

Cripple

by Jon Davies

Timothy didn't double-check the joke with Paul. For once, he wanted to be himself. It had been nearly two years. He hadn't made a single decision without asking first. Surely he had this down by now.

He thought about it for a long while before the boy's birthday party. People would laugh. Samantha would want him to go out with her. Timothy would have a girlfriend. His first. He was nearly thirty. He didn't have many friends.

"Read it out," he told Samantha, when she opened the envelope.

Her mouth was agape. Tears ran down her face.

"Just read it," he said.

David, Stella, Jennifer, all the others--there must have been over twenty people at Samantha's brother's birthday, ten years old, like her brother, up to thirty like Timothy--looked at each other like the people had at his sister's wedding. His sister was the one who had talked him into signing up with the clinic two years before, where Paul worked.

"Is something wrong?" Jennifer finally asked.

Samantha didn't say anything. She folded up the paper; her cry became audible.

It wasn't the reaction Timothy'd expected.

"It's a gift certificate," he explained, "for sky diving," then guffawed.

No one laughed.

"It's a joke," he said.

The other mouths opened now too.

"I know," Timothy explained, "he can't use it. He's a cripple." No one else seemed to understand. "That's the joke. What are you supposed buy a cripple?"

Stella gasped, a few others.

Samantha let out a whimper.

"The proper term is paraplegic," David said.

Jennifer stepped up with another gift, a box that she sat down in front of the birthday boy. "I'll open it for Bill if you want me to, Sam," she said.

Samantha didn't say anything, her face in her hands.

Timothy was just being himself. No one seemed to understand that.

He wondered if he'd blown his chance with Samantha.

The birthday boy snorted. It sounded like he was coughing gift wrap up from his throat.

"What was that?" Jennifer asked.

The birthday boy closed his eyes.

"I think he wants to be alone," Jennifer said. "A lot of stress."

Everyone stared at Timothy.

He felt like straps were being pulled tight across his chest.

"It was a joke," he began, and then thought better of saying anything more.

