

DIAGNOSED AT SEVENTEEN

**My Struggles and Triumphs Living With Rheumatoid
Arthritis**

Chapter One

by

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I hope you enjoy reading the first chapter of my memoir and will want to read the complete book.

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CHAPTER ONE: *Life-Changing Diagnosis*

I was surrounded by boys while growing up; my brother and three cousins were always nearby. As a result, I became a tomboy. Occasionally, I could be found playing with my dolls on the porch, but more often I was riding my bike or skateboard, or playing cars in the dirt.

My mother and father divorced when I was very young; Mom was raising my brother and me by herself. She worked long hours everyday and we spent the time at Grandma and Grandpa's house.

Their yard had a big box elder tree with a fork in its trunk, which was perfect for sitting in and watching everything going on in the neighboring yards. I spent hours shimmying up and jumping out of that tree.

Along side their house was a vacant lot that they used as a garden in the summer. Whenever any of the grandkids complained about being bored, Grandma would say, "Get your 'pea-picking butt' out there and pull weeds. Then, maybe you won't be bored." She also sent us out there when we misbehaved, but I didn't mind these "punishments" because I'd sample the sweet peas, the crunchy green beans, and the baby carrots while I worked.

Being so active, I often complained about aches in my legs and arms. Since there didn't seem to be any visible damage—a few bruises were all—my mother and doctors dismissed the pains as normal growing pains and childhood gripes.

When I was 10, Mom met someone and we moved to Manchester, Iowa. We now lived an entire state away from Grandma, and I missed always having her around. Letters flew back and forth between us several times a month. When I was 16 and going through difficult times with my mother, Grandma's

letters of comfort and encouragement helped me get through. One letter said "Don't worry; at 16 most girls have trouble getting along with their mothers. Boy, could I tell you stories about your mother when she was that age." She never told me those stories, though. I can imagine some of them, especially since Grandma often told me, "You and your mother are so much alike; I'm not surprised you are always butting heads."

A few months before I started my senior year, my brother, several of our friends, and I were playing ball in the yard. During my turn at bat, I hit the ball onto the roof of our porch. Since it was my fault and I was the smallest, I was elected to climb up and get it. After being boosted up, I grabbed the ball and tossed it down, then prepared to jump to the ground. Unexpectedly, panic gripped me. "I need a ladder. Somebody get me a ladder."

"Mom!" my brother yelled into the open kitchen window. "Sis won't jump. She says she's scared and wants the ladder"

Mom came outside. Hands on her hips, she looked up at me. "You don't need a ladder," she said.

"You've jumped down from there many times. Now jump."

So I jumped. But the landing wasn't right. My feet hit the dirt, my legs buckled, and my right foot hit the ground at an awkward angle, twisting my ankle. At the same time, my left knee banged into my forehead, barely missing my left eye. The skin broke open and I started to bleed.

Since I couldn't put weight on my right foot without experiencing intense pain, Mom took me to the emergency room. The doctor who examined me wrapped my ankle and, deciding the cut didn't need stitches, put on a butterfly bandage to hold the edges together.

"Stay off the foot for a couple of days," she said. "You'll be fine, but you may have a tiny scar on your forehead." You can still see the faint scar below my eyebrow if you look closely.

Soon I began to experience severe pain in my feet. I no longer liked to walk around without shoes because every stick and pebble hurt the bottoms of my feet.

Eventually my hands started to show symptoms. "Look at my thumb." I stuck my right hand into Mom's face.

"What's wrong with it?" She took my wrist and pulled my hand away so she could see it. "It's swollen. Did you smack it on something?"

I told her I didn't remember hitting it against anything. "Maybe I hit the volley ball too hard in gym class yesterday."

We thought the swelling would go down in a day or two, and it did. However, every so often the thumb would puff up again and be painful when I'd make a fist or try to grip anything.

I have always loved to eat, and rarely missed a meal. Besides the usual three-meals-a-day routine, I would visit the candy machine during the first break at school. I always got a chocolate bar and a can of pop to snack on.

