

Love is

Richard Hill

Life was not that easy for Tom. As a quadriplegic his life was significantly different to that of other people. He had been like this ever since he contracted polio in 1955 at the age of 17. The disease had left him totally paralysed. He couldn't move his arms, he couldn't move his legs, he couldn't even breathe for himself.

He spent the first 20 years encased within the womb of a large iron lung at the Royal Free Hospital in London. Only his head protruded from this cream and chrome clinical contraption. It was a meagre existence. He could only talk in waves as his respirator exhaled for him and he looked at life through a mirror above his head as he laid there.

He wasn't alone. He shared a ward at the hospital with other polio survivors. Some of whom improved with time and went home albeit with varying degrees of disability while others simply perished. But a few, like Tom, would require artificial ventilation for the rest of their lives.

At the age of 37, he escaped the imprisonment of the iron lung. He was given a tracheostomy, and a ventilator forced air into his lungs through the artificial hole in his windpipe. At last, he could sit up and see life the right way round. Volunteers from a local radio club set him up with a television at the end of his bed and a local carpentry enthusiast constructed a frame which could support a newspaper or book in front of him, the only downside being that someone had to turn the pages for him.

Twice a week, he had a visit from Beryl, his physiotherapist. She spent an hour or so manipulating his legs, arms and neck. They talked and found that they had quite a lot in common. They both had a love for authors of horror, supernatural fiction, suspense, crime, science-fiction, and fantasy novels. At the end of the physio session, Beryl would often read Tom's favourite, Stephen King to him. They both liked television drama and on her evenings off, Beryl would come in with fish and

chips and they would both settle down to watch their favourite, 'All creatures great and small'.

And so life continued. Tom and Beryl's lives became evermore entwined. They fell in love. However, Tom yearned to escape from the confines of the hospital. In 1985, Tom's uncle left a deed of gift to him in his will, enough to buy a small house with.

They now had no reason for Tom to remain in hospital but, the doctors pointed out, no-one with such severe disability had ever left hospital to live in the outside world. Undaunted, Tom and Beryl continued to make plans and decided to get married. The hospital medical technicians converted one of Tom's ventilators to run off battery, and tested it on Tom with great effect. No church had hosted such a marriage ceremony, but gave consent for Tom and Beryl to marry each other at nearby St. Mary's Church in 1980. They searched around and found a two-bedroomed bungalow in Chertsey, Surrey. It was well within budget leaving money over for the conversions.

They loved each other very much and loved their home equally. They frequently hosted suppers for their family and friends. They bought a transit van and converted it into a sort of ambulance with an extra battery for the ventilator. In this, they went on regular trips to fetes, festivals and other events. People often stopped and chatted and they found that they always saw the nicer side of folk.

They were once interviewed on ITV's disability magazine programme, 'Link', and asked if they knew the true meaning of love? They replied that they didn't really know but that they knew it was something very special and precious and worth keeping hold of.

Beryl never saw Tom's disability but deeper found a warm, honest, principled and trustworthy individual. In her, Tom saw a woman who cared deeply and who gave him all the love, warmth and affection he needed.