

## Sides

“So here are the official sides,” said Summer at lunch the next day. She pulled out a folded piece of loose-leaf paper and opened it. It had three columns of names.

### *Jack's side*

*Jack*

*August*

*Reid*

*Max G*

*Max W*

### *Julian's side*

*Miles*

*Henry*

*Amos*

*Simon*

*Tristan*

*Pablo*

*Nino*

*Isaiah*

*Luca*

*Jake*

*Toland*

*Roman*

*Ben*

*Emmanuel*

*Zeke*

### *Neutrals*

*Malik*

*Remo*

*Jose*

*Leif*

*Ram*

*Ivan*

*Russell*

*Tomaso*

"Where did you get this?" said Auggie, looking over my shoulder as I read the list.

"Charlotte made it," Summer answered quickly. "She gave it to me last period. She said she thought you should know who was on your side, Jack."

"Yeah, not many people, that's for sure," I said.

"Reid is," she said. "And the two Maxes."

"Great. The nerds are on my side."

"Don't be mean," said Summer. "I think Charlotte likes you, by the way."

"Yeah, I know."

"Are you going to ask her out?"

"Are you kidding? I can't, now that everybody's acting like I have the Plague."

The second I said it, I realized I shouldn't have said it. There was this awkward moment of silence. I looked at Auggie.

"It's okay," he said. "I knew about that."

"Sorry, dude," I said.

"I didn't know they called it the Plague, though," he said. "I figured it was more like the Cheese Touch or something."

"Oh, yeah, like in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*," I nodded.

"The Plague actually sounds cooler," he joked. "Like someone could catch the 'black death of ugliness.' " As he said this, he made air quotes.

"I think it's awful," said Summer, but Auggie shrugged while taking a big sip from his juice box.

"Anyway, I'm not asking Charlotte out," I said.

"My mom thinks we're all too young to be dating anyway," she answered.

"What if Reid asked you out?" I said. "Would you go?"

I could tell she was surprised. "No!" she said.

"I'm just asking," I laughed.

She shook her head and smiled. "Why? What do you know?"

“Nothing! I’m just asking!” I said.

“I actually agree with my mom,” she said. “I do think we’re too young to be dating. I mean, I just don’t see what the rush is.”

“Yeah, I agree,” said August. “Which is kind of a shame, you know, what with all those babes who keep throwing themselves at me and stuff?”

He said this in such a funny way that the milk I was drinking came out my nose when I laughed, which made us all totally crack up.

## August's House

It was already the middle of January, and we still hadn't even chosen what science-fair project we were going to work on. I guess I kept putting it off because I just didn't want to do it. Finally, August was like, "Dude, we have to do this." So we went to his house after school.

I was really nervous because I didn't know if August had ever told his parents about what we now called the Halloween Incident. Turns out the dad wasn't even home and the mom was out running errands. I'm pretty sure from the two seconds I'd spent talking to her that Auggie had never mentioned a thing about it. She was super cool and friendly toward me.

When I first walked into Auggie's room, I was like, "Whoa, Auggie, you have got a serious *Star Wars* addiction."

He had ledges full of *Star Wars* miniatures, and a huge *The Empire Strikes Back* poster on his wall.

"I know, right?" he laughed.

He sat down on a rolling chair next to his desk and I plopped down on a beanbag chair in the corner. That's when his dog waddled into the room right up to me.

"He was on your holiday card!" I said, letting the dog sniff my hand.

"She," he corrected me. "Daisy. You can pet her. She doesn't bite."

When I started petting her, she basically just rolled over onto her back.

"She wants you to rub her tummy," said August.

"Okay, this is the cutest dog I've ever seen," I said, rubbing her stomach.

"I know, right? She's the best dog in the world. Aren't you, girlie?"

As soon as she heard Auggie's voice say that, the dog started

wagging her tail and went over to him.

"Who's my little girlie? Who's my little girlie?" Auggie was saying as she licked him all over the face.

"I wish I had a dog," I said. "My parents think our apartment's too small." I started looking around at the stuff in his room while he turned on the computer. "Hey, you've got an Xbox 360? Can we play?"

"Dude, we're here to work on the science-fair project."

"Do you have *Halo*?"

"Of course I have *Halo*."

"Please can we play?"

He had logged on to the Beecher website and was now scrolling down Ms. Rubin's teacher page through the list of science-fair projects. "Can you see from there?" he said.

I sighed and went to sit on a little stool that was right next to him.

"Cool iMac," I said.

"What kind of computer do you have?"

"Dude, I don't even have my own room, much less my own computer. My parents have this ancient Dell that's practically dead."

