After I Am Withered

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A note from the author:

Sexuality in disability is often treated with ambivalence, if not outright derision from medical professionals. I made the choice to transparently discuss how my physical disability has impacted my sex life, to make my point of medical neglect and the personhood of women clear.

With the consent of my partner, I share in explicit terms, from my perspective as a disabled woman in a heterosexual relationship. I hope you will find these are in service of the point that disabled bodies deserve sexual health care.

Sarah is laughing.

Three strangers arrive at Abraham's tent with an impossible promise, and Sarah—pressed against the tent flap, listening—laughs. The text gives us her exact words: "After I am withered, shall I have pleasure? And my husband is old!" (Genesis 18:12)

The Hebrew word here is *edna*—pleasure, specifically the kind between wanting bodies. Sarah isn't asking if she'll have a baby. She's asking if her body, which has ceased menstruating and changed and aged, can still be erotic and pleasured.

God hears the laughter and confronts Abraham: "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?'" But God changes Sarah's words. God talks about childbearing and biological function. Sarah said pleasure. God said childbearing.

The rabbis noticed this substitution immediately.

Rashi, quoting the Talmud (Bava Metzia 87a), explains that God altered Sarah's words to preserve peace between husband and wife– she called Abraham old and incompetent. But there's another alteration happening, one the rabbis leave mostly untouched. Sarah's question about her body's capacity for pleasure gets translated into a question about her body's usefulness. A familiar framework for disabled people and women, what are our bodies for if not to be used by someone else? Erasure of Sarah's wanting is calculated manipulation that continues today.

I became disabled in the middle of my life. A spinal injury and subsequent surgery intended to fix me left me agonizingly disabled. After the initial crisis of learning to be alive differently, I faced a longer reckoning - how to be a useful human. I spent months focused on the basics - Sitting, standing, cooking, showering. I adapted my environment, and conceded where I couldn't adapt.

By society's standard, I was failing to get back to what I was before. My career, my health, the endless service of my children, community and family. My motivation was centered in my service to others.

What I didn't begin to reconcile was how to want my own withered body, or let anyone else want it.

Before failing me out for lack of progress, traditional PT taught me about spine precautions around bending and lifting and twisting. No one mentioned sex. Then again, no one had ever mentioned it. I'd been driving my body around for 30+ years, I'd given birth to 4 humans, and my sexlife had never been a concern.

My surgeon explained the hardware in my back, but he never brought up how to safely have sex. When I directly asked about the damage to my sexual function, I was brushed off and ignored. It was as if becoming disabled relegated me to a category of person for whom pleasure was off limits.

I told myself it was okay.

I had more important things to worry about, like pushing myself to get back to where I was before. Desire felt frivolously embarrassing to consider. If I couldn't trust my body to hold my daughter without collapsing or work for a living, why did I think I deserved pleasure?

The midrash goes further with Sarah. Bereishit Rabbah tells us that when God promises Sarah will bear a child, her youth returns to her. Her flesh becomes supple, she menstruates. The rabbis are obsessed with this detail—returning to it again and again. Sarah's transformation becomes proof of God's power, evidence of the miraculous, where the miraculous is defined in quantums of usefulness to those around her. Sarah is restored as a productive

woman who can be used to create new life and thereby a new people. Sarah's womb is exalted.

They are afraid of Sarah's pleasure. They don't mention her wetness or hunger. They don't explore her shock and excitement at the idea of being touched by her husband. They don't want to set a precedent for women to expect that pleasure is an entitlement. God rephrased pleasure to reproduction for Abraham's wellbeing, erasing Sarah's wanting, and the commentators followed.

The medieval commentator Radak sanitizes her wanting entirely. He suggests *edna* means something like contentment and ease. The Rashbam acknowledges the sexual meaning but runs away from it. Only the Ramban sits with it directly: Sarah is asking about marital intimacy, whether her aged body can still experience a pleasure she has missed.

What the commentators refuse to say plainly is that Sarah is asking if her changed body can still be a body that feels sexy. She's not asking permission to cum, or, if it's appropriate and modest or proper for an old woman to think about pleasure. She's asking if it's possible she can access her erotic self again.

Immediately after spinal surgery, a daisy chain of terrifying and grotesque complications began. My doctors were concerned by my numbness and paralysis creeping into my toes and feet. The debilitating pain with sitting. I stopped hearing the signals for when I needed to use the bathroom. I stopped feeling anything below my belly button other than pins and needles and agony.

