



Push Comes to Shove

SOMETIMES, much as I love the rural solitude of Cripple Creek, I enjoy venturing into the nearest big city for festivals, concerts, crafts shows—whatever. On these occasions, I've learned that the difference between a miserable time and a great time is a manual wheelchair.

I used to take no assistive device or, at most, a cane to events that required me to be on my feet for an extended period. Within an hour or so, my feet were dragging or flopping uselessly and I became tired, cranky, and no longer a pleasure to be with. My long-suffering friends would accommodatingly return home much earlier than they'd expected. Alternatively, they'd park me on a bench somewhere to be bored out of my gourd. I was very whiney in those days, and I was asked out less and less often.

Even though I could still walk moderate distances, I came to see that a wheelchair would allow me to relax and enjoy pout-free outings. I acquired a manual chair that I could push myself. I used my new chair for the first time at a crafts show with a friend and was delighted to find that she grew tired long before I did. The chair came with standard indoor tires. I soon replaced them with knobby tires, so that the chair would function on rougher surfaces. Its pneumatic tires were eventually given foam inserts so that maintaining air pressure would not be a nagging worry. I attached a back pack and a drink-holder to the chair. I bought a pair of black leather fingerless cycling gloves to keep my dainty mitts clean and callus-free. I felt quite the well-outfitted cripple.

On outings, I wheeled myself for as long as I could. I have good

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upper body strength, and I enjoyed learning a few of the more sedate sporty moves in my chair. Soon, I could make dramatic sudden turns or jiggle the chair back and forth in place (my new equivalent of impatiently bouncing on the balls of my feet). When I got tired of wheeling myself, I'd ask a friend to push. My friends were actually *pleased* to push my chair. Initially, this was probably out of relief that we could stay out as long as they wished. But over time, it became clear to me that there is something almost dangerously liberating about a wheelchair for the pusher as well as for the pushed. If I knew enough about psychiatric diagnosis, I'd be tempted to categorize people on the basis of their pushing styles.

I have one mild-mannered friend who was very insistent that she be allowed to push the chair. She wouldn't take *no* for an answer. She'd taken time to learn about MS and fatigue and wanted me to have a good time without overexerting myself. Unfortunately, she turned out to be incapable of remembering the foot-rests extending beyond the front of the wheelchair's seat. When we were in a crowd she invariably bumped me into the calves of the person in front of us. That person, naturally, turned around and glared—at *me*. I'd apologize, then turn around and glare at my *friend*, and she'd *giggle*.

"*Please!*" I begged her, "remember that my feet are sticking out down here. Try not to get too close to the people in front of us, okay?" She'd say she was sorry. She'd promise to be more careful. We'd wheel along for another few feet until *bam*, and she'd giggle again. I don't know what the problem was. She couldn't *see* my feet and *out of sight, out of mind*, I guess. I tried warning her as we approached those ahead, but it's hard to project your voice

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behind you and she said she couldn't hear me. I tried to stop the chair myself, reaching down and grabbing the rails, but instead of noticing where my hands were she viewed the resistance as an obstacle to be overcome and pushed harder, which resulted in more violent contact. This woman, reserved of affect and the type who wouldn't harm a fly, was soon giggling before we'd even hit the next hapless pedestrian. Something apprehensive in the set of my shoulders, seen from her perspective behind me as we approached, seemed to set her off. Now, upon impact, she'd burst into gales of helpless laughter. Toward the end of her tenure, I'd refuse to let her push. But I'd get tired, she'd plead, and I'd relent. Although she claimed to be trying for better awareness, we'd inevitably run into someone we didn't know. I finally had to fire her as a pusher because I was afraid someone would initiate a lawsuit.

Truth be told, had I paid attention to her driving style and put two and two together, I never would have permitted her to push me in the first place.

The next person to offer to push my chair is a very sweet, vegetarian, nonviolent, and spiritual woman—my companion, Twink. I have read that a woman who gets behind the wheel of an SUV undergoes a personality change that turns her from a safety-conscious, polite, and somewhat timid driver into a raging rhino of the raceway. I'm here to tell you (and thank God I *am* here to tell you) that the same phenomenon occurs when certain women get behind a wheelchair.

Twink, my chair, and I went to a very large, very crowded street festival celebrating the arts. There were concerts on several outdoor

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stages, crafts booths, art displayed along the sidewalk, installations of sculpture, and performance artists abounding, as well as foods of all kinds sold from wagons and tents. All this activity was crammed into a few blocks of one city street. Although I initially insisted I could wheel myself, the street rose uphill from the festival's starting point, and I quickly grew tired. Cheerful Twink offered to take over. This was her first experience with a "loaded" wheelchair. The chair is well-balanced, but Twink is a short, petite woman and at that time I outweighed her by 30 pounds. This festival is traditionally held on the hottest three days of the summer. Before long, my small friend was puffing and sweating. I told her I'd get out and walk (shades of pioneers' oxen-drawn wagons heading over Pike's Peak). She merrily insisted she was fine (she used to be a cheerleader) and continued pushing us to our destination—a band-shell where a friend was scheduled to perform.