"Okay, how about this one?" he said, turning the screen in my direction so I would look. I made a quick scan of the screen and my eyes literally started blurring.

"Making a sun clock," he said. "That sounds kind of cool."

I leaned back. "Can't we just make a volcano?"

"Everyone makes volcanoes."

"Duh, because it's easy," I said, petting Daisy again.

"What about: How to make crystal spikes out of Epsom salt?"

"Sounds boring," I answered. "So why'd you call her Daisy?"

He didn't look up from the screen. "My sister named her. I wanted to call her Darth. Actually, technically speaking, her full name is Darth Daisy, but we never really called her that."

"Darth Daisy! That's funny! Hi, Darth Daisy!" I said to the dog, who rolled onto her back again for me to rub her tummy.

"Okay, this one is the one," said August, pointing to a picture on the screen of a bunch of potatoes with wires poking out of them.

“How to build an organic battery made of potatoes. Now, that’s cool. It says here you could power a lamp with it. We could call it the Spud Lamp or something. What do you think?”

“Dude, that sounds way too hard. You know I suck at science.”

“Shut up, you do not.”

“Yeah I do! I got a fifty-four on my last test. I suck at science!”

“No you don’t! And that was only because we were still fighting and I wasn’t helping you. I can help you now. This is a good project, Jack. We’ve got to do it.”

“Fine, whatever.” I shrugged.

Just then there was a knock on the door. A teenage girl with long dark wavy hair poked her head inside the door. She wasn’t expecting to see me.

“Oh, hey,” she said to both of us.

“Hey, Via,” said August, looking back at the computer screen. “Via, this is Jack. Jack, that’s Via.”

“Hey,” I said, nodding hello.

“Hey,” she said, looking at me carefully. I knew the second Auggie said my name that he had told her about the stuff I had said about him. I could tell from the way she looked at me. In fact, the way she looked at me made me think she remembered me from that day at Carvel on Amesfort Avenue all those years ago.

“Auggie, I have a friend I want you to meet, okay?” she said. “He’s coming over in a few minutes.”

“Is he your new *boyfriend*?” August teased.

Via kicked the bottom of his chair. “Just be nice,” she said, and left the room.

“Dude, your sister’s hot,” I said.

“I know.”

“She hates me, right? You told her about the Halloween Incident?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, she hates me or yeah, you told her about Halloween?”

“Both.”

## The Boyfriend

Two minutes later the sister came back with this guy named Justin. Seemed like a cool enough dude. Longish hair. Little round glasses. He was carrying a big long shiny silver case that ended in a sharp point on one end.

"Justin, this is my little brother, August," said Via. "And that's Jack."

"Hey, guys," said Justin, shaking our hands. He seemed a little nervous. I guess maybe it was because he was meeting August for the first time. Sometimes I forget what a shock it is the first time you meet him. "Cool room."

"Are you Via's boyfriend?" Auggie asked mischievously, and his sister pulled his cap down over his face.

"What's in your case?" I said. "A machine gun?"

"Ha!" answered the boyfriend. "That's funny. No, it's a, uh ... fiddle."

"Justin's a fiddler," said Via. "He's in a zydeco band."

"What the heck is a zydeco band?" said Auggie, looking at me.

"It's a type of music," said Justin. "Like Creole music."

"What's Creole?" I said.

"You should tell people that's a machine gun," said Auggie. "Nobody would ever mess with you."

"Ha, I guess you're right," Justin said, nodding and tucking his hair behind his ears. "Creole's the kind of music they play in Louisiana," he said to me.

"Are you from Louisiana?" I asked.

"No, um," he answered, pushing up his glasses. "I'm from Brooklyn."

I don't know why this made me want to laugh.

“Come on, Justin,” said Via, pulling him by the hand. “Let’s go hang out in my room.”

“Okay, see you guys later. Bye,” he said.

“Bye!”

“Bye!”

As soon as they left the room, Auggie looked at me, smiling.

“I’m from Brooklyn,” I said, and we both started laughing hysterically.



## Part Five



Justin

Sometimes I think my head is so big  
because it is so full of dreams.

