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## Who'd Fuck an Ableist?

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I suppose that my first experience of disability discrimination in relation to my sexuality began when I was seventeen. I formed a close friendship with one of the boys in my class. We started the Hamilton Youth Citizens' Band Radio Club and we subsequently got all our friends into it. I was Secretary and Denis Marnell was President. We were best friends, class mates, colleagues and young activists (even if none of us knew it). But I made the mistake of falling in love with Denis.

It was quite pathetic, the way I told him. I said that one of the girls in our class liked him and that he had to guess which one. Would you believe that he wrote down a list of all the girls in our class? He made it in two columns, one for the girls he liked and one for those he'd never go out with in a fit. When he scrawled my name in the latter column he muttered, "You know what I mean." When the list was exhausted and my name stood alone, I started to cry.

Nothing was the same after that. Denis was so repulsed at the thought of having sex with a cripple that he started up a hate campaign against me. Year 11 was hell. They called me 'triple tit' because I was so fat. One, two tits and the spare tyre around my middle made a third. 'K-9' was another favourite. You know the robotic dog. Ha. Ha. I ran out of one computer class in tears. I marched straight home and told Mum that I refused to go back to school until something was done about the taunting. A couple of days off and I went back to face a group of coldly polite, yet none-the-less hostile, peers. The Year Level Coordinator had called an assembly and told them to lay off.

But school doesn't go all day, or on weekends for that matter. Most of us owned CB Radios and the airwaves turned blue with gossip. My stepfather had drugs in his car. My mother was supposedly having sex with her cats and with a twenty-one year-old member of our group (presumably not at the same time) and me? Well, I didn't get my period. Or so I was told over the air at a time when everyone was bound to be on channel. How could I? I used a wheelchair. The closest thing I got to a toot or a wolf whistle was when the son of some redneck yobbo would lean out the window of his Ute and yell, "Show us your wheels." Denis tore our fledgling club apart from the inside and tormented me for the good part of two years. He was the first able-bodied guy that I ever fell in

love with.

Michael Prest wasn't as overtly ableist, but he didn't spare me the cruelty. I met him on the front steps at school where all the loners hung out. All the rejects. The crippled. The slower kids. The ugly and unwanted. I suppose we met in the lost and found. We formed a very close friendship. He got me pissed for the first time and turned me on to Port. We had a competition going. We were supposed to finish a two-litre flagon in one night without spilling any, sharing it around or throwing up. We never made it as a team, but I've done it since.

We kissed and we petted. And I knew that he loved me as much as I loved him. But he never asked me out. There was just one little problem. His parents and grandparents were incredibly ableist. They eventually sent him to stay with his mother in Geelong to separate us for the summer. Time apart and all that. One minute he was my best mate, then suddenly he wouldn't speak to me. He refused my phone calls and he wouldn't tell me what I'd done wrong. But I knew the truth deep down. I had a disability.

Michael should have broken my virginity. Instead, he stood by while I went on the Pill and dated his best mate to make him jealous. This move, by the way, caused Mum to declare war on the teenage male population of Hamilton. No mother wants to lose her little girl, but I was nineteen and ashamed to be the second oldest virgin in town. No one thought I could have sex. And what kind of desperate would actually want to fuck me? So during the lonely summer of 1984/5, I picked up some guy called Jeff at the local pub. He bought me a drink and I invited him back to my place. Mum watched us like a hawk so, when I met him again two weeks later, we went to his flat for the night. I rang Mum and told her we were going there to listen to music. He didn't even have a stereo.

We fucked. It hurt like hell and it was far from romantic. He pushed my flat wheelchair home in the morning and dumped me at the back door. Well, I was every slut, whore and trollop in the book, according to Mum. She wrote herself off with Bundaberg Rum that weekend, and ended up in hospital for four days with alcoholic poisoning. I nearly lost her, going by the fact that they had to use the paddles to restart her heart. The last thing she said before she passed out was, "You'll be able to do whatever you like when I'm dead."

When she had calmed down, she later said, "What's done is done." But she's never quite forgiven me for breaking my virginity. My half-sister, Rosa Shelton, asked me how I had sex in the wheelchair. I didn't. He might not have owned a stereo, but he did have a bed. Anyway, Michael had just come back on the scene. I spent a night at his place. We fumbled, kissed and petted, but we fell short of fucking. My new status as a woman overwhelmed him, I think. I later sat in the lounge-room at my sister's place and cried while she took him for the first time. It should have been me.

We remained friends. Michael spoke only once of that summer holiday. I was living away from home for the first time

and he spent the weekend at my place. We'd sunk three bottles of Blackberry Nip between us, and we started fighting. He got really cruel and really bitchy. At one point, he unplugged my wheelchair and refused to let me move while he abused me. His ableism seemed to be at the guts of it. And the ableism of his family. I took off in the middle of the night. I got from Ormond to McKinnon, before an off-duty cop pulled me over. He walked me home and hung around for my second bolt, less than five minutes later. I was twenty.

Michael drove the bride's maids' car at my wedding. But something died that weekend. I wrote this poem a day or two later:

To Michael

Michael, we've been friends a long time  
So why am I still alien to you?  
When will you accept me completely?  
Is my world so different from yours?  
Yes, perhaps it is.  
I have enough hassles just living day to day.  
Getting around.  
I don't need social prejudice  
Any more than I need steps.  
It just makes life harder.  
It could happen to you too, you know.  
Or your children.  
So why do you hold it against me?  
I can feel and love and hurt,  
Just like you.  
I don't need to tell you that.  
You know it already.  
Most of the time you act like  
I'm one of the gang.  
But sometimes you remind me  
That I'm not, really.  
And that hurts.  
The other night, you made me feel  
So alone.  
Contagious.  
Dirty.  
Like a creature from outer space.  
And I'm writing this because  
It still hurts.  
Maybe I should send it to you.  
Make you hurt too.  
But I won't.  
I don't like to rub the salt in.  
I didn't think you did, either.  
So I'll try to pretend that  
We haven't changed.  
We've argued before, after all.  
And always made up.  
But maybe you'll notice that

I'm not as crazy as before.  
That I don't dance as much  
Or want to go on boat rides.  
Or ask you to pick things up.  
And I hope you remember Saturday night  
And realise why.

