the only one in America. But I was watching when Oswald was brought out, only to see Jack Ruby shoot him, cutting short the frenzy that would have ensued, leaving only a dull emptiness that I was to feel more than most. My depression about losing Doris and my anxiety about the upcoming operation wrapped me in a cloak of doom.

There were loud screams that came from down the hall. Talk in the patient lounge was that a twenty-three year old woman had received too much anesthetic during a gall bladder operation. Her heart had stopped beating for eight minutes, causing brain damage. I don't know exactly what happened to her, but I had time to think of a young mother whose life had been changed forever by an accident during surgery to save her life.

My grandmother Hull had had a gall bladder operation. I remember her showing us a large stone in a jar, as if confirming the need for the operation. My next roommate was a big, strong middle-aged man who gave me a new respect for the gall bladder. He was brought in so sick that he thought that he was going to die. After his emergency operation, he acted as if he still was going to die, yellow bile oozing out of him in a river of pain. It made me think that I would never put off needed surgery like he did because I was too poor, busy, or afraid like he was.

I started to get a bad reputation on the ward. Here I was hanging around the halls with a sinus infection, while the nurses had to deal with an increased number of patients who always come with the stress and overeating of the holiday season. The head nurse, who was also a Nun, treated me with disdain. My nose was dry and irritated. When it bled as it always did in winter in those days, she grabbed me and squeezed my nose so hard it bled more before it stopped. I was used to stopping the bleeding myself by simply holding a handkerchief under it gently until it stopped. Her approach seemed violent and unnecessary—like she felt my hospital stay was. She soon learned why I was there. Once she heard, I didn't see her again.

Surgery was scheduled early on December 4th. My preparation involved shaving my head from my ears back. The intern who shaved me covered it with gauze that he attached with adhesive tape. When I was wheeled into a pre-operation room, I was given a shot and an intravenous tube with a yellow liquid that I think was sodium pentothal. The man then removed the tape using cotton soaked in a liquid I thought smelled of ether. I was quite relaxed but I remember breathing in those fumes to hasten sleep. I do not remember leaving that room.

I do remember waking up in the operating room, and looking up at Dr. Salibi, his face surrounded by bright light. He was saying, "Are you all right?"

At the same time I said, "Hi, Doc. Yes, I'm okay."

But I was not okay, I just felt that way. When I woke up in the room, I felt good. I was acutely aware of everything around me and reacting with a clear head that my sinus condition hadn't allowed before. I felt no pain from the surgery, only a, "tightness," in my neck where a stiff bandage was taped. I couldn't feel anything from my neck down, so I didn't try to move anything, not even my hands.

Everyone was so worried, but I wasn't. I knew the operation wasn't a success, but in my own naive way, I felt that I would walk out of the hospital in a couple of weeks. I was very talkative and buoyant and wanted to play chess or do calculus, but only in my head. If I could have put pen to paper, I think those brilliant thoughts would have evaporated, leaving only the garbled ramblings of an accelerated stream of consciousness. It was only the morphine talking. Still, I am grateful that the powerful drug spared me from the pain my body must have been going through.

Dr. Salibi came in. He ran a ballpoint pen up the bottom of my feet and poked my hands, feet, arms, and legs with a sharp pin. I felt nothing and moved nothing. He was not encouraged by the results, but said we'd have to wait for the swelling to go down where the five-inch incision had disrupted my spine.

Somehow I had avoided the recovery room and intensive care. But my mother, grandmother, and father took turns staying up all night with me. I didn't move, so I required little. I was hooked up to intravenous feeding and had a catheter for urine, so I just lay there with my thoughts. Nurses would come in and check my vital signs and give me hypos, but day blended to night as I lay there talking and thinking, and staring at the ceiling. Roger had returned to school after Thanksgiving, and was given the onerous task of withdrawing me from school. It was the first time he was alone. The first time he had to make decisions without conferring with me first. While I was coming to terms with my paralysis, Roger was coming to terms with a forced separation from a brother who determined the direction of his life. In some ways the accident was harder on him than it was on me.