—John Merrick in Bernard Pomerance's  
*The Elephant Man*

## Olivia's Brother

the first time i meet olivia's little brother, i have to admit i'm totally taken by surprise.

i shouldn't be, of course. olivia's told me about his "syndrome." has even described what he looks like. but she's also talked about all his surgeries over the years, so i guess i assumed he'd be more normal-looking by now. like when a kid is born with a cleft lip and has plastic surgery to fix it sometimes you can't even tell except for the little scar above the lip. i guess i thought her brother would have some scars here and there. but not this. i definitely wasn't expecting to see this little kid in a baseball cap who's sitting in front of me right now.

actually there are two kids sitting in front me: one is a totally normal-looking kid with curly blond hair named jack; the other is auggie.

i like to think i'm able to hide my surprise. i hope i do. surprise is one of those emotions that can be hard to fake, though, whether you're trying to look surprised when you're not or trying to not look surprised when you are.

i shake his hand. i shake the other kid's hand. don't want to focus on his face. cool room, i say.

are you via's boyfriend? he says. i think he's smiling.

olivia pushes down his baseball cap.

is that a machine gun? the blond kid asks, like i haven't heard that one before. and we talk about zydeco for a bit. and then via's taking my hand and leading me out of the room. as soon as we close the door behind us, we hear them laughing.

i'm from brooklyn! one of them sings.

olivia rolls her eyes as she smiles. let's go hang out in my room, she

says.

we've been dating for two months now. i knew from the moment i saw her, the minute she sat down at our table in the cafeteria, that i liked her. i couldn't keep my eyes off of her. really beautiful. with olive skin and the bluest eyes i've ever seen in my life. at first she acted like she only wanted to be friends. i think she kind of gives off that vibe without even meaning to. stay back. don't even bother. she doesn't flirt like some other girls do. she looks you right in the eye when she talks to you, like she's daring you. so i just kept looking her right in the eye, too, like i was daring her right back. and then i asked her out and she said yes, which rocked.

she's an awesome girl and i love hanging out with her.

she didn't tell me about august until our third date. i think she used the phrase "a craniofacial abnormality" to describe his face. or maybe it was "craniofacial anomaly." i know the one word she didn't use was "deformed," though, because that word would have registered with me.

so, what did you think? she asks me nervously the second we're inside her room. are you shocked?

no, i lie.

she smiles and looks away. you're shocked.

i'm not, i assure her. he's just like what you said he'd be.

she nods and plops down on her bed. kind of cute how she still has a lot of stuffed animals on her bed. she takes one of them, a polar bear, without thinking and puts it in her lap.

i sit down on the rolling chair by her desk. her room is immaculate.

when i was little, she says, there were lots of kids who never came back for a second playdate. i mean, *lots* of kids. i even had friends who wouldn't come to my birthdays because he would be there. they never actually told me this, but it would get back to me. some people just don't know how to deal with auggie, you know?

i nod.

it's not even like they know they're being mean, she adds. they were just scared. i mean, let's face it, his face is a little scary, right?

i guess, i answer.

but you're okay with it? she asks me sweetly. you're not too freaked out? or scared?

i'm not freaked out or scared. i smile.

she nods and looks down at the polar bear on her lap. i can't tell whether she believes me or not, but then she gives the polar bear a kiss on the nose and tosses it to me with a little smile. i think that means she believes me. or at least that she wants to.

## Valentine's Day

i give olivia a heart necklace for valentine's day, and she gives me a messenger bag she's made out of old floppy disks. very cool how she makes things like that. earrings out of pieces of circuit boards. dresses out of t-shirts. bags out of old jeans. she's so creative. i tell her she should be an artist someday, but she wants to be a scientist. a geneticist, of all things. she wants to find cures for people like her brother, i guess.

we make plans for me to finally meet her parents. a mexican restaurant on amesfort avenue near her house on saturday night.

all day long i'm nervous about it. and when i get nervous my tics come out. i mean, my tics are always there, but they're not like they used to be when i was little: nothing but a few hard blinks now, the occasional head pull. but when i'm stressed they get worse—and i'm definitely stressing about meeting her folks.

they're waiting inside when i get to the restaurant. the dad gets up and shakes my hand, and the mom gives me a hug. i give auggie a hello fist-punch and kiss olivia on the cheek before i sit down.

it's so nice to meet you, justin! we've heard so much about you!

her parents couldn't be nicer. put me at ease right away. the waiter brings over the menus and i notice his expression the moment he lays eyes on august. but i pretend not to notice. i guess we're all pretending not to notice things tonight. the waiter. my tics. the way august crushes the tortilla chips on the table and spoons the crumbs into his mouth. i look at olivia and she smiles at me. she knows. she sees the waiter's face. she sees my tics. olivia is a girl who sees everything.

we spend the entire dinner talking and laughing. olivia's parents ask me about my music, how i got into the fiddle and stuff like that.

and i tell them about how i used to play classical violin but I got into appalachian folk music and then zydeco. and they're listening to every word like they're really interested. they tell me to let them know the next time my band's playing a gig so they can come listen.

