

Chapter 11 Excerpt

Out of My Mind by Sharon M. Draper, excerpt from chapter 11
(pages 90 – 99)

Fifth grade started a few weeks ago, and a couple of cool things have happened. Well, I didn't get a gadget that makes Garfield-like speech bubbles over my head, but I did get an electric wheelchair, and our school began something called "inclusion classes." I thought that was funny. I've never been included in anything. But these classes are supposed to give kids like me a chance to interact with what everybody else calls the "normal" students. What's normal? Duh!

Comparing my new chair to my old one is like comparing a Mercedes to a skateboard. The wheels are almost like car tires, which makes the ride smooth and easy, like riding on pillows. I can't go very fast, but I can propel myself down the hall with just a little lever on the handrail. Or, if I flip the switch to manual, I can still be pushed if necessary.

When Freddy first saw it, he shouted, "Woo-hoo!" like I'd just won the Indy 500. "Melly go zoom zoom now! Wanna race?" He spun his own chair in excited circles around me.

I'm sure he could beat me, even at the subatomic speeds our chairs are set to.

My electric chair is a lot heavier than my manual chair, and it's almost impossible for Mom and Dad to lift anywhere. "When you decide to switch to a rocket ship for transportation," Dad joked at first, rubbing his back, "you're gonna need to hire Superman to get it in the car!"

I grinned. But I know he saw the thanks in my eyes.

So he bought a set of portable wheelchair ramps that fold and fit in the back of our SUV. With those, he can roll the new chair into the back of our car and still have back muscles left over.

For me, it's all about the freedom. Now I don't have to wait for somebody to move me across the room. I can just go there. Nice. So when they decided to start mainstreaming us into the regular classes, the electric chair was really helpful.

Our fifth-grade teacher in room H-5 reminds me of a television grandmother. Mrs. Shannon is pudgy, wears lavender body lotion every single day, and I think she must be from the South because she talks with a real strong drawl. Somehow it makes everything she says seem more interesting.

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She told us on the first day, “I’m gonna bust a gut makin’ sure y’all get all you can out of this school year, you hear? We’re gonna read, and learn, and grow. I believe every one of y’all got potential all stuffed inside, and together we’re gonna try to make some of that stuff shine.”

I liked her. She brought in stacks of new books to read to us, as well as games and music and videos. Unlike Mrs. Billups, Mrs. Shannon must have read all our records because she dusted off the headphones and even brought in more books on tape for me.

“Ya’ll ready for music class?” she asked us one morning. “Let’s get this inclusion stuff goin’!”

I jerked with excitement. As the aides helped us down the hall to the music room, I wondered if I’d get to sit next to a regular kid. What if I did something stupid? What if Willy yodeled, or Carl farted? Maria was likely to blurt out something crazy. Would this be our only chance? What if we messed this up? I could barely contain myself. We were going to be in a regular classroom!

The music teacher, Mrs. Lovelace, had been the first to volunteer to open her class to us. The music room was huge—almost twice as large as our classroom. My hands got sweaty.

The kids in there were mostly fifth graders too. They’d probably be surprised to know that I knew all their names. I’ve watched them on the playground at lunch and at recess for years. My classmates sit under a tree and catch a breeze while they play kickball or tag, so I know who they are and how they work. I doubted if they knew any of us by name, though.

Well, the whole thing was almost a disaster. Willy, probably upset and scared about being in a new room, started yelping at the top of his lungs. Jill began to cry. She held tightly to the hand grips of her walker and refused to move past the doorway. I wanted to disappear.

All of the “normal” children in the music class—I guess about thirty of them—turned to stare. Some of them laughed. Others looked away. But one girl in the back row crossed her arms across her chest and scowled at her classmates who were acting up.

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Two girls, Molly and Claire—everyone knew them because they were mean to almost everybody on the playground—mimicked Willy. They made sure they stayed just out of the teacher’s line of sight. But I saw it. So did Willy.

“Hey, Claire!” Molly said, twisting her arms above her head and bending her body so it looked crooked. “Look at me! [...]” She laughed so hard, she snorted snot.

Claire cracked up as well, then let spit dribble out of her mouth. “Duh buh wuh buh,” she said, crossing her eyes and pretending to slip out of her chair.

Mrs. Lovelace finally noticed them, because she said sternly, “Stand up please, Claire.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Claire replied.

“You stand as well, Molly,” Mrs. Lovelace added.

“We were just laughing,” Molly said defensively. But she stood up next to Claire.

Mrs. Lovelace took both girls’ chairs and slid them over to the wall.

“Why’d you do that?” Claire cried out in protest.

“You have perfectly good bodies and legs that work. Use them,” Mrs. Lovelace instructed.

“You can’t make us stand the whole class!” Claire moaned.

“The board of education requires that I teach you music. There is nothing in the rule book that requires you sit down while I do it. Now stand there and be quiet, or I’ll send you to the office for showing disrespect to our guests.”