Because I was in a wheelchair, I was permitted to park myself close to the stage and Twink was pleased to benefit from this situation. But our friend's band is a popular one. People began crowding around us. Then a few made the mistake of stepping in front of me. My own tendency in such cases is to politely ask the human obstructions to respect my need as a disabled person and, if they must stay in the disabled seating area, to avoid blocking my view. But Twink, with her hands on the wheelchair, spoke from her newfound position as my guardian and said something which began, "*Hey! Idiot! Yeah, you, with the camera!*"

I can't remember the rest of what she said because the next thing I knew, some unfortunate had dropped a still-burning cigarette butt on the ground by my chair. "*Yo! Do you think the woman*

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in this wheelchair wants to smell your *stinking tobacco*?" I couldn't quite grasp that this was the gentle, people-pleasing Twink of my past experience.

The day continued to unfold. We left the band-shell and went to one of the indoor art galleries. There was a strip across the threshold of the entrance to the gallery, and Twink was having a hard time with the chair. Finally, she looked at a bystander and with all the sarcasm she could muster said, "*Excuse me!* Do you think you could be *bothered* to lend a *hand* here?" After viewing the work inside, we made our way to the exit. Someone jumped with alacrity to hold the door. Did Twink offer a simple word of thanks? No, it was, "Thank you. That was very kind. At least *some* people know how to act."

We proceeded to the food area. There was a special tent with tables for physically disabled people to sit and eat. A board had been placed as a ramp leading up to the tent. Twink aimed my chair at the board and (had it been an SUV) *floored it*. The chair hit the board's raised edge and flung me forward. I saved myself a spill by grabbing the armrests. Twink continued ramming, muttering in frustration about the stupid incompetents who'd placed the board so uselessly. She was oblivious of my suggestion that she tilt the chair. She refused to let me get out and walk. "You shouldn't *have* to walk. Don't these people know how to set up a ramp?!" I managed to keep my seat until, finally, some Good Samaritan helped her lift the chair onto the ramp. We rolled up to the tables, which were filled with able-bodied people unaccompanied by cripples. To them, the empty tent with tables must have looked like a cool, shaded place to eat—respite from the press of the

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crowd. Twink glared at these people in disgust. “*Clear out!*” she commanded, “This is *handicapped* seating! Do any of *you* have a handicap? I don’t *think* so.” The diners looked her over, saw the glint in her eyes, the set of her jaw, and her fists on her hips. With sheepish expressions and in silence they packed up their meals and left.

I’m not intensely outspoken politically when it comes to the rights of the disabled. I’ve tended to talk softly when I felt I must and to keep silent more often than is, perhaps, wise. Although I’d been hunched in my chair with embarrassment during each of these interactions, I was beginning to note the way folks jumped when Twink said, “*Jump!*”

Our meal over, we headed back to the car. We were now going down the long hill up which Twink had valiantly pushed me earlier that day. We were marching in lock-step due to the numbers of people around us, and I could sense her impatience at the slow pace. At one point, a woman and her husband cut directly in front of us and Twink, braking suddenly to avoid hitting them, said “Hey! Watch where you’re going! I’ve got a *disabled person* here. Try looking below *eye-level* sometime!” The woman glared—at *me*, of course, and angrily started to say something, but her husband grabbed her and hauled her off into the crowd. This event had cleared a little space around us and Twink walked more quickly with the chair. She trotted, and then broke into a run. People dodged left and right. Twink bellowed, “*Out of the way! Disabled person coming through!*” Our momentum increased, and I realized Twink was no longer pushing the chair—she was simply hanging on to it or even being pulled by it. Was I terrified? Yep.

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But as our descent continued, I began to feel exhilarated. I enjoyed the cooling breeze in my hair. I was used to people sighing in irritation over having to make room for my chair. I was used to having to request passage, ignored by those who chose not to “see” me. Now I grinned at the novelty of people fleeing for their lives. “Whoeeee!” we yelled, “Yip! Yip! Yip!” We were flying!

At the bottom of the hill, Twink brought the chair to a halt, told me how much fun she was having, and told me *I* was having fun, too. I agreed. We met some friends we knew and stopped to talk with them. I stood up from my chair for this. A pleasant and convivial exchange ensued when along came the couple Twink and I had almost hit at the top of the hill. The woman saw me standing there and turned to her husband, “See?” she said, “That woman isn’t even disabled! Look at her standing there. Where do people get off!” While my response to her was a smile and a wave, this was the last straw for Twink.

“Have you ever heard of *multiple sclerosis*?” she began, her volume increasing as she stalked toward the woman, “*Do you have any idea what that IS? Do you have ANY IDEA what it’s like to have a neurologic disease?*” Again, the woman’s husband took her arm and they disappeared into the surging mass of humanity as Twink continued shouting after them, “*What is your PROBLEM? Do you ever think of anyone besides YOURSELF?!*” In her empowered righteousness she was a wonder to behold. Our friends stared at her in awe.

I’ve come further into remission since that last outing in my chair. I still take my wheelchair on day trips, but I don’t always ride in it. Instead, I use it as a walker, pushing it myself from

behind. The seat provides a handy place for storing purchases, and I can still sit and use it a bit if I get too tired to walk. People look at me askance as I push an empty wheelchair. I don't mind the quizzical looks. They are a relief, actually, because they hold no potential for shouting-matches, lawsuits, or bodily injury. I am grateful not to be a catalyst for the character defects of my friends, now that it is my good fortune to be able to walk in contented safety. If you are able-bodied and attend the same events as I, it is *your* good fortune as well.