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Any Better Way

— by June Hale

My daddy died before I was born, and in the nineteen-twenties in our part of Oklahoma, everybody knew that a son born after the father had died could cure thrush by blowing his breath into a sick baby's mouth. Mrs. McKay was a nurse, and she knew it. Dr. Cott knew it. When I was born, Dr. Cott tried to refuse Mama's payment for his services "so I can use your son for treating thrush. We doctors haven't been able to find any better way of treating it." But Mama knew this was a kind-hearted excuse, as well, offered because of her recent widowhood.

Later in my life, I was to learn that thrush is a fungal disease, usually striking babies, causing sores in the mouth and terrible stomach pains. Now, seldom is thrush fatal, but such threats were more to be feared before the development of modern drugs.

My daddy's nickname happened to be "Doc," though he never doctored anyone. However, soon after I was out of the diaper stage, I was "doctoring" babies all over five counties!

How vividly I remember my first "patient." Some scenes from my second-year and third-year of life are exceptionally strong; and I couldn't forget my first "doctoring"—even if I wanted to. Mama and many other people told this story so often that I

could repeat it word for word even if my memory failed to recall the scene.

Nurse McKay was Mama's best friend and lived a few blocks from us. She and Mama called each other "Kay" and "Hale" and often said they were "chosen sisters." A bit before my third birthday, "chosen sister" Mrs. McKay drove her car to our house one day. She rushed into the house without knocking, and found Mama ironing some laundry she had "taken in." "Hale, get June and let's get out to the Fullers! The Fuller baby has thrush so bad she hasn't been able to nurse for two days. Dr. Cott said he can't seem to do anything to help. He told me to 'go get Doc Hale's cotton-topped boy'."

Mama responded hurriedly, "All right, Kay. Just soon as I can clean June up and change into my good dress."

"No, Hale!" Mrs. McKay said. "We really need to get on out to the Fullers. That baby is just awful sick and crying 'till none of the family has had any rest. They're worried to death. Let's just go!"

It was a real treat for me to go for a car ride. The McKays' car was a fancy one with a real top on it and side windows and an electric starter. It put those "T-Models" to shame. I was enjoying the ride and scenery and could not understand why Mama and Mrs. McKay were so excited and serious. Mrs. McKay told Mama, "Hale, you pray while I drive." Mama began to pray, and Mrs. McKay punctuated her prayer with "yes, Lord" or "do, Lord" until Mama finally said "Amen." Mrs. McKay

echoed the "Amen," and in the same breath asked, "Hale, has June learned to blow his breath?"

Mama answered, "I think so. No, I don't know. Oh, Kay, he surely knows how to blow."

I said, "Mama, what's 'blow'?"

"Oh, no!" shrieked Mrs. McKay. "Well, I'll just have to take time to teach him how to blow when we get to the Fullers."

"Mama, what's 'blow'?" I repeated.

When we got to the Fullers, we drove up into the yard. Before we stopped, Mr. Fuller was out to the car, and he opened the door for Mama and me. "Come on in. We're so glad you came," he said. "Dr. Cott was out, but he just couldn't help." Mr. Fuller carried me quickly up the steps and through the door, after first opening it for Mama and Mrs. McKay. The Fuller kids all stood in a ring around the living-room with Mrs. Fuller in the center, holding the crying baby girl. Tears were streaming down Mrs. Fuller's face, and the older children all looked ready to cry.

"They're here! He's here! Here he is!" Mr. Fuller announced to his family. I remember Mr. Fuller's piercing brown eyes to this day. He said, "Now, Son, see this little baby? She's sick. She doesn't feel good. That's why she's crying. We want you to blow your breath into the baby's mouth. That will make her well. That will make her feel better. Won't that be nice—for you to make her well?"

I responded with, "Mama, what's 'blow'!"

Mr. Fuller's mouth fell open, and he turned from me and glared at Mama with those piercing brown eyes. More tears streamed down Mrs. Fuller's face, and she started sobbing aloud.

Mrs. McKay said, "Now--now. Let's go into the bedroom. You lay the baby down. I'll teach June to blow his breath. Hale tries hard, but she can't do everything--what with making a living and taking care of her kids all by herself," and she added, without catching a breath, "you kiddies stay

out here." All five children stood watching in the doorway, like it was the ball-park bleachers.

Mrs. Fuller lay down on the bed and held the crying baby. Then Mrs. McKay led me over to the bedside. "Now, June, see the baby's mouth? Just do your mouth like this and blow your breath into the baby's mouth."

"Mama, what's blow?"

Mrs. McKay answered for Mama again. "It's just doing like this: See? Whuuuuuh. See? You can do that--can't you, June? Let's see you do that. Do it three times in the baby's mouth."

