



RACHAEL
LOFGREN

AGAINST **THE
ODDS**

Polio was on a rampage through the country, claiming young Vera as one more victim. Would it destroy her future?

**AGAINST
THE
ODDS**



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RACHAEL LOFGREN

DEDICATION

Dedicated with love to Judy Yoder, my “Paul” in the fellowship of His sufferings. You have taught me the beautiful fragility of life, the meaning of suffering, and the love of Jesus in profound ways. You live Philippians 3:10 with radiance.

Forever,

Your own “Timothy”

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The journey of writing a book is always just that, a journey. And it is never a journey walked entirely alone. Writing a book is a little like nurturing a child. You as a parent have the most direct and significant responsibility, but those around you also play a significant role. So to all those who took part in yet another book project, thank you!

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To Vera's parents and siblings, whose lives of quiet but tremendous love and sacrifice made Vera's life and testimony possible for her, your example of

selflessness and servant hearts shine brightly.

And to Vera, whose love and life left a mountain-sized legacy behind her. Thank you for the example you lived and the lives you impacted while you were here with us. I never met you on earth, but I look forward to meeting you in heaven. Your legacy lives on.

And above all, thanks to God. My purpose for writing comes from you. May these pages bring you glory.

—Rachael Lofgren



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CHAPTER 1

STORMS AND SHADOWS

“Lena!” I exclaimed to my toddler sister, “we’re birds and we’re flying!” The mellow May breeze wafted through Hartville, Ohio, caressing my tousled hair as I turned in wide circles. I stretched out my arms, and my skirt twirled around my bare ankles. Lena stretched her chubby arms to imitate me and wobbled on unsteady legs. I laughed and she giggled.

“Lena, birds sing,” I added after a moment. “We should sing too.” I broke into a joyous warbling song composed in my three-year-old mind, making Lena giggle again. My arms swooped and my small feet danced. I almost felt as if I were actually flying!

My make-believe ended when I heard my older sister calling, “Lunch time, Vera. Grandma says to bring Lena and wash up. Hurry!” Turning to Lena, I hoisted her into our little red wagon. “Maybe we will have soup,” I told her. “Grandma makes good soup.”

“Hungry,” Lena agreed. “Good soup.” She was almost a year and a half and still couldn’t talk very well, but we always understood each other. Even when

we fought, we made it up to each other.

“Grandma says to hurry.” I turned toward the house, puffing with the effort of pulling the wagon.

Inside we found our grandma bustling around the kitchen as usual. My five-year-old sister Ruth was dutifully helping to put on the food, and I could hear Mama’s soft voice from somewhere in the house telling my brother Leon it was time for lunch. Leon was just younger than me and just older than Lena. I hurried to help Lena wash her chubby hands before sliding into my usual place on one of the long benches.

Sure enough, Grandma had made soup. I was so hungry I couldn’t help peeking a bit during our silent prayer to watch the steam waft upward from my bowl. As soon as Dad said “Amen,” I took a tiny sip of broth from my spoon. *Mmmm*. It was delicious! But then my ears perked up when I heard Mama say something to Dad, and my spoon hung poised in mid-air for a moment.

“I need to go into town for groceries this afternoon,” Mama was saying. Putting my spoon down with a clatter, I wiggled excitedly in my seat. If Mama was going for groceries, maybe she would take me with her! I looked across the table at Lena, busily eating her soup, broth dribbling down her chin. Lena would be too young to go to town. But not me. I was a big girl. The very thought set my brown eyes dancing with delight. I just knew Mama would take me!

When Mama got ready to go that afternoon, I followed her outside. “Mama, can I come with you?” I stood eagerly on my tiptoes waiting for what I was sure would be her answer.

“Not this time, Vera. You can stay home and play with Leon and Lena. You’ll have a good time.” She stooped to kiss me briefly, her bonnet strings brushing the side of my face.

“But, Mama,” I protested hastily. “Please? I want to come with you,” I pleaded.

“No, dear. Not today.” Mama was gentle but firm. “Go and play, and be good for Grandma.” With that she turned and climbed into the car.

I knew then that she was in earnest. All my pleadings and entreaties would

be in vain. But I had set my heart on going, and when I set my heart on something I did not give up easily. Suddenly I knew what I would do.

Slipping quietly to the front of the car, I planted myself next to the bumper. If Mama wouldn't let me go with her, then I wouldn't let her go at all. I planted my bare feet firmly and pitted my puny strength against that big metal bumper, defying it to move me. With all the determination my little mind held at that moment, I was certain it couldn't. Our Ford had always held happy memories of going away for me, but now it was my enemy.

I heard the engine rumble to life and felt it vibrate through the vehicle. I pushed harder as Mama put the car into gear and began to move forward. Then suddenly I slipped. Before I had time to cry out, half my body was under the car and the huge blackness of the tire was over me. A thump. A scream. Yelling. It was all a blur of noise and pain.

I felt Dad's strong hands lifting me and stopped screaming. "Is she okay, Victor? Oh, the blood! I didn't see her. Oh, Vera, my baby!" Mama was crying.

