

Awards Day

I relived that day a hundred times in my mind. So great was my joy that I wanted to experience it over and over. I wanted to dwell on each moment, to savor it and somehow preserve it so that its imprint would never fade.

It was Awards Day at the elementary school I attended. Even though I was in the sixth grade, this was my first time ever to attend Awards Day; indeed, this was my first year in a school with children who were considered “normal” – that is, who had no disabilities. My disability was all too evident – the cerebral palsy that had gripped me from birth stole from me the ability to make my limbs do my bidding and the ability to speak clearly and without effort. But I refused to let it steal my spirit. Today was proof of that.

I wore a pink skirt that day, and my ponytail, as usual, hung over the back of my wheelchair. Waiting in line with the rest of my class to enter the auditorium, I watched as the students filed by the principal, Mr. Waits. Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Mem; then she disappeared. She was obviously trying to avoid letting me see her. “What’s she doing here?” I wondered. My heart skipped a beat as I realized that something special was about to happen.

A classmate pushed my chair to the doorway of the auditorium; then my homeroom teacher, Mrs. Deaton, gently backed my chair down the single step and parked me in front of the first row of seats. It always thrilled me to go to the auditorium – to see the large stage with the heavy curtain and the flags standing tall, and to hear the rustle of people in the audience. Today there were parents as well as students in the assembly. I looked toward the back, where the parents were sitting; and sure enough, there was Mama. Another sign that today was special.

Did I dare hope to receive an award? I couldn't let myself even think about that. After all, it was only a year ago that I had worried so about not being able to keep up with the other students. True enough, I had done well – very well – in my classes, but how could it be possible that I would be worthy of recognition in this, my first year? Still, my heart raced, and anticipation swept over me.

Mr. Waits stood in front of the stage, greeted those assembled, and began to call the names of students receiving awards. In my grade an award was given in each subject to the student with the highest average in that subject. I clapped as students I knew received awards in math, science, and social studies. Then suddenly I heard, "And the English award goes to Maxine Harper." The students went wild with applause, and the parents followed suit. Some parents, seeing no child standing, wondered who this new name, never before heard on Awards Day, belonged to. Then they saw me, sitting in my wheelchair, as Mr. Waits placed the medal in my hands. Applause filled the auditorium as children, parents, and teachers gave me a standing ovation. The joy that rose up within me was indescribable. If that weren't enough, though, I received yet another award – the Literary Award for the best book report. The applause broke forth again, and my heart nearly burst as I realized that so many shared my joy.

After the assembly I received a multitude of hugs and congratulations. The rest of the day was filled with festivities – picture-taking, parties, even a street dance that night. All the things I'd dreamed of being a part of had now become my new reality – my new life.