Still, not one doctor asked about my sexual function.

My first clumsy attempts at sex were initiated and led by me. I was determined to prove myself to my husband and the universe that had rearranged my body without my consent. I was still a skilled concubine, a pleasure seeking feminist in total control of her body. But all I felt was excruciating pain. My lumbar spine and sacrum felt like they were being ripped apart. The pain radiated into my husband's touch and presence. There was no comfortable position, no way to relieve it. Just white hot pain. My husband's face distorted with concern as he moved with me, each flash of worry made me more angry and ashamed. I was performing a part for myself.

We are partners in every sense of the word. Sex for us has never been one-sided. Our pleasure is inextricably linked. Through sex we communicated in the push-pull, back-and-forth erotic rhythm of heart beats and wanting. The mature kink and BDSM dynamic we'd cultivated over fifteen years transcended limited words, and gave us a supernal connection. Then, it was gone, and I couldn't admit what was happening. I couldn't tell him that every touch was so violently painful I was dizzy. I grieved the loss of my body as a place where he could meet me without hurting me. So I lied to him. I lied with my body and my voice and tried to convince him everything was fine while I screamed silently, berating myself for failing the one thing I was pretty fucking great at. It would take a year and a half to get to the point where I could admit the pain.

Eventually a pelvic floor therapist was covered by insurance because of the loss of urgency (and a few embarrassing incidents of incontinence that made me want to disappear entirely). She

was the first person, and only medical professional in dozens, who asked me directly about my sexual fulfillment.

She told me that sexual dysfunction and loss of sensation with spinal injury is not only very common, but always overlooked and dismissed unless it impacts an erection. Vaginal sexuality and pleasure is dismissed in abled bodies. In disabled bodies, it's derided. I was learning that being disabled puts you in a place of perpetual contrition and only good, abled girls get to cum.

But no one gets to talk about it.

Sarah laughs at the strangers' promise, God asks Abraham: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" The word there is *yippalei*—too wonderful, beyond possibility.

I believed my body was beyond the possibility of pleasure. The medical system had confirmed it through omission, addressing my bladder and bowels and ability to walk, but never once asking if I could feel arousal, if I could orgasm and enjoy touch.

At my first appointment with the pelvic floor therapist, I stood in front of her leaning on my cane and unloaded on her my long journey of terror. I told her about the emotional devastation I was feeling at the loss of sex with my husband. Sex was how we communicated, found each other again in times of turmoil, how we found order amid chaos. Sex, for me, was never about orgasms, it was a safe haven with my favorite person where I felt completely protected, secure, and safe to be myself. Losing my sexual function, being unable to move without pain, not even

being able to sidle my body up to him after a long day—that was a lonely hell.

She covered me in ice packs, held my hands, and let me weep. Big, hyperventilating, devastated sobs filled the room and took up space. She encouraged me to meet the grief and anguish. She held my body and allowed me to scream my violent lamentation as she massaged scar tissue on my back and in my abdomen.

My withered body and me held nothing back.

In subsequent appointments, my husband joined us. He sat on a chair and witnessed my pain. By this point, he was already so scared of causing me unnecessary and unbearable pain that I had to beg and plead for intimacy. And let's be real, it wasn't intimacy if one of us was pretending we weren't in excruciating pain. In retrospect, I often wonder if my performance didn't hurt him more than it ever hurt me, because I blocked him out to save my ego.

I cried about missing my husband's body, she told me something that Sarah’s body must have known through the earned wisdom of age:

Stop fighting. Stop trying for sex. Stop focusing on shame. Stop reaching towards the past and fighting the present.

Let go of the old ways I wanted and needed and took and received.

Let go.

Talk. Lay as close as you can to each other. Be naked. Share a space. Hold hands. Only do what feels like it's bringing you

together and stop as soon as anything at all is painful. Stopping isn't failure, it's successfully retraining my nervous system to seek safety. That was, after all, what I really was missing.

This ritual for intimacy and worship of my withered body was the first medical help I had received.

Let me be really clear. To find each other again, I had to meet myself, my very new disabled self, first.

We let go.

