

I'm Not Stupid, Stupid

Raphael was one of the boys in my year eight at Brinkley High and always sat in the back of the class in his wheelchair, with his special aide. Some of the other kids made fun of Raphael. They called him nasty names and pretended that they couldn't talk properly and they walked like spastics. If the teachers caught them, they got in trouble.

We were supposed to be nice to Raphael and treat him like he was normal. But how could we? He had cerebral palsy and couldn't talk properly and could only use a few fingers to type on his special keyboard. That's how he talked, through his computer. It sounded like a robot and it was hard not to laugh.

To watch him you'd think he was stupid, but he did the same work as we did. Some kids said his aide wrote the stuff for him.

When he came to our school at the start of the year, the principal gave us a long talk in assembly, how we weren't allowed to make fun of Raphael and we were meant to include him in things. But how can you include someone who can't run around and can't play sport? But he's a really good chess player, the best in the school. He also won the State championships last month.

Sometimes in class Raphael will say something really funny and everyone laughs. But some kids laugh in a weird way, like they would laugh at a little kid who says something clever.

I used to sometimes sit with Raphael in the caff at lunchtime, but I got heaps of grief from my friends. They started calling me "Chas the spas" and so I stopped. Some of the girls seem to like Raphael and talk to him.

When they were picking guys for the football team, I almost didn't get in. A couple of guys said I'd be a handicap because I spent time with Raphael. They said it might rub off.

Perhaps it did rub off, because now I go to class in a wheelchair.

It happened back in June, the accident. Just before the holidays. I was only riding my bike down to the shop when the car hit me. Mum said she thought I was dead and the doctors said I nearly was. Both my legs broke and my right wrist. But worst was that my face hit the road and my jaw broke.

I was in the hospital for five weeks and then had to stay home in bed for weeks. Mum collected stuff from school so I could keep up. My jaw was all wired so my mouth stayed shut. I had to get all my food through a straw and I couldn't talk properly. Dad said I sounded like a bad ventriloquist. Sometimes friends from school came round. Because I couldn't talk, they didn't stay long.

My legs wouldn't get better and I had two more operations. The doctors had to break them again. They said I couldn't walk on them until they were totally okay. My wrist and my jaw too. There were lots of tests and they said I had something wrong that made my bones not grow together the way they should.

I wanted to go back to school because being in bed all day was boring, so Mum and Dad got me a wheelchair and now I'm at the back of the class next to Raphael.

I had to learn to write with my left hand. It looks terrible. And because I can't use my mouth, I have a microphone pinned to my jumper and a loudspeaker. One kid said I looked like the Bionic Man, so now I get called Bionic Moronic all the time.

I get so angry at the stupid kids that make fun of me. They think I'm an idiot because I can't talk properly and that I'm a spastic because I'm in a wheelchair. I'm *not* stupid, just because I can't open my mouth and I'm *not* a spastic. It feels like my mind is stuck in my body because my body won't work the way it should. I feel like screaming at them that it's me, same as before.

I'm good at what we have to do in school. I understand everything. Well, nearly everything. I feel like I have been locked up in a box, with a couple of holes cut out for my eyes and a slit cut out for my mouth. My right arm is in plaster and my legs are stuck in plastic splints.

Sometimes I feel like just giving up. It's hard enough without all the agro from the idiots at school. Even some of the teachers treat me different. They look at me and smile and sometimes say stupid things about understanding how hard it is for me and stuff like that. How *can* they understand? How can anyone understand if they aren't like this? They can't know what it's like to feel like a prisoner.

At lunchtime I sit next to Raphael and we talk. His computer talks with my loudspeaker. We have to turn the volume right down, otherwise people complain. Raphael's teaching me to play chess and I'm getting good, but nowhere near as good as him. He's also teaching me how to do Sudoku and cryptic crossword puzzles. I'm amazed how good his brain is. I told him how I feel like I'm stuck in a box and he just looked at me for a long time. Then he smiled and said "yes". He was excited.

The other day Raphael showed me a book with poetry written in it. They were mostly about what it's like being him. He said that his mum writes it all down when he makes it up. And yesterday he helped me with some maths I couldn't understand. He's so smart. He's smarter than me. I guess it must be harder for him than me, being stuck in a broken body. At least I know I can run again when my bones fix themselves up. I'll be able to talk and shout and run and everything.

I decided today what I'm going to do when I finish school. I'm going to make people all over the world understand what it's like being Raphael and make them be nicer to people like him, who can't help it. They've done nothing wrong to be like that and it's hard enough without people making fun of them and treating them like idiots.

But the first thing I'm going to do when I'm no longer stuck is to knock some sense into the real idiots who think they're so great and give me and Raphael a hard time. I don't like my friends anymore.

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