Daph

A Story

Foreward

Between 1916 and 1955 large-scale polio epidemics ravaged the nation, killing or crippling tens of thousands of people. The young were especially vulnerable. This story takes place in that time.

by Rick Nau

My mother was batty. At least she had to be or she wouldn't have put up such a big stink about making me lie flat on my back during the hottest part of the day. It was a real mess. There was a polio epidemic going on and kids were dropping like flies. My friend Daphne showed up at school in a wheelchair. Her legs were shriveled into little things that looked like soda straws. Poor Daphne. My mother was right.

Staying in my room was still a drag despite my picture of Daphne. It wasn't fair. The lakes were nice and cool and it was just those lakes

that we weren't supposed to swim in. It was ridiculous.

At home there was nothing to do. My parakeet died. I buried it in a vacant lot and made a cross out of popsicle sticks but in a few days I found it kicked over. Maybe some kids had had a dirt clod fight and destroyed it.

I thought my mother had gone overboard on this polio business. I sat home in bed at noon and listened to the other kids play outside. She said they would get it, that their parents were irresponsible, but they didn't get it. Not at first, anyway. Only Daphne got it and Daphne hadn't done a thing. She hadn't even gone swimming.

My mother didn't stay in. She went out in the day and left the swamp cooler on and told me to stay inside and to tell the Spanish maid Hortensia to change the water in the goldfish bowl. Hortensia didn't understand English and besides, she was afraid of fish. I was afraid too. I changed the water myself and it stank so bad when I poured it down the drain

that I knew I was breathing polio right into my nose. I could feel my legs get weak and then a heavy pressure in my chest. I was getting polio except that when I went to bed and woke up and had forgotten about it, then my legs felt fine. Until I saw Daphne. I didn't want to be like her. But it was hard to take seeing her like this. She was so pretty and the boys had always made fun about her socks, that she would never take them off when we danced on the gym floor. I'd never seen Daphne's feet, but now I saw her knees and her thighs, all shriveled, and the tops of her socks loose around her ankles. I liked Daphne. But I didn't let on. It wasn't good to let on about such things, but it was true that when I sat next to Daphne I felt all special inside. Until the polio. She was so different now. She had braces on her legs and I was afraid to share milk with her out of the same straw. I felt bad about this.

My mother was a model. What kind of modeling she did, I didn't know, but she said legs were important. She was careful about her legs and she said that if I didn't get my sleep

during the hot Texas afternoon, I would get legs like Daphne.

I didn't understand. I liked Daphne but she was in some way poisoned. Like the smelly fishwater. She had not been careful, but then my friend Billy Roberts got hit. He was lucky. He only got one leg in a brace which was better than Paul Albertson who my mother said went swimming in the municipal pool which was the reason that he died.

I don't know why, but I didn't really believe that Paul had died. I figured he'd just moved away and that my mother was trying to scare me into staying in my room. But then my bird had died. Even my dog had died. It was a bad year in Texas but at least Daphne hadn't died.

I didn't know how to talk to Daphne. So I talked to her like I did before. She never said anything about the fact that she couldn't walk.

"How you doin', Daph?" I would say. "Would you test me on the nineses?"

"Sure, Johnny," she would say. "What's nine

times nine?"

She would always pick the doubles, like it was some kind of magic, the pairs.

"What's five times five? What's seven times seven?"

"Forty-nine, Daph," I would say.

I felt like a coward because I couldn't share her milk.

"When's it gonna be over, Mom?" I would ask.

"It can hit any time," my mom said. "You can't be too careful."

Poor Daph. What had she done? She was so pretty and there was something in her straw.

When it rained at school we took P.E. in the gym. That had to be hard for Daph. She sat in her wheelchair reading a book while the rest of us danced.

"What's you reading, Daph?" I would ask.

"Just a book," she would say.

"Can I get you anything?"

"I'm fine," she would say.

I would look at Daph while I danced with Sherry. I didn't like Sherry. She was my dance partner because I hadn't chosen anyone. She chose me. Last year I'd always chosen Daph. She was just my height and she laughed and giggled when we danced. Sherry was too tall. She took dancing too seriously and when we messed up she would call me clumsy foot. I didn't care. Anyone could see she was as clumsy as an ox.

I worked in the school cafeteria. It was a good job because I could eat all the food I wanted, but it was hot sweaty work. I had to scrape the plates when the kids brought back their trays.

"How about some jello, Daph?"

I was worried about Daph. She wasn't eating. She drank her milk and left her plate untouched.

"No thanks," she said.

"I can go back and get you some ice cream."

"I'm fine, Johnny."

"You should really eat more."

"It's too hot."

"How about some lemonade?"

She smiled and wheeled the chair around. Her blonde hair was getting longer only it didn't look healthy. It was frizzy at the ends.

My dad wasn't home much. He was on the road a lot selling things. Office machines, I think. My mom was often modeling or playing bridge with the ladies. When I got home from school the house was usually empty. Hortensia would be gone and there would be a note on the kitchen table telling me what errands had to be done. I had to mow the lawn or water the flowers. When I was done I'd go next door and play with my friend Tom Richards. His dad bought him a lot of practical stuff, radio kits and the like. Then Tom got sick. He almost died. I wanted to visit him in

the hospital but my mom wouldn't let me. She was scared to death. She didn't understand how Tom had gotten it. He'd changed my fish water once, only I didn't tell my mom about this. I got rid of the fish, flushed them down the toilet. I told my mom Hortensia had broken the bowl.

It got crazy. School was cancelled for a while, but even before this my mom made me quit my job in the cafeteria. I was lonely. Having Hortensia around only made it worse. She was like talking to a wall.