They stood. In the middle of the third row of chairs, where everyone else was seated comfortably, they stood.

This teacher is awesome!

After that, things went more smoothly. Jill, who had continued to cry, had been taken back to our room by one of the aides. The rest of us sat quietly in the back of the room.

Mrs. Lovelace began class once more. “I think we need a moment to gather ourselves, children.” She sat down at her piano and began to play “Moon River,” and

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then she switched to the theme song from one of those new vampire movies. Oh, yeah, she knew what we liked. When I started seeing the colors, I knew she was good. Forest green, lime green, emerald.

I glanced over at Gloria. Instead of sitting all curled up like she usually did, her arms were outstretched like she was trying to catch the music and bring it to her. Her face was almost glowing. She began to sway with the music.

Then Mrs. Lovelace completely changed tempo and played the opening notes to “Take Me Out to the Ball Game.” Willy clapped his hands wildly.

Finally, the teacher started to play “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy.” Dad would have loved it. Kids started to shimmy in their seats. Maria got up and started dancing! She clapped loudly, never quite on the beat, but to a rhythm that was all her own.

Mrs. Lovelace paused at the end of the song. “Music is powerful, my young friends,” she said. “It can connect us to memories. It can influence our mood and our responses to problems we might face.”

She cut her eyes at Claire and Molly, who still stood in the empty places where their chairs had been.

I wanted to tell Mrs. Lovelace I liked music too. I wanted to know if she’d ever heard the song “Elvira” or if she would teach us how to make our own music. I tried to raise my hand, but she didn’t notice me. It must have looked like just another one of those random movements that kids like me seem to make. But I had the feeling that Mrs. Lovelace was someone who’d take the time to figure me out.

The teacher went on. “Before I continue with the lesson, let’s make this a real inclusion experience. Perhaps our friends from room H-5 would like to sit with the rest of us instead of being stuck in the back.”

Freddy heard that and took his chance. He put his chair into gear and zoomed to the front of that big room and shouted, “I am Freddy. I like music. I go fast!”

The class laughed. I can tell the difference between people making fun of us and people being nice to us. Freddy could too, so he joined in the laughter. Mrs. Lovelace looked momentarily startled, then went over to Freddy, shook his hand, and welcomed him to the class. She sat him right there in front, next to a boy named Rodney. Rodney gave Freddy a high five, and the two of them grinned at each other. Okay, I had to admit it—I was jealous.

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Mrs. Lovelace asked an aide to bring Gloria down front close to the piano. A girl named Elizabeth glanced at Gloria nervously, but she didn't move away when Gloria was wheeled next to her.

Elizabeth's best friend is a girl named Jessica. At recess they sit together near the fence and share granola bars. I've always wondered what they whisper about. I also noticed that everything Elizabeth does, Jessica tries to outdo. Like, if Elizabeth beats her running to the fence, Jessica insists they run again so she can win too. Or if Elizabeth gets a new book bag, Jessica will have a new one the next day.

So when Elizabeth started talking to Gloria, who looked terrified, Jessica raised her hand and asked if one of the H-5 kids could sit next to her.

Maria might have trouble figuring out some stuff, but she's a real friendly person. "I wanna sit by the blue-shirt girl. I wanna sit by the blue-shirt girl," she demanded. She stomped down to Jessica's seat and sat down next to her. Then she jumped back up and gave Jessica a hug, then gave a hug to the kids sitting closest to Jessica. One kid stiffened up when she touched him, but I was surprised that most of them let her hug them. Molly and Claire, since they were standing, had no choice.

"Ooh, yuck!" Claire whispered.

"Cooties!" Molly whispered back.

Mrs. Lovelace raised an eyebrow, then cleared her throat. "It seems you two like to stand. You'll continue to do so the rest of this week."

"Aw, man! This sucks!" I heard Claire say.

Molly had sense enough to say nothing.

Maria didn't notice. She even kissed Claire on the cheek. That was funny.

Willy ended up next to a large, friendly boy named Connor.

Ashley and Carl were absent that day, so that left me sitting in the back of the classroom by myself. The room got real quiet. I suddenly felt cold, like the air-conditioning had been cranked up real high. I got goose bumps.

The teacher looked around the room, expectation on her face, I guess hoping that somebody would volunteer to take me. At that moment I would have given anything to be back in our bluebird room instead of sitting there with thirty kids staring at me.

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Finally, a girl got up out of her seat and walked over to my chair. She squatted down and looked me directly in the face. Then she smiled. It was the girl with the long hair who had frowned at her friends for laughing. "I'm Rose," she said, her voice soft.

I smiled back, and I tried really hard not to kick or grunt or make a noise that would scare her away. I held my breath and thought about calm, quiet things, like ocean waves. It worked. I inhaled deeply and slowly, then pointed on my board to **Thank you**. Rose seemed to understand...