A couple of times a week, I'd walk to the drive-in three blocks away and order a cheeseburger, fries, and a chocolate malt. These indulgences eventually started to show on my body and I gained a lot of weight. I wasn't fat, but I definitively had "curves." This prompted me to buy a box of weight-loss supplements. "These things don't work," I decided after finishing the first box, so I never bought a second one. Little did I know that in just a few months my appetite would disappear on its own.

During my senior year, I began skipping meals. "I'm too busy to eat right now," I'd say. "I'll catch a bite later." However, I was rarely doing anything important. I was usually reading a book, listening to music, or lying in bed daydreaming. I was just too tired and not hungry enough to expend the energy to go downstairs and eat.

Every year our school had a big dance before Christmas. “I really want to go,” I told Mom a couple of weeks before the dance. “I don't have a date, though.” This was going to be my last chance to attend a formal event before graduation. I didn't go on dates; I was that girl the boys teased and joked with, but never asked out on a date—except in jest.

My mom and stepdad suggested that my stepbrother, Bret, take me. I was crushed. “I don't want to go with my stepbrother!”

“No one will know he's your stepbrother,” they assured me. “He lives out of town and doesn't know anyone at your school.”

“But he's younger than me.” I wasn't convinced he would look old enough to be my date.

Eventually I agreed and began to prepare for the special night. Mom helped me color my hair; it was a mousy brown, and I wanted red tints put in. Since I didn't have a dress, we borrowed one from a friend. I thought it was beautiful; I felt pretty wearing it. The skirt was a navy blue velvet A-line coupled with a pristine white top. Bret wore a dark suit that made him look older, and quite handsome. I had to admit, we made a good-looking couple.

The night of the dance, my stepdad drove us to the gymnasium. “Call me when you're ready to come home. If I don't hear from you, I'll be back at eleven.”

The room was beautiful, crowded, and filled with loud music. I loved it. For a few magical hours, I even “forgot” my date was my stepbrother.

We danced several fast dances, sat out the slow ones, and ate an assortment of snacks. Actually, I just picked at the food. The excitement of the event overwhelmed any appetite I might have had.

“I'm tired and my feet hurt.” I had to shout in Bret's ear for him to hear me. “My ears are ringing from the loud music, and I want to go home.” Although the night had been short and I was enjoying every

minute, after two hours my body was starting to feel achy and I was tired.

A couple of weeks later, on Christmas morning, I unwrapped a new pair of corduroy jeans from Mom.

When I tried them on, the size-12 pants were too big.

“I told you they were too big,” my stepdad said. “She's lost a lot of weight in the last few months.”

At first Mom blamed it on “those diet pills you're taking.” However, when I insisted that I had stopped taking them after one box, she remembered other significant signs that something was wrong: my birdlike

appetite, my sore feet, and my constant fatigue. These were things she hadn't really noticed before since I wore baggy clothes and spent most of my time in my room or at my best friend's house.

She called the doctor to make an appointment for the next week. She sounded so frantic, the doctor agreed to see me right away.

The appointment was short. After I stepped on the scale, we discovered I weighed 97 pounds, a loss of 30 pounds in three months—and I wasn't consciously trying to lose weight. When I told her about my other symptoms, the doctor did a blood test. “I think you have rheumatoid arthritis.”

My first reaction was disbelief. “That's an old person's disease; there's no way I have arthritis. You must be wrong. I just have the flu.”

As it was rare for someone my age to have RA, at least in Iowa in 1973, my doctor wanted confirmation from a specialist, and decided to send me to a larger hospital—a big-city hospital in Cedar Rapids.

I hope you enjoyed reading this excerpt to my book. If you are interested in reading the rest of the book, you can get it at Amazon <http://www.amazon.com/dp/1511619155/> or Barnes and Noble <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/1122136844?ean=9781511619158>

Thank you!

Ruthie