

Christmas resolutions

I never made New Year's resolutions; I made Christmas resolutions. I didn't have many friends to talk to about my intentions, so I tended to decide on my own and sometimes upset Mum and Dad when they realised what I was going to do. Each Christmas I've tried to do something new.

It started when I was very young. Since my birth I'd seen all the consultants going. Psychiatric, bone, lung, joint – I had seen them all. Consultants and surgeons did their best on countless visits to hospital, but I was born with a mess of a body and I guess it took my young brain a lot of time and energy to come to terms with it. Maybe that's why I didn't talk for ages. Mum tells me I would grunt and point with the remaining fingers on my right hand when I wanted something.

Anyway, on my fifth Christmas I decided to speak. Being me, I wanted to get it right first time. I practiced in my bed, under the blankets, so no one could hear. I made my first Christmas resolution – I was going to speak at Christmas dinner.

It's become a family story to be told and re-told. Everyone was there. Auntie Marge and Uncle Harold, with their two kids. Auntie Eileen was down from Scotland. She wasn't married and spouted staunch feminism even at dinner time. Granny and Grandpa were still alive in those days, so it was elbow to elbow round the table.

"Pass the carrots someone."

"Do you want some stuffing, Harold?"

"Mum, Anna stole my potato. A crispy one."

"Has the baby got enough food?" asked Harold – referring to the physically disabled five-year-old who just wanted to fit in.

And that was my moment. As friendly family faces turned down the table to view the 'baby' who would need to be fed by Mum there was a moment's relative hush. They may have been considering my multiple disabilities rather than the growing number of abilities. I took a deep breath.

"Can I want more turkey... Plesh."

The hush became silence. Eyes were definitely on me now. I kicked myself for getting 'please' wrong.

"What did you say darling?" Mum whispered.

"Can I want more turkey... "I paused, getting my tongue ready for the word this time. "Please."

A round of applause. My mother crying, "John, John get her another slice of turkey. A nice thick slice. My God, she deserves it. Happy Christmas everyone."

From then on Christmas became a time of resolutions that elicited parental joy – I would try an electric wheelchair, I would go to normal school – and resolutions that didn't – I would learn to spit, I would use a new word each week including some swears.

But, generally, they turned out quite well. We had all coped with sixteen years of physio, special diets, scheduled operations, and emergency hospital visits. It was only as I neared

adulthood I realised the stress my condition, or multiple conditions, must have put on my parent's marriage. But we had come to my sixteenth Christmas eve and, once again, I made my resolution.

I was in my room carefully and clumsily trying to make myself look nice.

"I'm going out to the pub tonight, Mum." I called through to the living room. My speech by this time was good, though not perfect, but the voicing of my latest resolution made it rise in tone.

There was a pause. I felt so sure my announcement would get a negative response that, when I heard "What time will you be home?" I almost responded with, "Every other kid my age goes to the pub on Christmas eve so why shouldn't the disabled girl?"

I swallowed my excess saliva and my stroppy response, and replied, "Late, don't wait up."

After about five minutes Dad came in, dispatched by the Mother I thought to myself.

"You look nice," he said.

"Thank you," I smiled, despite the fact I knew he had a hidden agenda. "Could you do up my dress. I can't reach."

"Certainly, fair maid."

I leaned forward in the chair and finished putting scrunchies in my hair. It is amazing how dexterous you can be with six fingers shared between two hands.

"Which pub are you going to?"

"I dunno, probably a few," I muttered.

"You are only sixteen."

"Able kids go to the pub." It was a sharp and unnecessary dig. They had been heroes in the way they treated me like any other child, but a girl is allowed to be stroppy once in a while.

"And every other good parent is questioning their daughter about safety and responsibility," my father retorted.

"Just the Lamb and Flag," I said quietly.

"Do you want a lift?"

I looked up at him. Yes, my dad was a hero.

"Thank you, I'll ring Mary and say I'll meet her there."

Mary was my one close friend. You only need one. We'd met in the second week of secondary school, once the novelty of being seen with the kid in the wheelchair had worn off. I'd seen her standing on her own at the side of the playground, always watching, never joining in. We were both different to the other kids, but together our differences didn't seem to matter so much. She was the one who had suggested going to the pub on Christmas Eve, so maybe my resolution did have its roots in a friend.

Dad got me out of the car, I avoided his attempt at a kiss and suggested he left immediately. I could see Mary on the other side of the road, so I rolled down to the crossing and she came to meet me.

The pub was quite crowded, mainly with kids of our age. One of the few benefits of being a wheelchair user is you don't have a problem finding somewhere to sit. Mary bought the drinks and we sat with a group of kids from school.

People arrived and people left. There was a suggestion to go to another pub, but I was unsure, so I said I'd stay where I was. I took my life in my own hands and wheeled myself across to the bar to buy Mary and some of the other kids drinks.

It's all very well having 'disabled friendly' flooring that can be navigated in a wheelchair but try ordering a drink from a bar that's above your head. Lots of people were friendly and helpful, moving aside to let me get to the front and make my order. I sat waiting but the girl behind the counter kept serving people who'd arrived after me.

"Yeah, what can I get you mate?"

"Actually, this girl was here before me."

I looked up. He was scruffy but pleasant looking, dark hair, clean shirt and the obligatory facial hair.

"So, what are you after?" he asked.

He didn't stoop down, or enunciate his words, or speak slowly as if I was stupid. His smile seemed genuine, not forced or as brittle as a wine glass.

"I'd like two orange juices and two cokes." I said, gazing up at him.

"What did she say?" came the raucous female voice behind the bar.

The boy didn't answer for a moment. He just turned to look across the bar and said slowly, pronouncing his words quite carefully, "Why don't you ask her for yourself?"

The girl behind the bar looked at him for a moment, then looked at me – I mean really looked at me. She did a little smile.

"I'm sorry, busy bar and tired feet. What would you like to drink?"

"That's alright," I was about to add, 'we wheelchair users get used to it'. But it was Christmas and mistakes happen when you're rushed and tired. "I'll have two orange juices, two cokes and..."

Suddenly my chest felt tight and I gulped with the nerves of a lifetime first – a new resolution to be lived up to. I looked up at the boy, my knight in scruffy armour and asked, "Whatever you are having. May I buy you a drink?"