

# Nowhere Else to Sit

*Created May 2025, main storyline supplied by Carg, text and pictures by ChatGPT 4o.*

## Part I

It wasn't supposed to be a complicated trip — just a two-hour ride to a rural community center where Eloise volunteered once a month. She'd taken the journey before, usually by bus or on her folding e-bike, but this time, an unexpected storm had changed everything. Roads were flooded, power was out in parts of the area, and public transit was shut down. Her friend Leah, a program coordinator for the center, offered to drive.

"I'll be in a van with the mobility group," Leah had said. "We're picking up some of the kids on the way, but there's space."

Eloise hesitated. She didn't like being an inconvenience — especially not when she was already used to navigating a world not made for her.

At 31 years old, Eloise stood just under 4'5". She was proportionate, physically healthy, and highly capable — an advocate, writer, and volunteer who'd spent much of her life carving her own path. But sometimes, being smaller than most 10-year-olds meant compromises. Usually, she met them with good humor. But not today.

When Leah's van pulled up that morning, it was already nearly full. Five children, all in specialized seats. Folded walkers, a wheelchair, and gear for the day crammed into the rear. Leah looked apologetic as she gestured to the only available spot: a high-backed, supportive special needs car seat installed in the center row.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "We had to remove the regular seat for Matthew's wheelchair to fit. I didn't realize until this morning. You'll fit — but there's a crotch strap."

Eloise blinked, her face coloring slightly. She was wearing a skirt, a simple A-line cotton one. That kind of harness — a five-point restraint — wasn't compatible. She could already feel how awkward it would be.

"Do you have anything I could change into?" she asked after a pause.

Leah opened the back and rummaged. "We keep emergency clothing in case any of the kids have accidents. These are the largest pants I've got..."

She held up a pair of bright yellow PVC rain bibs, child-sized, stiff with age but clean. They looked like something from a preschooler's closet.

Eloise stared. They were clearly going to be snug — too short in the legs, too high in the crotch — but she was already soaked from the rain, and there were no other options.

She climbed into the van's tiny changing area behind the rear seats, stripped off her skirt and tights, and carefully pulled the bibs on. They crinkled loudly and clung to her legs. The elastic straps had to be let out as far as they'd go, and even then, they pinched slightly at her shoulders. She folded her damp clothes into a tote bag and returned, wordlessly.

Leah tried not to react, but her sympathy showed in her eyes.

The car seat wasn't just a seat — it was molded, deep, designed for stability and containment. The harness came over both shoulders and between her legs, clicking into a padded buckle that pressed firmly against the front of the rain bibs. There was no shifting, no slipping, and absolutely no way Eloise could reach the release once buckled in.

"I'll help you get out when we arrive," Leah said gently.

"I figured," Eloise replied quietly.

The ride was uneventful. The kids chatted or dozed. Eloise sat silently, shoulders squared, eyes on the rain-streaked window. She didn't feel infantilized — not exactly. She understood the necessity. But necessity didn't erase how isolating it felt to be buckled into a seat meant for someone half her age, wearing borrowed clothes she couldn't imagine herself ever choosing.

When they arrived, Leah helped her unbuckle. Eloise stepped out of the van with quiet dignity, tugging the rain pants straighter and smoothing her shirt.

The children didn't notice. They just waved at her and laughed about the puddles.

Later that afternoon, Eloise read stories aloud to a group of nonverbal children, still wearing the crinkly bibs. One child, a girl with cerebral palsy, reached out mid-story and touched her hand.

"Like mine," she said, pointing to Eloise's rain pants and then to her own.

Eloise smiled. "Yes," she said. "Just like yours."

## **Part II: Just Like Yours**

The storm passed by mid-afternoon, leaving the sky overcast but calm. The community center was filled with warmth, the kind that didn't come from heaters but from familiar voices, shared laughter, and the quiet resilience of people who'd learned how to be soft with each other.

Eloise had kept the rain pants on. Her own clothes were drying near a radiator in the back room, but she hadn't felt the need to change. There was something grounding, even oddly symbolic, about sitting in a circle of children and young adults — many in wheelchairs or harnessed seats — all wearing adaptive gear, braces, waterproofs, or weighted vests. For once, she didn't feel like the exception.

She helped with lunch, wiped down small hands, and gently redirected one boy who kept trying to climb the bookshelf. Nobody stared at her. Nobody asked why she was dressed that way. The bright yellow bibs squeaked when she crouched or walked too fast, and the straps still tugged a little at her shoulders, but the self-consciousness was slowly replaced by something more solid: presence.

Later, while stacking activity mats in the equipment room, she found herself shoulder to shoulder with Dani, one of the center's aides. Tall, freckled, in her forties, Dani had a calm way about her — the kind of person who made everything feel less like work and more like purpose.

"You've been good with them," Dani said.

Eloise smiled. "I've had practice. I used to help at my cousin's therapy group when I was in college."

"You planning to make this a regular thing?"

Eloise shrugged. “I don’t know. I usually do advocacy work, writing mostly. Sometimes I get a little... lost in theory.”

