



Can you hear my heart?

A selective mutism
awareness story

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An illustrated short chapter book for elementary-aged readers

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Paperback edition • 2026

Dedication

This book is dedicated to every child navigating selective mutism.

I hope you are surrounded by peers and friends who choose patience, kindness, and understanding. May you feel included, supported, and given the time you need to communicate in the ways that feel possible for you.

Your voice matters - even when speaking feels hard.

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Chapter 1: Did I Leave My Voice Behind?



My voice bubbled up in my chest and spilled out in belly laughs as I chased my brother around the backyard. It rose and fell with excitement as my sister braided my hair on the front porch. It squealed and teased as the sun shone down on me, warming my face. The whole backyard was listening. My voice filled our dinner table with exciting stories, magical fantasies, and silly jokes. Sometimes, though, a small, quiet shadow slipped into the corners of my throat, and my words would turn to stone. I had felt it before—at preschool, in kindergarten, and at birthday parties. Everyone thought it was shyness—Mom and Dad thought I just needed a little more time to warm up.

After all, the moment I got home, my words came tumbling right back out!

At night, when the sun went down and the moon took its place, that same lively voice softened into sleepy whispers. “Good night, Little Willow,” Mom would whisper, kissing my forehead. “Don’t let the bedbugs steal your light,” Dad would say. I would smile a tired, sleepy smile and whisper, “Good night. Love you.” in response. My siblings, Mom, and Dad knew that I had so much to say! Tomorrow would be the first day of school, and I was ready to let it all out.

Late at night, I tossed and turned in my bed. I could hardly sleep. Stories of conquering knights, silly dragons, and twinkling pixies swam through my mind. When morning arrived, with warm orange, pink, and gold splattering the sky, I was already out of bed!

I put on my best skirt: a magical, ultra-poofy creation made of pink lace and covered in sparkling silver sequins! Mom and Dad smiled and nodded in approval.

On the way to school, my words couldn't keep up with my feet! I bounced on my heels, chattering about the cute squirrel by the driveway and how excited I was to eat my chocolate bar for dessert. In the distance, a bright red brick building came into view. It was my new school.

As we neared the door, the sound of chatter like mine filled the air! Uh-oh. My stomach gave a flip as the sky above me turned a disappointing shade of gray and the Sun went to hide behind a thick curtain of clouds.

The classroom felt too massive, with its huge rainbow rug spread out in the center of the room, an art station with smears of red, yellow, and blue drying proudly on the racks, and a sea of little girls and boys turning to stare at me. Their stares felt too loud and intense.

I tugged at Mom's hand, but she did not notice. Did she forget about me? My body froze like a statue, and my stomach tightened like a squeezed balloon. My words froze solid to the back of my throat!

"Hi there!" came a loud, booming voice. It belonged to my teacher! I looked up and saw her wide, bright-eyed grin. She wore a skirt just like mine and large flower earrings. "You must be Willow. Welcome to the first grade! I'm Miss Robbins. I love your skirt! It is so beautiful! Where did you get it?"

I made it at home with Mom and my older cousin, I thought, but didn't say it. The words were stuck again. I looked up at my Mom.

Mom squeezed my hand. "You will do great, Little Willow. Always remember to smile."

I nodded, but my eyes filled with hot, burning tears. I listened to the quiet shuffle of her shoes as she walked away and left me all alone in my new classroom. "Would you like to join your new friends?" Miss Robbins asked me, but got no reply. My heart sank as Miss Robbins's smile faded. Why wasn't my voice working? Why did I feel so nervous? It's all right, Willow, I thought to myself. I still have time!

If the morning roll call was a game, I was already losing by a lot of points! Miss Robbins went around the room asking each of us what our favorite breakfast food was for attendance. I closed my eyes, and suddenly I was in Mom's kitchen. The sound of pancakes sizzling and the smell of my favorite sweet strawberry milk wafting toward me took over. But oh, there was more. My favorite breakfast wasn't complete without mountains of fluffy whipped cream. I could almost taste the explosion of flavors in my mouth. "Lisa, why don't you start us off?" Miss Robbins said. Lisa sprang into action, telling us how she loved homemade blueberry muffins. My stomach growled in response, and I hid a smile as Mathias went next, telling us how nothing beat a bowl of cold, crunchy cereal.

"Willow!" Miss Robbins exclaimed. "What is your favorite breakfast food?"

I felt the weight of every single stare in the room and heard my heartbeat like a trapped bird against my chest. I did not move. The silence stretched out, filling the room like the dark, heavy clouds I saw outside today. But worst of all, my fun, kind teacher sat waiting. I did not want to let her down!

