

# Staring at wheelchairs in the airport

by Lev Raphael



**Caption:**

"People stared at me in a wheelchair, then looked away."

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## Staring at wheelchairs in the airport

When I injured my knee a few days before a trip from Lansing, Michigan to D.C. via Detroit, I hesitated about arranging for wheelchair assistance in Detroit. I dreaded the exposure.

If you're flying to or from Lansing, the connection in [Detroit](#) can take at least fifteen minutes, even with the moving walkways and the monorail because you have to switch terminals. As they say in the city of my birth, New York, it's a schlep.

My injury didn't require surgery, just physical therapy when I got back. I had already cancelled a previous family visit to D.C. due to a severe migraine that kept me in bed for a whole weekend, and I was determined to go this time no matter what. The trip was important, but then so was my health and comfort. I did not want to aggravate my injury.

I'd been in an airport wheelchair before when I had to take a flight to London, and I didn't like it. Yes, I got through security much faster, but at a price. People stared, then looked away. Both parts of that equation were very disturbing. Were they wondering what was wrong with me since I seemed fit? Were they embarrassed for having been caught staring? I was embarrassed to have my disability—however unseen and temporary—on public display.

For this D.C. trip, a friend joked that I could wear a sign that said: INJURED KNEE. STOP STARING. That made me laugh, as she knew it would.

Being transported by wheelchair because of an injury, being helpless for what seemed like ages on that London trip made me feel reduced to that injury at a time when the pain, reduced mobility, and inconvenience had disrupted my normal routine enough already. In a chair, the disability felt like it was in charge, and I was along for the ride.

I could easily imagine the flip side for my D.C. trip if shame kept me from being wheelchaired at the airport: limping the whole painful way through the teeming airports. My light, well-packed roll-aboard would turn into a loathsome burden. Stopping to rest would be mandatory. Knowing that I might have to speed up at some point because the closer I got to the gate, the slower I'd be going as the pain and fatigue caught up with me. And people would stare anyway since airports aren't made for limping but for rushing, and my face would likely reveal how miserable I felt.

Having dealt with shame in other areas of my life and written about it, I knew facing this was important, so I did order the wheelchair. And? Well, there was no happy ending exactly. No sense of "closure." No soaring ballad by Adele over the credits. But at least I was comfortable and on time—and most importantly, I won't hesitate again if I need a wheelchair.

I've never been a sports nut, but I've belonged to a health club for years. I've done [yoga](#), weight training, spin classes, had swimming lessons with a coach, and I'd taken my physical being-in-the-world completely for granted until recently. I wonder now how many times over the years I've stared at people in airport wheelchairs. What the hell was I thinking?



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