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SUMMER IN EXILE

e. Ruth Ramsey

Today's headlines count the mounting toll of the AIDS epidemic. Stories tell of families who face the loss, the suffering, and the ostracism engendered when a family member contracts the disease. As I ponder their plight, I am reminded of an earlier time, a no-less-dreaded disease, and the ten-year old child whose life was affected.

On the south edge of Clinton there looms a building that played a pivotal role in my life during that summer of 1962. Known today as the Veterans' Center, it was then known as the Western Oklahoma Tuberculosis Sanatorium, a place where those who had contracted tuberculosis went to be treated until they either recovered or died. Prior to that summer, it was, to me, merely the place where my father worked as a nurse. The check-ups he underwent were merely a part of everyday life--until the day he came home and told us that the tuberculosis in his lungs, long inactive, had flared once more and that he would have to enter the sanatorium for treatment. A subsequent examination revealed that my mother had been stricken too. She also entered the sanatorium, and I was sent to live with Aunt Virginia and Uncle Herbert on the farm they rented near Laverne.

Looking back, I can appreciate the risk of infection that they took in letting me live with them. Since both of my parents were in the active stage of the disease, a real possibility existed that it was infected too.



ART BY MIKE SIGURDSON

A large bottle of I.N.H., a drug used in treating the disease, accompanied me, and I was dosed daily until I developed an allergy to the drug.

In consideration of the risk factor, it's essential to realize that in the early sixties tuberculosis was feared as greatly as AIDS is today. Certainly tuberculosis was more easily spread; and although it could be effectively treated, the disease was still a killer. Those who recovered from a first bout with the disease lived with the constant threat that it could erupt again at any time when their resistance was low. Few people were willing to risk exposure. In my case, the ties of kinship outweighed the risk of infection.

Although the possibility of my parents' dying was also real, it wasn't mentioned to me. At the time, I was ignorant of the potential of the disease to kill. My enforced exile seemed merely a long visit that I had to make so that I wouldn't be sick too. The shadows thrown by death and disease were swallowed up in the bright sunlight of summer days spent playing and squabbling with my cousins.

Life on the farm was radically different from what I had previously known. It came as a major shock to me, a cosseted only child, to be told by my rough-and-tumble cousins to "stop being a sissy!" I spent the rest of my stay trying to prove I wasn't--no mean task for someone as small and frail as I was. Trying to live up to new expectations wasn't the only difference I experienced. I also had to adjust to new circumstances.

The farm sat on the county-line road between Beaver and Harper counties, surrounded by rolling, sandy, sagebrush-covered prairie land different from the gentle red-clay river valley that was my home. The farm consisted of the house, a chicken and brooder house, the garage, a barn, and Uncle Herbert's shop--all places for a curious city child to explore. At night, the black sky covered the prairie like a hood, and the stars and moon took the place of city lights. The nights were often cool, and we slept rolled in blankets while a clean, sage-scented wind blew in the open windows and coyotes howled in the distance.

Aunt Virginia, already busy with seven children of her own,

GIRLHOOD

had her hands full that summer with the addition of a niece. Eight is a "quiver-full" by any measure, and all of us were under fourteen. Work in that size household was endless, and she saw that we older ones did our share. Nelda and I were given ironing, babysitting, and dishwashing chores. We also gathered eggs, a task I enjoyed since each day's gathering seemed to me like an Easter egg hunt with the hens doing the hiding. The older boys did the milking and cared for the cow.

Life wasn't all work, though. We spent many hours playing and not a few scrapping. Herbie and Lennie, the two oldest, took an unholy delight in teasing us younger ones; and the teasing sometimes escalated into all-out war. More often, we younger ones would avenge ourselves during a rousing game of "Coyotes and Dogs."

The rules of the game were simple: the older boys were the "coyotes," and we were the "dogs." The coyotes were hunted and "killed" by the dogs who hurled soft, partially inflated balls in the hope of killing all the coyotes before the dead ones were resurrected by a touch from one who hadn't been downed. We worked off quite a bit of aggression that way, and it was more fun than fighting.

Farm life proved physically beneficial to me. I became brown and lively from days spent in the sunshine and from trying to keep up with my healthier, stronger cousins. I also learned a number of skills I wouldn't have learned otherwise--skills such as plucking a chicken, churning butter, cleaning a fish. Aunt Virginia also gave me my first cooking lessons, and I learned something about babies from caring for the baby, Robert. Yet, despite these activities, I

missed my parents.

Although letters passed back and forth regularly that summer, I was able to visit my parents only once--when my Aunt Ruth came from Colorado for a visit and took all of us to Clinton to visit them. Because children weren't allowed on the ward, my mother met us on the grounds; her tuberculosis testing was negative at the time. I don't remember being allowed to see my father; the visit itself was short.


As we were leaving, I started to cry from the injustice of it all. I didn't want to go back; I wanted my mother and father. Aunt Ruth started to comfort me; but Aunt Virginia, wise in the ways of children, said, "Leave her alone. she'll only get worse if you pet her." I remember feeling indignant at that remark. After a few more experimental sniffs, which were ignored, I subsided.

I was often unhappy that summer--particularly after fights with my cousins. I would concoct wild schemes to hitchhike back to Clinton and live somewhere else--anywhere else. Fortunately I was a practical child and realized that my plans weren't feasible. I would have to wait to end my exile until my parents were released from the hospital.

Summer came to an end and school began before my mother was released. My father, much more ill than she was, would stay nearly six months more in the sanatorium. I came home to a fatherless household which subsisted on a welfare income barely adequate for our needs. Although I was unaware of it then, the events of the summer would shape my life for years to come in the form of regular visits from the county health nurse, frequent check-ups, and enough x-rays to make me glow

in the dark.

There was also shunning I experienced as a child of tubercular parents. I wasn't a total pariah, but the avoidance was definitely, subtly there. Long after my parents were declared free of the disease, the parents of my friends refused to let their daughters spend the night for fear of "catching a bug." Nor was I invited to stay anywhere. Unfortunately, fear is an intense, unreasoning emotion not always allayed by reason.

Miraculously I came through the exposure to tuberculosis unaffected. However, I can't say that I was unaffected. Life is a fabric of many weavings, and for good or ill, the experiences arising from my parents' illness provide the warp and woof of what I am. The pain of separation and being "set-apart" has been muted by time, but gives me insight into the feelings of those who are experiencing similar situations. Ironically, today's AIDS scare gives me insights into the workings of my own fear and the fear of those who do the setting apart. I find myself squarely planted in both camps, a musing member of humanity. 

(E. RUTH RAMSEY, recent SOSU honors student, after finishing a Bachelor's degree in English Education, now teaches English in the Vici Public Schools. Of this piece, "Summer in Exile," she says, "It was typed with the assistance of a small brown canine that has insisted on sitting on my feet all evening and growling at any interloper. Since all three children have been hovering all evening, I leave you to imagine the climate in which this piece of writing was produced.")