“Is she real or a statue?” Mathias called out, and soon, all I could hear was erupting laughter.

My cheeks were on fire, and suddenly, all I wanted to do was crawl into Mom’s arms for a hug. But she wasn’t here. Neither were Dad, my energetic brother, or my sweet sister. No one here had time to stop and wait for my words.

“All right, class, settle down!” Miss Robbins quieted us down and turned to look at me with a sad smile. “Let’s move on...Caleb! What is your favorite breakfast food?”

I could barely listen to what my other classmates shared, and when the time came to choose our seats, no one seemed to want to sit next to me.

Tears sprang to my eyes like uninvited guests at a party, until someone decided to take their seat next to me.

It was Lisa. “Hey there, Willow!” she greeted me, her voice filling the room. “I love your skirt! I guess we’re partners for the rest of the year. Isn’t that great? I also love your hair in those braids! I wish I could braid my hair, but my hair is too short and too stringy—yuck!” she giggled, ignoring the fear in my eyes.

Out of nowhere, Lisa puffed up her cheeks and stuck out her tongue. “I’m a pufferfish!” she squealed.

I wished I could talk to her about my animal kingdom fantasies, too. How cool would it be if we were sisters?

“Who’s ready for some superfun?” Miss Robbins asked us. In her hands were boxes filled with colored pencils, markers, paints, and even sparkly stickers. There were so many boxes I was surprised Miss Robbins didn’t drop any.

“We will be working on an All About Us poster! Here’s the plan: talk to your partner, find out what makes them unique, and turn your poster into a masterpiece! Ready, set, draw!”



I sat glued to my seat as girls and boys swarmed the drawing tables like ants over a piece of food, their words getting tangled over each other. Beside me, Lisa grabbed a big sheet of yellow poster paper and a box of fresh markers. She flashed me her biggest, most toothy grin.

“Okay, Willow! What is your favorite thing in the whole, wide world?”

That was a good question! Was it the feeling of the sun warming my face or eating popsicles by the pool, feeling the juice dribble down my chin? Was it making snow angels in the powdery winter snow or trying on Mom’s heels in front of the mirror? Was it biting into a crisp apple, watching a star-filled sky, or smelling fresh rain on dry pavement? Was it catching fireflies in a glass jar, each of them glowing golden orbs? The question hung in the air. I opened my mouth to speak, but my throat tightened, locking my answer away.

Lisa didn’t seem to mind. “My favorite thing in the whole, wide world is getting to eat dessert before dinner!”

My eyes got really big, and I nodded, agreeing with my new friend. I snatched a marker and sketched an ice cream sundae bowl to show it. Lisa clapped her hands together. “Bravo! Let’s add that to our poster!”

We got on our hands and knees to draw when Lisa asked me, “Why don’t you talk at all? Do you not like me?”

My smile disappeared. No, no, no! I shook my head, frowning. This was going to be a long day.

As I stepped into my house that afternoon, everyone was all over me before I could even grab a snack!

“How was school, Willow? How many new friends did you make? What did you learn? Are you doing anything exciting? Did you eat the chocolate bar I packed you?”

Questions, questions, questions. So many words and so much talking, spinning in dizzying circles around me. This time, I opened my mouth, and out came my words like a rushing, babbling waterfall.

“I think I have a new friend, Lisa. She likes animals, sparkles, and is just like me!” I explained. Then, I reached into my backpack and held up an empty candy wrapper.

“All done! The chocolate bar was delicious, Mama!” I laughed as Mom picked me up and swung me around. When she finally put me down, my sister patted the couch she was sitting on. “Come on, Willow! Let me paint your nails! It’s your favorite color, pink.”

When my sister was done, I held up my hands. They looked like tiny, fluffy pink cotton-candy clouds!

The thought of clouds reminded me of the dark clouds I had spotted before I entered my school, like rough bullies shoving through a hallway all at once.

Chapter 2: The Firefly Jar



I knew I had to tell someone. After all, my voice worked at home, and my words were endless streams of messy thoughts and half-finished fantasies.

After dinner, I found Mom and Dad sitting out on the back porch, laughing. My brother and sister were in bed, and I wasn't quite allowed to stay up this late.

"There's our Little Willow!" came Mom's voice first as I raced to sit on her lap. Dad ruffled my hair. "Aren't you supposed to be in bed, young lady?"

I stuck my tongue out at him, and soon, all of us were laughing our hearts out! Just then, in the light of the Moon, I spotted ten...no, hundreds...thousands and maybe even millions of fireflies! I squealed, grabbed my glass jar, and ran out onto the grass. It felt cold and prickly against my tiny, bare feet, but I didn't care.

