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Dear Diary: The Story of a Disabled Asian Woman

Nafisa Khanbhai

I am a thirty-year-old Asian woman and I work in my family's furniture business in Mombasa, Kenya. I have a disability caused by a spinal injury, but this is perhaps the easier part of my problem. Being a Kenyan Asian complicates my situation in ways that those outside my community might not easily realize; because Asians tend to relate more within than outside their social circles, a disabled person faces profound isolation within the group. Disabled Asian Female — how neatly the interplay between these three words captures the total weight of both the complexity and immensity of who and what I am. It has been a rough journey, on all three counts. And even though mine has been an insular world, it was still a sad discovery to realize that the prejudices that I have encountered amongst the Asian community in Mombasa exist amongst other Kenyan communities as well. As I contemplate the smooth finish of all the freshly scented furniture that has become a permanent feature of my life, I realize that daily I etch the diary of my life into the grain of the beautiful wood in a manner that reminds me of the huge distance between law school and this furniture shop. But why am I jumping ahead of the narrative?

I started school at the age of three years but my physical activity was severely limited due to the nature of my disability. The word pity and its attendant practices — especially the puzzle-pain-horror look on people's faces as they stare at me — has been my life's companion since those early days. Having to wear diapers up to the age of nine made me the object of fun for my classmates. Disasters never come singly, for at this age I developed kidney failure and I had to undergo a major operation. Call it luck or conspiracy but some odds are difficult to explain; whereas the operation took care of the nappy problem, I now found myself having to contend with incontinence and wearing a urine bag strapped to the right hand side of my stomach! To make matters worse, it was visible. From my earliest days, with the charms of femininity somewhat either lost or in my young mind forever unattainable, I found myself giving up the hope of ever becoming a mother; what man would ever accept me in my condition?

I had always dreamt of becoming a lawyer but after sitting for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education in 1989 I had to give up hope for any further education due to my health condition. My dreams of becoming a lawyer crashed as well, one more item on the pile of losses and dashed hopes that my life had now become. But I still wanted to see whether there was some life out there beyond the narrow limits of my local community. Somehow I always hoped, still, that there was a means to overcoming this limitedness.

I traveled to the UK four times to visit relatives, and what amazed me most was the availability of infrastructure and both social and institutional support for persons with various types of disabilities. Persons with disabilities could pursue formal education in spite of their conditions. This fact only served to remind me of my lost opportunity to pursue a legal career. I also found a generally supportive attitude amongst the citizens towards persons with special needs. These positive experiences set the stage for the rude shock I got once at the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport. I had just come in from London and needed to catch a connecting flight to Mombasa. Since I have calipers on both feet and I walk with the aid of two elbow crutches, I asked for a wheelchair. The lady I talked to was very rude and I was made to wait for a very long time. When the wheelchair was finally brought, the lady made it clear that she was expecting a tip! The lady at the check-in counter of the local airline whose flight I was boarding was equally rude; perhaps they thought that disabled persons could only understand the language of rudeness?

I must say that the romance side of my life has been spectacular, in its spicy letdowns that is. There is nothing I could have done to alter the fact of my disability, but perhaps I have had the personal problem of my being born into a closed Asian culture. I had been brought up to never believe or to ever expect that I could find a man to love me.

Dear reader, you must then believe me when I say that it was an out-of-this-world experience when, about ten years ago, this *wonderful* man came into my life. He came with hopes! He gave me dreams! He gave me feelings that I thought I never had! I realized that I was a still a lovable woman. Elation best describes what I felt for the eight years that I had a relationship with him. He was such an *excellent* person to me and we had such a *healthy* relationship that I never at any one point doubted that I was the center of his universe. His disguise was *perfect*. And then one day his friend (amazing how my man now finds me unworthy of attention) calls with the news that my wonderful-excellent-perfect man not only had another woman in his life but that they were also planning to marry. One more dream tossed onto the trash heap. Thus rejected, I realized that I had no real choice(s) to make; they had all been made for me the moment I turned out disabled. I realized that the mindset problem is not really personal but universal in my cultural set up. I moved on to contemplate my life, a life surrounded by pieces of furniture that have no feelings.

However, I consider myself very fortunate to have an immediate family that is very positive and supportive towards me. They have also faced challenges having a disabled member in the family, but they have never made me feel different or treated me differently.

Having personally experienced a lot of discrimination from friends in the Asian community and at times from the extended family, I decided that it was time to prove my capabilities and create awareness about disability in my community. I went to work at the Rotaract Club for eight years. Rotaract is an organization that assists the needy in society and that includes the physically and mentally challenged. However, I noticed that

the organization did not create awareness about those with special needs in society. Instead the organization runs on a simplistic, easy charity model — food, clothes, sometimes cash — a token approach that salves the giver's conscience. Even though this approach might serve immediate needs, I knew that we needed to and could do more. And then that old problem cropped up again; persons with disabilities have no voice in my community, and being the only such member in the club made it difficult to express my views, and when I did they were not appreciated. I did not blame the other members since I understood that either they are different or I am, and naturally our views would also be different.

These encounters emboldened me in my yearning to create awareness for disability issues generally in Mombasa. As soon as I retired from the Rotaract Club I produced a play, *Dear Diary*, in the year 2006. The play is based on my real life experiences as well as those of many more who endure life like me. Even as I emphasize the necessity of raising awareness concerning disability in Kenya generally, I must insist that the Asian community in particular needs to look deeply into its beliefs towards persons with disabilities and establish structures of social support for them. Whereas for my people business acumen is valuable, someone must teach them that an individual's inner self is even dearer. That is the challenge that all persons with disabilities, their personal circumstances notwithstanding, and their friends must take up. That is the lesson I would etch on the surfaces of this wood staring at me, only that it would ruin the polished exterior, wouldn't it? But I am tempted to go against the grain.

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