In a couple of days, my feeling came back in my legs and feet, and, more encouragingly, movement. Now, when Dr. Salibi used his ballpoint, my toes curled downward in pain. Soon, the bottom of my feet had many blue lines from his tests. My arms and hands were harder to heal. It started

in the neck muscles attached to my shoulders, a combination of itching and tingling, and then moved down my chest and through my shoulders and down my arms. For several days these sensations grew and grew, until at night it felt like, especially when I closed my eyes, like my arms were thrust into barrels of biting ants, swarming over and biting my skin nonstop. The tightness in my neck grew tighter, and only the activity of the day with people talking to me kept the demons away. Worse than the ebbing and flowing of my reawakening nerve endings was my lack of sleep. For ten days, I did not sleep. When I tried to relax, put the irritating sensations to a corner of my mind, and close my eyes, my head would pull downward violently toward the strong pull of my bandage, my rigid body would start to rotate backward, and my feet would float toward the ceiling in an accelerating backspin. I was falling backward faster than I had been thrown from the rolling car. The force was immense. Thoughts would rush into my head at the same time. This must have been Hell, and I would always wake up and open my eyes to keep from falling into it. Finally, late one night when I was really strung out and raving, Dr. Salibi appeared in front of me with a needle. As he pushed its contents into my arm, I went out as if hit in the head with a hammer, only to wake up a couple of hours later, at dawn.

Finally, Dr. Salibi sat down and told me what happened in surgery. Operations like mine were done with the patient sitting up in a special frame holding the body and head straight. He didn't tell me, but I always thought that I was given a gas as an anesthetic. A medical student at the Emory Clinic in 1980 told me that operations like mine, a cervical laminectomy, were done using a spinal anesthetic. He also said that the procedure caused many cardiac arrests. Salibi just said that, after he had my spinal cord exposed and was about to try to determine my problem, my heart rate had suddenly slowed, reducing blood pressure to my brain. They had to remove me from the frame, and as Dr. Salibi held my head and shoulders, lower me gently to the operating table. Lying flat on my back, my blood pressure was restored. But hemmorghing in the open incision was causing pressure on my spinal cord. Salibi stopped the bleeding and stitched me up, without ever completing the original exploratory operation. I don't know when it was that he allowed me to wake up on the operating table, but it seems to me he was checking to see if I had brain damage from the cardiac arrest.

He explained that he was going to keep me in the hospital and carefully monitor my progress before allowing me to attempt too much activity, eat,

or urinate without the catheter. He gave me many vitamins and antibiotics, and gradually reduced the morphine.

I knew I was better when I started to complain. My skin had become so sensitive that the sheets bothered me a lot. One morning, I got a dressing gown that felt stiff, course, and scratchy. When the nurse checked it, my chest and neck were covered with a rash. Salibi declared it a reaction to penicillin. It was my first brush with an allergy. Later I would learn to live with many of them.

Gradually, I was put on a liquid diet. After a week without solid food, I longed for a hamburger. My throat was cracked and raw from stomach acid that came up from my empty stomach. Enemas the doctor prescribed did nothing but confirm that I had no food left in my system. Finally, he let me eat an evening meal. It was good, but not enough to satisfy the hole in my stomach. That night my mother brought me a big bowl of popcorn. As therapy, I decided to use the thumb and forefinger of my left hand to pick each kernel up one at a time. It took a long time to eat the popcorn that way and I never did it again. That was the first night I slept.

When the catheter was removed, I thought that I would return to normal urination. Instead, after two days, I developed an overly distended bladder and couldn't urinate at all. The doctor reinserted the catheter. A few days later, he removed the catheter again and I started to urinate frequently into a urinal kept by the bed.