A tiny yellow spark flashed near the old oak tree. I cupped my hands over the glowing bug, lifted the jar lid, and whispered "hello" to my flashing friend.

Another spark of a flame flashed near a patch of tall grass, and I giggled as a firefly flew into my jar and knocked against the side!

When I could not catch any more fireflies, I placed my glass jar on the porch and watched my little friends fly in circles until I opened the lid to release them. They blinked their glows as they flew into an open night sky.

Suddenly, I was quiet. Too quiet. My thoughts were as empty as my firefly jar.

“Everything okay, sweetie?” Mom asked, patting my back. I looked down at my shiny pink nails. “At school... sometimes my voice gets stuck. I didn’t talk to anyone today, and everyone seems to hate me. It’s like someone locked my voice up and threw away the key.”

Hot, burning tears slid down my cheeks. I covered my face with my hands.

“Oh, Willow,” Mom whispered, shaking her head slowly. Dad pressed a kiss to my head. “They don’t hate you. How could anyone hate you?”

“They said I was a frozen statue who couldn’t speak! What if they’re right?!” I cried.

“Absolutely not. You are Willow, a big girl with an even bigger heart. Your voice isn’t gone. It just needs a little more patience, like a turtle in her shell. Do you poke and prod at the turtle or scream at her to come out?”

I shook my head.

“No. You wait for her until she is safe enough to peek out,” Mom said softly.

Mom was right. My turtle was still there; she just needed patience and a whole lot of love. On the way to school the next day, though, I felt worse. I dragged my feet along the sidewalk like they were made of heavy, drying cement. I didn't even look back at Mom to say goodbye. Recess felt lonelier than ever! I sat by the swing sets, alone, watching a silly, wriggly earthworm make its way across the mulch. In my arms was my favorite, cuddliest toy ever:

Beary Potter! Just like his name gave away, he was a stuffed brown bear who wore glasses.



“Aww, cool, what is this?” my classmate, Ellen asked. She snatched Beary Potter right out of my arms!

“He’s mine now,” Ellen said, mashing my toy against her cheek. I sat frozen on the swing sets watching Ellen play with Beary Potter. She hugged him. Stretched him out like he was slime. Then, she threw him to the ground, frowning.

“Only little kids play with stuffed animals,” she said. Then she got real close to my face, smiling slyly.

“Oh wait! Willow is a baby! Baby, baby, baby!” she chanted, clapping her hands together.

My breath came out in short, angry huffs, and all I could hear was the sound of Ellen’s laughter ringing in my ears like a swarm of wasps. I wished a hole would open from the playground mulch and swallow me up!

I pointed at Beary Potter, the tears back in my eyes. Ellen took one last look at my stuffed animal before throwing him to the ground. The poor thing landed right at my feet, looking as broken as I felt.

“Would you like to write your name in red or purple marker?” Lisa asked me. Recess had ended, and we were back in the classroom working on our All About Us posters. Now, this was a question I could answer! I reached out and picked up the red marker.

“Good choice! What’s your all-time favorite color, Willow?” she asked me. My chest felt tighter than a double-knotted shoelace as I shook my head.

“Oh. Right,” Lisa said.

I looked down at the floor, the anger bubbles forming again. I wished I could just pop them out of existence! It was the second day of school, and I still hadn’t said a word.

I couldn’t wait for pick-up time, when Mom would stand by the door and smile her warmest smile. That was usually my signal to run into her arms. I usually left without saying goodbye to Miss Robbins or Lisa. Not because I didn’t want to, but because I just couldn’t wait to get home, where my words would flow freely again! Days turned into weeks, but at school, my words stayed stuck.

One afternoon, Miss Robbins went straight over to Mom during dismissal. From my spot on the carpet, it looked like Miss Robbins was having a secret conversation with Mom about me, because her eyes met mine every few seconds. Suddenly annoyed, I walked up to Mom and tugged on her arm. Mom did not have a smile on her face. In fact, her eyes were tiny slits of worry.

Chapter 3: Miss Carla



After a quick snack at home—of animal crackers and some creamy strawberry milk—Mom sat me down on the couch. She took my tiny hands in hers. They felt warm.

“It looks like your words just need a little more help,” Mom said, before tapping me on the nose. I giggled. “There is nothing wrong with your turtle, Little Willow. She will come out of her shell in time, just like I said. We know someone who can help.”