With a deft movement of his hand, Dad flipped the piece of my peeled scalp back into place. "There's skull showing and a whole lot of blood. It's bad, Emma, but she's alive. Open the car door for me. We need to get her to the hospital immediately."

I tasted blood on my tongue. I felt Dad place me gently but hurriedly onto the back seat of the Ford. The pain blocked most everything from my focus. "It hurts!" I was sobbing.

Then I felt gentle arms pull me close, and I knew I was in Mama's lap. Her touch comforted and calmed me. Her voice was soothing but strained. "It's okay, Vera. Mama's here. Shhh . . ." Between calming me, she prayed in whispers and pled with Dad to drive faster.

Dad's deep voice was reassuring. "Emma, we will be there soon now. It's okay." He was driving much faster than normal. I could tell by the way we slid to a stop at each intersection. The car would jerk fast and hard as he slammed on the brakes. The jerking made my pain worse, and I couldn't stop crying.

At the hospital Dad carried me inside. Somehow in his arms the pain didn't feel as bad. When he laid me on the gurney, the intensity of pain returned

along with fear. What were they going to do to me? Would they put needles into me? “Vera, we’re going to fix you up,” the doctor calmly reassured. I lay very still and cried.

They stitched me up and sent me home with a white turban wrapped around my head. Mama held me all the way home. The twelve-inch sutured wound would form a foot-long scar on the side of my head. I wore the turban for the rest of the summer. Although the accident was traumatic enough, none of us knew that the storm that was to come three months later would overshadow it.

In the wee hours of a sultry Friday morning in August, I awoke crying. I slid out of bed in my long white nightdress and pattered across the creaking floorboards to my parents’ bedroom. “Mama,” I rasped urgently. Standing in their doorway, I waited for Mama to wake up, knowing she always did when I needed her.

“Yes, Vera?” She slipped out of bed and stooped down for me to come to her. “What’s wrong, little one?” she asked in a whisper. Dad was still asleep.

“Mama, my head hurts.”

She felt my forehead with her soft, cool hand. “Oh my, you’re hot! Come, Mama will help you.”

Leading me to the living room, she laid me on the sofa and went to get a cool cloth. “Here, take this.” She was back with a spoon and the bottle of fever medicine we used for baby Lena when she was teething. I opened my mouth and took the liquid, making a face at its sickening sweetness and bitter after-taste. It hurt to swallow, and my throat felt thick.

“Mama, my neck hurts.”

She sat down beside me and stroked my hair back from my forehead. “Shh, Vera, Mama is right here with you and you will soon be better. Just rest now.” She bathed my hot face and hands and sang to me softly in German. After a while I fell into a restless sleep. I awoke to find Mama gone and early morning sunlight streaming in the window.

Dad had just come in from milking the cows. I could hear him upstairs calling the other children to get up for breakfast. If we slept too late, we would suffer the dire consequences of being pulled out of bed by our feet. One such

experience usually sufficed to teach any sleepyhead to rise when our dad's booming voice called us to start the day.

I could smell coffee and hear the sizzling of bacon in the frying pan mingling with Grandma and Mama's soft voices as they made breakfast in the kitchen together. I tried to turn my head when Dad entered the living room a moment later. Crying out, I shut my eyes tight against the pain. My neck was stiff, and my head pounded. Tears formed in my eyes as my father stooped over me.

"What's wrong, Vera? Mama told me you weren't feeling so well this morning."

"My head hurts." My voice came out scarcely above a whisper. "It hurts when I move it."

"Hmm . . ." His tone was thoughtful. "Do you want something to eat?"

I shook my head slightly.

"Okay. You just rest then." He patted my shoulder gently and left the room.

The morning dragged long. After the breakfast dishes were done, Mama brought me a cool drink of water. But swallowing hurt, and I refused more than a few sips.

"Vera, you must drink something," she worried. "You have a fever. Come, try a few more sips."

I cried and refused. "Mama, hold me," I begged. She took me in her lap and rocked me. This comforted me, and I dozed and awoke by turns. Again at lunch I refused food. And when Dad came to see me before he left the house after eating, he went away looking worried. "I think I'll call Dr. Ream and see if he can come around for a visit this afternoon," I heard him tell Mama as he left.

When Dr. Ream came with the black bag he used for house calls, he took my temperature and listened to my heart and lungs. After finishing his examination, he looked grave. He left medicine with Mama "to bring the fever down," he said. His parting words were, "If her fever won't come down or she has trouble breathing, don't hesitate to take her to the hospital."

Afternoon dragged into evening and my whole body ached miserably. My head pounded. My crying had turned to feeble whimpers. I was too tired to

cry in earnest.

“Mama?”

“Yes, little one?” Mama’s soft eyes met mine tenderly.

“Mama, will I be better soon?”

“I pray so, Vera. Just be quiet and rest.”

Evening shadows lengthened over the hills of Ohio when Dad’s long strides brought him in from the barn. “Any better?” His voice was quieter than usual.

