

A GIFT OF FAITH

by Barbara Hattermer

I awoke in the middle of the night. Pins and needle-like sensations traveled up and down my legs, not the kind you feel when a limb "falls asleep," but pins and needles that stabbed deep into my flesh. I thrashed my legs around the bed, finding momentary relief only as I shifted my weight. Afraid I would wake my husband, I struggled to the living room of our small apartment. I was 25 years old, four months pregnant, and working to put my husband through graduate school.

I turned on a light, sat down, and reached for a book on childcare; but I couldn't read. The searing pain persisted. I stood up and staggered around the room. Unable to sit or lie down, I roamed the apartment until dawn.

I planned to work until my baby came. We needed the income. *My baby!* As the thought struck me, I cried out. My husband came running into the living room.

"What's wrong, darling? What are you doing up at this hour?"

"My legs are on fire. I have to keep moving to bear the pain."

He stared at my legs. They looked just like they always had. "Could something be wrong with the baby?" He read my mind.

As we fell into each other's arms, my tears ran freely.

"Call the doctor as soon as his office opens and stay home from work. I'm sorry. I have an eight o'clock class."

"Don't worry, I can handle it." I tried to be brave.

I managed breakfast and waved him off for the day. Dragging myself around the bedroom, I dressed for work. I patted my stomach. *Was my baby all right? Did this terrible pain mean something was wrong?* When I called, I learned my doctor was out of town and explained my symptoms to his assistant.

"It's nothing but pressure from the baby," he said with confidence. "Go to a store and buy a maternity girdle."

"But the pain, doctor!"

"You have to expect a little discomfort when you have a baby," he brushed my anxiety aside. I did as he suggested. It didn't help at all.

I struggled to work each day for two weeks. The doctor had examined me but found nothing alarming. The baby seemed to be fine. His diagnosis remained the same: pressure on a nerve.

The piercing pain settled into an unending ache. I dragged my right leg, which could no longer support my weight. When I explained to my aunt that my legs were losing their ability to function and my doctor seemed not to believe me, she took me to her doctor. He listened to my story, examined my legs, and called an ambulance. "Thank you, Aunt Eleanor. At last someone believes me."

"I'll call your parents in Florida," she said as we parted.

By the time the hospital completed admission and wheeled me to my room, I was paralyzed from the waist down. Everyone now knew that something was wrong. For the first time, I relaxed. No longer able to feel pain, I gave in to sedation and slept.

My parents flew in the next day and engaged a cadre of specialists to care for me. Somber-faced doctors paraded in and out of my room, peering at my legs, sticking pins up and down their length, asking if I felt anything.

Finally, my husband had enough. "My wife is not your pin cushion." He ushered the group of pin-sticking interns out the door.

The moment my obstetrician arrived back in town, he examined me, consulted with other specialists, and removed his assistant from my case. He appeared at the foot of my bed very somber indeed.

"We think you have cancer of the spine," he said. "It may be necessary to take the baby." Mother gasped and let out a muffled sob.

I heard the words but didn't believe them. I, who tended to look on the dark side and expect the worse, rejected the thought. From somewhere unknown to me, a gift of faith settled into my heart. I believed that my baby and I would survive.

"There is an outside chance it is not cancer of the spine," he continued. "I have ordered an ambulance to take you to another hospital for tests."

I remember the siren as we sped to yet another hospital, the concerned faces that greeted me, being wheeled away for the tests, coming back to the room to my waiting parents.

"Don't look so gloomy, Mom and Dad. I'm sure it will be all right."

"If only we'd been here. I can't believe you didn't call us." Mother reprimanded me.

"Mom, I'm so glad you're here now. I really need you." My eyelids grew heavy and I drifted off to sleep.

The next morning I awoke to find Mother in a more cheerful mood. "There are prayer groups all over Pittsburgh praying for you, dear. There are groups in Sweden, England, and Australia where your father has business contacts as well."

"How nice," I said with minimal understanding of the power of prayer.

Soon the doctor appeared at my door smiling. "You are a fortunate woman, there is no cancer. Since the baby is already formed at four months, there is a chance it will be normal, but you must understand it may well be defective. You should consider an abortion."

I looked at Mother who was wringing her hands. "I will keep the baby, doctor."

Where was this attitude coming from? Such optimism was foreign to me.

"We believe you have a rare form of polio," my doctor continued. "The paralysis came on slowly, but now is complete. There will be lasting effects. You may never walk again."

"But I have some sensation in my left big toe, doctor. Might not more and more sensation return?" That was the one thing the pins had detected.

"I can't offer you much hope," he said, "but I'll stop by tomorrow to see if you've changed your mind about keeping the baby."

"There will be no abortion, doctor. I will keep the baby."

Mother and I sat on a bench at the beach. We watched healthy little toddlers running on the sand. Several towhead boys and girls looked like the offspring my tall,

blond, blue-eyed husband might produce. I missed him. He was in school in Pittsburgh completing his degree.

The children splashed at the water's edge and squealed with glee. We watched in silence. In the three and a half months that I lived with Mom and Dad in Florida, we never once talked about what my baby would look like or whether it would ever run carefree on a sandy beach.

After a month in the hospital in Pittsburgh, my parents had flown me to Fort Lauderdale where they lived in a house built around an indoor swimming pool. Following Sister Kenney's water treatment for polio, they helped me into the pool four times a day. On land I could not budge, but in the water I could lift my legs and pretend to dance.

Mother rubbed my legs at night. She fastened a splint on my drooping ankle to hold it in place and prevent tendons from shortening. She made the months pass as pleasantly as possible.

The last two months we went to the beach every day. I could stand and with Mother's help struggle to reach beyond the sidewalk to the edge of the sand. Many days I succeeded in pushing one step further toward the water. The last week, shuffling and crawling the final few feet, I made it to the water's edge.

Mother and I talked about everything but the baby. I would fly to Pittsburgh to give birth. We planned the timing of my return with great care.

My husband greeted me at the airport and wheeled me to his car in a wheelchair.

“Just one month to go,” I said.

“I hope it’s a boy,” he said.

“I’d prefer a girl, but, above all, a healthy baby.” We did not indulge in fantasies about what our baby would look like. “We will love our baby, whatever its condition at birth.” I had no doubt that we had made the right decision not to have an abortion.

The day came when the cramps started. When I told my husband, we looked at each other. Soon we would know. The tension inside us and between us had been building all month.

After the delivery, I held my perfect baby girl in my arms. I counted her little fingers and toes and searched her body for the expected defects. There were none. When my husband arrived, I presented him with a beautiful, healthy, whole, contented baby. The mountain of tension dissolved. The reticence to speak vanished and words of rejoicing poured out. We laughed, we talked, we made plans. As the three of us bonded together in the hospital, it was the happiest week of my life.

Fifteen years later, after my legs had recovered, I met Jesus in a deeply personal way and knew an even greater joy. My first thoughts were of the time of my paralysis and I realized He had His hand on my life back then. The unprecedented optimism and the belief that I would walk again had come from Him. "Father, you gave me the gift of faith even before I knew you." I wept as I realized the full extent of His love.