

From Where I Sit

Sex and the City

Disability Style

by Danielle Sheypuk

On a fall day in 2000, I, an adventure-seeking country girl, moved from rural Pennsylvania to the Big Apple. Bright-eyed and fun-loving, having spent all of my 22 years in a wheelchair, I'd tasted independence in college and was oh-so-eager to spread my wings and fly to the unfamiliar, inviting New York City.

"How could her mother let her move to that big city alone?" opined the neighbors. "For God's sake, she's in a wheelchair!" Those were exactly the attitudes I was fleeing. I knew I was capable of a lot more socially and romantically than my small town could offer.

Sure, everyone thought I was going to New York to go to graduate school. But I knew the future had more in store for me. It was time to leave my comfortable, safe life with family to take care of me, and see if I could become an independent, sexual woman like all the able-bodied women around me. It was a challenge and the City called.

So, off I went to a Greenwich Village studio apartment that was way too small for my motorized wheelchair. A friend of a friend became my personal care attendant and the daunting thought of living far from home gradually slipped into a very do-able, exciting reality.



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It's Different in the City

And I started dating. It began with a kiss at 3 a.m. with my blind next-door neighbor who also was a graduate student at New York University. Then, there was a movie date with another graduate student.

Wow, here in the City, it was different. It seemed I could have a 6-inch pink Mohawk or be attached to my personal assistant with a studded dog collar and leash and no one would notice, never mind that I used a wheelchair.

Feeling braver and excitingly, uniquely different, urged by my wide circle of able-bodied friends who were doing it, I signed up for the online dating service Match.com. I hesitated at first to post on my profile that I use a wheelchair, afraid no one would respond. But guys did ... many, many guys.

I met guys who rejected me on the first date, and guys who missed the part that mentions my wheelchair and, once told, seemed to forget my phone number. Let's not forget the men who are actually attracted to disability and turned off by able-bodied women — an unusual breed indeed, whom some people consider fetishists.

Some dates said the wheelchair didn't matter, but apparently they'd envisioned me as a perfectly able-bodied woman, just sitting down. They tried to adjust, but failed. And thankfully, there have been men who acknowledged that disability is just part of me, and it was me they were interested in.

Am I Doomed?

With all the rejection, I question: Is not being able to walk like having bubonic plague? It's just a disability, I want to say. What's the big deal? I have so many great friends; why does dating have to be so radically different from friendship?

Sometimes I wonder if I wonder about my disability too much. Does it deserve the blame for my current relationship status (single)? New York City is full of fabulously single women with the "it" job, social life and look, who are lamenting the same thing — so many that they inspired the hit HBO series "Sex and the City." It seems the City toughens everyone's dating skin, regardless of age, race, gender or disability.

I see my able-bodied girlfriends struggling to find "the one" and wonder: Am I doomed? Will I decide to compromise my standards if I meet someone who accepts my disability and seems "good enough"? No, I'm going to keep my eyes open for someone compatible with me in mind, body and soul.

I've had a handful of short-term relationships, none of which amounted to anything serious. Chalk it up to the elusive "lack of chemistry." Yes, they had attractive qualities, but also some idiosyncratic traits that turned me off quicker than the thought of kissing someone with missing teeth and bad breath who calls me "Sweet Lips."

One fellow wanted to take me to bed on all of our dates, and I'm not speaking of the trendy Manhattan club called Bed. Another guy was barely able to muster a kiss after a few months of dating. I seriously questioned another's sexual orientation, one was too cheap to pay for a meal at McDonald's, and another, 20 years my senior, was just too old.

I went along for the ride. I like the adventure of getting to know new people, and the more dates I go on, the more I learn about, and become comfortable with, my disability and romance.

Disabled Dates

Wouldn't it be easier for me to date someone else with a disability? A relative of mine firmly believes so. Apparently, her logic is that our disabilities would make us compatible, or maybe she believes that only a disabled man would want to date a disabled woman.

I've never dated someone with a disability. I'm not opposed to it. No one with a disability has ever asked me on a date. Sometimes I think dating someone with a disability would be a pleasant relief, knowing he understands my physical limitations and the inconveniences that go along with it. To be totally upfront about my disability and have someone truly understand would be an experience I've never had before.

However, dating someone in a wheelchair presents some technical difficulties. How would we have sex or even make out? We'd probably have to parallel park to kiss. How would we travel? I often depend on the physical strength of the guys that I date.

The emotional comfort and understanding of dating someone with a disability is offset by the physical convenience of dating in the able-bodied world. But my parents taught me that where there's a will, there's a way. So applying this philosophy, I'll leave my options open.

Breathless

Dating has made me realize I'm a desirable, tempting, seductive, flirtatious woman. Exhilarating and arduous, this dating adventure sometimes leaves me feeling so unbelievably sexy that I might as well be Heidi Klum in a wheelchair, loving how my limitations make me unique and add something extra to my appeal. Other times, it leaves me feeling incredibly unattractive, wondering how any man would ever love me and my limitations, thinking maybe I should give up on men altogether.

Dating has brought up such intense emotions that several times it's taken my breath away. Sometimes I want to give it a rest, quit trying so hard; other times I'm energized and refreshed by getting to know someone else, being with them romantically and keeping alive the prospect of one day meeting — dare I say it — my husband.

From where I sit right now, I have hope (I think). I left the comfort and security of my home and now find myself right in the middle of a romantic adventure — it's what I expected, but more intense and fulfilling than I ever imagined.

Danielle Sheypuk, 28, is working on a doctorate in clinical psychology with plans to specialize in forensic psychology. She enjoys traveling, concerts, museums, ethnic restaurants and city nightlife. She has spinal muscular atrophy.