That someone was Miss Carla, a friendly, patient grown-up who helped kids like me feel safer when their words got stuck. The room where she stayed was different, but not in a scary way. A soft, fluffy rug covered the floor. Bookshelves lined one side of the room, stacked with not only books but toys that reminded me of Beary Potter. And there stood the friendly grown-up. My hands got sweaty, and my throat felt dry and double-knotted. Yuck! I hated that feeling. But before the grown-up opened her mouth, she waved. Then she patted the only open spot on the rug that wasn’t crowded with stuffed animals, inviting me to sit there.

“You must be Willow,” she said in a singsong voice. “My name is Carla. You can call me Miss Carla.” She laughed, clear as a bell. I could feel the corners of my mouth turn up to form a smile. Miss Carla sounded like someone who had enough words for two people. But she didn’t seem like most grown-ups who waited for my words, and seemed happy to meet me without them. Miss Carla waited for a few seconds before continuing. “You are holding a stuffed bear. He is adorable!” she said.

I nodded, hugging Beary Potter to my chest. I liked it when people did not crowd me with too many questions.

“Sometimes, kids have something called Selective Mutism, where their words get stuck in certain places, even though they can talk—or even chatter—in places where they feel safe. This is a safe place, though. You and your stuffed animal are welcome,” Miss Carla said. I nodded. It all made so much sense now! “Since you like your toy so much, would you rather play with him or play with the blocks?” Miss Carla asked, tilting her head towards Beary Potter. Blocks seemed like a fun idea. I could play with Beary Potter anytime! I pointed to a yellow box to my right. Colorful, tiny building blocks spilled out of the container, looking like loads of fun.

The next five minutes were a blur of building colorful, towering cities with Miss Carla until we ran out of blocks! Miss Carla clapped her hands together, admiring our creation.

“You did such a good job building with me! You have such a big imagination, Little Willow,” Miss Carla told me. I beamed, because I knew that was one of my favorite things about myself. Before my time with Miss Carla ended, she handed me a square whiteboard and a dry-erase marker. Smudges of dried-up ink marched across its blank canvas, and it smelled faintly of marker.

“At school, you can use this whiteboard whenever your words get stuck. It’s another way to let people know what you’re thinking! Let me show you.”

Miss Carla picked up the whiteboard. “Sometimes, I have something I really want to say, and I’m bursting with ideas! But instead of saying it out loud, I can write it down!” She squeaked the marker across the board before holding it up. Soon, I was looking at HELLO, WILLOW! written in large capital letters.

I wanted to try it for myself! I reached out and squeaked my own marker against the board to write HELLO MISS CARLA!

Maybe words didn’t always have to be spoken. Mine were sprawled across a whiteboard. They got the job done, too. Now, there was something magical!

Chapter 4: The Whiteboard



The next day would be poster presentation day! “Good night, Little Willow,” Mom said, tucking me in. “Don’t let the bedbugs steal your light!” Dad added, like always. I smiled. “I won’t! Do you still have my whiteboard, Mommy?”

“Of course!” Mom tapped the whiteboard sitting on my bedside table. “Are you going to use it tomorrow?”

“Yes. I’m so excited!” I said. That night, long after Mom and Dad were gone, my excitement turned into fear! What if Mathias laughed again? What if I dropped my whiteboard? What if Lisa decided I was a bad project partner?

Fortunately, the Sun came out early the next morning to chase my worries away. I did not forget to put on my favorite sequined pink lace skirt—the one I wore on the first day, too! I walked into class a little more bravely than I usually did, clutching my whiteboard. I even smiled at Lisa as we worked on the finishing touches.

“Ruby and Caleb, you’re up first!” Miss Robbins called. I let out a tiny breath. At least I had a little more time. Two groups presented before us. Finally, Miss Robbins looked at Lisa and me. “Willow and Lisa, you’re next!” Miss Robbins called. Her classroom voice sounded quicker and louder than Miss Carla’s gentle voice. My hands felt cold and sticky with sweat as I uncapped the marker. It took a few tries, and I even heard laughter! “Willow, would you like to present now, or would you rather wait a little longer?” asked Miss Robbins. My stomach flipped. I looked at Lisa. She gave me a small smile and a thumbs-up. I tightened my grip on my whiteboard, then nodded.

Ignore them, Willow, my mind's voice told me. But it was hard, especially ignoring the ugly, mean stink eye Mathias was giving me. Behind us was our lovely yellow poster. It was the color of a fresh, juicy cob of corn. The color of eggs, sunny side up, frying for breakfast. The color of—

“All About Us!” Lisa began, interrupting my stream of thought. “By me, Lisa, and my partner...” I scrambled for my whiteboard to write out my name, only to drop it! It fell to the floor with a clatter. Giggles filled the room, spreading fast like ripples on water.

