

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Denis Blandford for the wonderful artwork that has helped to make this book come alive and for all the fun we had working on it.

Also, to Brenda Smith for all the hard work she put into typing my long-hand notes and coping with the numerous changes I made.

CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	1
DEDICATION.....	2
TURNING POINT.....	3
THE EDGES OF REALITY	4
A CHAT WITH GOD.....	6
HOSPITAL DAWN	7
NURSES	8
BE YOURSELF	9
BITS AND PIECES	10
A PERSONAL GLOW	11
IN GOD’S HANDS.....	12
WITH LOVE.....	13
THE CONSULTATION	14
BITTERNESS.....	15
MOVING IN	16
SWEET ‘N’ SOUR.....	18
VALUES	19
I’M ONLY HUMAN.....	20
YOU DON’T SAY	21
JUST LIKE OTHER FOLKS.....	22
KINDNESS SOOTHES THE SAVAGE BREAST	23
DREAMS.....	25
A TOUCHING PLEA	26
ODE TO ROVER'S THOUGHTLESS OWNER	27
PRIDE OR PASSION.....	28
DECISIONS.....	28
GRRR!.....	29
UNCLE STAN.....	30
COMING TO TERMS	31
THE MAIDEN VOYAGE.....	32
THE SOUTHBANK NIGHTMARE	36
A DIFFERENT WAVELENGTH	37
SPLASHBACK	39
GETTING GOING	40

THE BOTTLE'S NIGHT OFF	41
1983.....	43
1988.....	44
GOOD ON YOU CAROLE	45
RAIN ON THE WINDOWS	46
A GOOD NIGHT OUT	48
NEGATIVE TO POSTIVE.....	49
PARKING	50
THE WAY IT IS	51
ALBERT.....	53
MY LIFESTREAM.....	55
THE BANK EXPEDITION	56
REFLECTIONS	59

PREFACE

My name is Richard P. Eason. I am forty-two years old.

On Friday the thirteenth of May 1983 I had a motorcycle accident. My spleen was ruptured, left lung collapsed and I had a severe brain stem injury. After a long spell in intensive care, all I could do was blink.

Now five years on, after many courses of physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy and all sorts of rehabilitation I have regained the use of about a third of my body, mainly on my right side. This is just enough to allow me to live a reasonably independent life in a ground floor council flat in Staines, Middlesex. I have a terrific home help, who comes to clean and cook and generally set me up for each day during the week. She is the backbone of my support. I also have a small nucleus of loyal friends who lend a hand, when I need it.

I depend on an electric wheelchair for my mobility and can't move about the flat without it. It takes an hour to get out of bed and get dressed and most of the tasks I perform are on that time and effort scale. I'm fairly weary at the end of the day, but it's worth it to have my precious independence.

Most weekdays I go to Fairways Day Centre, which is next door to where I live in Staines. They are very supportive and I usually spend the time drawing pictures, which I frame and sell. Being Chairman of the Physically Handicapped Clients Committee also gives me an interest. Occasionally I go into town in my "outdoor" chair, to the shops or the bank and sometimes I get out with friends to see the odd concert, visit a local pub or restaurant.

During the past five years I've suffered all sorts of traumas. My father and sister died within six months of each other, both had brain tumours. I love and miss them both. Then my marriage collapsed. This led to me having to get a flat and start life again, on top of learning to cope with my disabilities so I was under quite a lot of stress in those days. The prevailing feeling throughout that time was that although those around me tried to understand how I was feeling, they couldn't truly relate to my situation. This left a feeling of isolation I found hard to handle. As a way of release I started to write simple poems based on my experiences and my peculiar sense of humour helped me too, the highs and lows are reflected in the poems.

Having accumulated quite a collection over a period of time the thought occurred to me how comforting it would have been had I been able to read something like this in some of my darker moments. To know someone else had been through similar circumstances and survived to live in a more acceptable situation. So I decided to put a book together in the hope that if it got published it might help others treading the same rocky path. Also to try to give the able bodied a small insight into our world and with luck promote better understanding, to laugh and cry with us as fellow human beings.

DEDICATION

Ever since I was about five years old, I promised my mum that when I grew up and became rich, I would buy her a fur coat. Unfortunately, I didn't manage to do either and she never got the fur coat.

So mum, the least I can do is dedicate this book to you, in recognition of your wonderful example of love and courage. God bless you.

Richard

TURNING POINT

Friday the thirteenth was a sunny day
in eighty-three in the month of May.

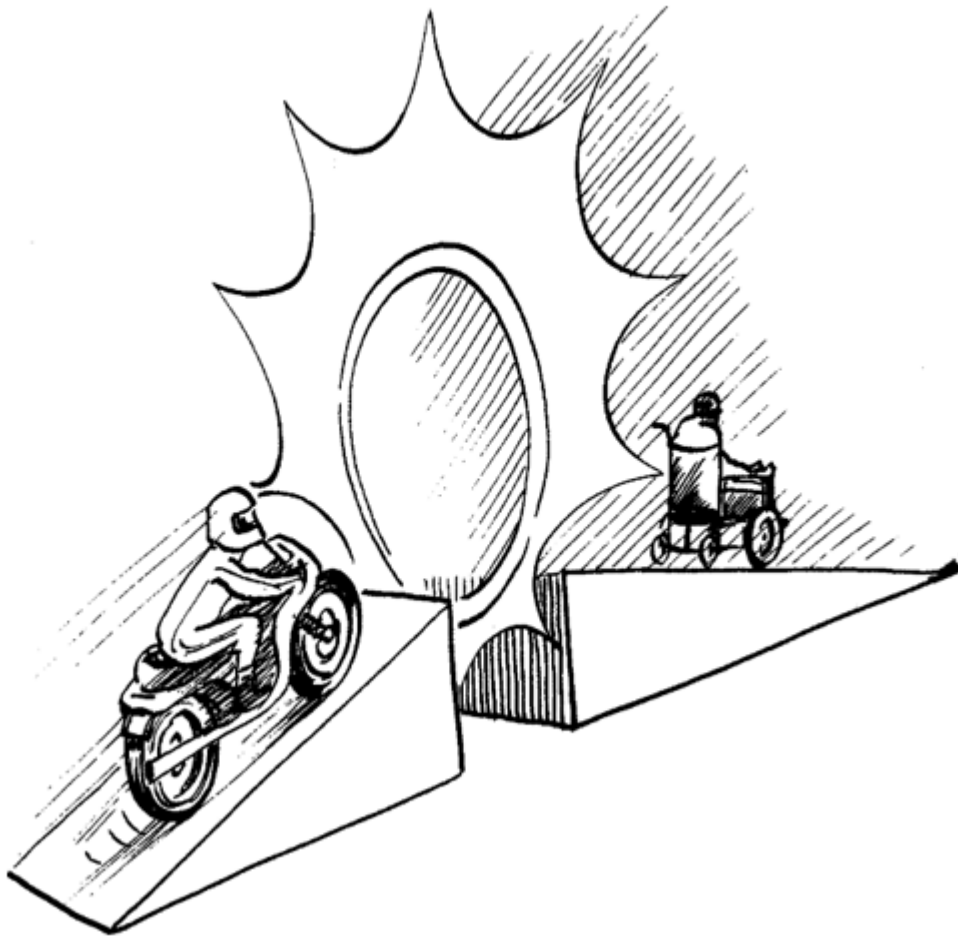
I took the bend about fifty-five
and didn't come out dead or alive.

A large pointing finger, silhouetted by the sun
quietly suggested my time had come.

The back wheel locked by the broken chain,
from that moment on I was never the same.

I look different now, healed by time,
searching for love in the mountains I climb.

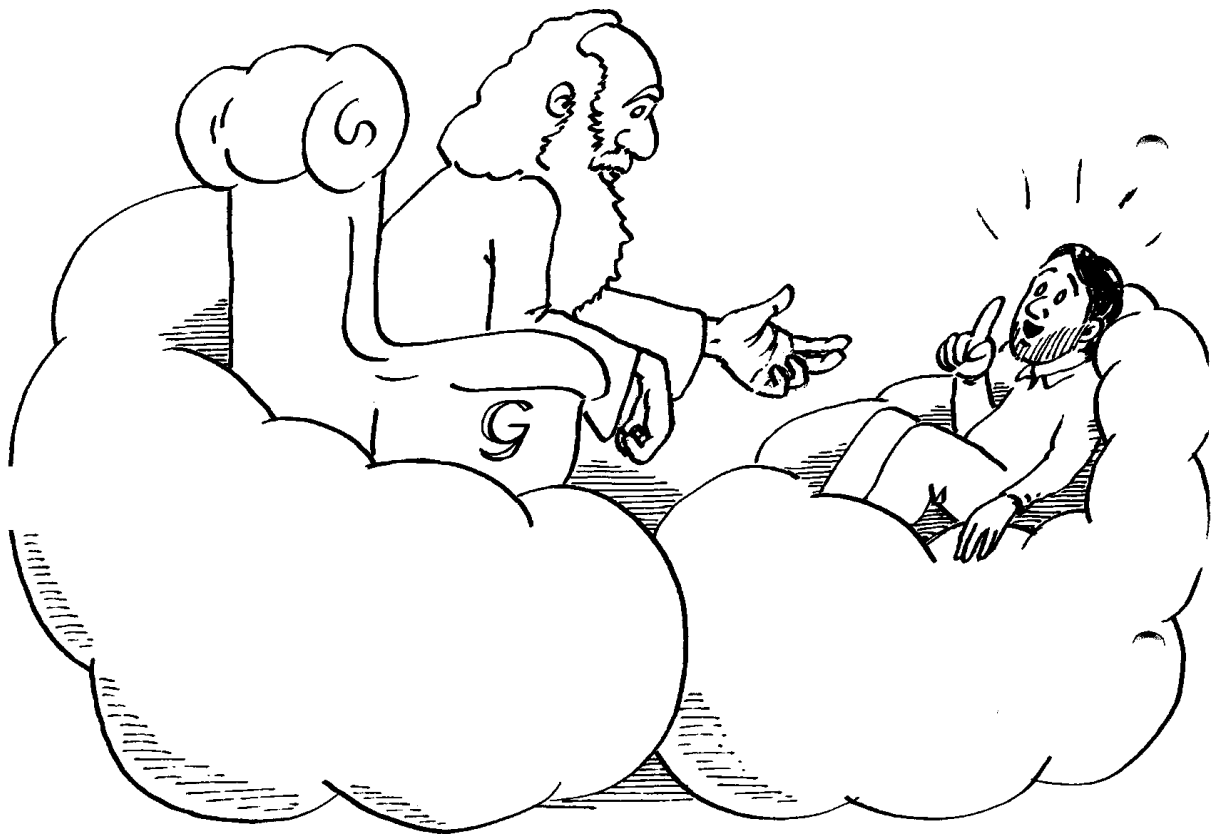
Thank God for the people who care and give,
without their kindness I couldn't live.