i'm not used to all the attention, to be truthful. my parents don't have a clue about what I want to do with my life. they never ask. we never talk like this. i don't think they even know i traded my baroque violin for an eight-string hardanger fiddle two years ago.

after dinner we go back to olivia's for some ice cream. their dog greets us at the door. an old dog. super sweet. she'd thrown up all over the hallway, though. olivia's mom rushes to get paper towels while the dad picks the dog up like she's a baby.

what's up, ol' girlie? he says, and the dog's in heaven, tongue hanging out, tail wagging, legs in the air at awkward angles.

dad, tell justin how you got daisy, says olivia.

yeah! says auggie.

the dad smiles and sits down in a chair with the dog still cradled in his arms. it's obvious he's told this story lots of times and they all love to hear it.

so i'm coming home from the subway one day, he says, and a homeless guy i've never seen in this neighborhood before is pushing this floppy mutt in a stroller, and he comes up to me and says, hey, mister, wanna buy my dog? and without even thinking about it, i say sure, how much you want? and he says ten bucks, so i give him the twenty dollars i have in my wallet and he hands me the dog. justin, i'm telling you, you've never smelled anything so bad in your life! she stank so much i can't even tell you! so i took her right from there to the vet down the street and then i brought her home.

didn't even call me first, by the way! the mom interjects as she cleans the floor, to see if i'm okay with his bringing home some homeless guy's dog.

the dog actually looks over at the mom when she says this, like she understands everything everyone is saying about her. she's a happy dog, like she knows she lucked out that day finding this family.

i kind of know how she feels. i like olivia's family. they laugh a lot.

my family's not like this at all. my mom and dad got divorced when i was four and they pretty much hate each other. i grew up spending half of every week in my dad's apartment in chelsea and the other half in my mom's place in brooklyn heights. i have a half brother who's five years older than me and barely knows i exist. for as long as i can remember, i've felt like my parents could hardly wait for me to be old enough to take care of myself. "you can go to the store by yourself." "here's the key to the apartment." it's funny how there's a word like overprotective to describe some parents, but no word that means the opposite. what word do you use to describe parents who don't protect enough? underprotective? neglectful? self-involved? lame? all of the above.

olivia's family tell each other "i love you" all the time.

i can't remember the last time anyone in my family said that to me.  
by the time i go home, my tics have all stopped.

## OUR TOWN

we're doing the play *our town* for the spring show this year. olivia dares me to try out for the lead role, the stage manager, and somehow i get it. total fluke. never got any lead roles in anything before. i tell olivia she brings me good luck. unfortunately, she doesn't get the female lead, emily gibbs. the pink-haired girl named miranda gets it. olivia gets a bit part and is also the emily understudy. i'm actually more disappointed than olivia is. she almost seems relieved. i don't love people staring at me, she says, which is sort of strange coming from such a pretty girl. a part of me thinks maybe she blew her audition on purpose.

the spring show is at the end of april. it's mid-march now, so that's less than six weeks to memorize my part. plus rehearsal time. plus practicing with my band. plus finals. plus spending time with olivia. it's going to be a rough six weeks, that's for sure. mr. davenport, the drama teacher, is already manic about the whole thing. will drive us crazy by the time it's over, no doubt. i heard through the grapevine that he'd been planning on doing *the elephant man* but changed it to *our town* at the last minute, and that change took a week off of our rehearsal schedule.

not looking forward to the craziness of the next month and a half.



## Ladybug

olivia and i are sitting on her front stoop. she's helping me with my lines. it's a warm march evening, almost like summer. the sky is still bright cyan but the sun is low and the sidewalks are streaked with long shadows.

i'm reciting: yes, the sun's come up over a thousand times. summers and winters have cracked the mountains a little bit more and the rains have brought down some of the dirt. some babies that weren't even born before have begun talking regular sentences already; and a number of people who thought they were right young and spry have noticed that they can't bound up a flight of stairs like they used to, without their heart fluttering a little....

i shake my head. can't remember the rest.

all that can happen in a thousand days, olivia prompts me, reading from the script.

right, right, right, i say, shaking my head. i sigh. i'm wiped, olivia. how the heck am i going to remember all these lines?

you will, she answers confidently. she reaches out and cups her hands over a ladybug that appears out of nowhere. see? a good luck sign, she says, slowly lifting her top hand to reveal the ladybug walking on the palm of her other hand.

good luck or just the hot weather, i joke.

of course good luck, she answers, watching the ladybug crawl up her wrist. there should be a thing about making a wish on a ladybug. auggie and i used to do that with fireflies when we were little. she cups her hand over the ladybug again. come on, make a wish. close your eyes.

i dutifully close my eyes. a long second passes, then i open them.

did you make a wish? she asks.

yep.

she smiles, uncups her hands, and the ladybug, as if on cue, spreads its wings and flits away.

don't you want to know what I wished for? i ask, kissing her.

no, she answers shyly, looking up at the sky, which, at this very moment, is the exact color of her eyes.

i made a wish, too, she says mysteriously, but she has so many things she could wish for I have no idea what she's thinking.