WILLOW! I squeaked my marker against the whiteboard and held it up.

“That’s cheating!” called Bob.

“Just say it!” added Mathias, snickering.

“Writing isn’t cheating. It is a way of communication that works best for Willow,” Miss Robbins corrected, before Lisa continued. “My favorite color is green because it is everywhere in nature, and my favorite dessert is cherry pie.”

My hands trembled, and suddenly, writing seemed slow and awkward. I pointed to the ice cream sundae bowl I had drawn on my poster and rubbed my stomach. That was my favorite dessert.

Then, I lifted the ends of my skirt and gave a little twirl. My classmates oohed. MY FAVORITE COLOR IS PINK. IT IS THE BEST! I squeaked my marker across the whiteboard, and looked up at Miss Robbins, who nodded in approval.

This time, there was no laughing. Everyone had their eyes on me, and I gulped. Did it work?

Lisa winked at me. “Pink is my second favorite color. Good choice!” she said, and the double knot in my chest untied itself as I relaxed.

Miss Robbins clapped her hands together. “I loved your beautiful artwork, Willow! Lisa, keep up the good work. Wonderful job, girls!”

Chapter 5: My First Playdate



The next morning, I woke up with a flutter in my stomach. This time, it wasn't from the nerves, but heaps of excitement. I ended up being so excited that I asked for a plain old glass of water for breakfast instead of my usual pancakes!

"Eat up, Willow," Mom told me, shaking her head. "You need your strength for when Lisa comes over."

"Mom! We should set out the board games for her. Ooh, and the tea set, for a tea party!" I jumped up from my seat. "I'll even wear my favorite tutu! You know, the one with sparkles. Then I'd look like a real—"

My words were interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell. "I'll get it!" I shrieked, running towards the door.

But before that, I made sure to grab my frilly tutu. That way we could start playing right away. I slipped it over my waist and threw the door open to Lisa's wide-mouthed grin and a gust of the sweet-smelling springtime air.

"Hey there, Willow!" she said. She sounded different from the Lisa I knew at school. Sillier, louder, and more energetic.

I wanted to talk to her, but my throat felt drier than the Sahara Desert. My chest tightened, and the dreadful, double-knotted feeling slammed into me like an intruder.

"Want a cookie? I baked them with my mommy!" Lisa held up a tray wrapped in tinfoil. I could smell the melting, chocolatey goodness from where I stood. But I wasn't hungry, or excited, or in the mood for a playdate anymore. Why wasn't my voice working?

“Hi there, Lisa! I’m Willow’s mom. Willow, why don’t you take your friend to your room? I’ve laid the tea set out!” She winked at me. I felt jealous—the kind that tickled the bottoms of your toes and set your cheeks on fire. Mom got to use her bright and clear voice to talk to my best friend, while I still hadn’t been able to use my voice with her. I followed Lisa upstairs to show her my room, feeling as heavy as a million pounds of bricks. Lisa didn’t seem to notice. “Oh my gosh, is that a tea party?” she squealed. “This is going to be the BEST playdate ever!”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me to sit next to her. Mom had laid a red quilted blanket over my bedroom floor so we could enjoy ourselves while staying nice and comfy.

I picked up a white, flowery teacup and brought it to my lips. It was make-believe tea, of course, so I made sure to slurp really loudly for effect.

Lisa copied me, then giggled. “I wish we could drink actual tea!” she sighed with longing.

I smiled and shook my head, the bad, icky feelings of jealousy draining from my heart. I held out my pinky.

Lisa giggled. “Ooh, fancy!” she cried, holding out her own pinky. We laughed together as we hooked pinkies. We really were the best of friends.

I slid a napkin across the blanket, pointing to the messy marker scribbles at the bottom: MORE TEA, PRINCESS PUFFERFISH?

We brought our adventures into a massive pillow fort that we set up in my room, throwing plush pillows at each other's heads.