“Well,” Dani said, lifting a crash mat onto the rack, “you’re not theoretical in those bibs.”

That made Eloise laugh — really laugh — the first time all day.

“I think I needed today more than I realized,” she admitted.

Dani didn’t pry, but her gaze was perceptive. “It’s hard being small in a big world, isn’t it?”

The words landed softly, but with weight. Eloise looked at her, surprised.

“My niece is your height,” Dani added. “It’s not just about physical space. People underestimate her all the time — talk over her, make assumptions. She’s had to learn how to take up space without apologizing for it.”

Eloise nodded. “That’s... exactly it. You learn to be strategic with your presence. Loud when it matters, quiet when it protects you. Today, I didn’t have a choice. I had to be small. Literally. And it reminded me what that feels like when it’s not on my terms.”

Dani didn’t say anything right away. She just reached for another mat, then added, “Sometimes being vulnerable is the thing that connects us, not what separates us.”

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By the time the vans were ready to leave, the rain had returned — softer now, more rhythmic. Leah handed Eloise her now-dry clothes, but Eloise held up a hand.

“You know what?” she said, half-grinning. “I’ll just ride back like this. I think the pants and I have an understanding now.”

The ride home was quieter. The children were tired. The van was warm. Eloise sat once again in the supportive car seat, fastened in place, but this time her body relaxed into it. She didn’t struggle against the restraint. She’d already proven she could handle it — not just the seat, but everything it represented.

And as they passed through puddled streets, Eloise thought about what it meant to take up space in the world. Sometimes, it meant standing tall and speaking out. Other times, it meant being willing to sit — awkwardly, vulnerably — in someone else’s space, wearing someone else’s clothes, and finding dignity in the shared human experience.

Not in spite of it.

But because of it.

### **Part III: Choosing the Seat**

The next visit came two weeks later. The rain wasn’t quite as heavy, but the sky was the same flat gray, hanging low over the city. Leah texted early that morning:

**“Van’s got a normal jump seat installed for you this time. Just FYI!”**

Eloise smiled at the message. It was kind — thoughtful — but something tugged at her.

She walked to the entryway, where a small package had been waiting for a few days. She hadn't opened it yet. Now she did, gently peeling back the brown paper to reveal the item she'd quietly ordered after the last trip: a pair of adult-sized rain bib pants, in slate gray. A little oversized — the smallest size available had still been a bit too long in the legs, and wide in the chest — but she'd tried them on once already and knew they'd work.

She stepped into them now, tugging them up over her clothes. The slick fabric swished gently as she fastened the shoulder straps and tightened them with a quiet *snap*. The bib came up higher than last time, brushing softly against the base of her throat. It wasn't uncomfortable — just noticeable. She threaded a canvas belt through the loops and cinched it around her waist, neatly folding the extra length.

Eloise caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror before leaving. She looked practical. A little odd. But she liked that. It felt like armor — not to keep the world out, but to let herself fully *be* in it.

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When Leah opened the van door, she blinked.

"New look," she said.

Eloise shrugged, amused. "Figured I'd come prepared. These are easier to clean than most of my usual clothes. And they worked great last time."

"Well, you've got options now. I added a jump seat behind the driver — it folds out if you'd rather not be... you know."

"In the car seat?" Eloise said, smiling lightly.

Leah nodded, a little sheepish.

Eloise stepped into the van and glanced around. The molded car seat was still in place — deep, padded, with its five-point harness resting open and waiting.

"I'll take this one," she said softly, patting the seat. "It actually worked well for me, too."

Leah watched her a moment, then said nothing. Just helped her buckle in.

The harness clicked snugly across her chest, the crotch strap pressing firmly against the bib pants, which held everything comfortably in place thanks to the belt. The tall sides cradled her gently. She adjusted the shoulder straps of the bibs so the plastic buckles didn't pinch near her neck — though the high bib still grazed her throat every time she turned her head.

She didn't mind.

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The van rolled through the city. Rain pattered on the windows like a lullaby. The hum of tires on wet pavement blended with the soft chatter of the children in the back rows.

Eloise leaned her head against the side of the car seat. Her body, embraced by the deep cushions and the gentle restraint of the harness, gradually let go of its usual tension. Her thoughts drifted, softened. The occasional sound of a child giggling or the rain surging briefly against the roof passed through her consciousness like ripples in a pond.

And then... nothing.

Just stillness.

Eloise slept.

It was a light sleep — the kind you fall into when you feel *safe*. A rare kind, in her experience. She didn't even realize she'd dozed off until the sound of Leah's voice gently nudged her awake.

"Hey," Leah said, smiling through the rearview mirror. "We're here."

Eloise blinked, disoriented for a moment. Then smiled.

"Guess I really was comfortable," she said, voice husky with sleep.

"I was going to let you nap a little longer, but one of the kids saw you and said, 'She looks like me!'"

Eloise chuckled, unbuckling slowly as Leah helped release the straps. "That might be the best compliment I've ever gotten."

