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BY KRISTA VILLATORO

EXPLOITING YOUR DISABILITY FOR TIKTOK FOLLOWERS

An Analysis of the Objectification of the Disabled Female Body



A comprehensive exam report submitted
in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the
degree Master of Fine Arts in Design
Media Arts

For my parents <3

My stacked thesis committee: Jenna Caravello, Dr. Sasha Klupchak, Lauren Lee McCarthy, and Peter Lunenfeld; thank you for guiding my misguided ideas about art, disability, and queerness. Thank you for choosing me and then choosing me again.

My art uncles and aunties: Leslie Foster and Ariel Uzal and Wiley Wiggins and Eunice Choi

Olivia Wischmeyer

Connor Walden

JJ Herz

Baeh Gill

Jamie Delany

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In 1994, attendees at the New Museum of Contemporary Art were astonished as they witnessed artist Bob Flanagan's naked body slowly ascending towards the ceiling suspended by his ankles. Shedding his hospital gown and breathing tubes, Flanagan exposed the pain caused by his cystic fibrosis, asserting that no external pain could match the pain inflicted by his own body.

I can't help but notice a similarity to the agony I experience every time I post a new TikTok video.

Although I am not a masochistic performance artist confronting the pretentious crowds at the New Museum and my disabled body won't ever be suspended by its nipples or ankles, its image will be reproduced millions of times for the visual consumption of the masses, which feels remarkably similar. Unlike an art gallery audience that eventually disperses, thousands linger in fascination with my disabled narrative. Whether within the confines of an art gallery or the realm of social media, the performance and voyeurism persist endlessly. I am acutely aware of how my

behavior is perceived and inseparable from the context of my disability. To be disabled is to exist in a perpetual state of erotic performance.

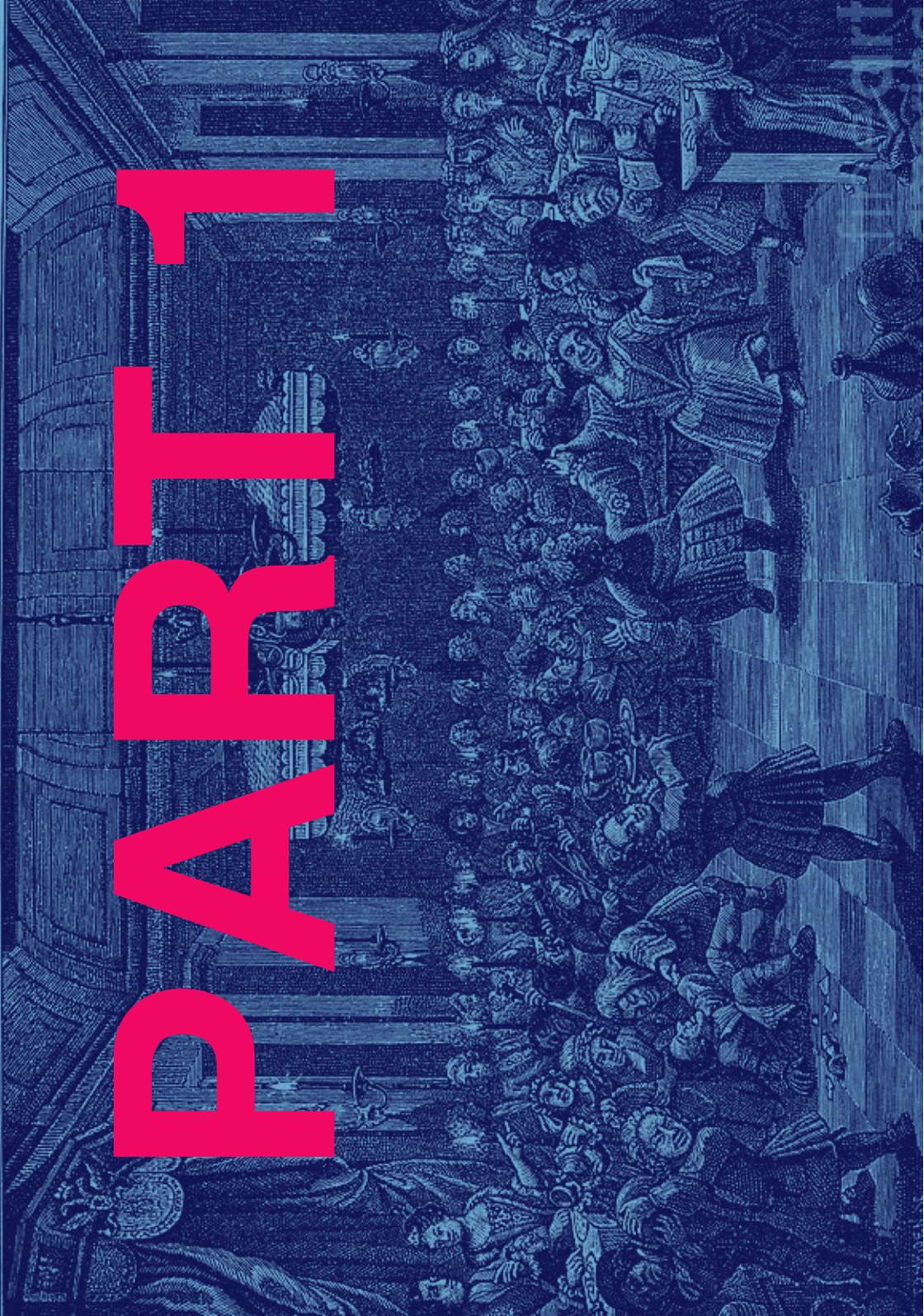
Contemporary culture quickly thrusts a camera phone into the hands of individuals who have endured spinal cord injuries or live with unconventional physical conditions, urging them to monetize and document their life stories for endless audience consumption.

Inspire us. Educate us.
How do you pee? How
do you fuck?

One could argue that the freak show industry was never truly eradicated but rather is now resurging in the digital age. Despite grappling with these complex ideas, my intersecting experience with queerness introduces a tension that compels me to transcend being merely an object of pleasure and disrupt the established narratives surrounding disability and pleasure. As I uncover the history of my community, it is crucial to discover a path forward that allows me to create work challenging these notions.

This collage writings forming this zine, is my attempt to map out my journey through these topics. It not only gives context to my completed works but also includes blueprints for the direction I envision for this body of work. The exploration begins by providing a brief background on disability and performance through the tainted history of freak shows, the audience, and the nature of laughter. It then progresses to contemporary devotee culture and its connection to my previous work, Smash or Bang. Subsequently, I examine the culture surrounding sex dolls and their specific impact on disabled women. The journey concludes with essays documenting my intimate exploration into pleasure, contrasting the notions of my body and narrative previously existing solely to create experiences for others. Ultimately, this work exists to challenge preconceived notions about the disabled body and questions who is entitled to experience pleasure.

PART 1





01 THE PERFORMANCE

The presence of individuals with disabilities in performance spaces, unfortunately, has its roots in their brutal exploitation for public entertainment, a practice spanning centuries. Some argue that remnants of these structures persist today. Dating back to the reign of England's Elizabeth I in the 16th century, these exhibitions or "shows" featured individuals with physical deformities, abnormalities, or disabilities, objectifying them for public curiosity and visual consumption. Many monarchs and nobles even collected individuals with bodily differences as objects for their private entertainment. Historical accounts, such as Frederick Drimmer's *Very Special People*, document instances like Lazarus and Joannes Baptista Colloredo, conjoined Italian twins who captivated the court of King Charles I and many other wealthy leaders. King Charles I was particularly fascinated by Lazarus and the underdeveloped twin, who hung upside down from the side of Lazarus's body, with only an upper body and left leg visibly exposed.

