

“You Shouldn’t Be Parked There”



It was cold, wet and miserable outside. It all felt too hard, but I decided to drag myself away from our fireplace and venture out to catch-up with a friend.

As we sat in a café immersed in conversation, a lady barged in. Her car was blocked in and she asked whether anyone owned the blue car.

Trying to be helpful I said, “no, mine’s the white one next to it, in the disabled park.” Instead of thanking me, her spontaneous and aggressive response was, “you shouldn’t be parked there anyway!” Taken aback, all I could manage to blurt out was, “I’ve got MS.”

In that moment, I felt self-conscious and angry, and I struggled to come up with an eloquent response.

On reflection I wish I had said, “I have MS and...

You represent my worst parking nightmare. Every time I park in a disabled space I fear judgement. Before opening the door I always survey who is watching. I then brace myself for the dirty looks, the sniggers and remarks. And today, you have delivered.

Having lived with MS for nearly 20 years, such outings have not always been possible. In the past, aggressive relapses have, at times, meant weeks and even months in hospital and rehab. I’ve been paralysed, had to stay in bed, used a wheelchair and have been faced with the challenge of learning how to walk again (and again and again).

Although you see me sitting down now, the reality is I still struggle with mobility. You may watch me walk into a building and appear to be okay. But keep watching. See how my legs

quickly tire and my gait widens. And, inevitably, a folding walking stick will appear out of my handbag.

My balance is compromised. Uneven surfaces, such as this café's carpark, are difficult to navigate. I'm constantly fearful of tripping or falling.

I wish I didn't need to park in these spaces. My choice, and my goal, is to park 100 metres away and enjoy a brisk walk. But at times this just isn't possible."

But I shouldn't have to tell an outspoken stranger all of this. Both me and my neurologist have deemed disabled parking necessary. And sitting in a café, enjoying catching up with a friend, I don't want to remind myself of all that is wrong and of the challenges I face every day. Let me enjoy being out.

One month on from this experience, I would also like to say to that stranger, "thank you! Your words have...

Made me resolute to not let the reactions of others stop me from going out and living well with MS. Now when I drive into a disabled park I don't even notice who is watching. Encouraged me to reflect and celebrate how much my health has improved. I've worked so hard at creating a life that is conducive to my overall wellbeing. I'm glad that you think I look too healthy to deserve a disabled park.

Highlighted that we still need to educate others not to be so quick to judge based on appearance. I am not alone in living with hidden symptoms, experiences and challenges. Let's try to refrain from judgement and not assume the worst. Instead, be kind, as we really don't know the hidden stories of others."