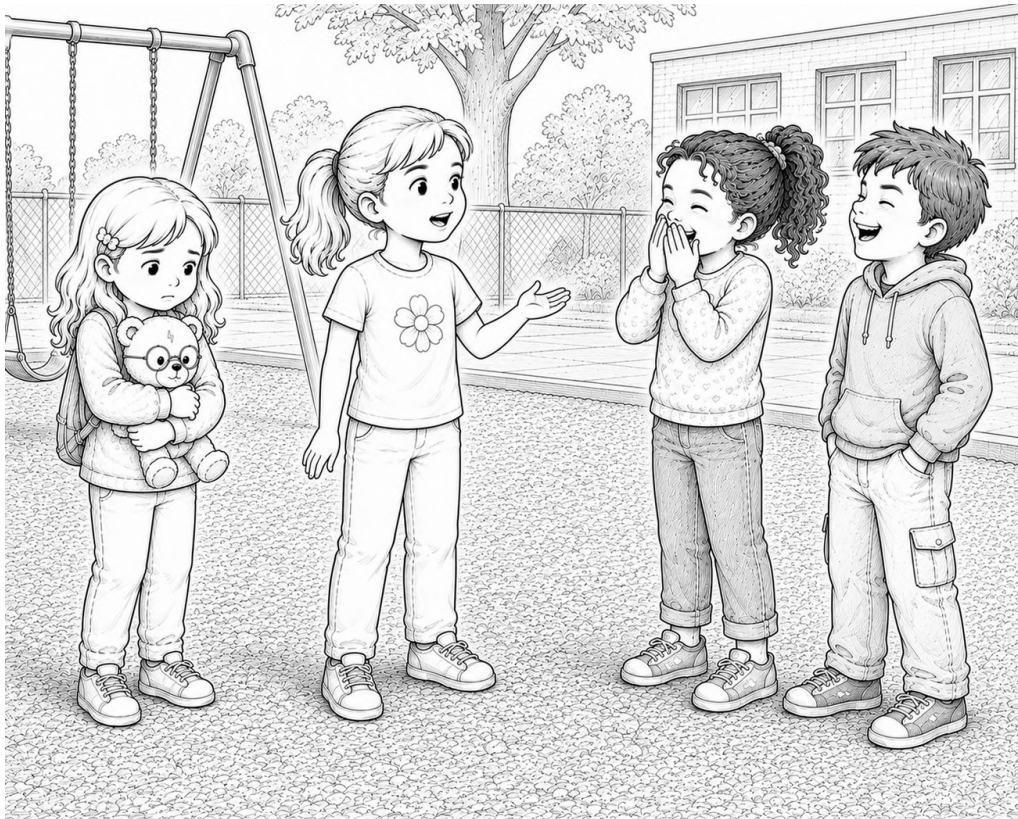
“Since the pufferfish can’t attack like a scary predator, she’s using...pillows!” Lisa said, throwing a stuffed animal at my head. My face broke into a smile, and soon, I was full-on belly laughing! I ducked just in time, wrapping a fluffy pink blanket around my shoulders to shield myself.



I buried my face, shaking with giggles. When I finally uncovered my face, I saw that Lisa wasn't staring or pointing. She just tossed another pillow at my head, her eyes glowing like one of my summer fireflies. I was right. Lisa was really my best friend in the world. At my next visit with Miss Carla, Mom told her about my playdate with Lisa and how well the poster presentation had gone, but she didn't forget to mention my nerves. Miss Carla understood. "Okay, Willow! Whenever you feel yourself—or your words—freeze, I want you to focus on your box breathing. You inhale for four seconds, hold your breath for four seconds, then exhale for four seconds. It does an awesome job clearing your mind!" The slow breathing helped my heartbeat settle and my body feel calmer.

"Next, close your eyes and name FOUR things you can see, THREE things you can hear, TWO things you can smell, and, if you can do it, ONE thing you can taste. This will help your body slow down when your nerves feel big," Miss Carla promised.

Chapter 6: The Talent Show



As the spring weeks rolled by, my confidence grew. Lisa and I spent our afternoons sitting on my bedroom floor coloring, sketching, and laughing over our shared love for art, and each day Lisa stepped into my house, my shoulders felt a little lighter. During recess at school on a breezy day, we were holding hands, weaving clumsily through the crowd, trying to join some classmates who were playing tag.

“Ellen! Mathias!” Lisa called out. “Looking for more people to join your game? We can!” Ellen clapped her hands together and rushed forward, but stopped in her tracks like a startled puppy when she saw me.

“No, sorry,” she said quickly, shooting me a rude glare. Mathias laughed. “She can never be ‘It.’ She can’t even count to ten out loud!”

Ellen let out a mean laugh.

My breathing grew heavier and louder. I stepped backwards, my heart hammering in my chest.

“You’re wrong!” Lisa said, stepping forward. “Willow doesn’t have to talk to play Tag. She just has to have fun. We’re leaving!”

She turned to me. “It’s okay. Should we play on the swings or the slides next?”

I shook my head. I didn’t want to do either of those things. I sighed and glanced back towards Ellen and Mathias. Lisa raised an eyebrow.