THE EDGES OF REALITY

The moon illuminated the misty night,
across the valley floated a sound like a scream.
Was it some nocturnal being, in pain or fright?
What was it that had frozen your senses
and left you feeling like you'd had a bad dream?
Nightmares invading your helpless imagination,
like a leaf on the rapids of a swollen stream?
No, it's just time for another painkilling injection,
by an overstretched night nurse doing her routine.





A CHAT WITH GOD

I'm afraid Lord I'm getting sceptical
about my role in your grand design.
I'm feeling a bit disillusioned
as to what you have in mind.

I'm assured there is good reason
for all that comes about,
that eventually all will be revealed
but I'm beginning to have my doubts.

Being disabled certainly brings home
the important things in life,
but was it really so necessary
to teach me with all this strife?

Perhaps you wanted me to write this book
to help others in a similar plight.
I just wish you would fill me in
then maybe I'd see the light.

There are people who lie and cheat and steal,
like that evil sod from number thirty-three.
He always seems to land on his feet,
why didn't he cop this lot instead of me?

Was I so bad in those pre-accident days?
Was I having too much of a fling?
Did you feel enough was enough
and decided to clip my wings?

Ah well, I'd better get on with it,
there'll be no peace until I do.
You're a tough one to understand Lord
But you know that I'll see it through.

When finally, I jump off this mortal coil
and join you up there in the sky,
hope you're going to sit down with me
and tell me the reasons why.

HOSPITAL DAWN

In those moments of tranquil half-life,
sandwiched between consciousness and sleep,
when all is safe and warm and free from strife,
shielded from the zone where reality creeps.

A breeze blows you towards the edge,
in reluctant, slow motion, you float.
Away from the comfort of that mental womb,
like a castaway in a sinking boat.

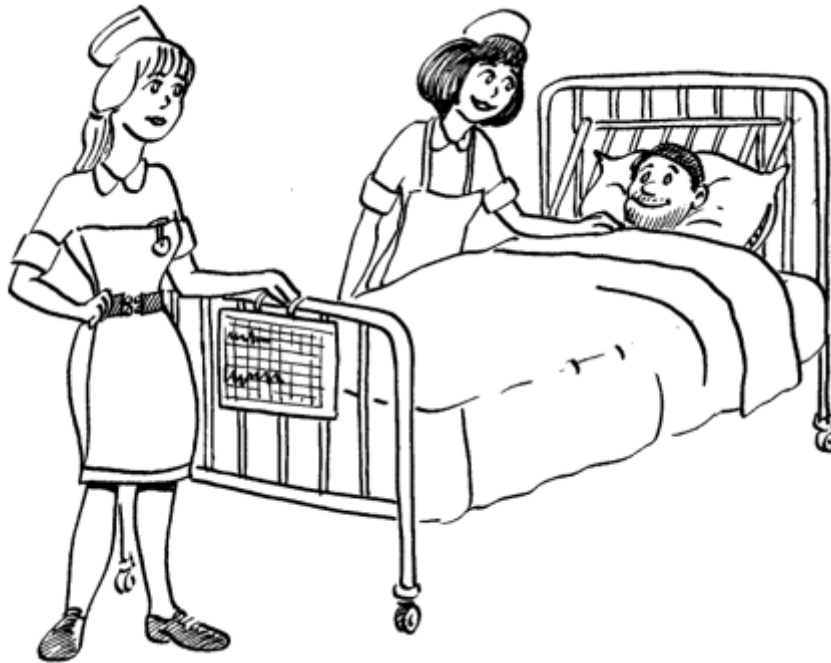
Eyes open, you see the shark's fin,
once again, you must fight to survive.
Do you go on trying or just jump in?
It's the nature of the beast to stay alive.

NURSES

Nurses give us naughty thoughts,
it's the uniforms you know.
Black stockings and crisp white tunics,
swishing to and fro.

We try to look so helpless,
lying there in our beds,
smiling in sweet surrender,
as the fantasies fill our heads.

Of course, they're quite aware of these lusty masculine urges,
it's what helps us fight the fight, God bless our lovely nurses!



BE YOURSELF

Hold your breath, don't let it out.
Be silent, don't give it away.
Look at the ceiling, avoid the eyes,
don't join in the games they play.

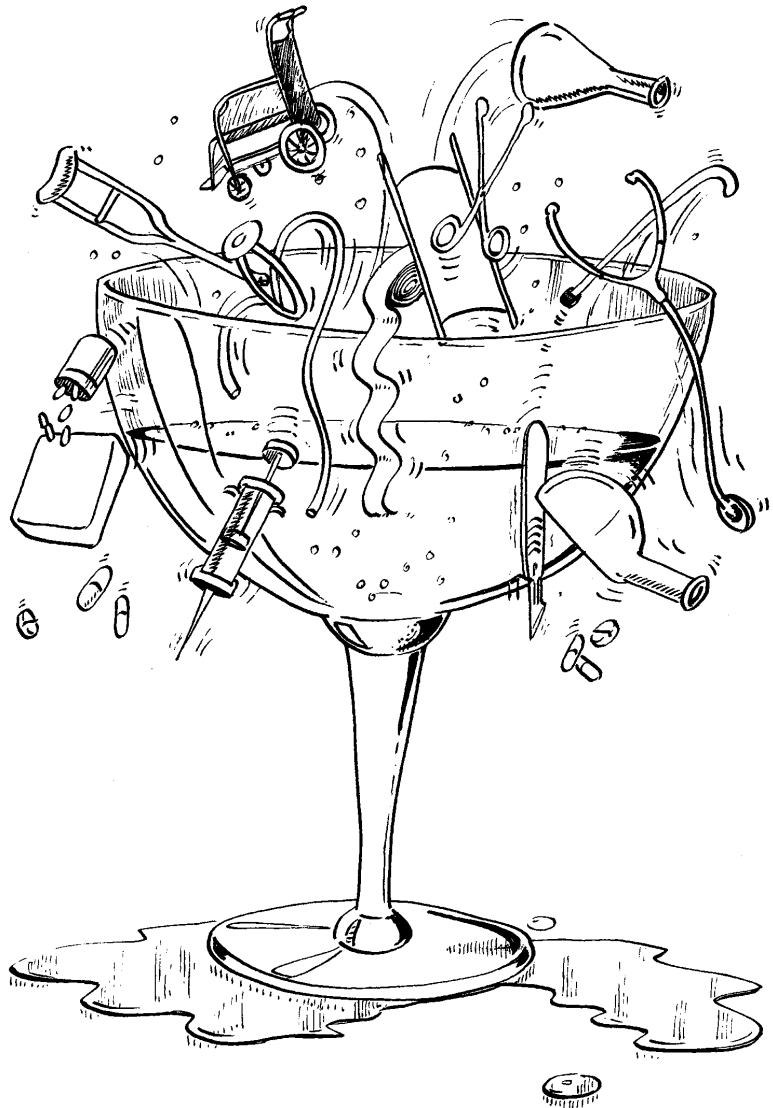
Be yourself, don't fall in the trap,
remember your spirit is free.
You know what you can get out of life,
and it's you you've got to please.

BITS AND PIECES

Stretchers, blankets and inco pads,
catheters, bottles and labs.
Beds, bandages and scalpels,
anaesthetics, operations and crabs.

Wheelchairs, crutches and walking sticks,
stitches, plasters and slings.
Doctors, O.Ts and physios,
Haemorrhoids, nosebleeds and things.

Diagnosis, prognosis and halitosis,
ingrown toenails, scabies and gout.
Hydro pools, theatres and walking frames,
G&T, cider and stout.



A PERSONAL GLOW

There's a light that shines for all people,
when things are dark, it sees us through.
Hold up your head, keep your spirits high,
the light shines especially for you.

So whatever happens, don't be afraid,
remember your twinkling star.
It's the one thing that can't be taken from you,
no matter whoever you are.

It's a flame that never flickers,
it's there till your life departs.
It's on your side and will never leave you,
it's yours to be kept in your heart.

IN GOD'S HANDS

There he stood at the end of my bed,
dark red eyes and goat-like head,
black and ugly, with an evil grin,
gloating like a vulture, was the king of sin.

Filled with terror, nowhere to turn,
his obvious impatience made me squirm.
He'd come to claim me, when I died,
but my heart still ticked, and my spirit still tried.

Just then a voice came, deep from within,
"You know the only way to deal with him."
Jesus told me I should start to pray,
the devil roared and then faded away.

Say what you like, this happened to me
and there's nothing wrong with my memory.
I've been told that the drugs probably cast a dreadful spell
but, on that day, the Lord saved me from going to Hell.

WITH LOVE

As the last tear is wiped away
and breathing evenly flows,
things are viewed in the cold light of day,
your spirits hit an all-time low.

Suddenly it's a brand-new game,
with a different set of rules.
The world is just the same,
but it seems a lot more cruel.

I've lost so much, I hear myself say,
these gifts I took for granted.
Abilities I used to abuse every day,
their memories leave me haunted.

Is anybody out there listening,
who somehow relates to my plight?
A friendly star glistening, saying it will be alright?