## The Bus Stop

olivia's mom, auggie, jack, and daisy come down the stoop just as i'm saying goodbye to olivia. slightly awkward since we are in the middle of a nice long kiss.

hey, guys, says the mom, pretending not to see anything, but the two boys are giggling.

hi, mrs. pullman.

please call me isabel, justin, she says again. it's like the third time she's told me this, so i really need to start calling her that.

i'm heading home, i say, as if to explain.

oh, are you heading to the subway? she says, following the dog with a newspaper. can you walk jack to the bus stop?

no problem.

that okay with you, jack? the mom asks him, and he shrugs. justin, can you stay with him till the bus comes?

of course!

we all say our goodbyes. olivia winks at me.

you don't have to stay with me, says jack as we're walking up the block. i take the bus by myself all the time. auggie's mom is way too overprotective.

he's got a low gravelly voice, like a little tough guy. he kind of looks like one of those little-rascal kids in old black-and-white movies, like he should be wearing a newsboy cap and knickers.

we get to the bus stop and the schedule says the bus will be there in eight minutes. i'll wait with you, i tell him.

up to you. he shrugs. can i borrow a dollar? i want some gum.

i fish a dollar out of my pocket and watch him cross the street to the grocery store on the corner. he seems too small to be walking around by himself, somehow. then i think how i was that young when

i was taking the subway by myself. way too young. i'm going to be an overprotective dad someday, i know it. my kids are going to know i care.

i'm waiting there a minute or two when i notice three kids walking up the block from the other direction. they walk right past the grocery store, but one of them looks inside and nudges the other two, and they all back up and look inside. i can tell they're up to no good, all elbowing each other, laughing. one of them is jack's height but the other two look much bigger, more like teens. they hide behind the fruit stand in front of the store, and when jack walks out, they trail behind him, making loud throw-up noises. jack casually turns around at the corner to see who they are and they run away, high-fiving each other and laughing. little jerks.

jack crosses the street like nothing happened and stands next to me at the bus stop, blowing a bubble.

friends of yours? i finally say.

ha, he says. he's trying to smile but i can see he's upset.

just some jerks from my school, he says. a kid named julian and his two gorillas, henry and miles.

do they bother you like that a lot?

no, they've never done that before. they'd never do that in school or they'd get kicked out. julian doesn't even live around here, so i guess it was just bad luck running into him.

oh, okay. i nod.

it's not a big deal, he assures me.

we both automatically look down amesfort avenue to see if the bus is coming.

we're sort of in a war, he says after a minute, as if that explains everything. then he pulls out this crumpled piece of loose-leaf paper from his jean pocket and gives it to me. i unfold it, and it's a list of names in three columns. he's turned the whole grade against me, says jack.

not the whole grade, i point out, looking down at the list.

he leaves me notes in my locker that say stuff like *everybody hates you*.

you should tell your teacher about that.

jack looks at me like i'm an idiot and shakes his head.

anyway, you have all these neutrals, i say, pointing to the list. if you get them on your side, things will even up a bit.

yeah, well, that's really going to happen, he says sarcastically.

why not?

he shoots me another look like i am absolutely the stupidest guy he's ever talked to in the world.

what? i say.

he shakes his head like i'm hopeless. let's just say, he says, i'm friends with someone who isn't exactly the most popular kid in the school.

then it hits me, what's he's not coming out and saying: august. this is all about his being friends with august. and he doesn't want to tell me because i'm the sister's boyfriend. yeah, of course, makes sense.

we see the bus coming down amesfort avenue.

well, just hang in there, i tell him, handing back the paper. middle school is about as bad as it gets, and then it gets better. everything'll work out.

he shrugs and shoves the list back into his pocket.

we wave bye when he gets on the bus, and i watch it pull away.

when i get to the subway station two blocks away, i see the same three kids hanging out in front of the bagel place next door. they're still laughing and yuck-yucking each other like they're some kind of gangbangers, little rich boys in expensive skinny jeans acting tough.

don't know what possesses me, but i take my glasses off, put them in my pocket, and tuck my fiddle case under my arm so the pointy side is facing up. i walk over to them, my face scrunched up, mean-looking. they look at me, laughs dying on their lips when they see me, ice cream cones at odd angles.

yo, listen up. don't mess with jack, i say really slowly, gritting my teeth, my voice all clint eastwood tough-guy. mess with him again and you will be very, *very* sorry. and then i tap my fiddle case for effect.

got it?

they nod in unison, ice cream dripping onto their hands.  
good. i nod mysteriously, then sprint down the subway two steps at a time.