“Maybe the talent show will cheer you up?” she said as soon as we reached the classroom. My face brightened a little. The end-of-year talent show was different from creating a poster or memorizing long, boring facts to present. It was a way for all of us to show off our wonderful talents. Though a lot of them involved talking, I had the biggest, most exciting idea for what my talent was going to be!

“I’m going to list 63 digits of Pi!” Ruby exclaimed. I was upset to learn that “Pi” wasn’t the actual pie people ate for dessert, before I heard Mathias shout, “I’m going to do my famous robot voice impressions and tell jokes! It’s going to be the best talent the world has ever seen.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, and Lisa seemed to agree. “His talents are loud, just like him,” she said.

I giggled softly. She was right. Mathias always loved being the loudest voice in the room, but having a talent didn’t mean you had to shout to be appreciated.

“What’s your super awesome talent going to be, Willow?” Lisa asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

ART AND FASHION, I wrote on my whiteboard. Those were the two things I was best at. “That’s amazing!” Lisa said, grinning. “It’s so you, Willow. I can come over to your house today, and we can practice for the talent show!”

I nodded gleefully. That sounded like a wonderful idea—especially because I loved having playdates with Lisa.

“Clear the stage!” Lisa cried as soon as we got to my house after school, kicking off her sneakers. “I’m coming through.”

I immediately switched on our old radio while Mom cleared the coffee table. As the beats swelled and grooved, Lisa burst into a series of jumps, twists, and spins before landing in a perfect split.

She was amazing! I clapped my hands wildly, holding up a sign I’d drawn with glitter markers: 10 out of 10!

“Thanks,” Lisa gasped, catching her breath with a big grin. “Show me your talent now...the speed drawing show!”

I didn’t have to be told twice. I set up my big paper pad on a huge easel. As I lifted a marker to the paper, my fingers shook. The thought of drawing in front of the whole class was definitely terrifying. I caught sight of Lisa sitting criss-cross applesauce style on my carpet. She flashed me a double thumbs up. She knew I could do it.

I grabbed my thick black marker and let my hands—and imagination—take over. I drew swooping lines for a magical princess, sharp strokes for a crown, and a tiny bear by her side wearing matching glasses.

For the grand finale, I turned to Beary Potter sitting on the couch and threw off his mini blanket. He was wearing a brand-new, sparkling purple cape I’d made him out of fabric and sequins!

“Bravo, Willow!” Lisa cheered, standing up. “Everyone’s going to go crazy over your talent!”

A little breathless, I turned to smile at Mom, who was standing over to the side. She rushed over to me, planting a kiss on my forehead. “Little Willow never fails to amaze,” she whispered into my ear. This time, I believed it too.

Soon the last day of school came around, which was also the day of our talent show! On that day, Miss Robbins stood in front of the class, a sheet of paper in her hand. “Since all of you were eager to go first, I have the order right here on my list. But don’t worry—if you’re too nervous to take your turn right away, please let me know. Now, let the showdown begin!”

As the class broke into cheers, I swallowed, clutching my backpack full of art supplies to my chest.

“First up on the list,” Miss Robbins said, unrolling her paper with a warm smile. “Ruby!”

The first few performances were entertaining and a little goofy, but brilliant. Ruby recited the 63 digits of Pi without missing a beat—well, except on the 18th digit, where she stopped and muttered a “sorry!” before continuing. But that’s okay. Everyone made mistakes! After all, we were just kids figuring out how to be brave. Then came Mathias, who used his robot voice to say, “What do you call a bear with no teeth? A gummy bear! Why did the crayon cry? He was feeling blue!”

He bowed dramatically, and everyone clapped awkwardly, trying not to laugh.

Miss Robbins chuckled. “Your jokes never get old, Mathias,” she said. She glanced at the sheet of paper. “Next

up, we have Willow! And don't worry, you don't have to present right away if you don't feel like doing so, my dear. Do you want to present or wait a little longer?"

My insides flipped, but instead of shaking my head, I took a deep, steady breath. It was time to use Miss Carla's trick. I tracked the four things I could SEE: my teacher, my classmates sprawled out on the carpet, Beary Potter sticking out of my backpack, and my brand-new, colorful sneakers. The three things I could HEAR were the air conditioning breathing cold air to cool the classroom, the thump-thump of my heartbeat, and the shuffle of my shoes as I got up. The two things I could SMELL were the smell of pine drifting through an open window and freshly drying paint from the art station. When I was finished, I felt much calmer. I was ready. I opened my backpack and pulled out the sheet of paper. Art and fashion were the only things in the world that filled me with happiness, and I was going to let that happiness take over. Propping the paper steady against the class easel, I reached for my markers. As I secured Beary Potter against a chair, I noticed a few of my classmates pointing at the mini blanket draped over my toy, exchanging whispers. Miss Robbins's smile got big, and she nodded at me to start my talent showcase. I could see Lisa giving me the thumbs up, Miss Robbins smiling at me, my backpack, and the classroom art station.

