

A Pox Upon Us All

By Ralph Fletcher

We kids did everything together. We sat at the same table, eating the same food, breathing the same air. We shared jokes, songs, glasses, towels, and toys. We loved to set up a line of blocks so that when you toppled one it would start a chain reaction and knock them down all the way from the living room to the bathroom.

We shared the same germs too. First one of us would catch a cold or cough or flu, then another kid would get it a day or so later, followed by another and another...until there were so many sick kids lying around the house, it felt like we were living in a hospital.

When I was really sick I got to sleep downstairs in Mom and Dad's bed during the day. I loved that. The saddest part for me was when the other kids got sick and I got evicted from the big bed. Usually Mom forbade us to turn on the TV during the day, but when we were sick she made an exception and let us watch for an hour or so.

I loved being sick, because that's when I got extra-special care from Mom. She would fix me soup or an egg on toast for lunch. When my nose got plugged up or I had a bad cough, she rubbed Vicks on my chest. But I never got a really big slice of Mom's time because there were always babies and toddlers at home, and she had her hands full with them.

The winter I was nine we all got chicken pox at the same time. Mom about wore herself out trying to take care of us. It got so bad that Dad stayed home from work to help out.

"Don't scratch!" Mom kept saying as we picked at the sores on our bodies. She gave us baths with baking soda, which left a strange, gritty residue at the bottom of the tub. For the first few days we were perfectly content lying around the house in our pajamas, doing puzzles, reading comics, watching daytime TV. But being cooped up inside soon made us restless. We needed an outlet for all that pent-up energy.

Mom took the baby to the store to buy some food. The instant she drove away, we started racing through the house, yelling at the top of our lungs, having wild pillow fights, completely forgetting that we were sick. When Mom came home she scolded us for messing up the house. The next day our muscles hurt, and Mom said we had used them too quickly after being sick for so long.

The chicken pox lasted more than a week. Eventually, we were healthy enough to go back to school. But two weeks later we were all sick again. The six of us could do nothing more than lay in our beds, limp as rag dolls. I had a headache and an earache, plus it felt like there was an achy fire in the joints of my shoulders, arms, and legs.

The doorbell rang. I felt too weak to go answer it. A man's voice boomed through the front door. A moment later Mom led Dr. Wentworth into the living room. He was a friendly, handsome doctor who came to our house four or five times a year.

"They're all sick?" he asked. "How about the baby?"

"No," Mom said. "At least, not yet."

"Well, well, well," Dr. Wentworth said. "Let's see what we're dealing with."

Mom called us all into the living room. Dr. Wentworth sat us in one long row on the couch. Then he went to work, poking backs and bellies and necks, peering into his stethoscope to seven beating hearts.

"Does it hurt to swallow?"

Nod.

"Do you feel tired?"

Nod.

"They've got swollen glands, every one of them, and that tells me one thing," he told my mother. "They've got the mumps. There's a lot of it going around."

"Mumps!" Mom cried. "How long will it last?"

"Figure a good week," the doctor said.

"A good week?" Mom just stared at him.

"Keep doing what you're doing," Dr. Wentworth told her. "Give them lots of liquids and lots of rest. Kids are pretty resilient. They'll survive."

"I know they'll survive," Mom said, sighing and picking up the baby who had started to cry. "It's me I'm not so sure about."