In Russia, Peter the Great hosted the infamous Dwarf Wedding, a mock gathering of approximately seventy little people rounded up from all over Russia for the matrimonial proceedings. The event took place for the amusement of the average-sized attendees. The little people were seated at smaller tables centrally positioned within the venue, while their full-sized counterparts observed from tables along the sides. Laughter roared as the little people, particularly those with physical differences such as hunched postures, protuberant abdomens, and truncated limbs, became drunk, leading to inebriated falls and culminating in a massive brawl as the final act of the performance.

This marked the beginning of a shift in societal perception. Disabilities were no longer viewed solely as omens of bad luck or manifestations of evil spirits, but rather as objects of fascination. Despite the influence of religious texts such as the Bible, where disabled individuals were often depicted as beggars in desperate need of divine intervention to free them from the perceived prisons of their bodies—sometimes associated with sins they or their families had allegedly committed—those who were once exiled and isolated because of their deformities began coming into the limelight. Much of this shift was due to a growing interest in medicine and science, which sought to explain the existence of these individuals outside of spiritual intervention.

By the 19th century, this had evolved into a widely profitable industry across Europe and the United States. Particularly in New York, Dime Museums surged in popularity, catering to lower-class citizens, as traditional museum institutions had primarily targeted the upper class and educated elite. Despite the growing inclusivity of these spaces, institutions continued to only welcome visitors with disabilities as exhibitions. These shows took various forms, from rare shows and halls of human curiosities to odditoriums, Congresses of Oddities, and Museums of Nature's Mistakes.

One of the most famous examples was P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York, which eventually evolved into the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Barnum's shows featured live exhibitions like Joice Heth, a blind and paralyzed slave woman whom Barnum claimed was 161 years old and had been George Washington's former nurse. Heth remained in Barnum's show until her death, after which Barnum hosted a live autopsy of her body, charging spectators 50 cents each.

This exploitation of disabled bodies likely occurred due to shifting social attitudes and changing laws. States like Michigan began passing legislation forbidding the "exhibition [of] any deformed human being or human monstrosity, except as used for scientific purposes," Michigan Deformed Human Beings Act, MI. (Penal Code (750.1 - 750.568) despite the continued exploitative nature of these displays. Although this ultimately led to the demise of traditional brick-and-mortar and pop-up freak shows, one can argue that structures exploiting disabled bodies for profit persist to this day under different names and modes of access. Reality television has become the new medium through which audiences access the lives of disabled individuals. (Müller, Floris, et al. 2012) This system also offers anonymity to viewers seeking out such content. Instead of traveling to see freak shows, audiences can now stream shows on personal devices without the societal shame associated with voyeuristic behavior.

While these programs can be credited with increasing visibility for everyday disabled individuals, networks understand that extreme cases attract the most views for their platforms. Shows like "The Undateables" on BBC and the Australian/American version "Love on the Spectrum" highlight individuals engaging in mundane activities, such as dating, solely because they are disabled. Viewers no longer gasp in awe due to the novelty of seeing these bodies but rather indulge in pity for their struggle to navigate everyday life within social structures that fail to support them.

However, scripted movies and television have also attempted to portray disabled experiences. Films like "Forrest Gump" and "What's Eating Gilbert Grape?" sparked conversations about the ethics of nondisabled actors portraying the lives of those with real disabilities. Additionally, Lars Von Trier's film "Idiots" revolves around a Danish commune whose members reject mainstream society by pretending to have physical/mental disabilities in public, sometimes resorting to violence. This perpetuates tropes of disabled individuals as helpless and unpredictable, reinforcing the notion that they are unfit to live among mainstream society.

Most recently, social media platforms such as TikTok have revolutionized the interaction between disabled performers and their audiences. Disabled creators now have the autonomy and opportunity to influence culture by normalizing their experiences and stories within mainstream spaces. However, this potential is often undermined as audiences tend to prioritize entertainment over education, compelling disabled individuals to once again resort to self-deprecation for visibility and recognition.

"Staring is an urgent urge to explain the unexpected," states Rosemarie Garland Thompson in her work on Disability and Performance. Staring is essentially a social choreography of a tension that positions both the spectacle and the spectator. And because we as the disabled are often so invisible, the moment we become visible is a novelty that people cannot look away from. In a modern culture which has confined disabled bodies to almost exclusively exist within performance spaces, the performance does not stop.

WHAT'S THE HARDEST PART OF A
VEGETABLE TO EAT?

THE WHEELCHAIR.

02 LOLS (ON LOLS)

What makes someone or something funny? For the longest time, like any middle school boy lacking in basic empathy and general self-awareness, I believed that whoever came up with the most outlandish, offensive, or off-base statement won the ultimate prize of being known as "the funny one." It was a title I garnered and defended in every interaction, even if it meant I came off as ableist, misogynistic, homophobic, or even racist. I was so uncomfortable in my body that I would do anything to break the tension created by its presence. The only solution seemed to be to make people laugh by any means necessary as if beating others to the punch of my trauma would lessen the blow, even though in the end, it was just degrading. I could call myself a cripple but my friends knew that was a line they couldn't cross — at least not in public. As someone with almost every intersecting identity, I had the license to use language that more often than not was harmful to those communities. But I rode the line so well it came off as edgy or provocative. This brand of humor was prevalent in the early 2010s.

Prominent comedians like Louis C.K. and Dave Chappelle were celebrated for "pushing the envelope" and being courageous as the cultural landscape was evolving beneath them. And shows like Ryan Murphy's hit "Glee" glorified punching down as long as you were an equal opportunity offender. However, their reign eventually came to an end, and homophobia and transphobia became unpopular in mainstream culture.

In high school, it was generally agreed that I was funny, albeit occasionally mean. But unlike Louis and Dave, I had the license to continue my toxic comedy style because if I was gay, disabled and a woman there was no way I could be homophobic, ableist, or misogynistic. Impossible! During this time I opened a finsta account (fake Instagram) in tandem with my public-facing Instagram account. One could argue that although this was my "fake" Instagram this was 100% more real than my public account ever was. The follow-request list was long because it was incredibly gate kept as the school administration made many fruitless attempts to crack down on these types of accounts as they were a cesspool for online bullying. Mine was particularly awful but in the midst of all of that, I wrote a lot about myself to the point where my disability became uninteresting to me, which forced me to become a fully dimensional character with multifaceted storylines. The cancer jokes became tired and the whole experience felt so far away from me and who I was becoming. All I wanted to talk about was landing a hot prom date or passing Spanish even though I was fluent and still failed. But also, I was ranking all the gays at my school and designated them into varsity gays vs junior varsity gays based on arbitrary reasons or vibes. And yeah, I did a side-by-side comparison of the boy who shot up our school and the rooster from Chicken Run (and I still stand by that!). It was all in poor taste and a bit elitist, but unfortunately, this was the start of my comedy career. Truth was that I had an incredible sense of comedic structure but absolutely no handle on it.

When I got to college I realized I had to pivot my style. These strangers didn't understand that my casual homophobia was just a bit I was really committing to and that I wasn't actually homophobic. I was still not ready to reckon with how others immediately perceived me, so humor was still the only way out. However, I knew I had to clean up my act. I became interested in the true art and mechanics of comedy and its purpose. I began to immerse myself in the LA comedy scene, attending shows all over town to better understand the medium and what made the greats great. I even tried to read *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* by Freud, but who was I kidding?