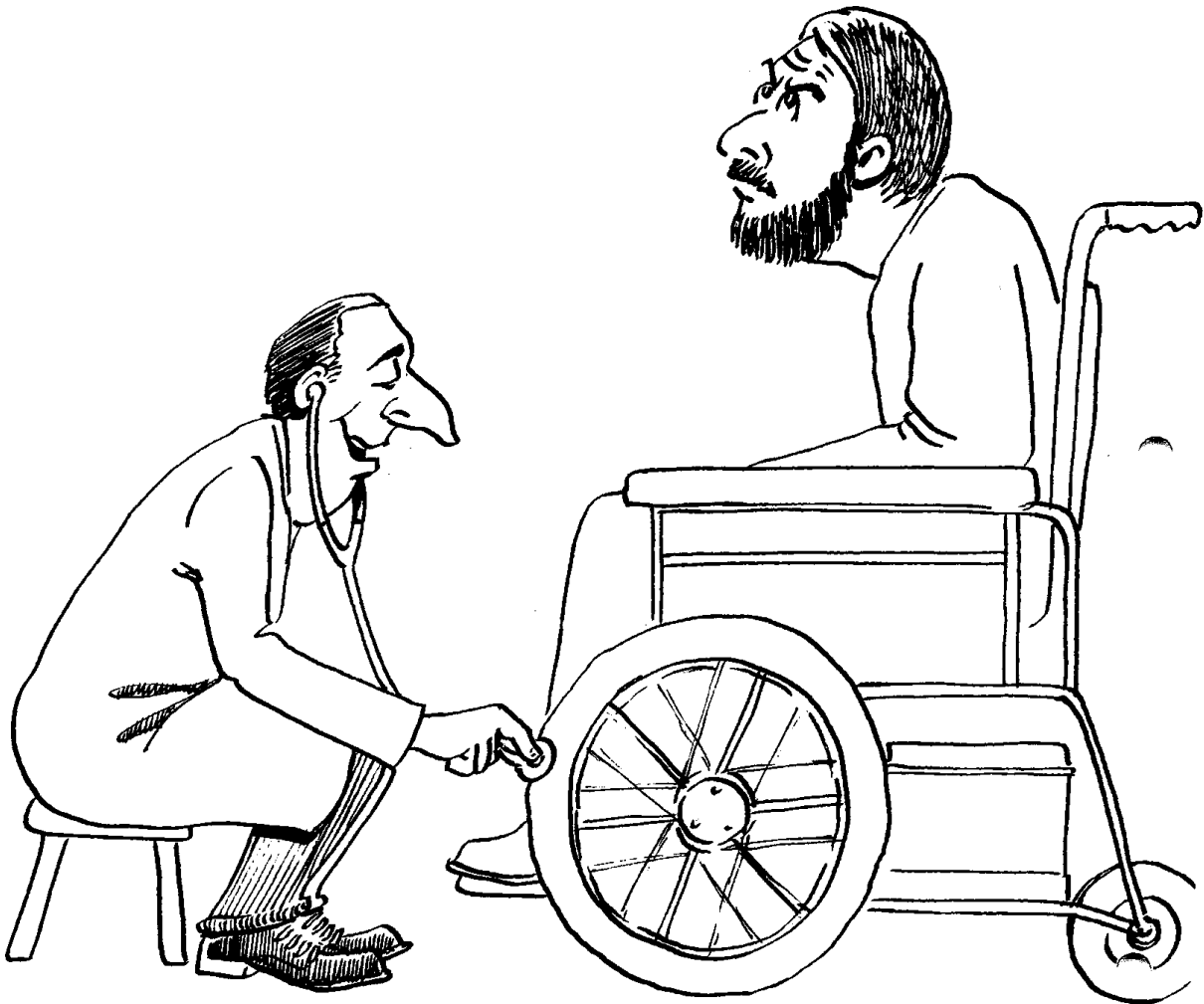
Love's the redeeming solution,
it sustains and keeps one alive,
overcoming pain and confusion,
giving me the strength to survive.

THE CONSULTATION

"Ah, good morning, Mr. Eason", the specialist said,
"according to the notes, there's something wrong with your head.
Just take a couple of aspirins and spend the day in bed.
I can see you're breathing heavily, so I'm certain you're not dead."

I was stunned by the genius
of this little man in grey,
his diagnosis was like lightning.
Though I'm tempted to say,
I think it was my wheelchair,
that gave the game away.

"Hang on, just a second" he said, through trembling lips,
triumphantly placing skilful hands up on his bony hips.
"You haven't got a headache, lad, you are one of those bloody Crips,
if you think that I can help you, I'm afraid you have had your chips."



BITTERNESS

Bitterness is such a destructive force,
a disease floating in on the tide.
Its ebb brings a blessed relief,
when it flows there's nowhere to hide.

Those vulnerable times when alone,
the devil whispers in your ear.
Urging you to indulge that weakness,
to screw you full of fear.

It gnaws at your very soul,
a belligerent growth in the mind.
Humiliation and helplessness,
frustration and anger, grind.

Happiness comes on those good days,
when the monster has gone to sleep.
You relish each joyous moment,
coping without gritted teeth.

I'm learning to sing gentle lullabies,
to pacify that emotional knife.
Keep it quietly under control,
whilst I get on with my life.

MOVING IN

The Walton and Weybridge Lions had offered to move me to my new flat. They were so kind to me. Their cheerful and supportive attitude towards the situation was a real help and greatly reassured me. The ambulance they used had a tail lift, which they used to load me and the bits of furniture and belongings I was taking with me. One of my friends from the Lions also brought his minibus so I was able to do the move in one go. I will be eternally grateful to them for the assistance that day. The Lions don't get half the recognition they deserve.

I had wanted to move in to the flat at the end of '86 for lots of pressing reasons, but the Council didn't want me to do so until the New Year as all the back-up I would require to survive would be on Christmas leave. I think at that stage they were a bit sceptical as to whether I would manage on my own and did not share my confidence that I would cope. A ramp had been fitted to my back door so I could come and go, and rails had been fitted in the bathroom, so I could use the loo.

I had to show the various powers that be, previous to permission for tenancy, that I could reach the sink taps, light switches, manoeuvre through doorways in my electric chair and generally manage the basics.

The first few months were a bit like a probation, but there was no way I was going to lose my newfound independence as far as I was concerned.

The first time I came through the door on that day in January 1987 was quite daunting. There were cardboard boxes and bags of clothes, bits of carpet my Mum had given me and bits and pieces donated to me by friends for the flat. I spent most of the day dodging people as they hung curtains, fixed lamp shades, unpacked crockery, moved furniture and hundreds of other activities. It was very bewildering. We stopped midday so we could enjoy some takeaway food someone had popped out for.

My friends were magnificent. It was early evening when all that could be done had been done and the last of my helpers left. I sat in the lounge feeling stunned, the silence was deafening, to coin a well-used phrase.

I thought, this is it kid, go for it. Life begins at 13 The Beeches, and I have never looked back, apart from a few hiccups.



SWEET 'N' SOUR

Sitting there, in your chair,
watching the world go by,
being pushed and fed and dressed,
people don't like to ask why.

You smile and it all looks O.K.
on your nose there's a nice big drip!
You're given a nod and a pat on the head,
it ain't easy being a Crip!

You arrive in the foyer, lots of ABs about,
loose in the world, mixing, what next?
So you hang out your tongue and roll the eyes,
it's what the public expect.

You smile and it all looks O.K.
on your nose there's a nice big drip!
You're given a nod and a pat on the head,
it ain't easy being a Crip!

Smile whilst scratching your crutch,
fart out loud, come what may,
the beauty of being stuck in a wheelchair,
is they think you're insane anyway.

You smile and it all looks O.K.
on your nose there's a nice big drip!
You're given a nod and a pat on the head,
it ain't easy being a Crip!

Drop food on your lap, make a nice mess,
dribble down the front of your sweater,
pull agonised expressions and contort your face,
then they'll tell you, you'll soon get better!

You smile and it all looks O.K.
On your nose there's a nice big drip!
You're given a nod and a pat on the head,
it ain't easy being a Crip!

VALUES

When I was whole, I was blind,
to the caring, the giving and kind.
I thought they were "do-gooders", just soft,
I was sceptical and often scoffed.
In the chains of disability,
without them I'd be in purgatory,
these friends have helped set me free.
Now I'm disabled, I can see.

I'M ONLY HUMAN

There is no need to shout,
my hearing is fine,
the injuries I've got
are in my spine.

I know I look strange,
cos my body don't work,
but there's no need to treat me
like a mindless jerk.

I won't go berserk,
or throw a fit,
bite off your hand
and swallow it

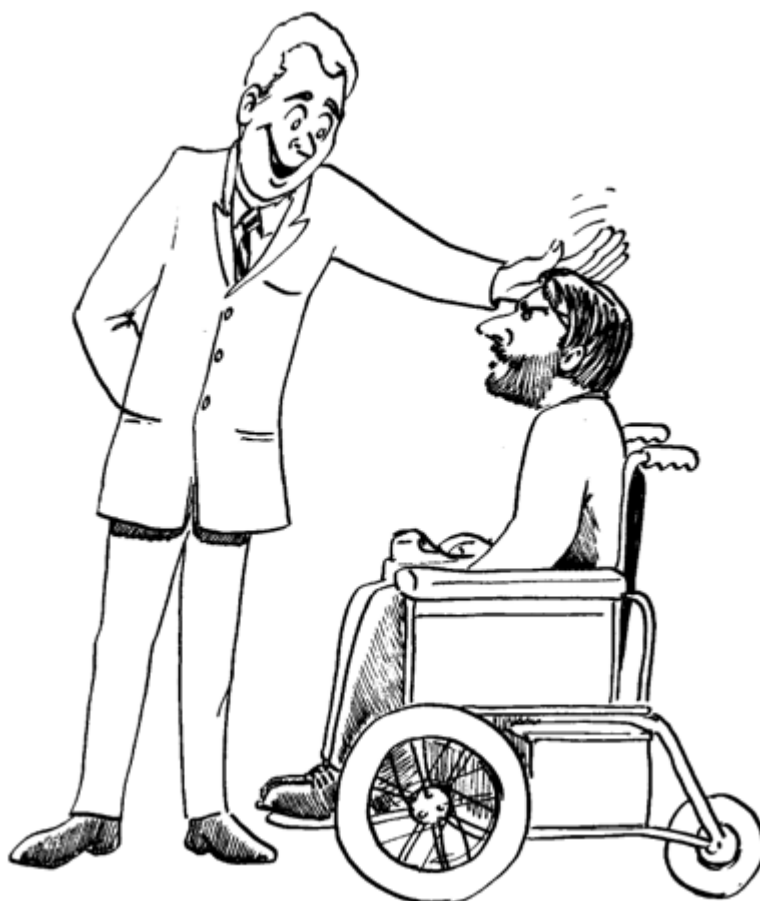
Try to talk to me,
don't be afraid,
you'll really be pleased
with the effort you made.

YOU DON'T SAY

Don't you get sick of hearing it said,
'There's someone else worse off than you.'
I know, I know, I've heard it all before,
it doesn't help even though it's true.

It's well meant but it's usually said
by a healthy able-bodied type,
whose never been sick or had a bad day
in the whole of their jammy life.

If you were worse off than all others,
there's one thing you wouldn't have to endure,
that's some silly bugger, patting your head
saying 'There's someone worse off than you.'



JUST LIKE OTHER FOLKS

It's wonderful to be a raspberry
in Spring on a sunny day,
trundling along the sidewalk
in the merry month of May.

Waist high amongst the bipeds,
the oncoming hips and turns,
and if they overtake you
you get a good view of their bums.

Loud whispers, "isn't it a shame"
come from somewhere behind your back,
now is the time to simulate a fit
and give them a heart attack.

It's only five years ago,
I was totally unaware,
I had a nice fit body
and the disabled just weren't there.

Now I'm a fully paid up member
and what's done is done,
but I can't see any reason why people like me can't have fun.

