



I get all the sympathy, Maggie gets all the work

John never lifts a finger to help his wife Maggie. When the rubbish needs putting out, he just lies there while Maggie struggles. When the doorbell rings, he stays in bed. They have been married for 25 years, yet John has never helped Maggie do the housework. He has never decorated the house and he's never weeded the garden. Maggie does it.

They are an extraordinary couple! John did not even take Maggie out to dinner on their silver wedding anniversary. If he could he would have. But he can't.

On 24th November 1955. John contacted polio. Since then he has been completely paralysed from the chin down. He can't even breathe - for over 40 years he has relied on a machine to keep him alive.

John was a merchant seaman when in 1955, on his 17th birthday, they docked at Corpus Christi in Texas. John felt unwell so went to his bunk. When he woke up, he couldn't lift his face off the pillow. He was suffocating. Determined, he managed to move his head slightly. This one movement saved his life, but was the last he ever made. He woke up inside an iron lung in the hospital in Corpus Christi, helpless and hopeless. A few months later he was flown back to England and admitted to the Royal Free Hospital at Hampstead in London.

Five years later, Maggie Bitten, an occupational therapist, was

shown around the hospital. John was inside an 'iron lung', with only his head sticking out. Maggie's first impression of the iron lung was it was like "a coffin on legs."

Part of Maggie's new job was to provide John with 'diversional therapy.' Someone suggested tapestry. "It was ludicrous," remembers Maggie, "I had to poke the needle through the cloth and put it in John's mouth then take it out of his mouth and push it back through the cloth again." She also taught him to paint with a brush in his mouth. He eventually learned sufficient control to sign his name.

By 1961 they realised their relationship was serious. John was frightened feeling he had nothing to offer anyone, let alone this bright, intelligent and articulate girl. But they fell in love and life began to change.

Against medical advice, they did the things they weren't supposed to do. Maggie took John for picnics and to the cinema, with the aid of a battery operated ventilator. But what would happen if the ventilator packed-up?

But they had underestimated Maggie's determination. Few expected the marriage to work. Both Maggie and John knew there would be difficult times. On their wedding day in 1961, John finally gained his freedom, but in a way, Maggie lost hers. "I get all the sympathy, Maggie gets all the work," John says.

He admits theirs is not a fifty-fifty

marriage, but there is a balance. Maggie agrees adding, "Although I give 90% and John only 10%, in other ways John gives a 90% share."

At their home in Hertfordshire, John controls everything by whistling. He uses a computerised control system to turn a code of whistles into actions. He can answer the front door entry video-phone. He can talk to Maggie wherever she is in the house through a system of intercoms. He can use the telephone, control the television and stereo, use a computer, control the heating, the light and the curtains. "Forty years ago," he remembers, "I couldn't even call a nurse. Now I can talk to people all over the world, on the phone or on the internet."

He has a specially designed bed with a motorised backrest, built-in ventilator, and he is not restricted to a life at home. They have a converted van and spend time travelling, shopping, visiting and watching their favourite sport, polo.

They have no children. Polio doesn't affect the sensory nerves, just the nerves that control muscles, so they have a healthy but modified physical relationship. John felt that if he wanted children, he should be able to look after them properly. "So we decided not to have children," says John, "but that was a bad mistake on my part."

"Many people look at me and think poor old John," he says, "but it's not like that at all. There are many people in this world who aren't loved by anyone or anything." He goes on: "I picked a very good woman... She's given me the push when I've needed it. She gives me the power to survive."

Story related by Richard Hill

On their wedding day, in 1961, John finally gained his freedom, but in a way, Maggie lost hers.