During this period, I drew two conclusions, the first being that the cause of laughter is just the brain's attempt to deal with incongruity. Incongruity occurs when elements that are not usually associated with one another are juxtaposed, creating a deviation from the expected. Like a disabled person being ableist. This unexpected alignment of ideas or situations elicits laughter as a response. So when an audience encounters something that disrupts their normal cognitive patterns or social norms, the resulting confusion and realization can produce a physical reaction. This process involves a sudden shift in perspective, where the mind recognizes the absurdity or novelty of the situation. The best comedians aren't racists, sexist, homophobes or, ableists - they are just able to manipulate incongruities, timing, and situational irony to craft punchlines that catch audiences off guard.

The second conclusion I reached is that no one does comedy quite like the Jews.

According to Yiddish scholar Ruth Wisse, for Jews, comedy has become a necessity. Living under a constantly challenged covenant, a sense of humor serves as the only psychological release. This distinctive approach to humor has been a crucial survival mechanism, enabling them to cope with centuries of adversity. Ultimately, laughter is restorative, bringing balance to those who experience it. For Jewish communities, humor has been essential in maintaining resilience and perspective in the face of ongoing challenges. This is similar to the experience of many within the disability community, who also navigate a world of incongruities and often find themselves at odds with their surroundings. (They themselves are the incongruities) In both cases, humor becomes a vital tool for enduring and thriving amid life's difficulties.

However, when I watched other disabled comedians it seemed like they couldn't stop making jokes at their own expense and that was something I could no longer get behind. I cringed when the punchline or the implication of the joke was simply driven by the nature of them being in a wheelchair. It felt so lazy. It felt so reductionist and self-objectifying. I wanted so badly to shake them and say "you don't just have to be disabled! You can also be an asshole like the rest of them!"

One of the biggest turning points in my comedy journey was when I saw KATE at the Pasadena Playhouse on a wet Wednesday night. Kate Berlant's one-woman show altered my brain chemistry and cured me. I felt changed forever. But to make sure I wasn't just impaired by the Aperol Spritz I had before the show, I went to see it again a week later sober, and this time I invested in a front-row seat for the chance to see Ms. Berlant up close.

The show consisted of a 75-minute long narration of Berlant's life, from her upbringing in Santa Monica to her move to New York at 18. And a recurring motif of a "big secret" she used to edge the audience. The promise of a trauma revealing made audiences salivate. Was she going to come out as gay? A cancer diagnosis? No. An iron deficiency. I was floored. This was exactly what my art was missing. This half-Spanish, half-Jewish woman had achieved what I thought was unachievable. She was advertising her trauma and soul to the audience but letting absolutely no one have it. She had drawn a clear boundary with her audience, making it known that while her work was deeply personal, her trauma was not for sale. This was a bold stance, especially in a time when we are constantly consuming each other's traumas in futile attempts to find intimacy that can only come from community in an individualist society. Her work was consumable, but she was not. This was the aspect of art-making I had struggled with for ages. I had made many attempts at creating personal work but failed to separate myself and especially my body from it.



This concept felt especially ambitious when I created my first interactive installation. This attempt at a Self Portrait consisted of two silicone joystick controllers casted and modeled from my own feet. As well as an LED interface that allowed the user to move through an endless 3D space. The work aims to comment on the extra layer of labor added when one is not considered in the design process of functional spaces. The game is tedious and patronizing, and often cannot be completed by a single user.

In some way, I had chosen to share a part of my body with audiences and allowed them to interact with me in a very intimate manner. However, I was profoundly affected by how the audiences received the piece or even mistreated the work because on some level they were mistreating me. They weren't just breaking my joystick - they were breaking me.

On the other hand, Kate was honest in her performance but had created a persona to protect herself while still being true to the work in front of an audience. It was a performance of a performance. Authenticity and dignity were not mutually exclusive.

"I think it was a friend of a friend who was, like, 'Oh, I just wish she had really gotten there.' And I just said, through my teeth, 'You missed the joke.' Also, it's, like, O.K., wait. You have this desire for confession, which is as old as time. And the aesthetics of confessional standup are so artificial. This thing of a guy in a hoodie talking about life and being, like, 'Here's my pain.' This insistence that that's not artifice was always so confusing for me. I'm, like, 'Well, it's an act.' We all know the people going onstage are performing themselves, but there are certain performances that conceal that process and are very beloved." - KATE

My first year of grad school, the unthinkable happened. I found myself in the middle of a tennis match when I received a private message from my finsta. A crypto warrior had hacked my beloved account and was holding it ransom for \$300. I felt exposed, vulnerable, and angry. Mostly angry at myself for being careless and not using Two-Step verification like any sane and sensible person. I never thought this would happen to me. I had seen this happen to my friends countless times and I would laugh in their faces and witness them have to start their lives over on a fresh account. But this was different. I was overcome with panic not only because all of my awful teenage thoughts were now made public for the world to see but because it was also all my life's work.

Suddenly, I was Carrie Bradshaw convulsing at the Apple store trying to recover all the writing she had not backed up. But more than anything I was crushed because I realized this meant something to me! I had never stopped posting. After all these years, I realized I really cared about my writing and this was a 12-year archive of my work and growth as an artist. This was my art no matter how bad it was. But the harshest reality of life is that you don't know what you have until it's gone. Needless to say, I shelled out the \$300 in bitcoins.

MAR 9, 2022

Hey!. Are you really interested in getting this account back?

I've told you what you should do

right

i need your email

My email hasn't got anything to do about this

are you so busy?.

Have you got Cashapp?

i can probably do cashapp

Okay, if you've got Cashapp, we can send it through Bitcoins.