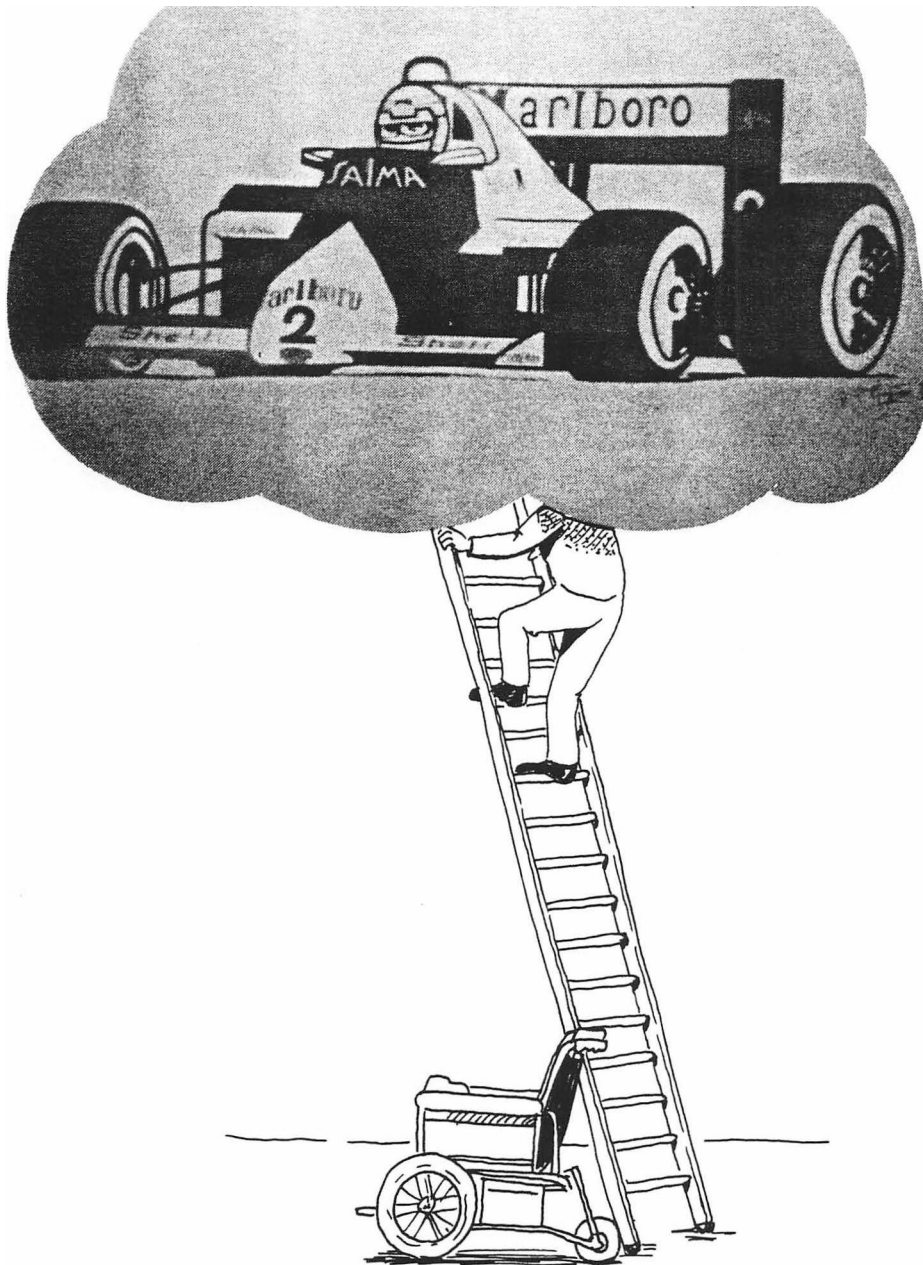


KINDNESS SOOTHES THE SAVAGE BREAST

I rattle the bars that form my cage,
at my disabled body I often rage.
The anger and frustration give me a power
to achieve certain feats
from which many people would cower.

I glare down the tunnel and find the light,
that single distant star on a cloudy night.
I fix it in the distance with a determined stare
never to flicker,
it wouldn't dare.

When I let go in brief moments, serene
I allow myself a pleasant dream,
a loving arm gives me peace of mind
a soothing word,
it's like sight to the blind.



DREAMS

Yes, I'm a dreamer, so what?
I've got both cheeks firmly on my chair.
Sometimes it's nice to be somewhere else,
in another land far out there.

We all need to enjoy our dreams
of walking, making love, driving cars.
Anything and everything is relevant
depending on who or what you are.

Isn't it funny that dreamers
become visionaries when they do?
Enough to make their life a success
and make their dreams come true.

So, if I appear to be miles away,
indulging in some optimistic scheme,
I may be thanking the man in the sky
for the reality of one of my dreams.

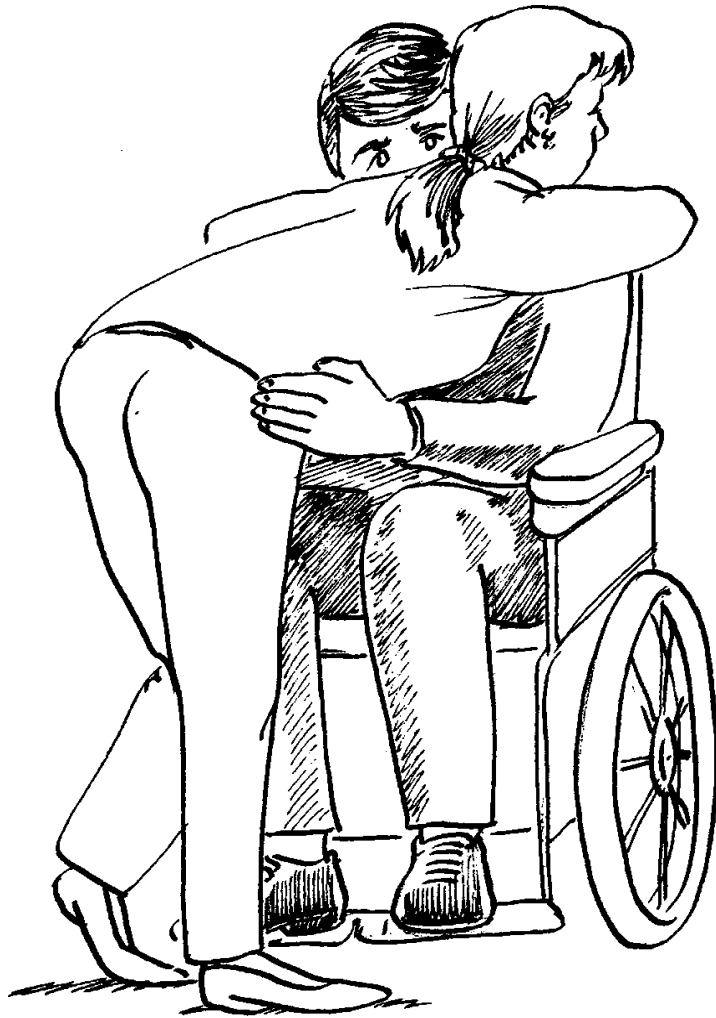
Then of course there's our fantasies,
the sort best kept in our heads,
cos if it ever came out
what we were thinking about
we'd get a hard slap on the leg!

A TOUCHING PLEA

Don't go without giving me a squeeze,
give me a kiss before you leave.
It's ages since anyone was close to me,
Sometimes I feel I'm going to freeze.

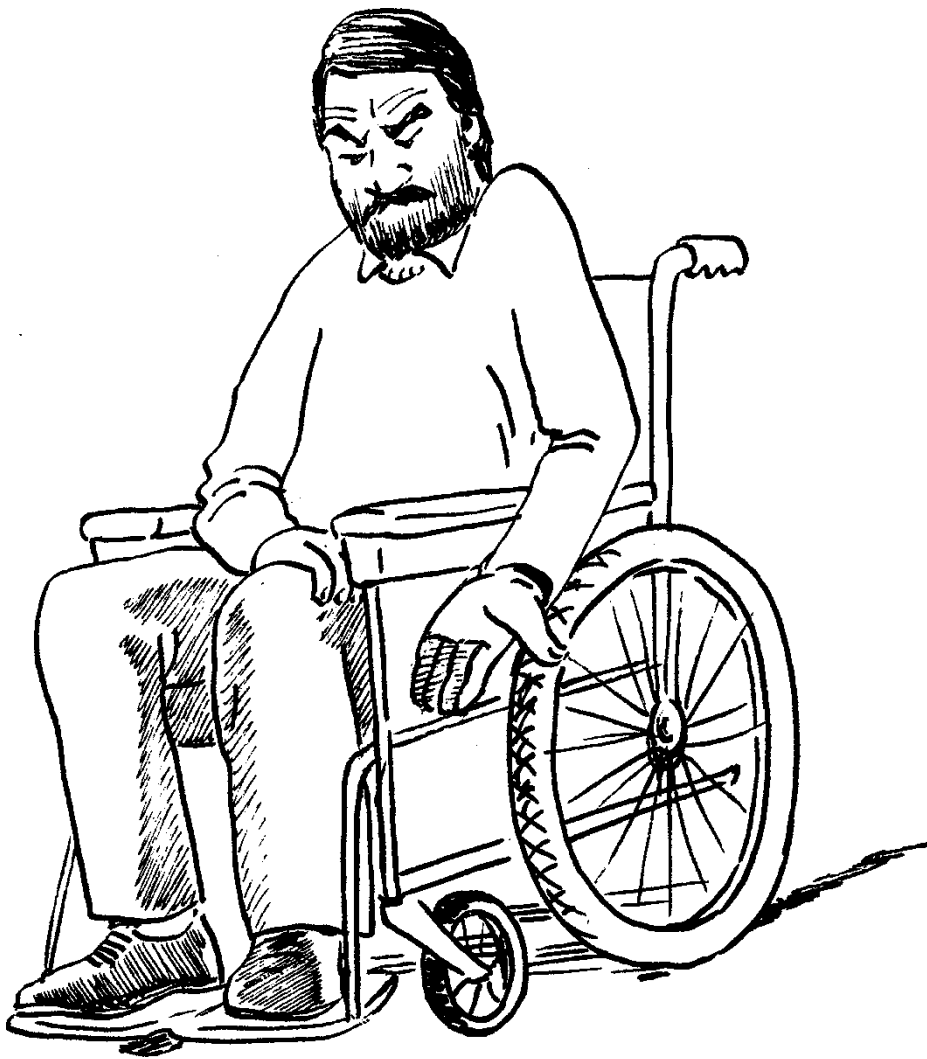
Just a hand on my shoulder, a little touch,
physical contact, I miss it so much.
So the little I get, I desperately clutch,
this wheelchair is like a broken crutch.

