

Keeping it in the Family

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The most caring families can reveal a powerful possessive streak when a disabled family member falls in love. The extent to which they can raise barriers and create mischief is related to this salutary tale by Oswald Cobblepot:

It's funny how I accepted that I was, am, and will always be, a disabled - in the sense that I have a physical impairment - person. Many of us will probably have been through the experience, in particular, those of us born with a particular impairment, of a gradual acceptance. No burning bushes on the road to Galilee for me. Rather, the realisation that I was physically different from a majority of my peers and that it was their apathetic attitude towards improving the environment, society in general, that was, and is, responsible for my being a disabled person.

It was probably just as inevitable that I gradually accepted a celibate life. The opportunity to indulge in casual sex, in any kind sex, seldom, if ever, arose for me and if it did then my inexperience meant that I have possibly missed a plethora of chances. Those few that I did recognise, and its difficult to misunderstand an offer of comfort, I rejected. The felt worst than outright rejection. They were a recognition of my humanity and the need for every individual person be needed, but simultaneously, they were a recognition that I was physically normal enough to even qualify as someone deserving of more than mere comfort. That, I thought, was carrying charity too far! It didn't really matter as far as I was concerned, for, whilst I don't believe marriage is a prerequisite to sex, I have always believed that an emotional commitment is.

In my darker moments I sometimes wonder *if* my insistence upon such an - emotional commitment is due to lack of confidence: I am no Michael Douglas. No woman has ever had a screaming climax whilst using an elevator with me. Although I have occasionally left them writhing in agony, having mounted their bunnions with a rather heavy electric chair... that's the way to bring tears to their eyes! Consequently, I sometimes consider the possibility that perhaps I unconsciously need that emotional commitment because that is where my strength lies. When it comes to caring, to consideration, to tenderness, to loving, I will take a woman beyond anything she might have experienced before. The Sharon Stones of this world don't know what they are missing!

Isn't it peculiar that when you stop yearning for something, as I yearned for someone to love, just when you accept and become resigned to the fact that there will never be anyone for you... they up and hit you right in the face! Well, that's exactly how it happened to me. She walked into the room, and had I not been sat in my chair, then I think I'd have collapsed. It literally was as if no one else existed, let alone shared the room with us. She looked at me and I melted. She spoke to me and I felt like a giant. Her warmth enveloped me and I was in love. In a matter of minutes my life and my world changed forever. Years later as I write these words my heart still pounds as I recall that first meeting.

Not a day or night passed that I did think or dream of her. It was an eternity before we met again. When it happened I studiously avoided coming on too strong. I couldn't risk anyone knowing how I felt. They wouldn't have approved. They would have stopped it. But worst, what if she became aware of my feelings toward her'? What if she didn't feel anything for me? What if she rejected me, or, worse still, offered me comfort? Time passed and I experienced the exquisite torture of frequently being in the presence of someone I longed to touch, to hold, to love, her every action inflamed my desire.

The fear of rejection, the sheer lack of experience that many disabled people must also be familiar with, almost prevented me from taking the

next step. Finally, in an act of desperation and, I should admit, frustration, I uttered the phrase so familiar to every lovesick man and boy: "Give us a kiss". That first chaste kiss very soon blossomed into a second more passionate exploration of each others lips, mouths and tongues.

So much has happened since I wrote the preceding. Weeks and months have passed. Our relationship, always subject to pressure from my family, has collapsed At least that is what my partner tells me: it's over. I hope and pray that it isn't, though I do understand why it might have become too intolerable for her.

The greatest pressure on our relationship came from my family. It's difficult to describe the evil vitriol, the wickedness and the sheer spite that has spewed from the mouths of so-called loving family members.

My mother, now in her seventies and physically frail, presented the first, and to some degree, insurmountable hurdle. No amount of reason, discussion, persuasion or argument could change her mind. I simply wasn't prepared or experienced enough to withstand her scheming. In the lull that followed our most vehement disagreements, she began, at first insidiously and later more openly, to make my partner feel unwelcome. She denied us any privacy whatsoever, insisting on using any room we happened to be in, popping-in with the slightest of excuses, insisting upon joining-in with our private conversations, upon trying to make the relationship into a triangle ... and she obviously succeeded, for she seems to have ensured the relationship ended.