## Rehearsal

the play is taking up most of my time as we get closer to opening night. lots of lines to remember. long monologues where it's just me talking. olivia had this great idea, though, and it's helping. i have my fiddle with me onstage and play it a bit while i'm talking. It's not written that way, but mr. davenport thinks it adds an extra-folksy element to have the stage manager plucking on a fiddle. and for me it's so great because whenever i need a second to remember my next line, i just start playing a little "soldier's joy" on my fiddle and it buys me some time.

i've gotten to know the kids in the show a lot better, especially the pink-haired girl who plays emily. turns out she's not nearly as stuck-up as i thought she was, given the crowd she hangs out with. her boyfriend's this built jock who's a big deal on the varsity sports circuit at school. it's a whole world that i have nothing to do with, so i'm kind of surprised that this miranda girl turns out to be kind of nice.

one day we're sitting on the floor backstage waiting for the tech guys to fix the main spotlight.

so how long have you and olivia been dating? she asks out of the blue.

about four months now, i say.

have you met her brother? she says casually.

it's so unexpected that i can't hide my surprise.

you know olivia's brother? i ask.

via didn't tell you? we used to be good friends. i've known auggie since he was a baby.

oh, yeah, i think i knew that, i answer. i don't want to let on that olivia had not told me any of this. i don't want to let on how

surprised i am that she called her via. nobody but olivia's family calls her via, and here this pink-haired girl, who i thought was a stranger, is calling her via.

miranda laughs and shakes her head but she doesn't say anything. there's an awkward silence and then she starts fishing through her bag and pulls out her wallet. she rifles through a couple of pictures and then hands one to me. it's of a little boy in a park on a sunny day. he's wearing shorts and a t-shirt—and an astronaut helmet that covers his entire head.

it was like a hundred degrees that day, she says, smiling at the picture. but he wouldn't take that helmet off for anything. he wore it for like two years straight, in the winter, in the summer, at the beach. it was crazy.

yeah, i've seen pictures in olivia's house.

i'm the one who gave him that helmet, she says. she sounds a little proud of that. she takes the picture and carefully inserts it back into her wallet.

cool, i answer.

so you're okay with it? she says, looking at me.

i look at her blankly. okay with what?

she raises her eyebrows like she doesn't believe me. you know what i'm talking about, she says, and takes a long drink from her water bottle. let's face it, she continues, the universe was not kind to auggie pullman.



## Bird

why didn't you tell me that you and miranda navas used to be friends? i say to olivia the next day. i'm really annoyed at her for not telling me this.

it's not a big deal, she answers defensively, looking at me like i'm weird.

it is a big deal, i say. i looked like an idiot. how could you not tell me? you've always acted like you don't even know her.

i don't know her, she answers quickly. i don't know who that pink-haired cheerleader is. the girl i knew was a total dork who collected american girl dolls.

oh come on, olivia.

you come on!

you could have mentioned it to me at some point, i say quietly, pretending not to notice the big fat tear that's suddenly rolling down her cheek.

she shrugs, fighting back bigger tears.

it's okay, i'm not mad, i say, thinking the tears are about me.

i honestly don't care if you're mad, she says spitefully.

oh, that's real nice, i fire back.

she doesn't say anything. the tears are about to come.

olivia, what's the matter? i say.

she shakes her head like she doesn't want to talk about it, but all of a sudden the tears start rolling a mile a minute.

i'm sorry, it's not you, justin. i'm not crying because of you, she finally says through her tears.

then why are you crying?

because i'm an awful person.

what are you talking about?

she's not looking at me, wiping her tears with the palm of her hand.  
i haven't told my parents about the show, she says quickly.

i shake my head because i don't quite get what she's telling me.  
that's okay, i say. it's not too late, there are still tickets available—

i don't want them to come to the show, justin, she interrupts impatiently. don't you see what i'm saying? i don't want them to come! if they come, they'll bring auggie with them, and i just don't feel like ...

here she's hit by another round of crying that doesn't let her finish talking. i put my arm around her.

i'm an awful person! she says through her tears.

you're not an awful person, i say softly.

yes i am! she sobs. it's just been so nice being in a new school where nobody knows about him, you know? nobody's whispering about it behind my back. it's just been so nice, justin. but if he comes to the play, then everyone will talk about it, everyone will know.... i don't know why i'm feeling like this.... i swear i've never been embarrassed by him before.

i know, i know, i say, soothing her. you're entitled, olivia. you've dealt with a lot your whole life.

olivia reminds me of a bird sometimes, how her feathers get all ruffled when she's mad. and when she's fragile like this, she's a little lost bird looking for its nest.

so i give her my wing to hide under.