So give me a cuddle, don't think twice,
show your affection, thaw the ice.
There's no infection, no terrible price,
to be close to someone would be oh so nice.



ODE TO ROVER'S THOUGHTLESS OWNER

It's on the pavements in town,
It's on the paths in the park,
It gets on your wheels and your hands,
left by the animals that bark.



PRIDE OR PASSION

I don't care if no one's in love with me,
my heart is enjoying being emotionally free.
But I have to confess, it's a bit of a struggle,
trying to manage without someone to cuddle.

DECISIONS

Can I let my pride thaw,
enough to ask for a straw?
or do I bust a gut
to lift up this bloody cup?

GRRR!

Lay me down in the stream of miracles,
that springs from heaven above.
Wash away the pain and frustration
and fill me with peace and love.

Lay me down in the stream of miracles,
float away the physical bind.
Dissolve the chains of spasticity,
restore peace once more to my mind.

Lay me down in the stream of miracles,
if my dreams can't be made real.
Let me drift away to another dimension,
to a world where one doesn't feel.

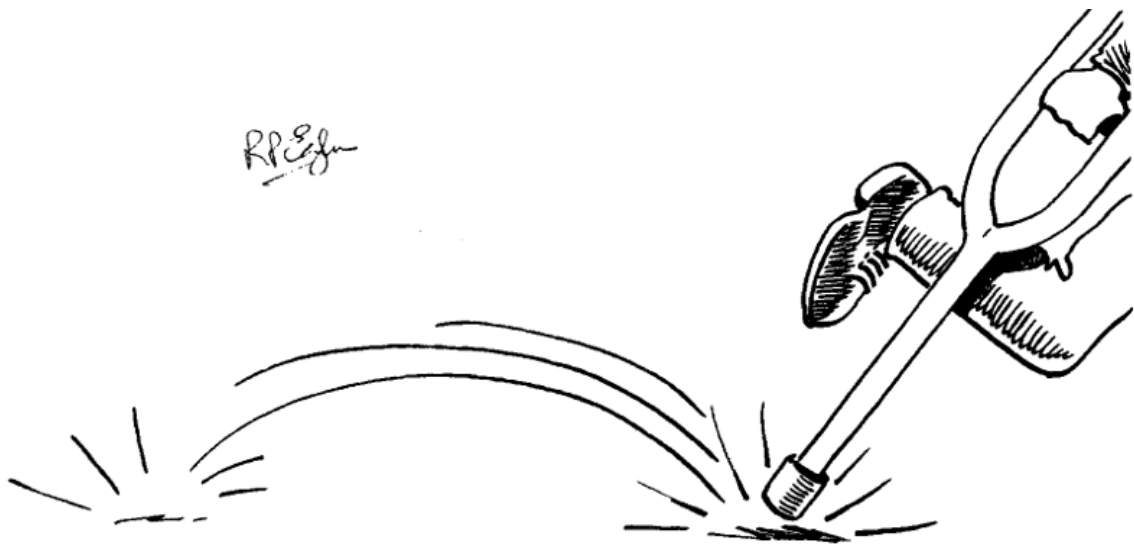
Lay me down in the stream of miracles,
but always keep me in your sight,
because if there's no such thing as miracles,
I'll show you how to fight.

UNCLE STAN

Uncle Stan was a bitter man,
he lost his leg in the war.
They gave him a lump sum
for the stump on his bum
but he felt it should have been more.

Nagging the wife, for his miserable life,
at the kids he'd never stop.
In the pub they would groan
whenever he'd moan, it's bad for a man on the hop.

Then out of thin air, came an answer to prayer,
one legged racing became all the rage.
Winning every cup that was ever put up,
he ran off the end of the page.



COMING TO TERMS

Then there are all those hours
I spend with only me,
trying to be philosophical
about what's gone and also what might be.

Discipline is essential
to keep negative thoughts at bay,
or find lots of things to do
well that's the theory anyway.

Dreaming is a nice escape,
but must be done in moderation.
Real life unfortunately must be faced,
with bloody determination.

It doesn't always work like that,
I get caught up by the blues.
Feeling sorry for myself
I'm afraid is nothing new.

But the longer I'm disabled,
the less it feels like a crime
and wallowing in self-pity
is such a waste of time.

THE MAIDEN VOYAGE

In the summer of 1986, three and a half years after my accident, I started to get some independence back. I had spent a year in the Wolfson Medical Rehabilitation Centre and had gained a lot of skills, like getting in and out of bed, getting some of my clothes on and off and going to the loo on my own. I had also developed a degree of skill at drawing and colouring, something I hadn't done since I was at school some twenty years ago, but my great desire was to be able to go out on my own. I really yearned to be free to just go to the shops on the corner, to independently move around in the outside world. I felt like my whole life had been spent enclosed in brick walls.

It was felt by my specialist and other people at the hospital that it might be a good idea for me to go to a mobility testing centre at Banstead in Surrey. The centre, for a fee, tests every aspect of your abilities and reflexes, senses etc. You are then tested on a simulator. They then assess all the information and decide if you have the necessary ability to drive a vehicle with the adaptations that are available to suit your particular disabilities.

I must be honest I knew I was being ambitious to say the least and I wasn't surprised when given a brief summing up of the day's tests. I was very tactfully told that perhaps it was a little early to think about driving a car. I didn't quite have enough moving parts to control what adaptations were developed and on the market at that time. It was then suggested I might try an "outdoor" electric chair. It was better than nothing, so I said yes. I was shown a large selection of chairs in a large garage. I was tired and cold by then, it had been a long day, but I knew the one I wanted as soon as I saw it. It was built like a tank. When I tried it, I found everything was comfortable, on being told it could climb five inch kerbs and would travel over twenty miles on one charge, I knew it was for me.

I went home with all the relevant information and was subsequently sent a written assessment a week later. The chair I had chosen was made in Germany and was called Meyra. There's only one agency in the South of England, based in Southampton, so I rang them and fixed up for a demonstration. A fortnight later I was test driving a brand new Meyra. Its top speed is six kilometres per hour, for someone whose only movement was a slow indoor ministry chair for the last three years, it was very exciting and felt like I was doing fifty! George, the Rep, ran alongside shouting encouragement and generally giving me instructions. George runs the Meyra agency called A.C.E.S. and has done for several years. I was later to find he is a great champion of the disabled. When we got back, he told me all about the braking system, lights, indicators, suspension and all the other features. I fell in love with it. This was to be my passport to freedom. The euphoria disappeared in one statement by George, "They cost just under £3,000." There was a long silence, then George said hesitantly, "how are you fixed financially?" I was astonished to hear myself say "it will take about six months"! I think I must have been on auto pilot at the time and I sounded so confident.

It actually took me seven months, but I never doubted getting the money together. I didn't have any savings, so I had to start from scratch. There's no doubt about it, good P.R. is the essence of successful fund raising. I let everybody know about the chair, nobody spared my desire for sponsorship. My day centre was very supportive, and all my friends were tremendous. I dragged the local paper in and told them all about the chair and how I was trying to raise money. This helped to generate more interest locally. There were sponsored walks, swims, runs, slims, parachute jumps, even a video horse race meeting. One friend, Terry Kent walked from Brighton to Staines, some 62 miles. He raised over £700 alone. I organised a disco and he timed his arrival during that evening. Unfortunately, he arrived early so there wasn't the large volume of people I had hoped there would be to celebrate his arrival. Nevertheless, those who were there gave him a big cheer and, as promised, I had a nice cold pint of lager waiting for him. In return, he had brought me a stick of rock

all the way from Brighton. It's a very precious goody I shall always treasure. I also received a large donation from Spelthorne Disabled.

At last I had enough. I think, in the end, everyone was delighted and somewhat relieved that it was all over. I had a lot of thanking to do. The generosity and endless support of so many people was extremely appreciated, I could never express my gratitude adequately.

I rang George at A.C.E.S. and ordered my chair. It was nearly Easter the following year before I got to go out in my beloved chair.

That following four months were probably the most traumatic in my life. December began with my wife and I agreeing to part and to make sure the boys suffered as little as possible. I see a lot of them now I'm settled thanks to her. My father died just after Christmas from a brain tumour - he had been ill for some time, but it was a terrible blow. I loved him dearly. While this was going on, I was battling for, and managed to get, a flat from the Council. So, it was agreed I could move in after the second week in January. This was quite an undertaking, it took a lot of co-ordinating, a lot of help from friends and a lot of determination. Two months flew by whilst I readjusted to my new life and learned how to survive with a visit from my Home Help each weekday. My confidence was growing, but I was very anxious about my sister. In January she, like my father, had been diagnosed as having a brain tumour. She was a senior Staff Nurse at a local hospital. We were very close, and it was so tragic. She passed away at the beginning of April. My Mum was devastated and I did my best to support her by phone and letter (she lives in Devon, the frustration at the time of not being able to jump in a car and go to her was almost as bad as losing my sister).

Due to these circumstances I had only used my "roller" - the new chair, to go back and forth, accompanied to my day centre. This is about a hundred yards away - I had no desire to go any further. Then one morning I was on my way to the centre, with Joe, a good friend who also attends with me, when I suddenly got the urge to "break out" when we got to the centre entrance. I remember I went on past, "Where are you going?" asked Joe. I remember that feeling of anticipation and excitement as I tried to sound casual replying, "Oh! Just for a ride, I'll see you later."

It was my maiden voyage. The very first time in four years I had gone somewhere, done something like this, completely unaccompanied. It was a bit like taking that first drive after passing your driving test, but the sense of exhilaration and achievement was a hundred times more intense. I kept stopping and looking around. I think it was to make sure I wasn't being followed by some well-intentioned ghost. It just felt so good to have all that space to myself. Eventually I saw the main road up ahead and it occurred to me, I hadn't decided where I was going! About quarter of a mile away was a parade of shops. I used to live close by this parade and knew there would be some friendly and familiar faces there, so I headed in that direction. I just hoped they would recognise me in my new situation.

