

Small Steps:

T H E Y E A R I G O T P O L I O



Peg Kehret

1: The Diagnosis

My ordeal began on a Friday early in September. In school that morning, I glanced at the clock often, eager for the Homecoming parade at four o'clock. As a seventh-grader, it was my first chance to take part in the Homecoming fun. For a week, my friends and I had spent every spare moment working on the seventh-grade float, and we were sure it would win first prize.

My last class before lunch was chorus. I loved to sing, and we were practicing a song whose lyrics are the inscription on the Statue of Liberty. Usually the words "Give me your tired, your poor . . ." brought goosebumps to my arms, but on Homecoming day, I was distracted by a twitching muscle in my left thigh. As I sang, a section of my blue skirt popped up and down as if jumping beans lived in my leg.

I pressed my hand against my thigh, trying to make

the muscle be still, but it leaped and jerked beneath my fingers. I stretched my leg forward and rotated the ankle. Twitch, twitch. Next I tightened my leg muscles for a few seconds and then relaxed them. Nothing helped.

The bell rang. When I started toward my locker, my legs buckled as if I had nothing but cotton inside my skin. I collapsed, scattering my books on the floor.

Someone yelled, "Peg fainted!" but I knew I had not fainted because my eyes stayed open and I was conscious. I sat on the floor for a moment while my classmates collected my books.

"Are you all right?" my friend Karen asked as she helped me stand up.

"Yes. I don't know what happened."

"You look pale."

"I'm fine," I insisted. "Really."

I put my books in my locker and went home for lunch, as I did every day.

Two days earlier, I'd gotten a sore throat and headache. Now I also felt weak, and my back hurt. What rotten timing, I thought, to get sick on Homecoming day.

Although my legs felt wobbly, I walked the twelve blocks home. I didn't tell my mother about the fall or

about my headache and other problems because I knew she would make me stay home. I didn't want to miss that parade.

I was glad to sit down to eat lunch. Maybe, I thought, I should not have stayed up so late the night before. Or maybe I'm just hungry. As soon as I eat, I won't feel so weak.

When I reached for my glass of milk, my hand shook so hard I couldn't pick up the glass. I grasped it with both hands; they trembled so badly that milk sloshed over the side.

Mother put her hand on my forehead. "You feel hot," she said. "You're going straight to bed."

It was a relief to lie down. I wondered why my back hurt; I hadn't lifted anything heavy. I couldn't imagine why I was so tired, either. I felt as if I had not slept in days.

I fell asleep right away and woke three hours later with a stiff neck. My back hurt even more than it had earlier, and now my legs ached as well. Several times I had painful muscle spasms in my legs and toes. The muscles tightened until my knees bent and my toes curled, and I was unable to straighten my legs or toes until the spasms gradually passed.

\$6.95



An Albert Whitman Prairie Paperback®

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ISBN-13: 978-0-8075-7458-4

ISBN-10: 0-8075-7458-9

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