

A DEFENSE OF DEPENDENCE

A WOMAN SEES ME IN THE LIBRARY. SHE HESITATES AND THEN APPROACHES. I've seen this play before. I am a woman in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the chest down though she may assume from the waist down because I use a manual chair. I am alone in public. Not an able-bodied protector in sight.

"Are you okay? Do you need help?"

"No, thank you." I gesture to the numbered lights above me. "Just waiting for the elevator."

"I couldn't forgive myself if I didn't at least ask." Her palms are raised in surrender.

INJURED IN A CAR ACCIDENT AT THE AGE OF SIX, I'VE HAD THIS CONVERSATION HUNDREDS OF TIMES. ONE OF the more exhausting things about being disabled is how able-bodied people perceive my disability—and, as an extension, me.

"AT LEAST THEY'RE TRYING TO BE NICE," MY FRIEND COUNTERS LATER, IN THE CAR. BUT HE DOES NOT CARRY these individual microaggressions with him as a weight that would bring me to my knees if I were not already sitting down.

AS A CHILD, I WAS TOLD BY FAMILY, TEACHERS, MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS—THE ADULTS WHO SHAPED ME that I must be independent, and I understood that dependence was capital "B" bad. The world is hardly optimized for my disabled body, though. So, I learned to ask for help when I need it. Friends and strangers oblige, but struggle to let me return the favor. I watch them push through pain and injuries, insisting that medicine and doctors are for other people. People like me? Small things, big things. They can do it on their own. They are fine. They are independent. They don't want to be a bother. Am I a bother? Such aversion to accepting the kind of help they are willing to provide unsettles me. I peel back this insistence for independence and find ableism a likely culprit. They don't want to be seen the way I think they might see me.

"NO, I DON'T WANT HELP," A FRIEND TOLD ME ONCE WHEN I OFFERED HER ASSISTANCE. "I WANT TO BE THE hero." Who does that make me in her story? I wondered. And why is it okay for me to play that role, but not her?

IF YOU HAVE PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS ABOUT THE KIND OF PEOPLE WHO NEED HELP AND THOSE WHO DON'T, you may be bumping up against some of your own biases. If you reject support as though it is a bad thing to need help, you are playing an unwitting role in reinforcing an ableist worldview. When I was younger, such rejection implied to me that my needs were shameful. Accepting the care of others chipped away at the fullness of my personhood. Reflected in the eyes of those who would not cede an inch of their independence, I understood myself to be a burden. Now, the rampant ableism around and within me is visible. On good days, I push through the familiar shame and settle into the gentle beauty of accepting the help of another person simply because I am in need and they are there for me. Intimacy and trust take root in the shade of such vulnerability.

IF YOU HAVE DIFFICULTY ASKING FOR OR ACCEPTING HELP AND YOU TEND TO THINK THAT THIS IS AN ADMIRABLE quality, that you are merely independent and strong, please open yourself to the idea that you are playing host to deep-seated ableism, disguised as something noble, perhaps foundational to propping up the person you believe yourself to be. Discovering and dismantling ableism in yourself is slow work—I should know. I'm still figuring things out.

ON OUR WAY HOME FROM THE LIBRARY, MY FRIEND AND I TALK MORE ABOUT THESE THINGS. HE IS NOT DISABLED, but he listens to what I have to say. As he lifts me back into my chair from his car, I do not feel like a burden. I lean into the steadiness of his arm as it braces me, and anticipate the thrill of being raised up, briefly weightless.



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