

Halfway to Venus: A One-Armed Journey

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

‘Do you mind being my baby?’

I was on my own, flying to Pisa to stay with some friends in Tuscany, and lunch had arrived on the tray in front of me. My heart had sunk. There is no question that the world we live in is designed for two-handed people, so if you only have one hand, everything is different, and often more difficult. Airline meals, with everything packaged, are one of my worst nightmares.

This one was particularly difficult to get into, but I was hungry and determined to eat the great lump of meat that sat in the middle of the dish. But how was I going to tackle it? I have always hated asking people for help but I knew that if I were to eat with any kind of decorum, I would have to. So I asked the Alitalia stewardess if she would cut it up for me. She took the plastic knife and fork, knelt at my feet and, looking up at me, made her inappropriate remark.

‘No, no of course not,’ I answered politely, but inside I was seething. How dare this strange young woman refer to me, a middle-aged passenger, as her baby?

I’d simply asked her to cut up my meat for me; yet somehow I felt, as I always felt in such situations, that *I* had to take responsibility for *her* feelings and, by making light of her comment, ensure that *she* did not feel embarrassed. So I started making excuses for her: she was young, English wasn’t her native tongue, she had probably been trying to put me at my ease – but dammit! why should *I* always be the one thinking of other people?

These were familiar thoughts, but instead of letting the remark rankle, I thought: this was it – the time had come to write a book about what it was like living with only one arm. Deep down I had always known that some day I wanted to write about my experiences, but the time had never seemed quite right. Several people had made veiled suggestions that I should attempt a book, but I had always brushed their remarks aside, feeling that when the right moment came, I would know. Some of my hesitation had been because I rarely think about having one arm; it has never

prevented me doing anything that I want to, and in terms of disability I think of it as relatively minor.

But the question ‘Do you mind being my baby?’ made me see that it is the way *other* people react that is interesting. Any limb is a part of the body, and losing one is a reminder of the death and dissolution of the body – which is perhaps why many people find my having only one so threatening.

Most of us have hands and arms and yet we probably take them for granted, not realising what an extraordinary part they have play in all our histories and cultures. That's why I want to make this more than just a personal testimony. I want to try and make people understand how important arms are, and to give them a sense of what losing one and living without it actually feels like.

I also thought it interesting to look at how arms and hands – or the lack of them – have appeared through time, how people in history and fiction have coped with having one arm, and how often poets write about hands, arms and touch. This led naturally on to how arms and hands are viewed in other cultures: the important distinctions between right and left hands in Arab countries, what different gestures mean, how different nationalities give various amounts of weight to their hand and arm gestures – the importance of hands in communication.

So, prompted by my own missing limb, I have gone on a journey of exploration and discovery, through literature and art and real life, about arms and their significance. And through all my reading and travelling, perhaps I have come to a better understanding of why I feel the way I do.

By the time I arrived at my destination in Tuscany, I had filled several pages of my notebook with ideas. Little did that airline stewardess know that she was the trigger for years of fascinating research and often painful writing.

In answer to those who rate privacy above openness, I would say that I believe that the arguments for privacy can be countermanded by stronger ones for straightforwardness, and that the more you give, the more you get.

So I have followed Robert Lowell’s advice: ‘Why not say what happened?’

This is what happened.
