

Finalist, Non-Fiction

No Different to Anyone Else
By Glynis Scrivens

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It's been an eye-opener for me, viewing the world from a wheelchair. I'm used to the anonymity of walking. Something you just take for granted until it's taken away from you.

Once you're sitting in a wheelchair, you force everyone else to make a decision. How will they behave when they pass you? You can see the indecision written on their faces. Even from a distance of ten metres.

Averting their eyes is simplest, but causes guilt. There but for the grace of God, they're thinking.

Do they say hello?

To make it easier I smile at them. Just a small 'I'm okay' sort of smile, nothing that invades their personal space or demands a response.

The problem with saying hello is that they need to physically look down on you, and that causes them to feel awkward too. A good compromise is when they can say hello to my husband, who's pushing me. That skirts the issue nicely.

But mostly it's a bit of a no-win situation punctuated by awkwardness. For adults, that is.

I always get happy responses from very young children when their pram crosses path with my chair. "Ah, an adult, this is fun," they're thinking. It's a revelation to them.

I guess the fun part for me is getting in and out of the chair and seeing the startled reactions. People seem to believe you either need a chair 100% of the time, or not at all.

Finding somebody in-between pushes them out of their comfort zone.

Shops are the places you see this. My husband wheels me around a shopping mall. We reach an interesting shop, and out I get. Walking about to explore. Jaws drop. People can't help staring. Escalators too. I just stand up and for those few moments look like everyone else. People look as though I'm advertising a miracle cure.

My younger daughter has instructed me, "When you're in the chair, stay in it. You can't be getting in and out." She wasn't sure how her colleagues at work would react, once they'd seen me in the chair, to then have to readjust their thinking. People like to put you in a box in their mind, stick on a label. Someone who doesn't fit into one of their boxes isn't appreciated. It's as though they feel they've unintentionally been tricked into feeling sorry for you.

Occasionally you find genuine understanding. Quite rarely, so it's to be treasured. In the hectic pre-Christmas rush, we went to a big department store. One lovely shop assistant simply asked me 'What have you done to yourself?' A simple direct question, asked with compassion. It turned out she suffered from multiple sclerosis. Perhaps there are occasions when she too needs to use a chair? Some shop assistants automatically speak to my husband, even in newsagents when I'm the one holding the magazines.

It's summer in Brisbane. My husband wheels me through the beautiful tranquil avenues in South Bank every other day for a swim in one of the pools. My empty chair by the pool arouses curiosity. Looking on, no one can tell which one of us in the water has mobility problems. It's nice to regain my anonymity here, for a time at least.

Next time you see someone in a wheelchair, just treat them like you would any other person – because that's exactly what we are.