

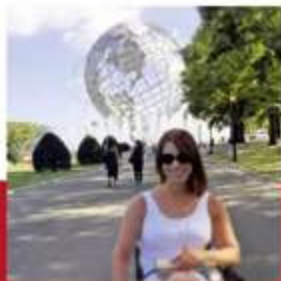
WORDS LIZZIE POOK PHOTOGRAPHS CIRCE HAMILTON



Kristen was unprepared for the sexual, critical and downright bizarre comments she received on Tinder.

When Kristen Parisi, 30, ventured into the world of online dating, she had no idea her disability would provoke such a shocking response

THE TRUTH ABOUT DATING WHEN YOU'RE DISABLED



TYPE THE PHRASE 'wheelchair + Tinder' into Twitter and you'll be met with some pretty shocking results. I should know, I did it one dark evening, when I'd been left feeling so worthless and so barren that there was nothing left to do but punish myself. As I scrolled through the barrage of derogatory comments, one of them in particular stood out. 'Was just talking to a girl on Tinder then found out she was in a wheelchair. LMAO!' it said, the words peppered with dozens of 'laughing' emojis. My breath caught in my throat. I felt as if I'd been

scorched. I wanted to hunt this person down, look them in the eye and ask them what *they* would do if, for every minute of every day, they had to work twice as hard as anyone else just to seem normal.

I'd signed myself up to Tinder a couple of months before. I had the same reasons as any other woman to want to try it: I was curious and thought it might be fun. I'd taken care over my profile – talking up my great career as a senior PR executive, my outgoing personality and ▶

my love of travel. But there was a worry in the back of my mind. I was aware that I was not like the majority of women you might find on that site – given that I'm a paraplegic, paralysed from the waist down since a catastrophic car accident that injured my spinal cord at the age of five.

Yes, I get around in a wheelchair, but I'm fully independent and live on my own. My chair is just a means for me to get from A to B – at least that's how I see it. But the amount of stares, whispered comments and straight-up abuse I get every day suggests that my chair is a bigger deal for others than it is for me. I've had strangers come up to me in the street and ask me if I can have children. I've had my own family members simply *assume* that I can't have sex. I've even had people jump to the conclusion that a boyfriend is my carer; that they couldn't possibly have any romantic interest in me.

'Normal' dating can be awkward. I remember being out for dinner with an ex-boyfriend and the waitress simply wouldn't address me. No matter how many times I asked her for a glass of water or a wine recommendation, she'd look over my head and say to him, 'What is it she'd like?' Another guy flat-out refused to admit to other people that we were dating – a move that left me with the ingrained and all-consuming conviction that I am simply not worth being shown off in public.

When it came to Tinder, I thought things might be different. But I was wrong. I didn't want to be 'deceptive' by cutting my chair out of my pictures, but equally, I didn't think it would have that much of an impact on whether someone would actually want to go out with me. Surely these men would care more about



our shared interests, our intellectual compatibility, or whether we'll find each other funny – all the things that would go into dating did the chair not exist.

But I decided to initially include pictures of me in my wheelchair and the responses were astonishing: 'Will you give me a ride... in your vag?' one said. Another simply messaged out of the blue saying, 'So I assume you're not looking to f'ck?' The absurd comments, *always* to do with sex, kept coming thick and fast. I soon took down the photos.

Things picked up soon after that, but I still wanted my dates to know I would be arriving in a wheelchair. Whenever I broached the subject, however, all I got back were insults. 'So why are you on here? Shouldn't you be dating someone in a wheelchair?' asked one guy flatly. 'Gross, no,' replied one immediately, before promptly deleting me. Another encouragingly asked a few questions about my injury, before swiftly changing the conversation to, 'So wait, does that mean you can't feel anal?'

Mostly, it felt like a constant fight for my right to be someone's date; like I had to prove to them that I was a fully functioning human being who was worthy of their time. Unsurprisingly, I got angry a lot and would dream up furious messages that I knew I'd never have the guts to send. But on other occasions, I felt an overwhelming sadness. I remember getting one particularly brutal rejection the week before my birthday, and just sitting there clutching my phone with tears streaming down my face. I rang my best friend and asked her, 'Am I just not loveable?' These men, whom I had never met, whom I had reached out to with hope

and vulnerability, had made me feel like I was worth nothing.

I'm still hopeful I'll find love, and I'm determined to be open and candid about my experiences with dating. Relationships are something that I take very seriously. It's so important to ask questions and create a dialogue about disability and sex, because the disabled as a community are so often desexualised.

Disabled dating is largely under-represented across the board, but there are some TV shows that portray disabled people and their romantic lives in a really positive way. *Glee*, for example, has been brilliant for that, and even *Family Guy* does it well. The character Joe is in a wheelchair, but he has a wife and he has children. His friends make fun of his disability, just like my friends make fun of mine. In return, I make fun of their weird noses or their strange hair. It's just part of life.

My experience has been unique in some ways but, in others, it hasn't – so much in life is based on the physical and people who aren't quite as physically able as the rest of the population are pitifully easily dismissed. Still, I'm glad I put myself out there. I've come away with a stronger sense of self and I now know I don't need to apologise for who I am. And it wasn't all bad. I did meet one guy who sent me roses and made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. We're no longer together – I ended things as we weren't quite the right fit for each other – but it reminded me that I am loveable and attractive; that I'm not just the girl in the wheelchair. I'm Kristen, and that's enough for me. ■



Kristen didn't want to 'mislead' dates by cropping her chair out of profile shots, but thought personality would be more important

