

Views From My Chariot:

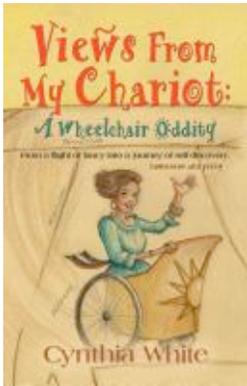
A Wheelchair Oddity

TENNESSEE

From a flight of fancy into a journey of self-discovery.
humorous and pitthy



Cynthia White



After thirty-five years of triumphantly adjusting to and viewing life from a wheelchair, **VIEWS FROM MY CHARIOT: A Wheelchair Oddity** is a type of CliffsNotes from Cynthia for anyone managing a life-altering disability, illness or injury. Divided into two parts (memoir and self-help), it is a humorous, optimistic, problem-solving, never-give-up, blueprint for physical independence and emotional freedom. Not only will it encourage and instruct, but it also inspires.

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Introduction

I was on top of the world. I was living a fantastical life amidst movie stars and musicians—spending one day getting Sidney Poitier’s autograph and another on Jimmy Buffett’s tour bus for a concert. The September day when everything changed I spent with several photographers shooting pictures in Aspen for my modeling portfolio. My last picture was poised atop a private Cessna gazing upward toward what was to be my next adventure—skydiving. That evening, I attended a dinner party where a fellow guest complained to me, “Would you sit down? You make me nervous!” A few hours later, one month into my twenty-eighth year, on a dark, winding Rocky Mountain road, my Porsche flipped and skidded to a halt—as did the life I once knew.

Regaining consciousness, I noticed the radio light was glowing but there was no music. Strewn beneath my twisted legs with one sandal off were my purse, a tube of lipstick, and a bottle of red fingernail polish. I had no thought to collect them; there was no use. Before I could consciously interpret my condition, my body knew that my neck was broken and I was paralyzed from the neck down.

A rescue crew extricated me from the crushed metal of my car. For the following six hours, as sensation drained from my body, I waited for an air ambulance service for emergency transport to a Denver hospital.

“Wake up! Breathe!” a medic continually revived me throughout the flight as a constricting weight wrapped my chest.

Thus began Thursday, the ninth of September, 1976.

Before my crash, I was in perpetual motion: I danced, scuba dived, water-skied and snow-skied, hunted and fished, cycled, golfed, played tennis, basketball, and was a foosball and backgammon champ. At the time of my accident, I was living out West at a ski resort. During the winter season, I taught children to

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ski. During the off-season, I was a photographer's model. My looks, body, and abilities served me well. But, I was detached and viewed life through a veil.

The night of my crash, as I was leaving a friend's home, I was startled by a non-existent veil I had just seen, and felt, open as I passed through it. I was well into adjusting to my new life when I realized that I had lived bound by that emotional veil. Now that I could no longer walk, I would gain a new freedom and learn to fly—in a wheelchair I would come to see as my chariot.

I never experienced the depression associated with the onset of a disability or disease. The doctors and I were convinced that my optimistic, hopeful outlook was the reason. I now know that it was also the effect of an emotional veil clouding reality. As a result, I would not look at my reflection in the wheelchair. Whether I was passing in front of mirrors, glass doors, or storefronts, I looked away.

My happy place is, and always has been, denial—if I don't see me in the wheelchair, then I'm not there. Of course, this sounds totally absurd when said out loud. It's like the child who loved putting his fingers into the sand of ashtrays. Even after having his hands popped several times, he still could not resist. One day his mother walked into the room to catch him playing in the ashtray with one hand while covering his eyes with the other. Just like that child, I had to take my hands from my eyes before I could successfully deal with my emotional issues relating to the appearance and limitations of my new body.

A year or so after my rehabilitation, I was sitting on my couch watching TV. I looked over at my wheelchair. It seemed like I was seeing it for the first time. In the quietness of my mind, I heard God say to me, "Do not despise your wheelchair. It is your chariot. In it, I will carry you places you have never been."