I wasn't disappointed by the warmth and general friendliness of the people in the shops and those who work there. The smell of the bakers was like honey to a bee! And I pulled up outside the bakers to survey the freshly baked bread and cakes in the window. I'm afraid my stomach is the freeway to my heart, those who know me may be tempted to enlarge on that. It hadn't occurred to me to try and go in and buy something. I was so used to sitting outside while someone else shopped, but the look in my eyes obviously expressed my desires to do a smash and grab! Because a lady assistant with a friendly smile came out of the shop and said, "would you like to come in?" I nearly said, "who me?" I didn't, instead I replied "yes, please" like a schoolboy whose been offered their favourite treat. She opened the unopened half of the double door and in I went. I had to use great restraint in

my purchasing. I invested in a pasty, a jam doughnut and six cheese straws. The lady came out from the counter and helped me stow my goodies on my lap and sort out a safe place for my change in my small travelling bag, then held the doors open for me to get out. Those small gestures helped to make the whole episode a truly wonderful experience. As she bolted half the door again, she told me to take care and come again. I assured her I would and thanked her. Well, I was like the cat that got the cream! Smiling with the pleasure of success, I made for a small park close by to have a picnic!

I found a nice sunny spot to park up and eat. There were flowers, shrubs in bud, birds singing, peace, for the first time in what seemed like a lifetime. My spirit soared like an eagle; I was free. I was so emotionally uplifted I wept uncontrollably and for a while I couldn't eat. I must have been there two hours, feeding me and the birds. It was the most beautiful time I can remember for a long, long time. I never get tired of sharing that experience with people, especially those who helped me to get my roller. Because without them it wouldn't have been possible. The roller has opened so many doors and I want for them, through me, to get some pleasure from all their efforts. I hope also that those who were not involved will be inspired to help others or do great things themselves.

I know I'm lucky to be able to call on such a wealth of support, but if your disabled that wealth is there for all to tap. All you have to do is ask loud enough.



THE SOUTHBANK NIGHTMARE

At the Royal Festival Hall
there's a death trap in disguise,
it's called a loo for the disabled,
only entered by the unwise.

The design is a complete disaster
situated up on the fifth floor,
comparable to the world's biggest folly,
complete with a spring-loaded door.

The approach is a one in three gradient
running across the entrance to the loo,
access is gained by skidding sideways
as the door tries to cut you in two.

The door inside is slightly angled,
its surface is the smoothest I've seen.
In fact it's flaming lethal
to all but Torvill and Dean.

So, leaving this chamber of horrors
is the final perilous ordeal.
Having negotiated all the hazards entering,
the exit requires nerves of steel.

It has to be fast and skilful,
like finding traction uphill on ice.
Avoiding being guillotined
by a door that slams shut in a trice.

The inventor must have hated the disabled.
He must think we shouldn't exist.
The only other conclusion to be had was
he designed it when he was pissed!

A DIFFERENT WAVELENGTH

Unease was written all over his face,
he hadn't seen me before in a chair.
We used to play squash and have fun together,
now trepidation filled the air.

I don't know who suffered the most,
it was hard to hide the distress.
He couldn't think of anything to say
and I tried too hard, I guess.

My voice had reduced to a whisper,
I could tell he hadn't caught a word.
He smiled awkwardly and nodded,
he wouldn't have if he'd heard.

So, we kept up the charade for a while
both praying it would come to an end,
when it did, he left in a hurry,
and I never saw him again.

He's yet another painful aspect,
a part of what's been lost.
I must keep counting my blessings,
not waste time, counting the cost.



SPLASHBACK

I was in the pub
for a pint or two,
got that familiar problem,
couldn't get into the loo.

So I went out in the night,
avoiding the light,
searching for privacy.

It's amazing what you do
if you can't use the loo
and you're desperate for a wee.

Hey diddle diddle, I needed a tiddle
so I used my bottle to avoid fuss,
in the dark I concentrated
but was suddenly illuminated
by the headlights of a passing bus.

From my face the blood drained,
as it ruined my aim
and I completely lost my composure.
A discreet private pee it was meant to be,
but I've been done for indecent exposure.

GETTING GOING

The alarm goes off,
the quiet shattered,
my heart flutters
as the bell clatters.
Haul myself
out of bed,
pull a jumper
over my head.
Trousers, shoes, underwear,
unplug the charger
for my chair.
Into the bathroom
go to the loo,
brush my teeth,
my hair too.
Now to the kitchen stretching,
yawning, have a cuppa,
greet the morning.
Take my pills ,
keep my muscles calm,
check the heating
keep nice and warm.
Guide my chair
to the front door,
pick up the
mail from off the floor.
Open the envelopes
my own special way,
another challenge
another day.

THE BOTTLE'S NIGHT OFF

We really were hungry after the show,
and stopped at a sign saying, "Pizzas to go."
I felt the tingle while she was in the shop,
and try as I may, it wouldn't stop.

I'd brought my bottle should the need arise,
but I was in for a rather nasty surprise.
Can you imagine the way I felt?
I couldn't unfasten my safety belt (tra la!)
strapped tight across my thighs and hips,
so, I couldn't undo my bloody zip!

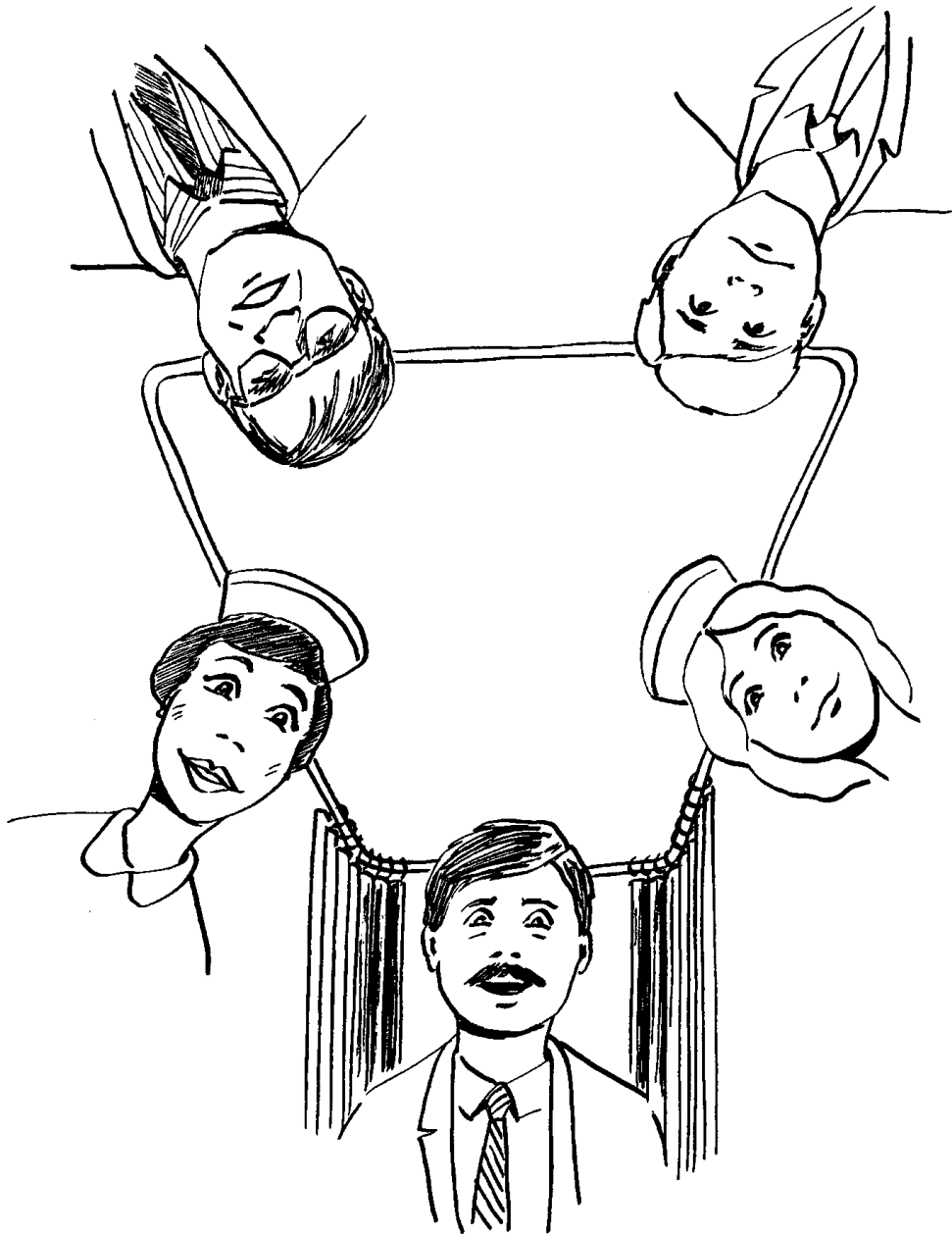
With my legs crossed and breath held tight
I suddenly realised this was not my night.
I knew the feeling, I had had it before,
I was just about to wet my drawers.

My friend returned but it was too late,
my bladder decided not to wait.
There we sat, parked on Norwood Green,
it was not a very pretty scene.

Steam from my trousers had begun to rise,
I could only sit there and close my eyes.
I'd had enough of the pizza and cheese,
Lyn just sighed and gave my arm a squeeze.

Wet and soggy and smelling of wee,
I looked up and said, "Why me Lord, why me?"
We both exploded in a laughing fit,
how else could you handle it?

Homeward bound from a nice time uptown,
why should I let it get me down?
Life's too short, it goes whizzing past,
that's not the first time and won't be the last.



1983

There's nowhere like a hospital ward,
when your totally paralyzed.
You've landed on another planet,
and all you can move is your eyes.

Surrounded by strange shapes and colours,
another dimension on your back.
Noises, comings and goings,
view of the ceiling and curtain track.

Someone smiles as the needle goes in,
everything hazy, nothing clear.
Wish I could move or scream,
they seem to ignore my obvious fear.

A posse of long white coats,
discussing me, making plans.
Please God, they know what they're doing,
my life is in their hands.

Ah' here comes that lovely nurse,
she treats me like I'm human.
If I ever get to talk again,
I'll tell her how grateful I am.

Will I awake and find it gone?
Must be positive to survive.
Concentrate on my recovery,
give some point to being alive.

1988

It seems a light year away,
it's all just hospital notes.
A catalogue from an alien dream,
nurses, observations and doctors' quotes.
Now I'm in charge of my life again,
after much blood sweat and tears.
I'm still kicking and fighting,
and bloody glad to be here.

GOOD ON YOU CAROLE

She breezes in each morning,
sleeves rolled up ready for the fray.
Always bright and cheerful
to set me up for the day.

She washes me and cleans the flat,
Nothing's ever done by half.
And although she always works flat out,
we still have a chat and a laugh.

She makes my bed and waters my plants
and organises me with my shopping.
Gets my breakfast and a cuppa tea,
then the kitchen floor gets a mopping.

She makes life so much easier
with a lovely sense of fun.
Nothing is too much trouble
and it's always willingly done.

A hundred chores she manages to do,
including preparing my dinner.
She's my home help and a valued friend,
thanks a million Carole Skinner!

