

Chapter three. Spring 2005. Expanding horizons

I returned to university feeling gloomy after moping around the house for four weeks. The second I walked into the canteen I felt happy again, hearing people saying "happy new year, Matt". I was among friends, able to go where I pleased. I chatted to Trish, my culture lecturer, and all the worries of the world were gone. she made me laugh, for the first time in a couple of days, by telling me about her friend's devil-cat; I told her about my worries, and she reminded me that everyone has such worries. Campus had already become the very embodiment of freedom for me. When I was living with my parents, I felt restricted; I was unable to go out without their permission, and there were not many places in the small town where we lived where I could go. The MMU Alsager campus, however, was sheltered and safe.

On the small campus at Alsager, I could get to where I needed to be quite easily. This new term, however, I could go one step further. When he had dropped me off in my room that cold, January morning, Dad had delivered my powerchair. I had been using an electric wheelchair for quite a while, but until then we had debated whether it was suitable for me to use on campus. Strictly speaking I did not need it, in the way that the severely disabled boys at the special school I went to need their powerchairs; but when it came to moving long distances I tired quickly and became unstable, so we decided it was time for me to start using my powerchair on campus. I instantly gained much more freedom. Too weak to propel myself in a manual chair and too unstable to walk any real distances, until that point I had been confined to campus. The walk to Brandies, the campus bar, had been my limit. Much further and I would have become too tired and risked falling. Now, however, I could go wherever I wanted. I was eagerly looking forward to exploring the village under my own steam, and perhaps even the lanes and fields beyond.

Once back in my room after a coffee in the canteen, I settled back into writing on my computer. Even with my special extended keyboard, writing for me is a slow process. An essay of, say, fifteen hundred words could take an entire afternoon for me to type out. On the other hand, it was a process I enjoyed: there was – and still is – something in the composing of words, of putting them together, which I found enormously therapeutic.

In my first year, I had lectures, seminars and writing workshops on four out of the five days of the week. On those days, Esther came to help me. She would go with me to lectures and classes and take notes for me. On days when my timetable was blank, Esther did not join me, leaving me, after my Home-helper had left me after breakfast, to fend for myself. Most mornings I would try to do some writing, and then, after an hour or two of tapping at my keyboard, I would go to what we were now calling the

Wes for a cup of coffee. I would usually take a book with the intention to read it, but invariably I would find four or five of my friends there and start talking.

That January, however, university arranged some extra help for me. On one of my free afternoons, I was introduced to a guy called Bill. A short, scruffy, second year Sports Psychology student, on the first day I had him I set straight to work dictating a film essay to him on my Lightwriter. I often found that I could type faster on my communication aid due to its prediction function, so Bill typed into my computer what I typed into my Lightwriter. I invited him into my room and spent two otherwise silent hours speaking my essay for the fortysomething student, originally from South London, to type. By the time we had finished it was getting dark; my fingers were hurting and I was fairly hungry, but I was rather pleased with the progress I had made.

5

Over the next few weeks, I began to see Bill quite frequently, eventually employing him as a personal assistant. That way, he could help me get dinner in the evenings, a far more agreeable, flexible state of affairs than having to wait until the fixed time for the home-helper ladies. The Direct Payment system allows people with disabilities to employ their own staff, their salaries supplied by local government. Thus the service user is in direct control of their own support. It was how I payed Esther when she helped me get lunch, and eventually how I payed Bill. He and I soon started spending our evenings together, striking up a friendship.

The year was slowly drawing to a close, and as a person I had grown more than I would ever have thought possible. I slipped into a comfortable routine of lectures and seminars, of days with Esther and evenings with Bill; of weekdays on campus and going home for the weekends. The highlight of my first year, however, came towards it's end, in may, with the grand summer ball. It all started, I suppose, about mid-morning on the fourteenth of May, when, during a coffee break in the film festival, I noticed a fairground ghost-train being erected at the back of the Wesley centre (the campus canteen).

At about three, after the film festival had heard Dr. West-Burnham's closing speech about the irony of calling film studies a "Mickey mouse degree", I could not help counting down the hours until 7pm. This was a mistake, for when one does this, time seems to drag.

Nevertheless, seven eventually came.

On Wednesday nights I had often see a girl from the Crewe campus. Until last night we had not spoke, but I had wanted to say hi for a while. She had CP too, although

not as severe as mine. I had always been reticent of going up to her - after all, we only share a neurological condition and nothing else. I reasoned that she would not like to be singled out, so I let her be. Yet towards the end of the evening, I was sitting down, when the girl came to sit by me. Ironically, she had been wanting to say hi to me all year too. I have always been of the opinion that, as a subculture, we disabled must stick together to remain strong, but was afraid she would not agree. For some reason, I have always been more comfortable with fellow crips - they have more of an idea of where I am coming from.

Hence, the six hours between seven and one flew by, as if the god of time had been saving his energy by going slowly the previous six hours for a sprint. As the lights of the bar rose, I went back home, wondering if beer washes out of nylon spandex. The academic year had come to an end; it had been fantastic. I was getting great results and enjoying myself more than ever before. Little did I realise, though, the fun had only just started.