

Finalist, Non-Fiction

Who's in Control?

By Phyllis Dolislager

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My first experience in a wheelchair almost ended in divorce court. Knowing that I'd never make it on my polio feet for three days at the National Booksellers Convention, I gave in and got a manual wheelchair. My husband Ron, bless his heart, willingly agreed to be my pusher.

Immediately we found an obstacle just getting from our hotel to the Orlando Convention Center next door. Fortunately I could get out of the chair as he carried it up/down five or six steps. We figured out where the elevators were in the Convention Center, despaired that there was so much carpeting, but how were we to know that the popular book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus* was going to be our main problem?

I had taken seven copies of my latest book proposal with me. Selling one's self and one's book idea in three to five sentences is a precise skill. Timing is key. Imagine having made a great presentation, followed by a positive response, handing over the proposal, saying good-bye, but not moving. And having this happen more than once....

I knew right then and there that I needed my own power. This person had to regain some control over her life. Three days in a manual chair—even with the world's best husband standing behind me and pushing me—was all it took. Decision time was here. But what was the solution?

Then we attended the Abilities Expos in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and Doug of T.D. Medical introduced us to the EZ Power Chair. I wanted one!

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My first trip to the mall with my power chair will forever be burned into my memory. With my sore right arm (I now know that it's a torn rotator cuff.), there was no way I could lift the chair into and out of the car's trunk by myself. Even though the power chair breaks down into three pieces, the heaviest piece is 29 pounds. My dear friend Evie Opitz was visiting and offered to accompany me on my trip to the mall—my first in three years!!! This was going to be a BIG day.

First we practiced taking the chair apart, putting it into the trunk, and then taking it out and assembling it again. With Ron and Evie's husband, Al, looking on and offering all kinds of verbal instruction, we hoped that we had it firmly in mind, and off to the mall we went.

We parked at the Sears end of the mall, opened the trunk, and together unloaded the parts of the chair, and assembled it. Then I sat in my chair, and we were off to do our shopping.

But alas, getting through the door into Sears wasn't all that easy. It felt like I had to literally go left, go right, go left, and go right until I wiggled my way into the store. It was with a sigh of relief that we finally began my long-awaited, shopping trip.

What looked like "forward march" immediately became a "mine field." As I passed by a round table with a long, blue skirt, it started shedding small boxes of jewelry. They tumbled off falling randomly about me. I stopped, but I couldn't see that I owned any responsibility. I started to move, more boxes tumbled. I stopped, the boxes stopped. I'd start, and they'd throw themselves to the ground again.

Needing some assurance that I wasn't at fault, I looked around for Evie. There she was, immediately behind me, bent over in laughter. I mean, she was holding her sides she was laughing so hard. Catching my eye, she said, "Stop. Turn it off." As I realized that I hadn't been able to even start shopping without causing destruction, I was ready to cry. But there was my usually dignified friend laughing her head off. And that calmed me down, and I was able to see the humor.

As she untangled the hem of the table skirt from my chair's axle, she continued to laugh. So instead of retreating to the car, I continued our "forward march" past numerous brightly colored tables with skirts holding more boxes of jewelry.

Three hours later, with our purchases stuffed into the storage area under my seat, we headed back through Sears to the car. This time we by-passed the skirted, "mine field," and I even made it through the doorway without bouncing back and forth, hitting its sides.

As we disassembled the wheelchair and placed its parts, plus our packages, into the car's trunk, it was with a true sense of accomplishment and a smile on my face that I, the proud owner of a power chair, headed home.