At the time, I interpreted this to mean geographically, but it has proven to be an enlightening archeological dig excavating through layers of buried emotional issues. Through my interruption of disability for the past thirty-five years, I have learned lasting lessons,

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not by asking, "Why me?" but by digging deeper with, "How can I solve the problem?"

Still, when frustrations get the best of me, I cuss (sorry), I fuss, sometimes I cry. Then I pray. I remember the medic's prophetic words: "Breathe!" I take a deep breath and start again.

Prologue

This book, *Views From My Chariot: A Wheelchair Oddity*, was conceived freshly out of the gates on my chariot ride. Person after person encouraged me to write a book. At the time, I didn't think I had anything important to say.

I have always been a writer and was confident I would someday write books. I have written poems, articles, and stories through the years—little distillations of life, as I viewed it. It wasn't until after a divorce that I began a book of fiction. At the same time, I began jotting down notes for other book ideas. Of the five books I have started, this one is the spring crocus. It was the first to push its way through. To my way of thinking, it's the most important.

After thirty-five years of successfully living in, adjusting to, and viewing life from my chariot, I want to pass on some encouraging nuggets and fun facts in managing a life-altering disability. Whether faced with a disability, illness, or injury, I offer this optimistic, problem-solving, never-give-up blueprint for physical independence and emotional freedom.

The first section is an honest and humorous vignette memoir—highlighting snippets from my previous life, contrasted by snippets of my new life.

To prevent reader whiplash from the transition of a personal memoir to advice-related information, I included chapters in an appendix, the second section, of how I have tackled and resolved barriers and the inevitable daily vexations on my chariot ride. It also contains humorous, sometimes quirky, personal anecdotes, numerous how-to's, and encouraging why-not's in managing a disability. I gathered item names, prices, and sources for purchase of these products, equipment, and assistive aides that I have found helpful—a must for individuals and families adjusting to one of life's

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inconvenient interruptions, as well as for professionals working to rehabilitate us.

My hope is that this book will serve you as a type of CliffsNotes for this course in your life, not only for instruction on your way, but also to help heal the broken places and to inspire you to be your best you—happy, contented, and fulfilled.

Welcome to views from my chariot.

PART ONE: MEMOIR

Rocky Mountain Flashback

At Christmastime 1975, the husband of my youth and I drove an acquaintance back to his home in Aspen, Colorado. We were living in Illinois at the time, where he was working with the family business in railroad construction. We hadn't taken a real vacation since our honeymoon, except for one summer in Europe, and we hadn't skied in Colorado. It sounded like a great vacation.

As we drove into town after dark, it was like entering the German fairytale village of Hansel and Gretel. Quaint and colorful gingerbread houses with lace-trimmed front porches lined the streets, each magically aglow from their lighted roofs and porches to the holiday themed sidewalks and yards.

After a month of skiing, we decided to move there. I flew home, purchased a Ford Bronco, loaded a U-Haul truck with the minimal furniture to furnish a place to live, then drove west across country to our new condominium.

We had both looked into job opportunities, but found it difficult to press into professional positions mid-year in a small resort town. I was a speech pathologist; he was a civil engineer with a law degree. Since we needed immediate income, we had a tow bar and receiver hitch attached to his Bronco. He would tow vacationers' vehicles from snow-laden ditches and embankments while he studied for the Colorado bar exam.

I found a job at the Kinderheim School in Snowmass Village, Colorado, another resort twenty minutes up the mountain from Aspen. It was a day school for the young children of vacationing families. The children were dropped off in the morning and picked up by après ski time. While the parents enjoyed the slopes, we provided educational activities, as well as mid-day ski lessons. It was on one of these mornings that a tall, dark, handsome movie star walked in to register his young daughter.

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Appreciating that time on the slopes is like gold and trying to respect his anonymity, I humbly offered up the nearest object for his autograph—my green leather ski mittens that matched my jumpsuit. Graciously, he signed “Sidney Poitier.”