## The Universe

i can't sleep tonight. my head is full of thoughts that won't turn off. lines from my monologues. elements of the periodic table that i'm supposed to be memorizing. theorems i'm supposed to be understanding. olivia. auggie.

miranda's words keep coming back: the universe was not kind to auggie pullman.

i'm thinking about that a lot and everything it means. she's right about that. the universe was not kind to auggie pullman. what did that little kid ever do to deserve his sentence? what did the parents do? or olivia? she once mentioned that some doctor told her parents that the odds of someone getting the same combination of syndromes that came together to make auggie's face were like one in four million. so doesn't that make the universe a giant lottery, then? you purchase a ticket when you're born. and it's all just random whether you get a good ticket or a bad ticket. it's all just luck.

my head swirls on this, but then softer thoughts soothe, like a flattened third on a major chord. no, no, it's not all random, if it really was all random, the universe would abandon us completely. and the universe doesn't. it takes care of its most fragile creations in ways we can't see. like with parents who adore you blindly. and a big sister who feels guilty for being human over you. and a little gravelly-voiced kid whose friends have left him over you. and even a pink-haired girl who carries your picture in her wallet. maybe it is a lottery, but the universe makes it all even out in the end. the universe takes care of all its birds.

## Part Six



# AUGUST

What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how  
infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and  
admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension  
how like a god! the beauty of the world! ...

—Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

## North Pole

The Spud Lamp was a big hit at the science fair. Jack and I got an A for it. It was the first A Jack got in any class all year long, so he was psyched.

All the science-fair projects were set up on tables in the gym. It was the same setup as the Egyptian Museum back in December, except this time there were volcanoes and molecule dioramas on the tables instead of pyramids and pharaohs. And instead of the kids taking our parents around to look at everybody else's artifact, we had to stand by our tables while all the parents wandered around the room and came over to us one by one.

Here's the math on that one: Sixty kids in the grade equals sixty sets of parents—and doesn't even include grandparents. So that's a minimum of one hundred and twenty pairs of eyes that find their way over to me. Eyes that aren't as used to me as their kids' eyes are by now. It's like how compass needles always point north, no matter which way you're facing. All those eyes are compasses, and I'm like the North Pole to them.

That's why I still don't like school events that include parents. I don't hate them as much as I did at the beginning of the school year. Like the Thanksgiving Sharing Festival: that was the worst one, I think. That was the first time I had to face the parents all at once. The Egyptian Museum came after that, but that one was okay because I got to dress up as a mummy and nobody noticed me. Then came the winter concert, which I totally hated because I had to sing in the chorus. Not only can I not sing at all, but it felt like I was on display. The New Year Art Show wasn't quite as bad, but it was still annoying. They put up our artwork in the hallways all over the school and had the parents come and check it out. It was like starting school all over

again, having unsuspecting adults pass me on the stairway.

Anyway, it's not that I care that people react to me. Like I've said a gazillion times: I'm used to that by now. I don't let it bother me. It's like when you go outside and it's drizzling a little. You don't put on boots for a drizzle. You don't even open your umbrella. You walk through it and barely notice your hair getting wet.

But when it's a huge gym full of parents, the drizzle becomes like this total hurricane. Everyone's eyes hit you like a wall of water.

Mom and Dad hang around my table a lot, along with Jack's parents. It's kind of funny how parents actually end up forming the same little groups their kids form. Like my parents and Jack's and Summer's mom all like and get along with each other. And I see Julian's parents hang out with Henry's parents and Miles's parents. And even the two Maxes' parents hang out together. It's so funny.

I told Mom and Dad about it later when we were walking home, and they thought it was a funny observation.

I guess it's true that like seeks like, said Mom.

# The Auggie Doll

For a while, the “war” was all we talked about. February was when it was really at its worst. That’s when practically nobody was talking to us, and Julian had started leaving notes in our lockers. The notes to Jack were stupid, like: *You stink, big cheese!* and *Nobody likes you anymore!*

I got notes like: *Freak!* And another that said: *Get out of our school, orc!*

Summer thought we should report the notes to Ms. Rubin, who was the middle-school dean, or even Mr. Tushman, but we thought that would be like snitching. Anyway, it’s not like we didn’t leave notes, too, though ours weren’t really mean. They were kind of funny and sarcastic.

