

“Walmart Weirdos”

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In the local Walmart with Bianca, I noticed I'd become my own shopping cart. She pushed me up and down the aisles as we looked around and picked up the things we needed, each item accumulating on my lap. At that time, I was still getting used to life in a wheelchair after I crashed my car, which broke my neck about two and a half months prior in February. I was still in the chest and back brace that supported my neck and chin and getting used to paralysis from the chest down. I spent my time still in the manual wheelchair I couldn't push on my own – one with a solid black backrest and wide head rest that reclined back when someone squeezed the handles – which was quite comfortable for me at the time because the power wheelchairs intimidated me.

But, life was moving on. I was back in my jeans and T-shirts and going to school to socialize during the lunch hour with my friends for the rest of my sophomore spring semester as I adjusted to this new way of living. I decided to go to Walmart after lunch so the store wouldn't be as busy. I tried taking small steps to get back out in the community, even though I was as nervous as a preacher's wife standing naked in front of the congregation – Here I am in a wheelchair, World! Vulnerable and open for everyone to gawk at – though Bianca, my oldest sister and part-time caretaker at that time, didn't think people would pay much mind to me at all.

“Can we pick up some ponytail holders?” I asked Bianca. It was strange asking others to take me to different places, instead of walking into the store and shopping by myself.

“Which one do you want?” she asked once she pushed our way over there.

“Would you get that one?” I asked, pointing to the exact bunch with my eyes.

“This one?”

“No, not that one... the other one. Go up one. Go right three... Yes! That one,” was the new way I would get what I wanted from the shelf. She grabbed a pack for herself, both of us having long red hair, and we went to our last stop, the jewelry area.

With stands full of earrings and necklaces blocking the path, she walked away to look at something. I sat waiting by the glass countertop filled with watches and shiny jewelry when a woman approached my right side.

“Where does it itch?” she asked, standing behind me, angling her shoulders and head in front of me with her hair dangling down.

“Uh, what?” I asked, wrinkling my eyebrows.

“If you have an itch, I can scratch it for you,” this complete stranger volunteered as if concerned about my itches going unscratched.

I didn't know how to respond, so I just stared back at her. I glanced at my sister with *help me* eyes and then looked back at the lady.

“Well, you just let me know if I can help you. I'll be around, okay?” Then she walked away.

“What'd she say?” Bianca asked as she came back.

“She wanted to scratch me.”

“She what?”

“She told me she would scratch my itch. I told you people would treat me like I was a freak! This is why I don't want to go out,” I said.

“Now don't get sad. You can't help what some idiot is going to say. Besides, it's probably her way of saying she feels bad for your circumstances.” My sister tried to comfort me

and rubbed my cheek when she saw I was crying. “And it probably won’t be the last time it happens. Well, it will today. I think we’re ready to go.”

In that moment, I didn’t care why she said it. I just didn’t want the attention. I didn’t want people to notice me because I was in a wheelchair and I was different. I wanted to go home and just stay hidden.

We went to the express lane to check out. She took everything off my lap and was paying a few feet behind me as a towering older man in a white lab coat made eye contact with me.

“I want you to have this,” he said reaching his hand out for me to take a small, folded paper he was holding. I looked down at his offering hand and then back up at his pale face, noticing his rusty orange hair. He could then tell my arms did not move and I couldn’t reach up to grab it, so he laid the paper on my lap.

“Okay,” was the only thing I could think to say in return.

“God bless you and have a good day,” he said as he walked backwards away from me. I could then see he was from the vision center from the embroidery above his side pocket.

“Not again,” Bianca said as she came in front of me.

“Get that and see what it says.”

“It is...,” she started to say as she unfolded the tiny paper, “a 1-800 number for a Christian helpline.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“No. Look,” she said, holding the paper in front of my face.

Christian Helpline and Support

1-800...

