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How I Became a Human Being: A Disabled Man's Quest for Independence (Wisconsin Studies in Autobiography)

Mark O'Brien, Gillian Kendall

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September 1955. Six-year-old Mark O’Brien moved his arms and legs for the last time. He came out of a thirty-day coma to find himself enclosed from the neck down in an iron lung, the machine in which he would live for much of the rest of his life.

How I Became a Human Being is Mark O’Brien’s account of his struggles to lead an independent life despite a lifelong disability. In 1955, he contracted polio and became permanently paralyzed from the neck down. O’Brien describes growing up without the use of his limbs, his adolescence struggling with physical rehabilitation and suffering the bureaucracy of hospitals and institutions, and his adult life as an independent student and writer. Despite his weak physical state, O’Brien attended graduate school, explored his sexuality, fell in love, published poetry, and worked as a journalist. A determined writer, O’Brien used a mouthstick to type each word.

O’Brien’s story does not beg for sympathy. It is rather a day-to-day account of his reality—the life he crafted and maintained with a good mind, hired attendants, decent legislation for disabled people in California, and support from the University of California at Berkeley. He describes the ways in which a paralyzed person takes care of the body, mind, and heart. What mattered most was his writing, the people he loved, his belief in God, and his belief in himself.

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