

Day in the Life of Liz

Liz Crow

From Mustn't Grumble

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Dear Ju,

Well this is a sure fire way of getting me to do something constructive with my time. I'm stranded somewhere between the first and third floors of the polytechnic. Yes, you've guessed it, after so many months of threatening to strike, the lift has finally caught up with me. It's okay at the moment - being confined in a four feet by four feet metal coffin hasn't got to me so far - and hopefully this will at last spur them on to fork out on repairs. A member of the library staff got stuck last term (for over three hours). The powers-that-be got a bit touchy about that; the idea of a *disabled* student being stuck should really put the wind up 'em! The library staff are being very sweet. They keep talking to me and clearly have visions of panic setting in. Meantime, PTL for personal computers...

That was the library staff again: 'Are you still all right? Would you like us to stay and talk to you?' 'No, no, I'm fine.' (It's knackered bellowing up and bellowing down a lift shaft.) *'I have my computer so I'm okay.'* *'You have your computer in there? - She has her computer in there!' relayed to the rest of the staff.*

My whole life seems to revolve around access (lack of) at the moment. I tried to go to the Museum of the Moving Image last week - *their* lift is out of order, but anyway it seems their 'accessible route' means going through the entire exhibition backwards in order to reach the starting point, so I think I'll boycott that one. I found a council health club with swimming, massage and jacuzzi, and went to check out the facilities yesterday, but *they* couldn't work out how to operate the stairlift, so I went back home. It all reminds me of my first day at the poly when the very first thing I managed to do was get firmly wedged between the 'accessible' loo and the 'accessible' loo door, so much and had to press the panic button to be released.

Twenty minutes later and they've rung for the outside lift engineers. I must remember to request the installation of a wall-table and a potty.

I'm bad, having taken on too much, but too tempting not to, so hope no regrets two weeks from now! There's the biggest UK disability rally yet - three major cities and upwards of 15,000 people expected (not bad going, considering lack of accessible transport, money,

personal assistance, and so on). Today I volunteered to get together the banners and placards for the London contingent, so now I have to organise a group, materials and design, and make it all happen. Two-hundred-plus placards, all for around fifty quid. Regrets? Hah!

The whole demo thing is beginning to get underway at last in this country, though we need to make the whole thing more cohesive/unified/impact-ing. Our techniques are relatively unsophisticated compared to other civil rights groups because it's still all so new. But last week there was another bus blockade of Oxford Street ('At last Disabled People Are Catching Buses.') which resulted in 'seventeen people being arrested, eleven in wheelchairs', i.e. publicity at last.

The publicity was really useful to us: when 'our' lawyers requested the cases be moved to an accessible court this was refused, so there were (local) TV pictures of people being carried into the court. The courts looked proper silly and the media comments were well favourable to us.

I have to decide whether to steward on this rally, or whether to go and demonstrate; in which case it could be law abidance versus arrest. Not sure how I feel about getting arrested. But what with this and the poll tax I'm sure to find out some day soon.

The lift engineers haven't turned up, so they're now calling the fire brigade!

On the subject of arrests, I heard a bulletin from parliament the other week. Apparently the Home Office is now implementing plans for wheelchair-accessible facilities in Britain's jails. (Out of the local authority prison, into the Home Office one.) Nice to know they have their priorities straight. Personally I think this is directly related to the first big national disability demo two years ago which brought half of South London to a halt. Rumour has it that it really put the shits up them to see disabled people out there (even shouting and waving placards!). The response is certainly logical and demonstrates an unassailable commitment to equal opportunities.

Oh shit, I can hear sirens!!

Hiss of brakes and grind to halt.

Clunk, clunk

(Tell you what, sod the lecture after this. I'm heading straight for the bar. As soon as I've been to the loo.)

Ever ripe for a bit of masochism, I've just been to the bi-annual NAIDEX (national aids for 'The Disabled' exhibition). As ever, it was all able-bodied - able-bodied designed, able-bodied run; scores of able-bodied, white, middle-class, suited men. And full of so many ugly images. There are able-bodied salesmen having a laugh, racing up and down on wheelchairs and on scooters - till it suits them better to walk, when up they leap.

Body-beautiful females ('Miss Everest & Jennings'), swimsuit-clad, model bath hoists to hords of long-tongued, lusting salesmen. And the aids and equipment are priced so high they're out of the range of all but the rich and famous. I need eighteen grand - not 'would like', but 'need'. Now I wonder, which shall I apply to: Telethon or the DSS Social Fund?

...Clunk...

The manufacturers, of course, have us over a barrel. As long as the government refuses to resource essential needs, how can we not spend our last pennies on their goods? My only comfort was the exhibition's poor security. So easy 'twould be to trial a demo-wheelchair in the direction of the nearest exit sign and never return. I have no moral hesitation, knowing the way they line their pockets from our predicament. My only fear would be getting caught. But then, imagine the headlines: 'Cripple caught stealing mobility'. (Can you steal a right?) And prosecuting a poor defenseless cripple would be so bad for business.

Lowering of chains? (Disturbing the peace and quiet and the clickety click click of my letter writing.)

Doors opened. Man lowering? (God this is embarrassing!)

Silence.

(Does this sort of thing happen to other people?)

Money (or the lack of it) seems to be dominating my life at the moment. I'm just putting together my final final appeal for attendance allowance. If you can prove that you need full-time 'attendance and supervision' you might (might) win enough cash to pay for approximately six hours' assistance per week. I've been turned down (lies, damned lies from the DSS medical examiners) at two stages so far and have received a provisional 'no' at the final hurdle, despite my chances actually having looked good for a time. So much for counting chickens: I'd been counting pennies and pounds (over two-and-a-half years' back-pay). I'd visualised presents all round for my glee club, with a holiday in the sun for me to recuperate from the strain of it all. And the anticipation of relieving my financial straits felt fine. Pfffh!

So now is my last ditch attempt to plead, beg, prostrate myself, etc. I've spent a demoralising month keeping a diary of every single thing I can't do (plus some more), written reams (well nine pages) giving a blow-by-blow account of a day in the life of... (try wearing them down). I'm submitting letters from various Professionals as evidence, including a letter from the housing co-op's newly-invented 'tenant support officer' (a mate of mine, bless 'im!). And Mum has just written a supremely brilliant and heart-rending account of her daughter's disintegration - when she read it to me over the phone I near-wept to hear of this poor woman's plight (mine I mean, tho' perhaps it should be hers too). So if that doesn't do the trick, I give up. All this angst for twenty-four quid a week!

Many more clunks, forcing of doors, shoutings up and shoutings down, and

...And four burly and rather good-looking firemen - waterproof trousers, leather gloves, shiny yellow helmets and all - got me out. 'See you again' one of them said (tho' I don't think *that's* what he meant). I hope not!

But it didn't end there. Because I spent the rest of the evening being hauled from floor to floor by human-lifts (never quite reaching the floor with the bar on it), and somewhere between the third floor and my car I lost my keys, but didn't discover till I got home, by which time the college switchboard had closed down, and the housing co-op's spare keys could not be found but my neighbour went and collected my other spare keys from my home help, whilst my other neighbour plied me with wine, but when I put them in my brand-new 'accessible' lock, I found the lock had jammed and I had no way into my flat, so my other, other neighbour went to hunt out a screwdriver...

But in the meantime the lock clicked into place, and I was *home!*

I am *home!!* (Why did Mum laugh?!)

So after that fairly standard day in the life of Liz, I shall leave you. See you again ever so soon.

Lots of love,
Liz