“Why? Was he watching me this whole time, thinking I need help?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but I think it is time for us to go before I snap at the next moron that even looks at you the wrong way.”

When we got home, Bianca showed me the paper again. On the other side was a list of customers and stated whether they wore contacts or glasses. Then I realized, *he thinks I need help. He doesn’t know anything about me. He just saw me in a wheelchair and judged.*

Why would someone do that? I cried to myself that night. Do they really think they are helping me any? I just want life to be normal again.

Another Christian judged me as someone who needed fixed. He didn’t know that I was also a Christian and that I did have faith, trusting that God was taking care of me, even though I was going through an unexplainable, difficult time in my life. He didn’t know and neither did the old grandma who attacked me with her abrupt words one day in Walmart a couple years before my car accident.

As I stood in front of a wall of lotions, contemplating my choices, a frumpy grandma said “You’re what’s wrong with this world,” to me just a couple feet away.

“Uhh,” I said, already feeling tension. I instantly knew what she was referencing – my longsleeved black fishnets under a black T-shirt and the bottom of my jeans so large they completely covered my shoes. I may have even had a spiked necklace or safety pin earrings.

“You know that? I don’t see how your mom can let you out of the house like that. She should be ashamed of you.” Her words pierced my chest and reddened my cheeks.

“I should be ashamed of what exactly?” my mom defended. To my surprise, she heard every word a couple feet away.

“She’s yours? You let her do this to herself?” the grandma said as I snuck away to the end of the aisle.

“There’s nothing wrong with her. She’s a good girl – a good Christian girl,” my mom said.

“A *good* Christian dresses like *that*? Those aren’t the Christians *I* know.”

“Well what you don’t *know* is that she’s 15 and an honor student in high school; she has a job and even cleans the whole house for me when she gets home so I don’t have to. Maybe you should take your opinion and stick it up your ear.” What this grandma didn’t know was that she was picking a fight with a stout German woman who held her tongue for nothing when the door was opened.

Yeah, I dressed like a freak, but I had never been judged for anything in my life at home, at school, or at church until that moment. That moment when someone decided my worth because of their opinion of my appearance. Thankfully, I was valued, accepted, and loved because, when alone, I would have wilted and felt like a worthless teenage girl.

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Bianca had just unloaded me out of the van in the parking lot of yet another trip to Walmart the summer after my accident. The days were hot, making it more enticing to get out often. I was finally free from my neck brace, which helped to bring a sense of acceptance and normalcy to my life. As I waited on Bianca to lock up the van, a familiar face walked up to me.

“WELL, WELL! Hello there, Rose! Fancy meeting you here!” MaryAnn said to me loud enough for half the parking lot to hear. Growing up, she would often attend the same little country church that my family and I did. I knew she was a bit on the radical side by her

willingness to go to the front of the church to preach at her own discretion or even interrupt services with her flamboyant testimonies.

“Hi,” I said as I tried to avoid eye contact.

“You probably don’t remember me, but I used to go to church with y’all. I am so glad I get to see you out here today. And hello to you, Bianca. You doing well?” she asked, maintaining the same volume. Of course I remembered her. There was no mistaking her wavy black fro and red lipstick against her pasty white skin.

“We’re pretty good,” Bianca answered standing next to me.

“Well. I have just got to tell you that I KNOW you are going to be healed, Rose! Do you know that? Jesus told me himself!” By this time she was yelling out and I was too surprised to say anything back. She continued with both arms straight up in the air, “He gave me a vision of visions and you, sweet baby girl, stood up from that chair and WALKED. Yes, you WALKED. And we’re going to claim this miracle from Him, believing that YOU WILL BE HEEEALED!”

At this point she still had her hands up in the air and had turned around in circles a couple times, feet stomping up and down as if the devil himself was trying to creep out of the pavement underneath her. I only stared at her wide-eyed.

“Now, if you trust in God and know in your heart that Jesus is going to heal you, this miracle will be yours! I know it, honey, because He is still aliiiiive today,” she said, coming down from her high.