Let's get it done right away, just follow my steps and send screenshots

okay it's downloading

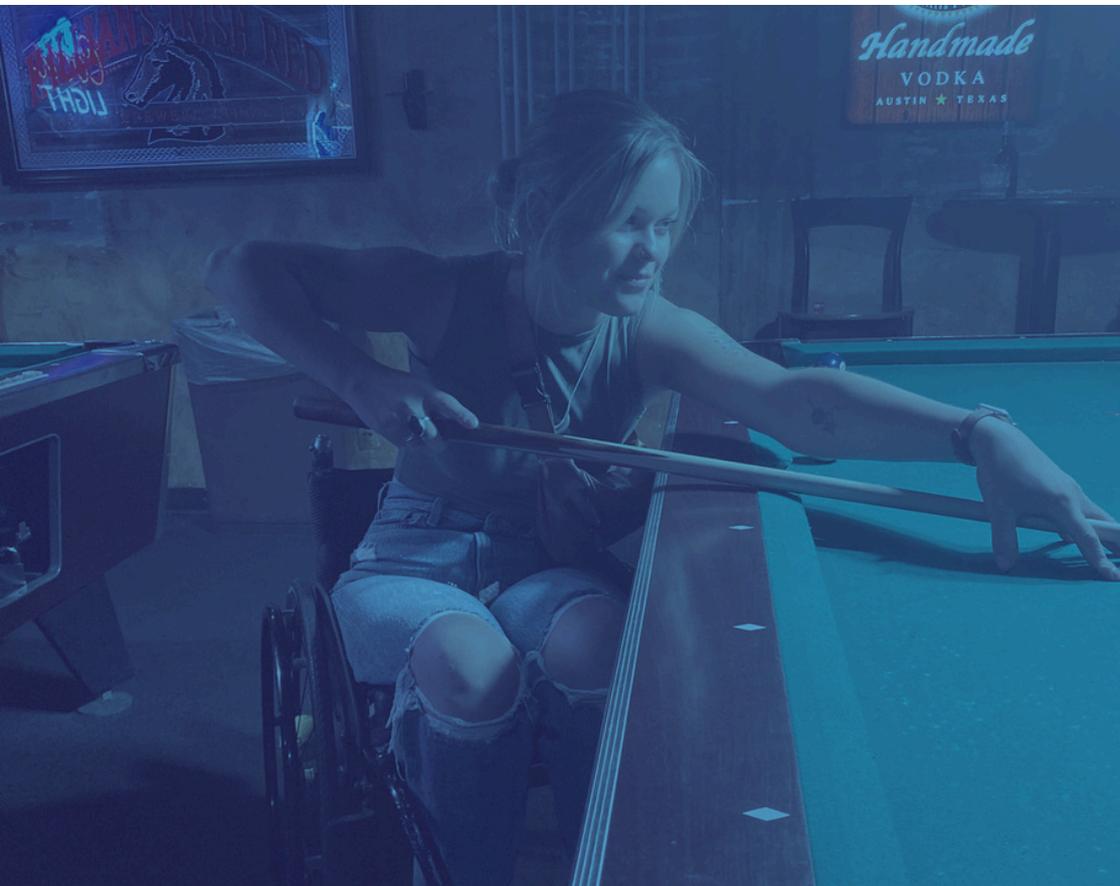
How's your tournament going?

its alright - i play early tomorrow



03 S.O.B

Baeh and I met on Hinge while I was home in Colorado braving the pandemic in the safety of my childhood home. We matched instantly and it was like the meme of two spidermen pointing at each other. We were like twins. We quickly learned that we were both gay, Pisces, 21 years old, and both had level t-4 spinal cord injuries; except Baeh's injury was complete and mine was incomplete. Also, I was a Central American immigrant and she was a white girl from the middle of nowhere Kansas. It felt odd to make a friend off an app specifically made for romantic encounters but the reality was neither of us were interested in dating other wheelchair users from the start. Neither of us would claim to be true ableists but we also both knew that logistically the dynamic never would've worked. It was a dead end...if you will.



When we finally met in person I realized that for every one thing that brought us together, there were many things that pulled us apart. Like that night in her apartment when she carefully pulled out a pink handgun and my blood turned cold. I hadn't seen one with my raw eyeballs in many years. She passed it from hand to hand with extra caution keeping her fingers away from the trigger. She had her reasons for owning a death machine and I did my best to try and look past them for the sake of this new friendship where I finally felt seen. Personal gun ownership was completely off the table for me as someone who survived a school shooting during my freshman year of high school and lived 10 minutes away from Columbine most of my life. I could not fathom any scenario where the presence of a gun could be used as a tool for de-escalation. But to her as a disabled woman living on her own, owning a gun didn't feel like it was optional.

At the time I chalked up her misguided red beliefs to the fact that she was from Kansas and in my heart believed her time in Colorado would eventually transform her into the liberal queer she was always meant to be or at least a moderate. I ignored this and many other political incongruencies and our hangouts began to frequent even more.

By the summer, businesses started opening up again after a long pandemic winter. Baeh and I were also desperate to be outside as fresh 21-year-olds with legal IDs burning holes in our pockets. Such was the desperation for even just a drop of overpriced legal alcohol that we were even willing to go to straight-people bars in Downtown Colorado Springs. A town with some of Colorado's most iconic red scenery but also an overwhelming aura of raw testosterone brought on by the looming presence of four military bases within a 10-mile radius. Baeh was quite fond of Cowboys; a dingy western bar with floors so sticky it was difficult to push my wheelchair through the crowds. We would be constantly approached by strangers who were so overcome by the sight of not one but two girls in wheelchairs drunkenly rolling over their toes. Baeh liked to get on the dance floor and line dance with men even though she was a lesbian and wheelchairs notoriously do not move laterally. I liked to sit on the side holding our beers and watch her uninhibitedly work her charm on these men. She would more often than not get us even more beers and fireball shots. Most encounters were uncomfortable more than anything else. Most common were conversations that ran too long because they couldn't catch a hint that we were both gay but not with each other.

FONNOR 29

34 miles away

*(1) "Was gonna try to sweep you off
your feet but it looks like you've got
it covered"*



I was routinely tapped out and ready to go home by 9 pm but I knew I couldn't leave Baeh alone, so most nights I rallied. But one night the exhaustion overcame me and I did go home. I instantly felt a flood of guilt for the rest of the night. I knew I had her location and I knew she would text me once she was home safe, but I knew deep down that leaving Baeh alone in a straight bar was very different from ditching any of my other friends on a night out. Usually, I could deal with my own physical vulnerability and was very aware of it after many years of my mom reminding me that I was an easy target whenever I wore something she deemed dangerously scandalous. She would hound over the fact that other girls in my position could run away and fight off unwanted advances but I was different. I could ignore my own vulnerabilities but I had a hard time ignoring hers. These kinds of thoughts ran constantly through my mind and I would try to mentally prepare myself at every corner. I thought about how I could stand up but realistically, in a true altercation, I could at least get on the ground and crawl thanks to my incomplete injury

An incomplete spinal cord injury is complicated. One second you're standing up by grabbing onto the side of your car and you feel like you've somehow cheated the system, and the next second you are face down on the pavement, brought down by spasm or your knees buckling out from under you. Living in a precarious state of bodily autonomy serves as a constant and throbbing reminder of what you are actually missing and the ways it has made you incapable. Like a toxic ex that hovers around you and never lets you forget, or move on from them. Having an incomplete injury also implies a responsibility when you are around those whose disabilities are more involved, one that I've been aware of for as long as I've been a part of the disability community. I remember my first year of Wheelchair Sports Camp emptying Otter Pop tubes into my friend Sarah's mouth, a quadriplegic who couldn't sweat. I was also a camper at the time but there were never enough volunteers on site to help keep everyone cool in the hot sun. This is the way it's always been because we know we have to take care of each other.

ERI 26

3.54 miles away

(1) "either way you won't be able to walk after sex"



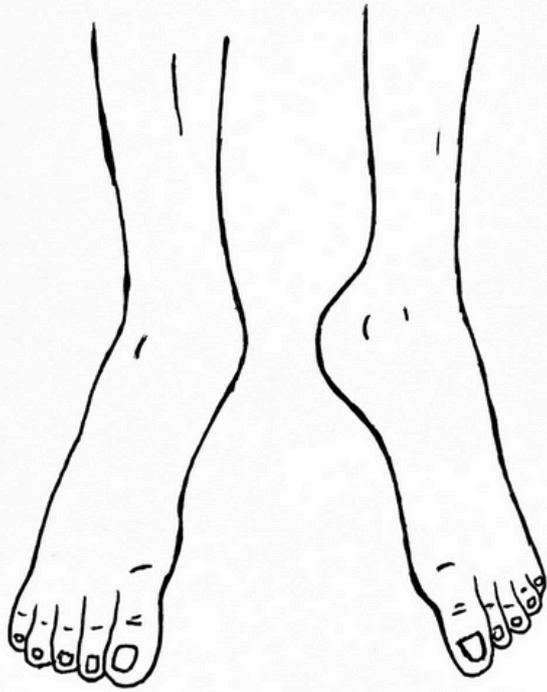
My biggest responsibility when I was with Baeh was being the chair bitch. I would help her into the car, load her wheelchair in the back, and then load myself in and finally my own wheelchair. As we would complete this long process and often in the dark, I would imagine the worst of scenarios because of how vulnerable I felt. But what I failed to realize was that as much as I was taking care of her she was also taking care of me in her own way. If something were to happen to me - she had no problem putting lead in a person's leg with her gun.