"No comprende," she would say.

"Neither do I," I would say.

School started again. Some kids were missing. Susan Philpott. Olivia Bohannon. They hadn't gotten sick. Their parents had moved away, up north where there wasn't any polio.

Daphne was back. She had her book in her lap and she sat beside me.

"Ask me the twenty timeses," I said.

“What’s twenty times twenty?”

“You never change, Daph.”

I walked her home after school. She wouldn’t let me push her, not even over the curbs. She had a system, she said. She was getting muscles in her arms. Her hair looked healthy again.

“I’ll buy you a coke,” I said.

“Okay.”

It was hot again. Sweltering. The city pool was closed because of the sickness.

I put some change in the machine and pulled the handle down. A cold bottle slid down the chute. I opened it and handed it to Daph.

“You want to go on the swing?” I said. “I can lift you up.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, Daph. Let’s go on the swing.”

“You’re not having a coke too?”

"I'm out of change."

She offered me her bottle. She'd already taken a couple of swallows and there was foam floating on the surface.

"I'm not too thirsty yet," I said.

We went to the swing. I lifted Daph into the leather bucket but it was too low to the ground. Her braces dragged in the dirt.

"I don't think this is gonna work, Johnny."

"Sure it will."

I lifted her into a higher swing and took the coke out of her hand.

"Hold on tight."

I pushed her gently so that the swing wouldn't go too high.

"Push harder," she said.

"Okay."

I gave her a slightly harder shove so that she

was going about six feet in the air. Her hair was starting to fly out from around her head.

"Higher," she said.

I pushed at her harder and harder until she was flying practically parallel to the ground.

"I'm gonna bail out," she said.

"Don't do it, Daph," I said.

"Here goes," she said.

At the top of the swing's forward arc she let go and went flying through the air. She hit the ground feet first and skidded along through the dirt.

I dashed up to her. Her skirt was up around her waist and there was blood on her knee.

"You okay, Daph?"

"That was fun," she said.

"You're not hurt?"

"Of course not."

"You sure that's okay to do, to bail out like that with braces and everything?"

"Why not?" she said. "I just did it."

"You wanna do it again?"

"Sure," she said. "Where's my coke?"

"Oh, yeah."

I brought her the coke.

"Have a sip," she said.

I looked at it still foaming up inside from the late summer's heat.

"Maybe I should go get us another," I said. "This one's getting warm."

"You're out of change, dummy. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah," I said.

I took a drink of the coke and held it out to Daph.

"No thanks," she said. "I wanna bail out again."

“Okay,” I said. I lifted her back to the swing and gave her a big shove.

“I wanna go higher this time,” she said.

“Okay, Daph,” I said. “Hold on tight.”

About The Author

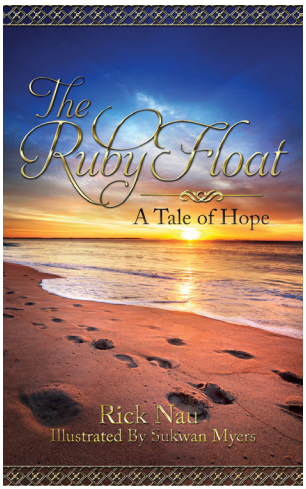
Rick lives in Southern California with his wonderful wife, Bettina. He often helps her tend the hummingbird garden—which is becoming quite jungly—and sometimes needs to defend her from certain exotic creatures that lurk in the shade of the honeysuckle bushes. When he's not out and about in wilds of the backyard, you're likely to find him reading and writing, especially in winter, when the fire's blazing in the hearth and the rain's coming down in sheets outside the window.

His first publication, *Daph*, a story set during the polio epidemics of the 1950s, was awarded Best Short Story Of The Year by *Writer's*

Digest. He has written two novels–*The Ruby Float* and *Theodora's Children*–part of a series called *Tales Of Hope*. The third in the series, *Desert Gold*, is now in work.

You can connect with Rick at Dancing Pen Books, Twitter, Facebook, and Google+.

The Ruby Float



We've all been there–our hearts broken, our lives shattered, our hopes and dreams dashed. Many things can do it–a serious illness, the death of a loved one, a disappointment in life, a divorce, the loss of a job, a rejection. When we're young the loss is amplified. In a small world everything looks bigger, more immediate, more frightening.

In The Ruby Float two children are heartbroken when they discover their grandmother is dying. Desperately wanting to help, they search for a mysterious person who they believe can save her. With only a few clues to

guide them, they embark on a perilous journey, sailing a small, homebuilt raft across a broad expanse of ocean. What they discover changes not only their hearts, but the heart of an entire nation.

If you're eight or eighty, you'll thoroughly enjoy The Ruby Float. Parents will take special delight in reading it aloud to their children, who'll love the many beautiful illustrations by artist Sukwan Myers.

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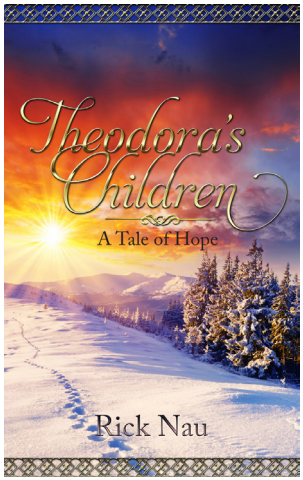
Theodora's Children



Gretchen is a young girl who suffers from a dreadful loneliness. Though she is extremely rich, having virtually everything under the sun that any boy or girl could ever want, she has no friends—not one, not a single one.

Then, one day, during a terrible disaster, someone mysterious enters her life, someone who will cause it to change forever.

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