Yes, I believed in God and I knew Jesus performed many miracles. I also believed that there might be some hope out there for me some day to try to get my arms or legs back. But at this moment, I thought MaryAnn was just nuts.

“Thank you for sharing,” Bianca said, trying to move on.

“Don’t thank me. Thank God! And remember, claim that miracle!” she said with one arm in the air as she walked away into the parking lot.

“We didn’t even make it into the store this time,” Bianca said smiling as we crossed the street.

“I’ll admit, this one was insane and kind of funny,” I said.

“It was. That’s MaryAnn for you. I’m glad you thought it was funny this time too,” she said.

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Dad and I spent a lot of time together before my accident, but as time went on, he was the one to take me to appointments and go shopping with me more than anyone else. A couple summers after my accident, we were out shopping when he noticed one of the tires on my van was low and seemed to be quickly losing air. Being out of town, the closest place we knew was the tire center at a Walmart, so we drove a mile down the road and parked at the side of the building to get in line. While waiting for my van to be seen, he pushed me around the store to pick up a few things and then went toward the back of the store to grab some lunch from the built-in McDonald’s.

“Will I need a new tire?” I finally asked since we were sitting side-by-side at the table.

“I don’t know. Just depends on what they find,” he answered between bites.

“A new tire might be expensive. I hope they can plug it...,” I continued. Not able to handle my own food, dad reached some fries for me to bite when one fell directly down into the open V-neck of my shirt.

“Oops. Can’t get that one,” he said as he laughed at my misfortune.

“Geez. I have to go the rest of the day with a fry down my shirt!” I said shaking my head.

“Just keep it as a snack for later,” he said, still laughing.

“I guess I have to.” My shirts were never very low, but when I looked down, I could actually see a part of the french fry laying along my bra. And although Dad and I were close – he had helped me brush my teeth and even helped me blow my snotty nose quite often – grabbing a fry down my shirt was boundary I’d never cross.

We were done shortly after that and went down a few more aisles to waste time until we heard “Shrader, your vehicle is ready” over the speaker.

At the service counter, Dad stepped in front of me to talk to the mechanic at the cash register and take care of the bill. I just happened to notice a gangly man with dark, messy hair walking toward me on my left side, coming in from the garage. He was slowly nodding his head up and down as if listening to a smooth jam no one else could hear. I fixed my eyes on the keychain rack on the counter to my right because, by looking at him one fraction of a second too long, I instantly knew I trespassed into his invisible, personal bubble. I could feel his eyes still on me as he walked past.

“Hey,” he whispered, startling me. He was bent over behind me and I could only see him on my peripheral left side.

“Hi,” I said back reluctantly. He just stood there seeming to wait for my response. I sat there with my eyes glued to my dad’s back in front of me, who was talking away to the service guy.

“I just needed to tell you that I really like your toes. They, uh, really look good, ya know, with that polish on... all nice and stuff. That shit right there gets me going good, if you know what I mean,” he hissed a couple inches from my ear. He paused as if to establish his dominance

over me in that moment, now intruding on my personal space and causing my heart to pound. Before walking away, he whispered, “Now you have a good day.”

CREEP– I thought, as I shuddered after I knew he was gone. My stomach churned and I clenched my jaw to suppress my lunch from coming up. I didn’t even know he looked at my feet.

I told my dad about the toe freak as he strapped my wheels to the floor when we got to the van.

“What’s wrong with a little compliment?” he said, sarcastically.

“You’re not serious! He was a complete creep. I felt so violated! I’m always attracting weirdos,” I said smiling back.

“You can laugh about it, though. I think your get used to this paralysis thing.”

“I have to. Old people and weirdos love me. I’m starting to think this is going to be an endless cycle. I guess it’s just another one to add to the list.”

“Well, just think: at least he didn’t say anything about your fry.”