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Inside the center, Eloise moved with easy confidence. Her gray rain bibs swished as she knelt, stood, carried craft supplies, and crouched beside wheelchairs. They weren't perfect — the loose fit meant the bib sometimes tugged upward at her neck, and the belt shifted when she bent — but they worked. And they matched the rhythm of the space she'd come to love.

When one of the children asked, "Why do you wear those pants?" she answered without hesitation.

"Because they let me move how I need to. Because I'm like you."

The child smiled. "They're cool."

Eloise grinned. "Yeah. I think so too."

#### **Part IV: Misunderstood**

Eloise had become a familiar fixture at the community center. Her name was on the volunteer calendar every Thursday now. Some of the children had taken to calling her "Miss Rainpants," a nickname she secretly adored. She'd even ordered a second pair — navy this time — and had started sewing her own elastic belt loops to keep the bib from slipping too high at her neck when she bent or sat.

But the ease she had found in this work was interrupted, quite suddenly, by pain.

It started as a sharp twinge while she was lifting an art supply bin, and then became something else entirely when she twisted sideways to grab a dropped brush. A deep, biting spasm shot through her lower back, stealing her breath. She collapsed to one knee, gripping the edge of the table as white noise filled her ears.

Dani, ever watchful, was at her side in seconds.

“Okay, deep breaths,” she said, her voice calm but firm. “You pulled something. Let’s not push it.”

Eloise tried to wave it off, but the pain wasn’t letting her bluff her way through it. She was helped into the quiet therapy room, where the staff usually assisted children with posture issues or sensory breaks. A low, firm-structured support chair with shoulder and lumbar stabilization straps was pulled out.

“This might feel strange,” Dani said gently, “but it’ll keep your back in position. Just until we know it’s nothing serious.”

The irony wasn’t lost on Eloise. She, the independent volunteer in waterproof overalls and boots, was now being eased into a chair meant for a client.

The harness system slid over her shoulders and across her chest with practiced efficiency. The lumbar pad was firm, upright. When the crotch strap was tightened — carefully, over her navy bibs — and the chest strap clicked into place, she was locked into a completely upright posture that made it impossible to slouch, twist, or lean.

It wasn’t painful — just restrictive. Safe. Stabilizing.

And oddly... familiar.

She exhaled slowly and let herself rest.

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It was maybe twenty minutes later when the door creaked open and a young woman walked in. New. Nervous. Early twenties, clutching a clipboard. Clearly a new volunteer.

“Oh!” she said when she saw Eloise. “Hi there! My name’s Harper. Are you... do you like crafts? I can bring some markers over?”

Eloise blinked. “I—”

“You don’t have to talk if it’s hard,” Harper added quickly, her tone syrupy, the way someone talks to a child. “Would you like me to read you a story? Or... oh! I brought Play-Doh!”

Eloise opened her mouth to explain. To *correct*. But something stopped her. Not anger. Not shame. Just the quiet, weary recognition of being seen through the wrong lens — again.

All her life, people had looked at her and made assumptions. That she was twelve. That she was someone’s little sister. That she needed help, not that she *gave* it.

This time was different, though. She *was* in a restraint chair. She *was* unable to move without help. And in that moment, she understood something deeper than before: how easy it was to misread need as incapacity. How many of the people she helped each week endured this constantly — without the choice to unbuckle and stand up.

She smiled gently. “Thank you, Harper,” she said, evenly. “But I’m actually a volunteer here.”

Harper froze, mouth half open.

“I hurt my back helping earlier, and I’m in this to keep everything aligned until it settles down.”

“I—oh my God,” Harper stammered, blushing furiously. “I’m so sorry. I just... I didn’t know—”

"It's okay," Eloise said calmly. "You were kind. And that's a good start. But one thing you'll learn here: never assume someone's role just by how they look, or what they're sitting in."

Harper nodded quickly. "Right. Yes. Absolutely."

Eloise gave her a reassuring smile. "I could still go for some Play-Doh, though. Purple if you've got it."

They both laughed, and the tension eased. Harper retrieved a small tub, handed it over, and left to finish her orientation.

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Later that day, Dani checked in again and helped Eloise out of the chair. The stiffness in her back was still there, but manageable.

"Did I hear you converted a volunteer with a single stare?" Dani joked.

Eloise rolled her eyes. "She meant well. She just... didn't see me yet."

Dani patted her shoulder. "Happens to the best of us."

"I think it helped me understand the kids a little better," Eloise said quietly. "Not just how they're treated... but how hard it is to find your identity when someone hands you one you didn't ask for."

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That evening, Eloise updated her blog — a post titled "**The View From the Other Side of the Harness.**" She wrote about the chair, the mistaken identity, and what it taught her about dignity, assumptions, and humility. The post went quietly viral in the disability advocacy space, shared by parents, therapists, and educators who recognized the deep truth of it.

And at the center, the kids greeted her next week with extra Play-Doh and an affectionate nickname.

**Miss Purple.**