Whenever I was around Baeh I thought a lot about my other friend Holly. She was closer to my mom's age and had been a wheelchair user since her late teens. And much like my Mom, she frequently reminded me of the innate vulnerability of my disabled body - even more so as a woman. She was no stranger to unwanted approaches from men throughout her life. Not much later after she acquired her injury she went out with her friends and a man tried to make conversation with her but she didn't engage. Unable to deal with the rejection, the man found her car in the parking lot and deflated one of her tires. He waited and followed her as she drove away knowing she would have to eventually pull over. And once she pulled over he parked behind her and feigned he was there to help. He got in her car, trapping her next to her disassembled wheelchair. She was assaulted in her car on the side of the road.

Research on abuse survivors among disabled women is limited, primarily because many survivors are physically or verbally unable to report the abuse, or they may not recognize that they have experienced it (Elman, p. 3). The nature of many disabilities makes it easy for perpetrators to isolate their victims. In reported instances, the perpetrators are often male and known to the victim. These individuals may include caretakers, siblings, or even romantic partners who exploit the victim's dependency and vulnerability caused by their disability.

When I created S.O.B., I aimed to loosely emulate the online dating interface we are all so familiar with. The shooter game went through a series of messages sent to wheelchair users while on online dating platforms like Tinder, Bumble or Hinge. Even though I do not date men or regularly engage in online dating, I still felt like I was playing this game with every interaction I had with the men in my life. I've always found men to be incredibly unpredictable—not all men, but enough. Whether it's a stranger at a bar, a Tinder date, a classmate, or a caretaker who knows you rely on them, the game doesn't stop, and you cannot let your guard down. I was constantly listening for a joke or an innocuous comment that would reveal their awareness of the power imbalance and its implications. I needed to know if, in a moment of vulnerability created by my disability, they would take advantage of it. It was a fine line—almost undetectable—but I was always listening for it.

Baeh didn't think this way. She was always at ease and carefree in the world, and I almost resented her for it. However, I eventually realized that the moments when I saw her experience the kind of recklessness only able-bodied women usually enjoy were the moments we were together because she felt safe. It was never about the gun; more often than not, the gun stayed back in her apartment when we were together because at the end of the day we could take care of each other.



04 DEVOTEES

KRISTA

I guess the one thing that we haven't talked about is how when we met in 2021 we were both trying to become wheelchair influencers. I stopped because I could not take the pressure. I felt so overwhelmed by having so many people perceive me. The DMs and comments were beyond unhinged and I could not continue. But you stayed the course and are still going to this day. And you've actually grown a bit of a following.

BEAH

Yeah I would say that most of the messages I get are honestly just people asking for advice on spinal cord injury, or they're asking questions for a family member, or friend who is disabled. Or they're like "you're so inspirational!" or something like that. — But then of course some of the messages are from devotees being creepy and being like "You are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen" — I stopped checking my message request a long time ago. But recently, there was a guy who messaged me or slid up on my story and he was like "Your girl (Baeh's girlfriend) needs a haircut..." and he was like "I'll send you \$50 for a haircut if you send me anything with the foot emoji". And I told him my quote rates. I've never ever been paid for a foot picture or anything like that before but I was like I'm at least going to get \$75 for a foot picture. I said "What's anything?" and then he said "Like foot pictures.." or he called them "spasmies" like muscle spasms and I was like "OK well foot pics are \$100 and anything that's like niche like muscle spasms is at least \$250" and then he didn't reply.... No wait — he did reply and he was like "Well could you send me something as a gift first so I know that you won't just take my money" and I was like "I'm not gonna send you anything I don't know you like you definitely are gonna have to pay first." And then he didn't reply, and then he likes slid up on a story of Sonita (Baeh's girlfriend) and was saying that he thinks I'm so beautiful, but is so disappointed that I'm gay and then I was like "Honestly I don't give a fuck what you think about me being gay". I felt like arguing that day so I engaged in the conversation which probably shouldn't have but anyways I don't really give a fuck if you care if I'm gay or not, and I'm gonna send another one.

KRISTA

Okay great!

Devotees represent a niche and often controversial subset of fetishism. The term has gained notoriety within the disability community, describing a growing population of individuals who openly objectify or fetishize disabled bodies. These devotees often view disabled people as objects of desire rather than as equals with agency and autonomy. Individuals of this type, who often flooded both my private messages and Baeh's, are sexually aroused by the physical characteristics or limitations associated with disabilities, such as the use of mobility aids, the presence of amputations, and atrophied limbs. While some devotees claim their attraction fosters genuine appreciation and love for people with disabilities, this behavior is frequently questioned for objectifying and dehumanizing individuals based on physical attributes specific to disabled bodies. Because at the end of the day is it really okay to say "I like my woman disabled" in the same way it's normalized to say "I like my woman blonde"?

Even more complex is the genre of disability pornography, particularly focusing on women and girls with visible disabilities. Publications like "Amputee Times" shed light on this trend, portraying disabled women in stereotypical, sexualized situations. Researchers have linked this fetish to developmental experiences in early childhood, although this explanation is heavily debated. Disability pornography often mirrors the themes found in pornography of other marginalized groups, depicting women as dominant or masochistic to justify male abusive behavior. It perpetuates harmful myths that women, especially those with disabilities, derive pleasure from subordination and vulnerability, contributing to the denial of their civil rights. (Elman, p. 258)

BEAH

I don't think I'd ever date somebody who identifies as a devotee. I think that I would feel like if my leg spasm-- Oh. I forgot to mention this in my last message; he said that he saw one of my videos of me spasming. And he said "the pain you're in from your spasms. It turns me on so much"

The notion that women crave male sexual desire permeates most pornography and films. Disability pornography is distinct for its explicitness and brutality. This perspective is even evident in mainstream media. For instance, Helmut Newton's 1995 Vogue photos and the film *The Piano* both fetishize women's disabilities. In *The Piano*, a mute woman is coerced into sexual acts in exchange for her piano, depicted as her voice, and ultimately becomes further disabled. Similarly, the film *Boxing Helena* portrays a woman who, after becoming a quadriplegic, transforms into a compliant lover in a doll-like state.

Disability pornography often eroticizes orthopedic aids, turning hospital settings into sexual playgrounds. Even death is sexualized, exemplified by a Copenhagen morgue director who allowed unauthorized access to cadavers for voyeuristic purposes. This genre perpetuates harmful myths about women with disabilities, emphasizing their supposed inherent sexuality and compliance. (Elman, p. 265)

The reality is that there is an undeniable link between necrophiliacs and those who identify as devotees. Both groups display a fetishization of struggle and a fascination with bodies that lack autonomy and agency. Devotees often focus on moments of struggle that are not inherently sexual but become eroticized through the lack of agency exhibited, such as going up and down stairs or transferring in and out of a wheelchair. This fetish has the potential for harm as it involves sexual feelings that the devotees cannot control, emphasizing a vulnerability that mirrors the necrophiliac's desire for a body that feels dead but is still warm. The performance is not overtly sexual but is deeply erotic, revealing a disturbing connection where the body is alive yet entirely subject to another's will. This scenario poses the unsettling question of what one would do with a living body over which they had full control, drawing a direct and troubling parallel to necrophiliac tendencies.