I saw Mama shake her head and I could see the worry in her eyes. Her voice was equally quiet. “I’m afraid she’s worse, Vic. Her limbs are stiff. “

“How is her fever?” He came over, looking down at me with earnest concern.

Mama pressed her hand to my forehead. “Still high.”

“Where does it hurt, Vera?” He bent over me solicitously. I only whimpered in response and he went to call the doctor. When he returned moments later, it was with hurried steps and a grave countenance. “We need to take her to the hospital immediately.” He stooped and took me into his strong arms. Turning to my grandma, he asked, “Can you stay with the children, Mom?”

“Of course, Victor,” Grandma said.

Retrieving her Sunday bonnet from the hook, Mama placed it on her head and hastily told the other children goodbye before heading out the door with Dad and me.

My four-year-old brother Fred stood shyly in the doorway. “ ’Bye, Vera.”

“ ’Bye,” I squeaked. My throat was so sore that my words didn’t come out right.

“Be good for Grandma, son.” Dad’s words were firm. Fred only nodded. I closed my eyes and waited, drifting in and out of my fog of pain.

At the Aultman Hospital in Canton, Ohio, I found myself under the bright lights of the emergency room, surrounded by bustling feet and hushed voices. The doctors and nurses were kind, but the needles and movement and lights during the examination hurt me. I was frightened and felt hot and cold by turns. When a nurse saw me shiver, she pulled a warm blanket over me. I cuddled deep and shut my eyes tight, trying to escape the pain.

Then the doctor came in, and I was uncovered and turned on my side.

They pushed my stiff legs upward and my head forward into a fetal position. I cried out in pain. "There, there. It will only be a few moments, honey," the nurse soothed as she stroked my hair. I tried to fight the painful position but a second nurse held me firmly in place. I felt a burning pain in my back, and tears dripped down my face. "Mama," I whimpered.

"Shh, honey. You can see your mama soon. Just hold still and be a good girl."

Those ten minutes seemed like a very long time. When the spinal tap was finally finished and I could lie back normally with the sheets snuggled over me, the tears were still running down my cheeks. The nurse brushed the tears from my face and tucked me in. "It's over, dear. Now you can rest."

I never heard the fateful words the doctor spoke to my parents. I only knew I wanted my mama and that she wasn't coming. But in another room he was gravely informing them that I needed to be admitted to the hospital immediately.

"I'm very sorry. The spinal tap came back positive for poliomyelitis. We'll make her as comfortable as possible. But I'm afraid we have an epidemic on our hands." It was 1952, and polio was on the rampage across the country. He shook his head sadly. After assuring them he would do all he could for me, he left them to absorb the news alone.

Meanwhile, I was being wheeled on a gurney up to the fifth floor of the hospital. Here in the solarium I joined other patients in the semi-isolated polio ward. A cheerful, bustling nurse immediately examined me. "Hello, what's your name, little one?"

Her smiling eyes were kind and her hands were gentle. She seemed to sense how fearful I was. "Vera," I squeaked.

"That's a lovely name, dearie. Open your mouth for me, okay?" She slipped a thermometer under my tongue and held my hand briefly between her warm fingers while she took my pulse. She was obviously efficient. But there was a comforting motherliness about her too. "Vera, my name is Mrs. Barbara Gaston and I'm going to be taking care of you for the next little while. You just lie still now and rest and get better real soon." She gave me another one of her lovely smiles before turning and bustling away.

I did as I was told and lay still. There was nothing else I could do. By now my whole trunk and arms were paralyzed. Only my neck and legs were still partially mobile. "Mama!" I cried out for the only comfort I knew as my breathing became labored.

The nurses were soon back, wrapping my tummy and arms in steaming hot wool cloths to loosen up my stiff muscles. I felt helplessly alone. "Mama," I pleaded.

The minutes ticked by, and my breathing grew ragged. As I fought for breath through a haze of pain, I heard Dr. Ream's voice. It seemed to come from a distance. "She's breathing with her abdominal muscles now instead of her chest muscles. We need to transfer her to the iron lung."

I felt my stiff, wooden body being lifted. They laid me on a bed inside a pressurized metal cylinder and adjusted the rubber foam around my neck. My head stuck out the end while the rest of my body was lost in that great metal tube. They closed the side ports and started the engine. I suddenly felt as if I could breathe again. I was so worn out, I closed my eyes.

Then she was beside me. "Vera." She murmured my name gently, and I opened my eyes with effort.

"Mama," I lisped weakly. She stroked my hair.

Then I felt another hand touch my face. It was Dad's work-roughened one. "Vera, we're here."

I looked up to see that both of them had tears in their eyes. I did not know the doctor had just informed them that I might not live through the night.

I closed my eyes wearily but through the fog I heard Dad say, "She's not going to die, Emma. I won't let her."

"She's in God's hands, Vic. It's going to be okay," I drifted away to the sound of Mama's voice as the tide of pain receded before the waves of exhaustion that engulfed me.

Beside me my parents waited and prayed.