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Stories 4 Wings

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Ability to Cope With Social Exclusion

The Garden of Understanding





Maya pressed her face against the classroom window, watching her classmates gather in excited clusters during recess. Their laughter floated through the glass like music she wasn't invited to hear. At fourteen, she had grown accustomed to being on the outside looking in, but it never stopped hurting.

Her worn sneakers squeaked against the linoleum as she made her way to the library—her usual refuge. The other students parted like water around a stone, their conversations dropping to whispers as she passed. She knew what they said: Poor Maya with her thrift store clothes and her weird parents.

After school, Maya hurried home to the small apartment she shared with her parents. Her father, David, was waiting in his wheelchair by the window, his face lighting up when she entered. Born with spina bifida, he had never let his disability define his spirit. Her mother, Sarah, looked up from her computer where she worked as a freelance transcriptionist, her guide dog Luna resting faithfully beside her chair.

"How was school, sweetheart?" Sarah asked, her fingers never leaving the braille keyboard.

"Fine," Maya lied, settling into their routine of gentle deception. She wouldn't burden them with her loneliness—they had enough challenges.

That evening, Maya discovered a notice in her backpack about a school garden project. Students could volunteer to help create a community garden on the empty lot next to the school. Something stirred in her chest—a tiny seed of hope. Her father had taught her about plants during their Sunday walks to the park, sharing his knowledge of botany from his college days before his accident.

The next morning, Maya gathered her courage and approached Mrs. Rodriguez, the biology teacher coordinating the project.

"I'd like to help with the garden," Maya said quietly.

Mrs. Rodriguez smiled warmly. "Wonderful! We need all the help we can get. Do you have any gardening experience?"





Maya nodded, thinking of the small herb garden her father tended on their fire escape.

Saturday arrived gray and drizzly, but Maya showed up at the designated lot with a borrowed spade and determination. To her surprise, only three other students had come: Jake, the class president; Emma, a quiet girl from her math class; and Tyler, who usually spent his time sketching in the margins of his notebooks.

"Where is everyone?" Jake asked, looking around the muddy lot.

"Maybe they thought it would be canceled because of the rain," Emma suggested.

Mrs. Rodriguez arrived with a van full of supplies. "Well, we have enough eager volunteers to get started! Maya, I understand you have some gardening knowledge?"

For the first time in months, Maya felt useful. She showed the others how to test the soil, explained which plants would thrive in their climate, and demonstrated proper planting techniques her father had taught her. Her shyness melted away as she found her voice through her passion.

"Your dad taught you all this?" Tyler asked, genuinely impressed.

Maya hesitated, then decided to trust them with the truth. "Yes. He's in a wheelchair, but he knows everything about plants. He studied botany in college. And my mom helps too—she has an amazing sense of touch for checking soil moisture."

Instead of the judgment she expected, Maya saw curiosity and respect in their faces.

"Could they help us sometime?" Emma asked. "I mean, if they want to?"

The following Saturday, Maya nervously led her parents to the garden site. She had prepared herself for stares and whispers, but instead found genuine welcome. Her father's wheelchair didn't hinder his ability to direct the planting layout, and her mother's suggestions about plant spacing proved invaluable.



"Mr. and Mrs. Chen," Jake said, "would you consider being our official garden advisors? We could really use your expertise."

Word spread about the knowledgeable parents helping with the garden. More students began showing up, drawn by curiosity and staying because of the sense of community they found. Maya watched her parents bloom like the plants they tended, their wisdom and humor winning over even the most reluctant volunteers.

One afternoon, as Maya worked alongside her new friends, Emma sat beside her during a break.

"I'm sorry we never talked before," Emma said quietly. "I was always too scared to approach anyone, and I guess I thought you preferred being alone."

Maya looked around at the thriving garden, at Tyler showing her father his botanical sketches, at her mother laughing with Jake about his over-watering tendencies.

"I thought I did too," Maya admitted. "But I was just protecting myself from being hurt."