My sister and brother-in-law, at first supportive, soon sank to similar depths of behaviour. They would enter rooms and turn tvs on even when it was obvious my partner and I wished to be alone. Night after night we would return home, after escaping for a few hours to a cinema or restaurant to relax in our own company, only to find that they had parked their car so that it blocked the ramp I use to get into the house. They would go out of their way to ignore, and make it pointedly obvious that they were ignoring, my partner. Their ignorant and spiteful behaviour knew no bounds But unfortunately it was successful,

for such behaviour does have a cumulative effect and eventually even the strongest of people has to get out of such an environment.

On reflection I feel that initially they were supportive because they were pleased that I had a relationship. Eventually, I think they felt threatened by the relationship. What if I got married? What if my partner and I wished to live together in the family home?

What would then happen to them? And so they set out to destroy the relationship and they succeeded, For no matter how strong feelings are, eventually they weaken under sustained bombardment. Perhaps the relationship would have ended sooner had I told my partner of my sisters comments concerning our relationship, that it wasn't right for a non-disabled person to have a full relationship with someone as disabled as I am, that such a person must be sick or perverted to even harbour such feelings for a person like me.

How does one overcome such ignorance and prejudice? I don't think you can. I think you simply except that it exists and is the result of a level of intelligence and immature emotions that are beyond rhyme or reason. However, in that acceptance you have to bite the bullet and determine to actively seek an opportunity to leave such environments. Though unfortunate, it is the reality of family life for many disabled people trying to make relationships with non-disabled people work in society today. In many ways it is the uneducated (both intellectually and emotionally) family, disabling and marginalising the disabled person in ways and means far more hurtful than anything society can do. By asserting, and abusing, their control and power, whether it be due to sheer bloody mindedness, financial greed, or simply due to the fact that they might themselves be emotionally impaired, the family abrogates all claims to family ties and loyalty. Through the exploitation not only of the powerlessness of the disabled person, but also his or her lack of opportunity and access to limited and frequently nonexistent support services, it's easy for a family to say "No". With the full knowledge that, for instance, people like you and I can be on housing waiting lists for years and meanwhile have no hope of making relationships permanent or lasting.

The Sting

Signs of the Times

It could only happen in Oldham. Two new shops have opened in the recently refurbished town centre. Yet another charity shop, this one for Cancer Relief, sits side by side with `Supercigs", a shop designed rather to promote and encourage cancer! Talk about cutting out the middle man!

And am I the only person in the world who can remember a time when there were few, if any, charity shops in our town centres?

The Tip of the Iceberg

Scope, Britain's largest disability charity, recently admitted to covering up 10 years of child abuse at one of its schools. Disabled pupils were sworn at, denied food and physically abused by staff.

In another recent scandal, staff at a home for people with learning difficulties have been accused of sexual abuse and fraud.

These stories don't take up many column inches on the few occasions that newspapers bother to report on them; only rarely are prosecutions brought.

But anyone who's spent time in any kind of institution knows that these scandals are just the tip of an enormous iceberg. Abuse is so common that it's almost taken for granted.

It's time that those who are responsible for such instances of abuse were treated in law the same way as any other person guilty of assault (or worse!) might be treated. The recent Scope scandal took place over a ten year period, during which these crimes were covered up by other staff and management. Even when the evils were exposed, no criminal actions were brought.

And that's criminal!

Mixed Messages

Many original and inventive stunts were organised up and down the country to celebrate the "International Week for People with Disabilities".

One local campaign, designed to coincide with the IDODP caught the eye more than most, if only for it's somewhat mixed messages.

The Lothian Coalition of Disabled People promoted a positive view of disabled people using the slogan -"Disabled people are proud to stand on their own two feet"!

Fine, you may say, assuming you have feet in the first place, and that, if you have, you're able to stand on them! Just to rub salt in the wounds of those of us who don't stand up, the slogan was promoted via large panel posters – on the sides of double-decker buses!

But even if this were the case, a little more thought might have been given, in this instance, to exactly what message we are trying to convey to the non-disabled public.

The Disabled Person's Burden

Here's a story about the widely-advertised holiday cottages at Penrose Burden. Two dissatisfied disabled visitors complained after they had been left without adequate heating throughout the Xmas period. This was the central point amongst a whole list of smaller complaints.

In an appalling letter of reply, the owners said that the visitors should be grateful, and told them: *"Don't even think of asking for your money back"*.

It's interesting how different standards of service are often applied to disabled people, in the apparent belief that we should be grateful that

basic access has been provided. And as long as accessible holiday accommodation remain as relatively scarce as it is now, the owners will find no shortage of new and unknowing disabled guests to take the place of their dissatisfied customers.