At this point, it's essential to note that the term "devotee" has evolved over time and has been used in various contexts within disability discourse – especially on online forums. In some cases, it has been reclaimed by disabled individuals to describe their admirers or supporters who genuinely appreciate their abilities and contributions beyond their disabilities. Sites like Paradevo.net have created a space for devotees and disabled individuals to meet consensually and explore the dynamics of their urges. In this context, being a devotee may imply genuine admiration and support rather than objectification. I still think it's gross, but whatever.

 **r/disability** · 2 yr. ago
Stunning_Employee_33

...

Am I a devotee?

Question

Hi there, I am a 21 year old abled bodied man who has been attracted to disabled women for as long as I can remember. I've been attracted to abled and disabled women in my life time.

I just keep on hearing about devotees and I keep hearing different things. One side says they are a bunch of creeps who only look at the disability. And there's a normal side which think the person is attractive.

For me personally I am attracted the person. I don't want to call it a fetish or a devotee or anything like that. I just want to hear all of your opinions. Feel free to ask me questions! Thank you!

 3 

 28

 Share



YeastyP1ssFlaps · 3y ago

What's your favourite physical disability in someone?



 1 

 Reply

 Share

...



loveisnotwrong OP · 3y ago

anything that affects mobility, but if I had to choose, quadriplegia would be a favorite

 1 

 Reply

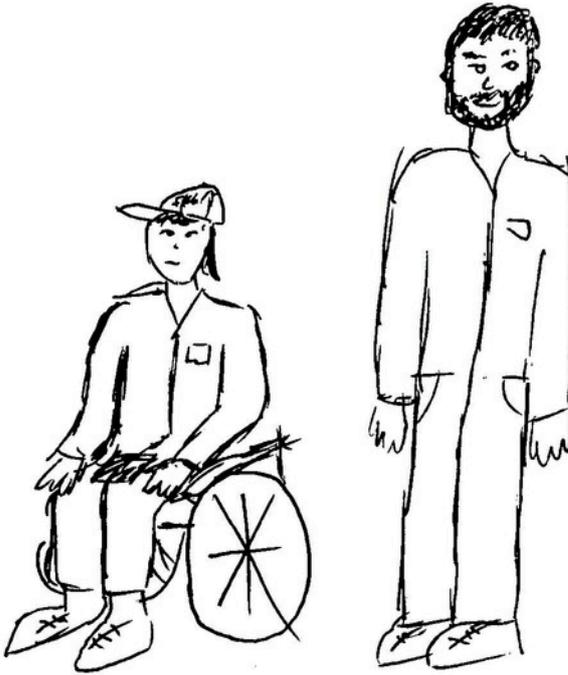
 Share

...

I am afraid to own a Body—
1090

I am afraid to own a Body—
I am afraid to own a Soul—
Profound—precarious Property—
Possession, not optional—
Double Estate—entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir—
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier.

- Emily Dickinson



(and Connor)

05 KRISTA AND CHRISTA

When Connor rolled into the IKEA showroom with Christa in tow, most people were unfazed or even unaware of the spectacle unfolding in their very own Burbank IKEA location in partnership with the IKEA residency. Many shoppers passed by without realizing that Christa was a life-size sex doll being pushed in a wheelchair. To the everyday shopper, nothing seemed out of place until Connor picked Christa up and positioned her on a couch by manually bending her knees and elbows into a sitting position. Heads began to turn when he sat next to her, amplifying the disproportionate features of her body—her childlike face and extra-long legs creating an uncanny valley effect. An elderly couple watched them through a display window, covering their mouths in shock. “I think he thinks she’s real,” the husband added, unable to look away.

Apart from devotee culture, there exists another community: men who date sex dolls not just for quirky performance art but as part of their lifestyle. Similar to Paradevo.com, there is Dollforum.com, an online community with over 18,000 users known as “Doll Lovers” or “iDollators.” Just as there is a community of people attracted to women with doll-like features, there is also a community attracted to dolls with women-like features.

This intersection of necrophilia and devotee-ism is evident in the use of sex dolls, which serve as tangible representations of these fetishes. (Desbuleux 2022) This dynamic parallels the fetishization of disabled individuals, who are sometimes objectified based on their disabilities rather than being seen as whole, complex human beings. Individuals who engage in relationships with sex dolls may objectify them yet seek humanity in objects designed to provide pleasure.

Buying Christa was an impulsive decision. My biggest motivation and sense of urgency came from the fact that she was on sale for the low price of \$500 and if you squinted a bit she kind of looked like me. This was an opportunity I feared might not come again as newer models can go for upwards of \$4,000. But Christa was pre-owned and had some wear and tear. She was a rescue — if you will.



When I looked at the website displaying the dolls like meat from a butcher shop, I was instantly drawn to Christa because she was the only one clothed. I believe this is what allowed me to humanize her in my mind. The real moment of connection happened once she was in the passenger seat of my car. As I was already on the road, she triggered the seatbelt alarm because she weighed more than me. I struggled to steer while I reached over to her to put her seatbelt on. I quickly became very fond of her, and the initial weirdness wore off. I felt the innate human need to take care of her to the best of my ability—even though, without another wheelchair, I couldn't move her or transfer her out of the car. But still, I brushed her hair to make sure she looked put together and shared my clothes with her. I even replaced her press-on nails.

And as time passed I grew a huge sense of responsibility to ensure she was taken care of. We shared many moments that felt eerily similar to the instances of care I had with my other disabled friends. It was almost like taking care of a quadriplegic woman who depended on me for everything, including the smallest tasks like bending her fingers for her. I knew she wasn't real, OBVIOUSLY but to me, she felt like a symbol representing women as a whole, and that alone demanded some level of dignity and respect. I wanted to protect her because of her lack of autonomy, and I hated the jokes men made about fucking her even though I understood ultimately that was her purpose. It triggered the anger I felt when I saw a gang of boys assaulting one of the female sculptures in the sculpture garden at school.



A poll conducted on The Doll Forum revealed that 50 percent of dolls were purchased for non-sexual reasons. Among these, seven percent were bought specifically for cuddling and sleeping, while 11 percent were intended as replacements for human companionship. For many people, the goal is to replicate the presence of a human being, which started to make a lot of sense to me once Christa came into my life. When I began this portion of the project, I expected to feel the same disgust I felt towards devotees on Instagram making fake accounts to prey on disabled women. I was aiming to expose those involved in the most extreme form of objectification of women. However, instead of disgust, I found myself feeling immense empathy. Humans use various prosthetics to improve their quality of life: some use limb prosthetics to walk, and some use dolls as prosthetics for a sense of human connection that they cannot otherwise achieve for whatever reason. And at the end of the day, they weren't hurting anyone. More than anything, my relationship with Christa reminded me of my relationship with my own body. I could never understand how she felt or what she liked because our connection was severed. I did my best not to hurt her when I moved her. I knew the silicone was tearing in many places, but I couldn't understand why. I carefully bent her knees with my hands, just as I did with my own legs. To me, it was more than just an object for sex. We never slept together. The closest we ever came was a nap I took on her lap in the backseat of my car.

KATE BERLANT PLEASE FORGIVE
ME FOR I AM ABOUT TO SIN .