RAIN ON THE WINDOWS

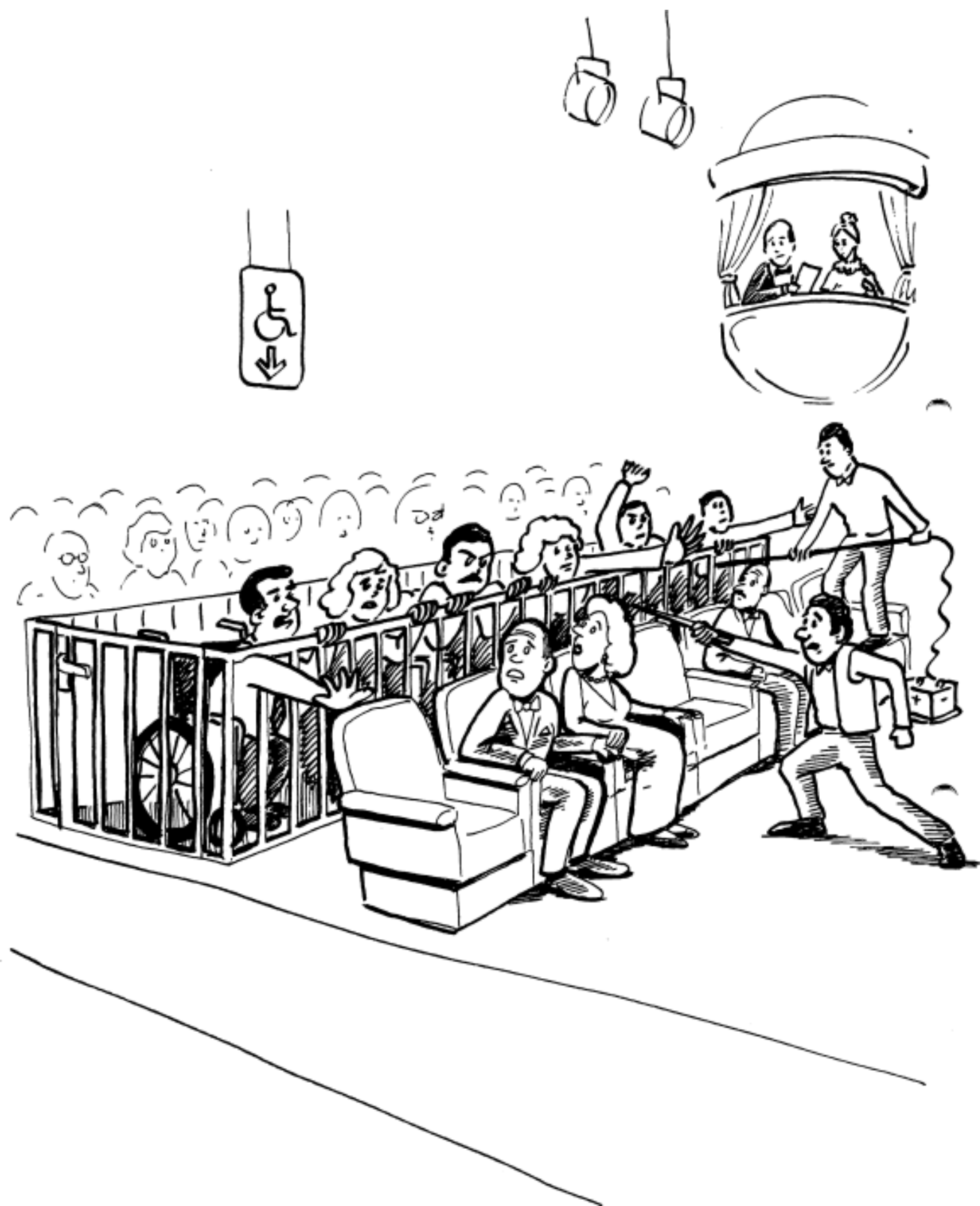
Finally, I come to take my rest,
there's nothing like your own bed.
It's great to hear the rain on the windows,
for relaxing the weary head.

At last the light has been switched out,
I can let out that last long sigh.
It's great to hear the rain on the windows,
as you wave the world goodbye.

Duvet tucked up under my chin,
letting tensions slide away.
It's great to hear the rain on the windows,
in bed at the end of the day.

Slithers of dreams drift into mind,
perhaps a preview for tonight.
It's great to hear the rain on the windows,
as reality drifts out of sight.

Subconscious now the pilot,
determining wherever one flies.
It's great to hear the rain on the windows,
for me it's a lullaby.



A GOOD NIGHT OUT

The Crips were in their enclosure
snarling at the ABs in their seats,
the stewards were trying to contain them
with prods and lumps of raw meat.

They packed them in wheel to wheel,
to minimise any chance of escape,
the show had to run smoothly,
and people's lives might be a stake.

The first half passed off peacefully,
but then a near riot ensued,
wheelchairs spilled into the aisles,
one had decided he needed the loo.

Of course, it was the one at the back,
which meant they had all to move round,
the ABs muttered nervously,
until the rumpus died down.

When the show was over,
the ABs beat a hasty retreat,
the Crips had to be restrained
till normal folks got off the street.

At last the 'all clear' sounded,
and they let all the Crips go,
"Well - they've had a night out!"
said the promoter counting his dough!

NEGATIVE TO POSTIVE

I'm filled with indignation
at the sheer degradation
of my disability,
bereft of explanation.

But I'll use my imagination
to beat all the frustration,
that kind of inspiration,
is really my salvation.

So, despite my situation,
I've got my compensations,
and with that realisation,
I'll enjoy a celebration.

PARKING

When we are out and about
and you're pushing me in my chair,
if you ever have to leave me
don't park me by the stairs.

It makes me very envious
to see them being scaled,
I took it all for granted
'til my legs began to fail.

I promise to scream outside the shops
if I'm left with the prams & babies,
it's just about as humiliating
as being dumped by the door of the ladies.

Please don't leave me facing a wall
like a naughty boy in class,
or somewhere where I'm continually cursed
because nobody can get passed.

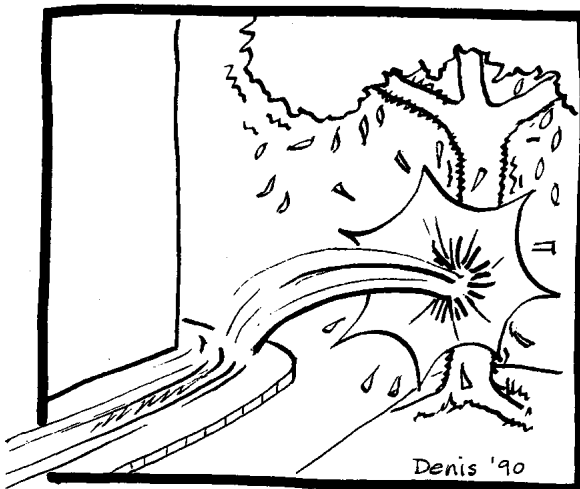
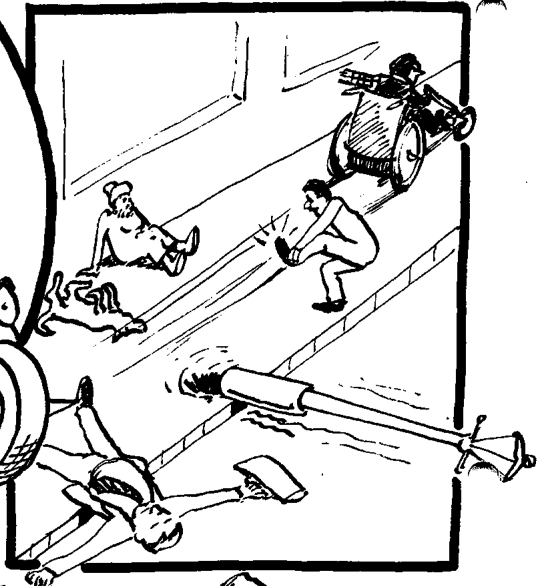
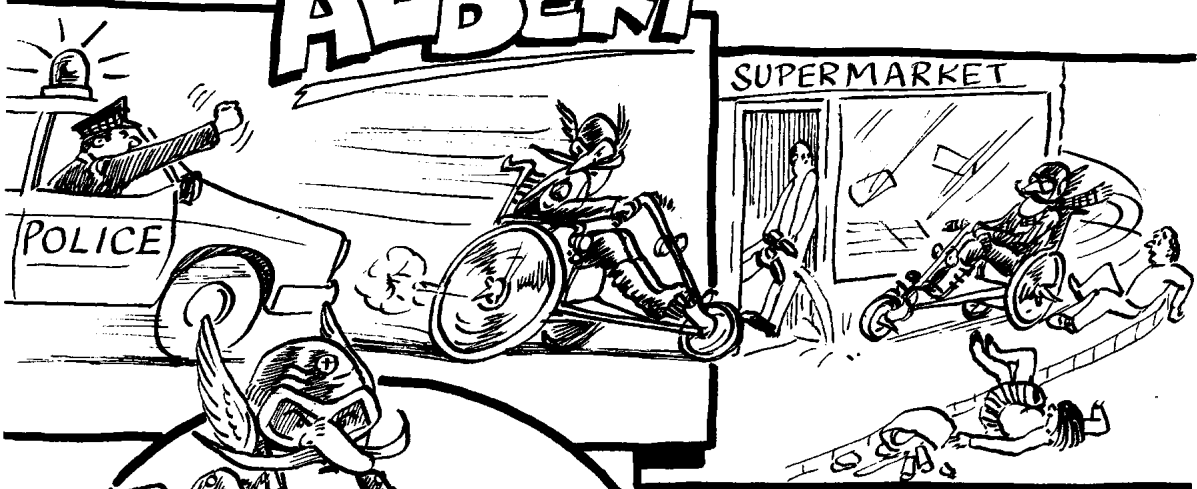
What I need is a quiet bar
where I can catch the Tender's eye,
enjoy a nice peaceful pint
and watch the world go by!



THE WAY IT IS

I don't like being like this,
it wasn't my choice.
Severely handicapped
with a strange voice.
Although it's really shitty
spare me any pity.
Just let it be agreed,
it's respect that I need
so I can be a man
and be proud of what I am.

ALBERT



ALBERT

Albert the terrible was a notorious Crip
who had the speed of a hare.
An outrageous daredevil to all and sundry,
a Hells Angel in a souped-up chair.

He terrified the population
in the streets where he raced.
Causing mayhem and destruction,
by the law he was often chased.

Grandparents still tell grandchildren,
wide eyed, through trembling lips,
about the many scandalous exploits
of Albert the hell raising Crip.