Ms Katie F. Ball  
March 4th, 1986.

Our friendship seemed to go on. Then Jamie walked out on me. July 6th, 1987. I rang Michael for some moral support. At first he said he couldn't come over, and then he rang back. We got pissed, toasted the good old days. I lent him a couple of cassettes. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. And I never saw him again. My theory is that while I was married, he was safe. But once I became available, his feelings for me kicked in. And so did his ableist attitude.

He stopped ringing me. He wouldn't return my phone calls. I knew and finally, I gave up. Something creepy happened in December that year. Our house was burgled, and my first instinct was to yell out, "Michael, stop fucking around and get out of the shadows."

I married Jamie for all the wrong reasons. Though, I did love him. He was my ticket to staying on the outside, should anything happen to mum. A bad marriage was better than the prospect of institutionalisation. And I wanted to finally prove that I could attract a man. Any man. We married in the Hamilton Botanical Gardens. Denis Marnell and a group of his followers stood on the hill above us and chanted, "Say no!" while Jamie was taking his vows. Some of the old folk refused to believe that we were actually married. And when Jamie left me, my best friend, Anne asked if he had left because he couldn't cope with my disability. At least she had the guts to ask me straight out. The whole town were talking about it behind my back.

For the record, our break-up had nothing to do with my disability. Jamie and I were incompatible. We were doomed to fail from the start. Simple as that, and just as ordinary. It took me three years to get over him. I stayed virtually celibate. Loneliness and frustration gave rise to much poetry. I had a four-year pen affair with a guy in England. He was supposed to come to Australia and marry me, but nothing ever came of it. I think now that I needed to live in a kind of 'virtual' reality for a while, on a sexual level anyway.

I finally decided to do something about my non-existent sex life. That's when I started on the 1500 numbers. I recorded messages, spoke to guys and even met a few. Then I found Intro Line. And with it, I found an outlet for my latent sexual promiscuity. So began the coming out of Katie Ball.

It hasn't been a bed of roses. I can tell you that now. But I found Pete on Intro Line. I suppose I'll always have a soft spot for the dating service that we now affectionately call 'Intro Fuckers'. And boy, are there some fuckwits out

there. Talk about close encounters of the ableist kind. I've been told by men that my vagina is ugly, that they can't fuck me because of my disability, that fucking me must be like fucking a rag doll, that they'd love to have a relationship with me, but that they can't handle the sight of my body. Most guys say they'll come over, but they never show up. I've had guys come over, stand around in obvious discomfort, and then invent some lame excuse to go back to their car, never to be seen again. Two of them turned up one night. They rang me from their car, got me to come out on the street, and then shot through as soon as they saw me. I had one guy who chickened out of coming over, so he sent a mate around in his place. At least the mate had choof.

The most danger I've ever been in was the night that one guy shot through with our stereo and a few other electrical items. I've never really been scared for my physical safety. I just figure you can't rape the willing. But the emotional assault stays with me. The look of revulsion on a man's face at the sight of my naked flesh does absolute wonders for my self-esteem.

And then there are the 'freak show' types. Their motives range from mild curiosity to fully blown fetishism. It's great to hear, at the peak of an orgasm, "I've never fucked a woman in a wheelchair before."

Why do I continue to put myself through this kind of abuse and humiliation? I often ask myself that very same question. But I've always been fascinated by human sexuality. And I'm a disability rights activist, whether I like it or not. So why not campaign on sexuality and disability discrimination. Combine the two. I've had a gutful of being treated like some ugly lump of rotting flesh. And the worst thing is, I'm not alone. I have long argued that people with disabilities should focus our attention on sexual emancipation. Physical barriers are born of attitudinal ones. When the community can finally accept us as whole human beings, we will be granted automatic access to such things as public transport, education and open employment.

In 1990, I wrote a library-based dissertation on sexuality and the disability rights movement. I have both spoken at, and been a participant in, many forums, workshops and conferences on the issue. I've done much reading on the subject, and written many articles. I've even worked as a phone sex operator. But Ted and Di Morgan were the straw that broke the camel's back. When Club Jacaranda gave me the perfect opportunity to run a court action, I took it. And I've gone public in a big way.

I fully intend to put the sexuality of people with disabilities on the map, both within the sex industry itself, and throughout the community at large. The Morgan's discriminatory actions reflect society's perception that people with disabilities are sexless. This is simply not true. Sex is for everyone. I am taking a political stand for the rights of all people with disabilities. We have the right to access goods and services within the sex industry under the

same terms and conditions as any other person. We are not freaks and we are not perpetual children. We have exactly the same feelings, urges, needs and desires as anyone else. Our bodies are just as erotic as the stereotypical super models portrayed in *Playboy* magazine. And it's about time that society was forced to acknowledge the truth of this reality.

In 1988, Martin and Helen Stewart made love on Bondi Beach as a honeymoon protest against society's ableist attitudes towards our sexuality. Thirteen years later, what's changed? When community education fails to bring results, then it's high time that we use the legal system to our full advantage. Sue the bastards for every cent they've got. In this way, we will at least gain rightful access to goods and services within the sex industry. We can't legislate in the realm of human relationships, but forced to recognise our sexuality from a legal perspective, the community will eventually have to see us as human beings. And, six weeks pregnant with our second child, I want to be there when it does.