PART 2

06 UNSTRAPPED THE ESSAY

The biggest difference between my own body and Christa's body was that I knew Christa's body came with the sex function but I wasn't sure my body did. Due to the level of my paralysis, I struggled with much simpler functions like knowing when I was hungry or even knowing when my bladder was full. Early on in my recovery, I remember using a device designed to help reconnect the neurological pathways between my brain and body. The setup consisted of a game with a menacing orange fish that would swim up as my bladder was artificially filled and back down as it was emptied. I felt no difference - I was entirely numb from the nipple down. For many years I dealt with frostbite and burns because of how often I would forget the bottom half of my body was still attached.

The first time I saw a disabled person have sex was by accident. I was on Twitter (X) when I came across a video of Andrew Gurza getting head from another guy while still in his wheelchair. At first, I was disgusted by the sight of unsolicited porn on my timeline. Then I was confused and I couldn't tell if it was because what I had just witnessed was gay or disabled or both. And then I was intrigued —

Andrew Gurza is a disability activist and proudly claims the title of the first disabled porn star. He is truly a pioneer at the intersection of disability, queerness, and sex, asking questions that many, including myself, struggle to articulate. Gurza had hosted disabled orgies and advocated for the creation of inclusive sex toys designed with disabled people in mind. He discussed the inherent shame associated with being disabled and its impact on one's sex life, highlighting how society views sex and disability as an abomination because they deviate so much from the norm.



This perception makes the idea of disabled people having fulfilling sexual lives seem almost impossible. Gurza emphasized that while the World Health Organization considers sex a basic human right, this right is often denied to disabled people because society prefers to ignore them, thereby undermining their entire sense of worth as a human. For Andrew, making porn was empowering because he would rather be seen as a fetish than not be seen at all. Witnessing his journey changed everything for me. I didn't make plans to join an orgy at this point, but this was the push that empowered me to explore the limitations of my disabled body within the context of queerness. Up until this point my experience was limited and suddenly I felt like the world had opened up for me.

What I liked the most about J was how comfortable they were with their queerness. They were undeniably witty. The banter was quick and it felt like what good tennis feels like when it's not for points but rather for the addictive feeling that comes from being able to hit well back and forth with somebody. It was the type of sense of humor that I had recently learned could only come from a Jewish person. But more than anything I was drawn to how they smashed right through the eggshells most people avoided surrounding my disability. It dawned on me that they might have been more comfortable with my disability than I was at the time. It was quickly clear that they were experienced which made it feel low-stakes enough for me to give myself room to explore what my body was capable of. But also I wanted to be around them all the time even if I felt violently ill whenever we were together. It hadn't even started but it was clear it was too much too fast. My body and I had entered into an abusive relationship. And while in therapy I was confronted with the reality that I was forcing my body to do things it couldn't do.

As it turned out, PTSD isn't all that different from hunger – it's somatic and this I could feel. Before this, I thought trauma just manifested itself as bad thoughts I could just push away or warped beliefs about reality. But trauma shows up like a stomach ache or anxiety so dizzying all you can do is close your eyes and try to go to sleep. And a lot of the time you don't know why or remember what happened that made you feel this way in the past. You just know that you do and it makes innocuous events feel like the end of the world and suddenly you're in fight or flight mode running away from people that care about you. It doesn't matter how much your head wants to be somewhere if your body is elsewhere - this kind of dissonance will have you leaving a Shrek 2 screening every 20 minutes looking for alcohol and you can't exactly figure out why.

It was clear to everyone else but me that my body was still dealing with things I had mentally moved on from. You can forgive and forget but the body does keep score... or whatever that war fetishizer said. I was reckoning with the fact that my body didn't want people touching it. It contracted when people tried to hug me and vibrated like an iPhone after I finished hooking up with someone. My body was communicating with me but I just wasn't listening. I was so scared of others taking advantage of my body but as it turned out I was the only one brutalizing my body. Why did I feel like I had to do this? Maybe on some level I thought forcing my body to have sex was going to make me feel like a real person or someone deserving of it. I was treating my body like a life-size fleshlight and jamming things into it in hopes that it would make me feel whole.

My time with J was complicated. I got more than I had bargained for. I had made a friend. But unfortunately, relationships are mirrors and the closer you get the more you are confronted with the parts of yourself you've been avoiding - or parts of yourself you didn't even know were there that needed to be dealt with. Unsurprisingly we didn't fuck. We ended up doing something far worse. We wrote a screenplay together. Was it good? NO. But I realized that wasn't really the point. I think the biggest takeaway from the experience was that at the end of the day, life is merciful and it gives you what you need and not what you want. And what I needed most was someone to sit next to me and make me feel like the things I thought and said were worth writing down beyond an Instagram caption. But more than anything else I needed to come to terms with the fact that I was still in a body that is living and breathing and not made of silicone. And it existed just for me and nobody else. I could stop the performance at any time.

UNSTRAPPED

Written by

Krista Villatoro & JJ Herz

INT. SOFIA'S APARTMENT - DAY

SOFIA (25, seemingly poised, and Latina) sits at her desk on a video call with her THERAPIST (30s, queer, older sister type, abrasive).

SOFIA

...And at one point ball was at least 4 inches off the from line but I just let her have the point. I didn't even call it out because I knew it would cause bigger problems and I was already 3 games ahead

She fidgets with a plush tennis ball in her hand as she talks

THERAPIST

uh-huh

SOFIA

I still came out on top. I just let it go and I didn't let her get in my head. That's never happened before.

A beat.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

And my strokes are starting to feel just as good as before.

THERAPIST

That's amazing. Well on that note I think that's our time for today

Looks at her notes one last time.

THERAPIST

I have to say - I really am incredibly proud of you. The progress you've made in the past year is truly remarkable.

SOFIA

I'm surprised that you're surprised. I never stopped being a winner. Why would I handle this any different?

THERAPIST

Okay I certainly think you can win a tennis match, but I don't think anyone really wins in a car crash. And even if you could win, in this case I don't think you did.

An abrupt pan out to a wide shot reveals that SOFIA is sitting in a manual wheelchair.

SOFIA

Wow. That was great - I'm writing that one down.

THERAPIST

But in less than a year you're already driving again - that feels like a bigger win to me.

SOFIA

Yeah! But I can't really text and drive because now I need both hands. That's the real tragedy

Her THERAPIST nods and takes notes.

THERAPIST

Well I'm glad. Like I said - it seems to me like you're pretty well adjusted

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. GROCERY STORE PARKING LOT - DAY

SOFIA transfers from her wheelchair to the edge of the trunk of her car next to her groceries. CUSTOMER (50s, man) spots her and begins his approach to help her unsolicitedly.

SOFIA

(under her breath)
Fuck.

CUSTOMER

Do you need any help with that?

SOFIA

No I think I'm good, but thank you though.

CUSTOMER
It's really no bother.

SOFIA
Really. I got it.

SOFIA clicks the remote. The trunk closes slowly behind her, all the while SOFIA awkwardly maintains eye contact with the CUSTOMER.

As soon as the trunk is closed, SOFIA forces her body between the seats until she finally crashes in the driver seat head first with her limp legs in flopping in the air.

CUT BACK TO:

INT. SOFIA'S APARTMENT - DAY

SOFIA still sits on a video call with her THERAPIST.

SOFIA
Never been better.

THERAPIST
How's the dating life going? You still on the apps?

Sofia tenses up unable to break this tension with her humor.

SOFIA
A bit.

THERAPIST
Any potential matches or maybe a fuck?