The High Street, Saturday morning,
was his favourite time for action.
Lots of shoppers and a dry pavement
to give him maximum traction.

He'll suddenly appear from nowhere,
a black knight bent on deadly deeds,
ready to cause chaos and confusion,
mounted in his custom-built stead.

He filled the local population with terror,
to take cover they did not have to be told,
the strong protecting children and old folks,
his presence ghastly to behold.

A bright red handlebar moustache,
tinted goggles framed bloodshot eyes,
at the high speeds he usually travelled
they were needed to keep out the flies.

His black helmet was very distinctive,
on each side was glued the wing of a lark.
A tartan scarf which was spattered with gravy
and woolly gloves he had stolen from Marks.

His torso was swathed in leather,
badges, studs, all the latest gear.
An awesome apparition,
with a frighteningly evil leer.

With a blood curdling scream
the devastation would start,
the way he thundered off
froze many a stout heart.

Killing dogs and flattening lampposts,
crushing poor old pensioners feet,
causing heart attacks and bruising,
he would demolish the flipping street.

The Police tried everything to catch the fiend
and the Church was asked to pray
but he always avoided capture,
the swine always got away.

Then at last fate caught him up.
Albert met his grisly end.
He forgot to lean, he lost his line
and crashed whilst taking a bend.

Hitting the tree doing sixty,
He couldn't have felt a thing.
Him and the chair were wrapped round the trunk,
like a pastry round a rolling pin.

There were bits of him all over
and his head was framed by a wheel.
To make things worse, he couldn't be dislodged,
he couldn't even be peeled.

Finally, they decided to varnish him
and leave him there on the tree,
a grotesque reminder of the crazy Crip
for all the world to see.

If you should visit that chilling scene
there's still traces of him to this day,
with the epitaph "old Crips never die,
they simply fade away."

MY LIFESTREAM

VERSE 1

My place of birth was a mountain spring,
the normal beginning for a life to flow.
Gaining in strength as do all that grow,
to tumble over rocks that make you sting,
divert into eddies where the whirlpools cling,
the thrill of speed, the urge to go,
being dragged along by the under tow.
All care abandoned for a wonderful fling,
that sound in the distance you completely ignore,
totally absorbed in the power and glory,
the unseen waterfall destructively roars.
Most survive, it's just a bad splash,
for me it's a devastating crash.
Suddenly it's a very different story.

VERSE 2

Destiny, a pool that's quiet, deep and slow,
frustrating and alien from everything before,
like a silent scream behind a closed door.
My old life, a leaf, carried off on the flow,
so I searched out a new way for my spirit to go.
Entertained by dragonflies that land on my shores,
and handsome salmon, who visit on tour,
the sunshine and mist often deliver a rainbow,
no worries of being forced through a turbine
now, no problem of being crushed at the dam,
no fear of pollution or chemical grime.
I have gained deep strength, my heart is warm,
in spite of the stones that ripple my calm,
after all a man is a man, is a man.

THE BANK EXPEDITION

The first time I went into town was quite an adventure. I have difficulty getting my jacket on and also, I need help to lock my door so I got a friend to assist me with these tasks and made arrangements to meet him so he could help me back indoors on my return.

Off I went feeling like Drake setting sail to discover the other side of the world. I went via streets I hadn't been down since the accident, five years ago. It all looked different. Probably because I had never seen it from the level I found myself in the electric chair but it was exhilarating. Finally, I came on to the pavement of the main road leading into the town centre. It was noisy and the volume of traffic seemed a bit intimidating, so I tended to keep to the inside of the pavement, as far away from the passing vehicles as possible. I was also aware of the attention I seemed to attract from passers-by, especially young children. It made me smile, it would have been lovely to have talked to them, to answer all the questions their curious little minds were obviously trying to figure out, but most parents dragged them in the opposite direction to where they were looking, trying to keep up with the day's schedule. It felt good to be devoid of the rat race.

I came up to my first real hurdle crossing the road into the shopping precinct. There is a pedestrian crossing which crosses four lanes of traffic in a one-way system. Two lanes in, halfway across, is an island and it's all controlled with traffic lights. The other side looked a mile away. Although common sense told me I would have plenty of time to get over, I was incredibly nervous, worrying about the lights changing before I got to the other side. Of course, they didn't. Nonetheless the sense of relief was undeniable when I reached the safety of the pavement on the far side.

I pressed on toward the precinct doors grinning inwardly. I felt stimulated by the excitement of being out and about in the real world for the first time coping with traffic and public places. My confidence was growing, and I was now grinning outwardly as well as within. I was pleasantly surprised how eager people were to hold back the main doors, to let me into the precinct, and it didn't bother me if I was scrutinised by anyone. This was alright, I was doing ok. I decided to go to the bank - the ultimate challenge!

The bank is situated in the High Street, outside the precinct, on the other side so I went right through the complex, enjoying the bright colours of the shop windows, the music drifting out, the faces and appearances of all the people milling about. There was also a conglomerate of smells, takeaway food, perfumes, cigar smoke and many more aromas. All my senses seemed to be working overtime.

The total effect put me on a real high. On reaching the doors that led out on to the High Street, once again there were plenty of willing people to open them. I got the feeling they enjoyed helping, something I've come across all the time since. It's something I take a lot of care not to take for granted and always appreciate. It's nice to make a point of saying thank you, to see the pleasure it gives them.

I made my way up the busy High Street pavement to the bank. I sat in my chair looking at the doors, preparing myself for whatever may happen next. There was no way I could have anticipated what did occur and I am not sure I would have gone in had I known.

Suddenly I realised I was staring blankly at the face of an elderly man, with a quizzical expression on his face, he was holding the bank door open for me. He was waiting for me to react. I shook myself and entered, apologising for being so slow. He told me not to worry in a very loud voice, patting my

arm. He obviously thought part of my disability was deafness. This also had the effect of drawing the attention of everyone in the bank to yours truly.

It's amazing how many people get nervous when they see my outdoor chair. It has large front wheels and small rear wheels that steer it, there are headlights, indicators and many other features conventional chairs don't have.

I got the distinct feeling they didn't think it safe for me to be in charge of it. Having a wicked sense of humour, I was very tempted to do something really outrageous and freak them all out, but the task ahead had a sobering effect on me. I moved over to a desk where a young lady assistant was handling enquiries. She was very nice and told me she could deposit the cheques I wanted to put into my account, but I would have to queue up to get cash out. She helped me fill out my cheque, then I got in the queue. It was 1pm and full of dinner hour customers.

The line of waiting people went the whole length of the bank, formed along a row of stainless-steel posts joined by thick rope covered in a shiny blue material. It was a typical system where you wait your turn at the end until a buzzer and a blue light indicate which position is vacant, then proceed and make your transaction, in theory!

When my turn came, I realised I would have to make an acute U-turn, to travel back up to the waiting teller. My heart sank as it dawned on me that to do this was going to require a forty-point turn! On my seventh or eighth manoeuvre most of the queue were acutely embarrassed on my behalf, pressed back against the walls to give me maximum turning space.

I went forward once more, this time cutting as close as possible to the end post. Too close alas, down it went, having a 'domino' effect in reverse on all the rest.

The rope pulled each one over, one after another, anybody who was not aware of what was going on was now fully in the picture. A flustered assistant tried to retrieve the situation and stepped forward, presumably to move some of the posts scattered all over the bank floor. Unfortunately, she approached from behind as I reversed to extricate myself from the posts and rope, I went right over her toes.

The first I was aware of what happened was when she came hopping into my line of vision, holding her left foot, with an expression of excruciating agony on her face. Poor girl, she must have been in great pain, but she didn't utter a sound. Well I'm afraid my evil sense of humour got the better of me, I cracked up, that seemed to snap the tension all round. The whole place erupted hysterically; people just fell about laughing. I think it could be described as spontaneous eruption, even the assistant ended up with her elbows resting on my shoulders, her face buried in her hands crying and laughing alternately. The people behind the counter were involved too and the whole place took five or six minutes to gain anything resembling composure. Finally, with posts restored to their correct position and I pointed in the right direction I approached my teller with the illuminated sign. People were no longer shy about looking at me, quite the reverse. I was now the centre of attraction.

I felt like something on a slide under a microscope, but the atmosphere was very warm, so I didn't feel too uncomfortable.

The counter was now on my left side, the side that is totally paralysed. I only have partial use of my right arm. It was with great effort I tried to reach across my chest to put the cheque book on the counter, but I just couldn't make it. My victim of the earlier disaster limped to my assistance, passing my book over and collecting the cash. She then put it safely in my bag for me. She then went to the door and with what looked like a dozen other people, held them open for me. I started forward and

to my consternation a scratching, crunching noise came from my rear wheel. The hub nut had gouged a jagged groove out of the veneered panel on the front of the counter. Mercifully everyone chose to pretend it hadn't happened, so I decided to join them and kept going out of the door. Everybody at the door was smiling, telling me to take care and saying goodbye. It felt like I was leaving a family gathering.

Then the assistant said, 'I hope to see you again, sir' and the doors closed behind. I just managed to get out of sight of those lovely people before I exploded into another hysterical giggling fit. It had been an amazing experience I'll never forget.

When I go to the bank now, they deal with all my business at a side desk, I get very good service and they are always very kind and courteous - a credit to the bank.

The journey home seemed very mundane after that, but I think that day gave me more confidence to cope with my life than anything that had happened to me prior to that.

I never again saw the lovely young lady assistant who came out with that line 'I hope to see you again, sir', she probably took up a less hazardous occupation like Bull Fighting!

REFLECTIONS

After five years I've come to the following conclusion - people like myself in similar circumstances can have satisfying and full lives and have fun, using the following philosophy: make the most of what's available, physically and materially. Don't lament what's been lost, that's history, be brave and honest with yourself.

Never accept things as they are, devote all your resources towards improvement, and having a laugh! Not necessarily in that order. If you can laugh at yourself and encourage others to join in and retain your dignity, I reckon you've cracked it.

We all suffer in many ways, but the thing we've got to remember is we're not alone. We all share the same cause, to have as normal a life as possible, rejoice in each victorious step towards that end, no matter how small it is, whether it's being able to cope with going to the loo independently or tying one's shoelace with one hand.

I find that people round me almost get as much pleasure out of these accomplishments as I, knowing what it took to achieve them. Invariably it leads to comments like "I couldn't cope with that if that were me."

It makes able bodied people think about their own lives and how much effort they are putting into their own fulfilment. Suddenly things look different! We, the disabled, are setting the examples, being the leaders instead of the led, the pushers instead of the pushed. Surely that's enough to give us reason to smile!!