I closed my eyes, and I saw my flashing firefly friends, my brother and sister cheering me on, and Mom and Dad tucking me in and telling me not to let the bedbugs steal

my light. My light. I wasn't going to let anyone—not the bedbugs, my classmates, or my stuck words—take that away from me. When I opened my eyes, I was smiling. I decided to change things up a little. I started outlining my beautiful princess drawing, shading her gown with deep purples and royal blues, and giving her a confident smile. Then, I drew her magnificent sidekick—a shorter young princess with bouncy hair and her arm wrapped right around the main princess's shoulders, cheering her on! I glanced out at the front row and saw Lisa staring at my paper, a grin spreading on her face. She clapped her hands over her mouth and winked. I didn't have to say a single word—she knew exactly who that sidekick was. But my masterpiece wasn't over yet. With shaking hands, I lifted the mini blanket off of Beary Potter.

There was silence. Then gasps, oohs, aahs, and finally, clapping. My sequined purple cape was proudly wrapped around Beary Potter's shoulders. A paper taped to my toy read: WILLOW'S WONDERFUL CAPE CREATION!

I gave Beary Potter one last gentle pat, flipped my easel pad closed, and gathered my markers. Mathias whistled loudly, and Miss Robbins was beaming from ear to ear, clapping louder than anyone else.

My cheeks were warm, but my heart felt lighter than it had in ages. I had used what made me happy to close the dark, scary space between my stuck words and letting people know who I was. Not with a flashy talent, a loud voice, or something I didn't have, but simply by being myself. That was the easiest thing in the world for me!

Lisa's performance was wonderful, too. Watching her twist and twirl, shake and shimmy, and leap and glide across the carpet was like watching a magician cast a spell on her audience—pure magic!

The classroom finally settled down, filled with the sounds of chairs scraping against the floor as they were pushed in, and the quiet shuffle of whispered voices and shoes. Miss Robbins was wiping a tear from her eyes.

“Thank you for being the best-behaved, most talented first-grade class! As you go off to the second grade, keep working hard, be kind to anyone you meet, and NEVER stop being yourself, or dreaming big!” she told us all. Never stop being yourself. Sounded easy enough for a dreamer.

Lisa threw her arms around me. I hugged her back, smiling so hard my face hurt.

“Bye, Willow... I'll see you over the summer!” she exclaimed. I nodded, then reached my pinky out to her. We locked pinkies and exchanged smiles—our promise was sealed. As Lisa walked away, my throat felt relaxed, and I was flooded with happiness. “Thank you, Lisa,” I said softly. My heart was soaring, and the words tasted sweeter than my favorite strawberry milk dripping down my chin.

Lisa twisted around, flashed me a smile, and continued walking. For the first time, I was feeling pretty GOOD about second grade. I hadn't left my voice behind. It had been with me all along—in my laughter, my drawings, and right here in my heart, a song waiting to be heard.



About the Author

Namasya Subramanian is an eighth-grade student and a Girl Scout working toward her Silver Award. For her Silver Award project, she created a youth awareness campaign to raise awareness about selective mutism, a condition she experienced when she was younger.

Her own experiences showed her how challenging school and social situations can feel when peers do not understand why a child may be unable to speak. She wrote *Can You Hear My Heart?* to help children better understand selective mutism and to show how patience, inclusion, and friendship can make a meaningful difference for kids with SM at school and in social settings.

Namasya also created goodbyesm.com, a website with activities and practical tools for peers and teachers who want to better support children with selective mutism.

Through this project, she hopes more children with SM feel understood, included, and supported.

goodbyesm.com



Sometimes the loudest
words are the ones
trapped inside. 

Willow has a lot to say, but at school, her voice just won't cooperate. When the classroom gets too loud or the spotlight turns her way, her throat tightens and her words completely disappear. Most people think she's just shy, but Willow is fighting a quiet battle with Selective Mutism.

Can You Hear My Heart is a heartfelt, relatable story about finding courage, the power of true friendship, and learning that there is more than one way to use your voice.



For every child
who finds it hard to
speak — you are
seen, you are heard,
and you are enough.



 **A Selective Mutism**
Awareness Story 