SOFIA
Woah.

THERAPIST
What? You haven't fucked...since?

SOFIA
(feigning nonchalance)
No, I mean I fuck....I still fuck..Obviously

THERAPIST
When was the last time?
(beat)
Ok...how about when was the last date you went on?

SOFIA

It's been a while.

THERAPIST waits for her to continue.

SOFIA (CONT'D)

OKAY I was sort of talking to this girl but she lived in Brentwood and I just think anything past the 405 isn't really any of my business to begin with. And her profile says she wants kids which is insane because who is still having kids? At this point its honestly eco-terrorisim. I think I would have wasted both of our times.

THERAPIST

Okay. Well, I do think it's important that you start to give people a chance. People might surprise you.

EXT. TENNIS COURT - NIGHT

SOFIA hits the ball back and forth with DANI (20s, Latina) They struggle to maintain a rally as they laugh their way through it.

Lauren (late 20s, also a wheelchair user) sits court side with BEA (20s, bold) smoking a joint

CUT TO:

All four now sit court side passing around a joint while SOFIA changes the grip on her racquet and DANI lays down flat like a starfish.

SOFIA

She basically prescribed me a dating app. Is that even ethical?

BEA

I mean, you could use a date or at least some action.

SOFIA

Honestly - I'm still recovering from Owen Wilson girl

LAUREN

Oh right, Owen Wilson girl. I forgot about her.

DANI
Owen Wilson girl?

SOFIA
She was all like, you can drive?

BEA/LAUREN
(their best Owen Wilson impression)
WOWWWW

LAUREN
You live by yourself?

BEA/SOFIA
WOWWWWWW

SOFIA
You can cook?

EVERYONE
WOWWWWWW

SOFIA
Ahh I miss her. Maybe I should text her

LAUREN
Please don't.

SOFIA
There was that one girl I did like
but then she was all 'my brother
also has Down Syndrome'

A collective groan covers the court

SOFIA (CONT'D)
And it's like okay so you're
OBSESSED with disabled people then?

LAUREN
Whatever happened to shame?

DANI
We gotta bring it back

LAUREN
You can text Owen Wilson before you
text her.

SOFIA
It's okay - I'm not going to text
anybody. I haven't really felt...
(MORE)

SOFIA (CONT'D)

anything in a long time and maybe I
won't feel anything again and I'm
okay with that.

Silences falls through the group as they all exchange
concerned looks.

LAUREN

Wow - the drama.

INT. SOFIA'S APARTMENT

SOFIA opens the door and drops her bags from the day onto the
floor with an audible sigh of relief. She takes her shoes
off, and switches her jeans to sweatpants. Water boils on the
stove. We see a hand reach from below and pour a box of mac n
cheese into the pot. SOFIA climbs up on the counter to reach
for a bowl and seamlessly catches herself back in her
wheelchair. She makes her way to the living room while
skillfully balancing her mac n cheese, sides, drink, and her
phone. She holds a fork in her mouth.

SOFIA gleefully sinks into the couch and digs into the mac n
cheese. Her phone buzzes mid doom scroll.

DANI (TEXT)

Did you see this??

SOFIA is blasted by the light of her phone as she stares at a
picture of her ex girlfriend getting engaged. Panic crosses
her face. She throws her phone across the room.

A beat. SOFIA slithers off the couch onto the floor to
retrieve her phone out from under the tv.

INT. SOFIA'S APARTMENT BATHROOM - NIGHT

SOFIA brushes her teeth ferociously, staring at herself in
the mirror. She picks up her phone and looks at the photo
again, then puts it back down. She spits out her toothpaste
and picks her phone back up. A masochistic ritual.

INT. SOFIA'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

SOFIA lays awake, unable to sleep. She picks up her phone,
and opens her messages. She scrolls through many unopened
texts from girls she met on dating apps. Finally, she opens a
message from NAT.

NAT (TEXT)
Hey! It's Nat from Hinge.

So what's a girl got to do to get a date around here?

She thinks for a second, then types out a reply and presses send. After a beat, she throws her phone across the room.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

SOFIA makes her way through a packed bar. Butts and cracks fly in her face due to the natural height discrepancy created by her wheelchair.

She spots NAT (mid 30s, masculine-presenting lesbian) at a high top table in the back of the bar.

NAT
I'm so sorry all the other tables were taken but I can help you up. I've been doing my squat lifts.

She demonstrates the form

SOFIA
No that's okay. I think I can do--

Nat scoops her up mid sentence in a fireman style hold and places her on the seat. Sofia blinks, disoriented, and comes to in the middle of the date.

NAT
My parents live in Illinois, but I've been here for four years now. So I just tell people I'm from here. I was out in Silverlake, but moved to Culver because my old apartment was on the second floor and my ex was struggling to get up the stairs.

Sofia's eye narrow knowing what's coming next.

NAT (CONT'D)
She was also in a wheelchair.

SOFIA
Oh! Awesome!

She takes a sip of her beer and exits the shot dramatically

INT. BAR - LATER

Sofia sits at the bar alone, nursing another drink. JESS (20s, sexy, tattooed) sits down next to her. She smiles at Sofia, who smiles back nervously still recovering from the disastrous date.

CUT TO:

INT. BAR - LATER LATER

Sofia and Jess sit closer together, noticeably buzzed.

SOFIA
Listen- I just think it's kinda fucked up that you get a Make-a-Wish for cancer but not for a car crash. I too almost died.

Jess puts her hand on Sophia's leg, but she doesn't notice until she finally looks down.

JESS
Okay, I think it's mostly because you're 25 and not 5, but you're right. It's a travesty that you never got to go on stage with Hannah Montana.

SOFIA
You get it.

They smile at each other a little too long.

INT. JESS'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Sofia and Jess make out passionately on Jess' bed. Between kisses, Sofia tries to make conversation to try to mask her nervousness

SOFIA
I like your apartment. It's nice. I bet the rent isn't so nice.

They kiss more as she her eyes looks around.

SOFIA (CONT'D)
Is this a tempur pedic?

JESS
No...it's from Ikea. An Asvang.

Jess pins Sofia down on the bed making her even more nervous. She attempts to challenge her but quickly realizes the limitations of her body

SOFIA
You don't actually have to do that.
It's not like I could really go
anywhere anyway

Jess laughs and continues to kiss her. She takes off her top, then Sofia's with less ease. They keep kissing.

Jess notices Sofia's body isn't reacting to her advances.

JESS
Are you okay?

SOFIA
Yeah

JESS
Are you sure?

SOFIA
Yeah. Keep going.

They both look down to see JESS already has her hands down Sofia's pants.

SOFIA
Oh.

They continue to kiss. JESS pulls away so she can look at SOFIA.

JESS
Do you want me to stop?

SOFIA
No it's okay.

A beat

It's just I can't feel anything
below here.

SOFIA points to where most of her sensation stops. JESS traces a line, sensually, right above it. SOFIA smiles. JESS kisses above the line.

Jess looks up from kissing her chest.

JESS
Can you feel this?

SOFIA
Yeah

Jess traces her neck

JESS
Can you feel THIS?

SOFIA
Yeah

Jess caresses her face.

JESS
Can you feel this?

She kisses her and smiles as the tension begins to lift.

SOFIA
Yeah. Can you feel this?

Sofia shoves her playfully but once again unaware of her own limitations she pulls them both off the bed and onto the ground

JESS
Okay yeah I felt that.

She continue to kiss off camera

SOFIA
Yeah okay good.

END

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