B. Plagemann, *My Place to Stand* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1949): 236-123.

also by Bentz Plagemann

INTO THE LABYRINTH
ALL FOR THE BEST
WILLIAM WALTER

BENTZ PLAGEMANN

My place to stand

FARRAR, STRAUS
AND COMPANY · *new york, 1949*

twelve

Day after day, in the pool or on the treatment table, I had been drilled in the names and the functions of the muscles of my legs. Charts were hung on the walls of the doctors' offices and in the treatment room, and Miss Plastridge loaned me a book with plates and complex explanations which I promised to study.

"A polio, like a diabetic," she said, "must learn to be his own physician."

Meanwhile, my brace had arrived. I had begun by learning to stand in it, with Mrs. Schlosser on one side

and Mac on the other. I had even taken a few faltering steps, holding on to both of them. It depressed me to find it so difficult. My left leg would soon be good as new, with exercise, but I had not known that the weakness of my hips, only slightly involved, would so completely destroy my feeling of security. Even with my back to a wall, my brace locked at the knee, I would feel brittle and vulnerable, at least ten feet tall; thinking that if I fell I would shatter on the floor like a tower of blocks.

I practiced with the others; I, too, had my supervised walking. Twice a day I did the length of Georgia Hall, with Mrs. Schlosser holding my belt; and when I finished that I took my turn on the steps. I practiced falling on the grass outside, and Mrs. Schlosser would go down with me and show me how I might learn to raise myself without aid, a feat which I did not feel I could ever accomplish.

None of those who worked with me felt discouraged. I was progressing; the results might not be so immediately apparent to me, but one day I would look back and see how far I had come. And when I went home, my improvement would be more rapid, they told me. There would be no one around with the training necessary to anticipate my needs, no matter how sympathetic they were. And that would be a good thing.

So they could estimate the time when I would go home. It would be sometime in February, they thought. I accepted this with mixed feelings. I did not want to leave, yet I knew that when you had recovered from the first weakness of the illness, and had mastered the technical details of compensation for your disability, then to delay in leaving would be to increase your dependence. Also, you had to make room for the next one on the waiting list.

Meanwhile, on the social level of our life at the Foundation, we were preparing for Christmas. We planned the decorations, and we practiced carols in the chapel. Dr. Harald led us in the latter and accompanied us on the piano there, or sometimes on the small electric organ, a recent gift. We were to sing our repertory of Christmas songs in what we called a "combined operation," at the Catholic service in the morning and the Protestant service in the afternoon.

In the weeks of practice our group became so proficient and proud that we decided two performances were not enough. After all, we said, everyone couldn't come to the services. So, early on Christmas Eve, the Foundation bus picked us up in front of Georgia Hall. We were lifted into it as though we were going to Manchester. It was a warm evening; we wore no coats, and we rolled the bus windows down to let in the fresh, pine-scented air. Then we drove through the

Foundation grounds in the darkness and sang our carols. As we approached a house or cottage, Mac would slow the bus, and we would come out strongly in our best harmony while the lights came on in the doorway and figures gathered there to shout out the old greetings to us. Once a woman ran into the road with a plate of candy, and we stopped, and she passed it through the open windows.

When we had covered the grounds in this way we drove to the rear entrance of the Medical Building. The push boys had brought our wheel chairs down for us, and we were put into them again and went up in the elevator to sing in the rooms of the bed patients.

After we had gone back to our rooms to bed, and I was just drifting into sleep, I heard the night attendant pause outside my door. She opened the door stealthily and came in like a conspirator, so I pretended to be sound asleep while she tied the Christmas stocking to the back of my wheel chair. I hadn't been at all prepared for this, and after she had gone I sat up quietly, like a child, and felt the familiar, lumpy outlines of oranges and nuts, trying to laugh to myself and not succeeding very well.

In the morning we woke early for Mass, and sang, sleepily, while Dr. Harald, unfamiliar with the Catholic service, called in a nervous stage whisper from the organ, "Now? Now?"

And then, as we came out of the chapel, our generous Kicklebury friends, as if to steal a page right out of *The Christmas Book*, stopped us to ask if we would have breakfast at their house.

It is very difficult when I come to this part of my story, because for breakfast we had champagne. Authentic, French champagne, which we drank from hollow-stemmed glasses as we sat in our wheel chairs. It isn't easy to fit this episode into the general picture our friends had of us (poor people, alone, and paralyzed at Christmas time).

But it was little wonder that I fell out of my wheel chair as I made my way back to my room. We had all stayed much longer than we intended, and eaten very little, for who wants food when there is champagne? But I had a promise to keep with myself, and I excused myself from the party and coasted by myself down the hill to Builder's Hall. When one of the wheels of my wheel chair struck a stone, I was pitched forward into the road and lay there laughing until someone came to help me back in.

Once back in my room, my head cleared of the wine by the tumble and the excitement of the moment, I reached with shaking fingers for my shining new brace and strapped it to my right leg. Then I wheeled myself into Georgia Hall.

The doors of the dining room had already been

opened for our early Christmas dinner, and everyone there had gone in. I was glad that I was alone in Georgia Hall and I began to tremble with eagerness and apprehension. I wheeled my chair backward to a wall for support, and raised myself upward on the chair's arms. I locked my brace at the knee and reached for my new crutches, slung on the back of the chair. Then, for the first time alone, I kept the promise I had made to myself in Naples, and my whole body light with happiness, I walked into the dining room.