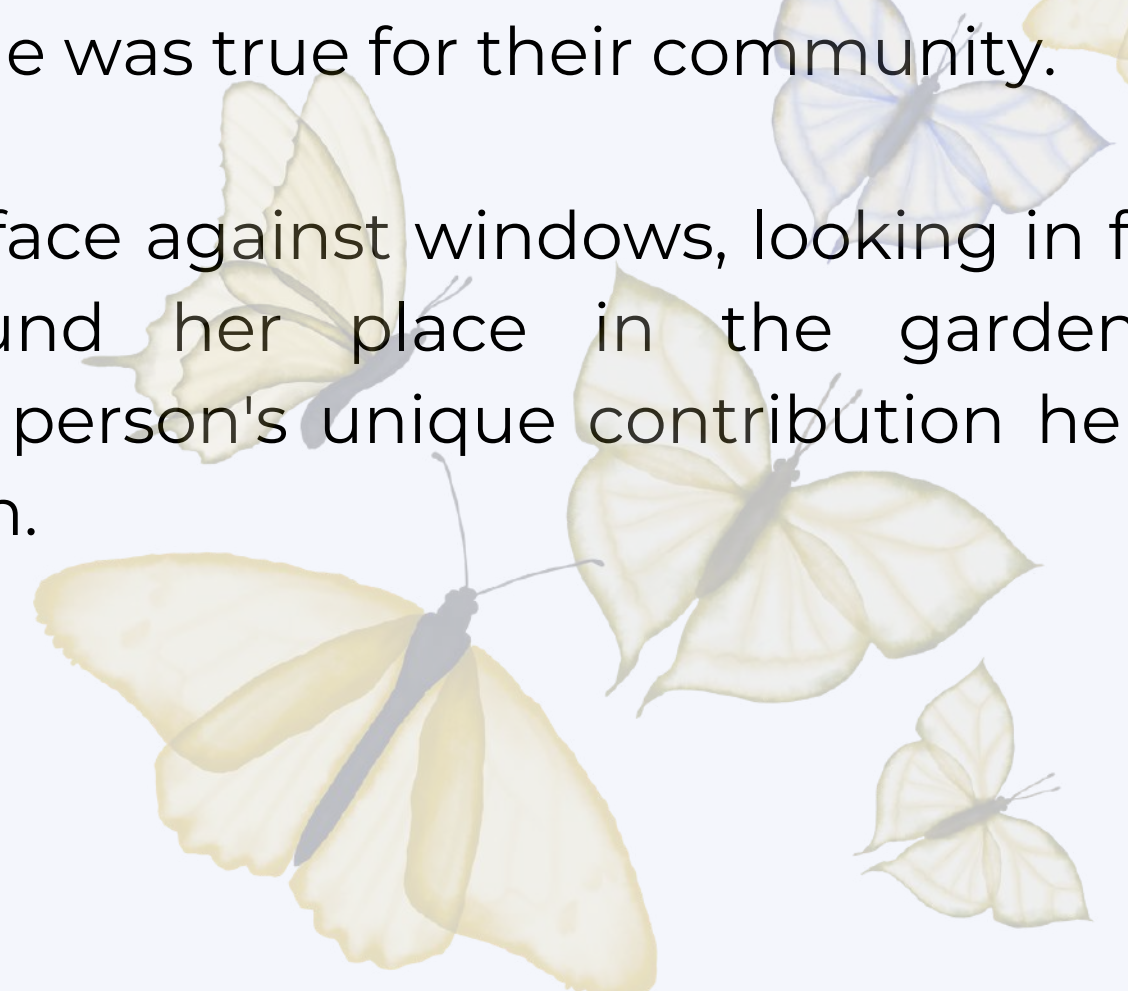
The garden became more than a collection of plants—it became a bridge. Students who had never spoken began working side by side. Parents started volunteering, including those who initially hesitated about working alongside Maya's parents. The harvest festival they organized brought together the entire school community.

Standing in the garden that autumn evening, surrounded by the laughter of friends and the proud smiles of her parents, Maya realized something profound. The exclusion she had experienced hadn't been about her worthiness—it had been about fear and misunderstanding on both sides. When people took the time to truly see each other, to share knowledge and work toward common goals, the barriers that seemed so insurmountable began to crumble.



The garden had taught them all that diversity in soil types, plant varieties, and growing conditions created the strongest, most beautiful ecosystem. The same was true for their community.

Maya no longer pressed her face against windows, looking in from the outside. She had found her place in the garden of understanding, where every person's unique contribution helped the whole community flourish.





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