As Mrs. Fuller held the baby over to me, I puckered up...and kissed her squarely on the mouth.

"No, no, June!" Mrs. McKay said, growing impatient. "Don't kiss her. Blow your breath into her mouth like this: Whuuuuuh. Wwhuuuuuuuaah."

Mr. Fuller said, "Son, blow your breath into her mouth, and I'll get you some candy."

Mrs. Fuller added, sobbing, "And we'll take you for a ride in our car. And we'll come and get you tomorrow--and the next day, too, to blow in her mouth. And we'll give you some more candy." She sobbed harder, "Oh, Mrs. McKay, I do hope June can give the baby a little relief today. I know he's supposed to blow three times for three days; but the baby cried all night, and she couldn't nurse for two days. She needs help today. Just look at her sore little mouth!"

I looked closer. The baby's mouth was all white and yellow sores--and oozing blood. "I don't wanna kiss her again," I said.

Mrs. McKay responded in a frustrated tone, "Don't kiss her. Just blow your breath into her little mouth like I showed you. Now--blow!"

"Mama, what's 'blow'?"

"Hale," Mrs. McKay said, "June's nearly three years old. He should know how to blow his breath by now, especially since he's needed to cure thrush. Babies all over the county could have been using him already if he knew how to blow his breath."

"Mama, what's 'blow'?" This time

all heads turned angrily toward Mama. She made sure they were all turned completely before she responded.

I knew she was talking to me, although she was staring straight at Mrs. McKay. "'Blow' is what you do when you 'foo' your dinner when it's hot."

I said, "Sissy foos my dinner."

"You can foo. The baby's mouth hurts like when your dinner is hot and makes your mouth hot. The baby needs you to foo her mouth."

I fooped the baby's mouth.

"Now, do it again," Mama instructed, and I fooped the baby's mouth twice more. The baby's loud crying immediately quieted into sobs. Mrs. Fuller was still sobbing, too; but she began laughing while she continued to sob.

"I don't know, Hale," Mrs. McKay said. "There wasn't much breath in his blowing. I don't know whether he really got his breath into the baby's mouth. A boy his age should be able to blow his breath correctly, since he never saw his father."

Mama answered, "Ask the baby if June got his breath into her mouth."

By that time, Mrs. Fuller was nursing the baby. Mr. Fuller said, "Why, that baby is too busy with her dinner to answer you--even if she could. Towhead, I'm going to come get you and your Mama tomorrow to do that again, and we'll go downtown and get some candy and take a nice car ride."

"No," Mrs. McKay said. "You go back to your job, and I'll bring June out again tomorrow."

"All right, Mrs. McKay," Mr. Fuller said. "But, Son, come Saturday, I'll take you for a car ride."

Next morning, Mrs. McKay drove over to our house again. "The Fullers telephoned," she said, "and the baby is well! No need for you and June to go again. The thrush is completely cured."

Mama said nothing, but she and Mrs. McKay just stood facing each other a moment, and then Mrs. McKay began to cry. "Oh, Hale, I'm

so sorry," she said, and she and Mama hugged each other. I couldn't understand. If the baby was well, why was she crying and hugging Mama? Mama explained, "It's because we're 'chosen sisters'." I still didn't understand, but for a boy not quite three, one reason was as good as another.

Not long after that, Dr. Cott came to our house and brought me my first pair of bib overalls. How proud I was of them. "Oh, I had to get them for June," he said, "because I can't stand to see a boy begging to have his big brother's overall legs rolled up so he can wear them."

Well, I got car rides all over five counties--sometimes thirty-five miles out on dirt and gravel roads--to "doctor" the babies for thrush. Occasionally, grown folks or teenagers would have thrush, and I doctored them, too, always with the help of Mamas' prayers. But I never went back to any of them the second or third day as prescribed. The thrush was always well a few hours after the first doctoring. I also rubbed kids' warts, and many times--but not all times--the warts disappeared; the failures I presumed to be due to my doctoring warts without benefit of Mama's prayers.

By the time I was ten, my services for curing thrush were sought less and less often until finally I got no car rides at all to blow my breath into sick babies' mouths. Mama explained that some of the doctors said the thrush would have gotten well without my blowing in the babies' mouths, and these doctors said I never had had to go back after the first day because the babies were "due to finish the sickness anyway."

But the memories of Mama's prayers, of sick babies and their anxious parents, and remembering the release of their suffering and anxieties has dug deep in my being, forming impressions which time has eroded into canyon-like attitudes. I know we can do some things. . .no, we can do many things that can't be explained.