I gave myself exercises— Prana (breathing) techniques, focusing on the broken communication between my brain and my pelvis and my heart. My therapist told me to touch myself, and relearn what sensation remained. Map the new territories of feeling. She said it might take months. She said it might never fully return. She said to be patient with my body. Most critically, she taught me to relax when I felt like fighting was the only option, ending the perpetual cycle of anger and fear that my nervous system was stuck in.

I wasn't sure what would happen, but I started trying. Alone first, because I needed to meet my body without an audience, my husband's concerned face, or the pressure of partnership without knowing what I had to give. I found pain easily. That pathway was wide open and hyperactive - the loudest noise. Pleasure was much harder. It was hidden in small quiet spaces, barely perceptible. I had to stop and listen. I had to trust it would be there and want it.

My body never returned to what I lost.

It is different. My thigh became an erogenous zone as my nerves rewired themselves. My feet. My arms. The skin of my scalp. All new places for pleasure, with new sensations coursing through entirely new neural maps. Once I was able to be honest, I brought myself back to my husband, and found he was dedicated to listening with me, but for this to work, I had to tell him what felt good, what hurt, and when to stop. I had to learn that sex wasn't about assuming what my partner wanted and giving it to him at any cost. It was about what he really wanted: to know me, this withered me, completely.

Our intimacy bloomed wild. Our kink was enhanced by my empowerment through submission to the mutual goal of finding pleasure. We're voyagers into the wild, horny, spiritual unknown. The more I lean into the vulnerability of honesty, the more I want. To know myself. To be seen completely. To experience the total power exchange of loudly and honestly wanting.

Wanting really is the most radical act a disabled person can do.

When the strangers return a year later, Sarah has given birth to Isaac. His name means "he laughs" or "laughter." Sarah says, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6).

The rabbis read this as joy about the birth and baby. The joy in the fulfillment of God's promise. But Sarah names her son after her own laughter—the skeptical, disbelieving laughter of a woman who couldn't imagine her withered body experiencing pleasure.

And I wonder if Sarah did.

If she took her withered body, her skepticism, her anger, her futility, her pain and went into her tent alone, got naked, laid down on her bed and met herself. If jettisoning her pain and rage was what gave her the space to take the withered self and find the pleasure that the sages erased.

What was Sarah doing while God had a soft word with Abraham? Maybe, by the time the two of them were chatting, Sarah had already made herself cum three times.

The miracle isn't that Sarah was useful. The miracle is that Sarah's body, which she had written off as beyond pleasure, desire, or sex, was returned to her as a place where pleasure could be found. But perhaps it was returned because Sarah asked the question out loud. She laughed at the impossibility and then went to find out for herself. God determined her pleasure and wanting were inconsequential to her utility, but Sarah didn't settle for that.

My pain still wins.

I still have to build in rest and recovery, communicate what I need in the moment instead of what I wish I could do. I still have to go into the tent and meet myself, exactly as I am, in order to know my own wants.

But I'm no longer performing the old play of competence. I'm no longer trying to prove that my disabled body can mimic a lost self. I cry when I have to say "sorry, I can't today", but I can at least say "I want to", and bring my earnest wanting as my offering.

— Sarah asked, "After I am withered, shall I have pleasure?" The text doesn't give us her answer. But a year later, she's laughing and naming her son after the laughter. She's telling everyone who will listen: God brought me this.

She's not talking about the child. Maybe she's talking about the sex.

The rabbinic tradition struggles with Sarah's frankness about pleasure, rushes past her explicitly sexual question, and translates her desire into something less threatening. But don't be confused, Sarah wanted pleasure.

After I am withered, after my body has changed, after it has dried up and aged and become something I no longer recognize—can it still feel good?

The question itself is the radical beginning of the answer.

Sarah had to laugh before God even bothered to speak to Abraham. She had to name her disbelief, and articulate what seemed beyond possibility for her changed body.

Sarah's flippant laughter becomes Isaac, the child through whom the covenant continues. Her pleasure is the origin point of our tribe. Maybe the story of Isaac is a parable for the real truth, to avoid squeamishness and discomfort around female pleasure.

Sarah fucked. And she enjoyed it.

I don't know what my relearned pleasure will yield. But I know that it had to start with the questioning, laughing, disbelief and frank acknowledgment that my body had changed:

After I am withered, shall I have pleasure?

Sarah asked first. I'm still asking. I'm still wanting.

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