When removing my mittens after his daughter’s ski lesson, I realized that his autograph had melted into an unrecognizable ink smear! I still have the memory.

Aspen and Snowmass were haunts for celebrities; many kept homes there. Their anonymity was respected and there were no harassing paparazzi. They were regularly seen in shops, restaurants, and bars. Some that I remember were John Denver, Emmylou Harris, Jimmy Buffett, Andy Williams, and Buddy Hackett. One morning, I had a conversation with Jill St. John on the street in Aspen.

The way we met Jimmy was at a dinner party. A chef friend of ours knew him. Serving up wonderful cuisine, our friend and his wife hosted six to eight of us in their home. Later, Jimmy invited us to be guests on his tour bus. My best memory of that ride was beating him in backgammon. I was terribly competitive, and he was a good sport. (He beat me the first game.)

It really was like living on top of the world. There are four resorts there within driving distance of each other: Aspen Mountain, Aspen Highlands, Snowmass, and Buttermilk. We skied them all. Five miles up the mountain from Aspen’s 7,907 feet base elevation is Snowmass Village at 8,104 feet base elevation. Altitudes below 8,000 feet rarely cause altitude sickness or AMS, although it does happen. Symptoms are loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, dizziness, and difficulty sleeping. Many vacations have been spoiled by an unexpected hospital visit. We never even experienced fatigue.

We snow-skied and cross-country skied while there was snow. For downhill, we skied the blue or black diamond marked runs in Snowmass, but in Aspen similarly marked runs are steeper and have more moguls. The reason I know this is that once an expert skier friend of mine took me up for free expert lessons. I struggled forever getting down that mountain. When I finally hit the end of the run, I

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broke into tears out of frustration and relief. (I probably ordered a pitcher of margaritas that night.)

In warmer weather, groups of us hiked up other mountains, cooked out, and camped. I also golfed and played tennis on a women's doubles team in Snowmass Village. Before shooting my modeling portfolio in the late summer, I modeled for the International Boutique of Aspen's catalog, *A World of Fashion*. The owners owned a ketch-rigged sailboat. Several times a year, they contracted the making of our clothes while visiting the Turkish coast.

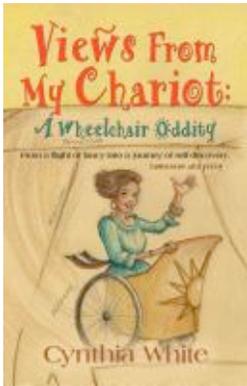
Snowmass Village, where I lived (Its population is 2,992 today; it was 800 then.), is located in western Colorado, nestled within millions of acres that make up the Snowmass Maroon Belle Wilderness Area and the West Elk Mountain Range. After ski season, I remember riding a chair-lift up over the mountains to watch streams of elk in their migration. It must have been in late spring or early summer. It was also during that late spring before my autumn wreck that Claudine Longet, Andy Williams' ex-wife, fatally shot her boyfriend, "Spider" Sabich, a former Olympic skier, in his Aspen chalet. From reports, alcohol and recreational drugs were part of their lives.

I knew firsthand of the abounding supply and profuse use of marijuana and cocaine in Snowmass and Aspen. My husband was a dealer, a chemical dependent, and an alcoholic. I realized this while we lived in Snowmass. I don't know how he avoided prison. He would be gone for days at a time on his drug runs. On numerous occasions and in many states, he was stopped and his Bronco searched. In Colombia, as he landed at the Bogotá airport, he was met by a swarm of armed police who confiscated his plane. Fortunately, it was an empty incoming flight to pick up cocaine, not a loaded outgoing one. He was detained until his lawyer flew in to pay for his release.

He died in his sleep at the early age of forty. His body was used up.

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It all began as a romantic adventure in my mind. And, I don't remember that Bronco ever towing another vehicle. I think, like Hansel and Gretel, we were all enticed by the fantasy of chocolate, icing, and nougats on the walls, and became trapped by the lure.



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