The mean head nurse I spoke of earlier had disappeared. I heard later that some nurses, nurse aides, and orderlies had refused to work with me for fear of hurting me. Instead, several young, energetic nurses treated me with great care. On December 21st, also my 21st Birthday, my family was scheduled to visit at 2 pm. I had eaten lunch and decided to urinate before they came so that I wouldn't have to interrupt the visit. After I finished, I propped the urinal on my hip and reached for the call button that I grasped with my left hand and pushed against my chin to activate. The button was pinned near my head. Reaching for it I tipped over the urinal, soaking the bed and me. When a nurse answered the call, she found another nurse and they changed the bed and me in five minutes. They pulled the new sheets tight across my chest with my arms out on top. Before the nurses left, they decided to crank up my bed so that I'd be sitting up. The sheet was so tight that I was left hanging high by my armpits, unable to wiggle out, until my mother loosened the sheet and let me slide down to a more comfortable position. We laughed. I was relieved.

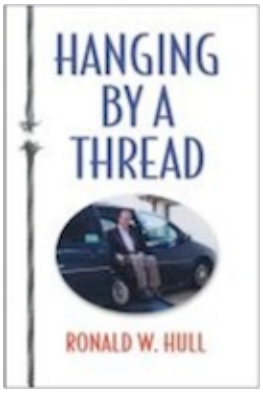
Later that night, some young people visited the young man who awaited surgery in the next bed. They offered me a drink from some liquor they were carrying. That was the closest I got to a party for my 21st Birthday. That Christmas was the hardest. I spent it in the hospital. This was my hometown, but few of my high school friends home from college visited. I got many cards. Some came from people I didn't know. Some came from friends who seemed no longer to be friends. Most said, "Get well soon." I kept explaining that I wasn't sick, only paralyzed. It annoyed me to think that many of my so-called "friends" would expect me to recover fully from some strange illness, but wouldn't rally to my side as I struggled to lead a new life. The hardest lesson I learned was that over half the young people I had reached out to and considered friends would, because of a surgical accident that was a result of nothing I did or deserved, abandon me forever. Some friends I reclaimed much later, like Ruth Kohs from my high school class whom I had chauffeured on dates. She even went with Roger to our Junior Prom, double-dating with my date and me. She was a nurse in the same hospital, but never stopped by to see me. Maybe it was a fear of seeing me "crippled" or maybe it was an awkwardness that many people feel around people with disabilities. Whatever it was, I vowed to go forward and make new friends. But inwardly the hurt remains. I remember lying there alone one day when a group of carolers came by. They stopped outside and sang a couple of beautiful Christmas carols. The music filled me up with emotion. I was so glad that I was still alive. I started to cry uncontrollably. At that moment my sister's best friend stopped by. Taken back by my crying, she almost left. I said, "Wait. Come back. I'm okay." She did, and we talked, but I'm not sure I convinced her that I was crying because I was happy.

My therapy consisted of stretches and forced movements by a physical therapist, accompanied by muscle shock therapy. The movements were painless and daily gave me a better sense of my muscles, their strength, and range of motion. The shock therapy consisted of running a 90-volt direct current through a muscle by attaching two electrode pads. The pads were soaked in a saline solution. The shock caused the muscle to flex, supposedly recreating normal nerve function and preventing muscle atrophy. Muscle atrophy, or a withering of the muscle, occurred in both my hands and arms within a day or two after the accident. While the muscles I still had control of seemed to respond to the therapy and other exercise, the muscles that atrophied reached that state quickly, and never returned to normal or changed after that. I began to hate the shock therapy. For all its

benefits, I flinched at the cold, wet feel of the pads on my skin, the sharp sting of the shocks on my skin, and the burns that left red marks like an octopus all over my arms.

When my legs were ready, I started to sit up and eventually walk. After five weeks, I was released from the hospital. My therapy continued at home or as an outpatient for four months until that summer.

Ron at 20, awaiting surgery with a sinus infection, watching the John F. Kennedy assassination aftermath in the hospital lounge.



Ron Hull was paralyzed during spinal surgery in 1963. Able to walk with atrophied hands and arms, a hand splint enabled Ron to write and return to college with help from a rehab program. Ron's life changed dramatically but he was determined and, with good grades, got a fellowship to Stanford and a job in industry. A doctorate and 45-year career in higher education while the paralysis and discrimination continued to increase is his story.

Hanging By A Thread