One was: *You’re so pretty, Julian! I love you. Will you marry me? Love, Beulah*

Another was: *Love your hair! xox Beulah*

Another was: *You’re a babe. Tickle my feet. XO Beulah*

Beulah was a made-up person that me and Jack came up with. She had really gross habits, like eating the green stuff in between her toes and sucking on her knuckles. And we figured someone like that would have a real crush on Julian, who looked and acted like someone in a KidzBop commercial.

There were also a couple of times in February when Julian, Miles, and Henry played tricks on Jack. They didn’t play tricks on me, I think, because they knew that if they got caught “bullying” me, it would be big-time trouble for them. Jack, they figured, was an easier target. So one time they stole his gym shorts and played Monkey in the Middle with them in the locker room. Another time Miles, who sat next to Jack in homeroom, swiped Jack’s worksheet off his desk,

crumpled it in a ball, and tossed it to Julian across the room. This wouldn't have happened if Ms. Petosa had been there, of course, but there was a substitute teacher that day, and subs never really know what's going on. Jack was good about this stuff. He never let them see he was upset, though I think sometimes he was.

The other kids in the grade knew about the war. Except for Savanna's group, the girls were neutral at first. But by March they were getting sick of it. And so were some of the boys. Like another time when Julian was dumping some pencil-sharpener shavings into Jack's backpack, Amos, who was usually tight with them, grabbed the backpack out of Julian's hands and returned it to Jack. It was starting to feel like the majority of boys weren't buying into Julian anymore.

Then a few weeks ago, Julian started spreading this ridiculous rumor that Jack had hired some "hit man" to "get" him and Miles and Henry. This lie was so pathetic that people were actually laughing about him behind his back. At that point, any boys who had still been on his side now jumped ship and were clearly neutral. So by the end of March, only Miles and Henry were on Julian's side—and I think even they were getting tired of the war by then.

I'm pretty sure everyone's stopped playing the Plague game behind my back, too. No one really cringes if I bump into them anymore, and people borrow my pencils without acting like the pencil has cooties.

People even joke around with me now sometimes. Like the other day I saw Maya writing a note to Ellie on a piece of Uglydoll stationery, and I don't know why, but I just kind of randomly said: "Did you know the guy who created the Uglydolls based them on me?"

Maya looked at me with her eyes wide open like she totally believed me. Then, when she realized I was only kidding, she thought it was the funniest thing in the world.

"You are so funny, August!" she said, and then she told Ellie and some of the other girls what I had just said, and they all thought it was funny, too. Like at first they were shocked, but then when they saw I was laughing about it, they knew it was okay to laugh about it, too. And the next day I found a little Uglydoll key chain sitting on my



chair with a nice little note from Maya that said: *For the nicest Auggie Doll in the world! XO Maya.*

Six months ago stuff like that would never have happened, but now it happens more and more.

Also, people have been really nice about the hearing aids I started wearing.

## Lobot

Ever since I was little, the doctors told my parents that someday I'd need hearing aids. I don't know why this always freaked me out a bit: maybe because anything to do with my ears bothers me a lot.

My hearing was getting worse, but I hadn't told anyone about it. The ocean sound that was always in my head had been getting louder. It was drowning out people's voices, like I was underwater. I couldn't hear teachers if I sat in the back of the class. But I knew if I told Mom or Dad about it, I'd end up with hearing aids—and I was hoping I could make it through the fifth grade without having that happen.

But then in my annual checkup in October I flunked the audiology test and the doctor was like, "Dude, it's time." And he sent me to a special ear doctor who took impressions of my ears.

Out of all my features, my ears are the ones I hate the most. They're like tiny closed fists on the sides of my face. They're too low on my head, too. They look like squashed pieces of pizza dough sticking out of the top of my neck or something. Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating a little. But I really hate them.

When the ear doctor first pulled the hearing aids out for me and Mom to look at, I groaned.

"I am not wearing that thing," I announced, folding my arms in front of me.

"I know they probably look kind of big," said the ear doctor, "but we had to attach them to the headband because we had no other way of making them so they'd stay in your ears."

See, normal hearing aids usually have a part that wraps around the outer ear to hold the inner bud in place. But in my case, since I don't have outer ears, they had to put the earbuds on this heavy-duty

headband that was supposed to wrap around the back of my head.

"I can't wear that, Mom," I whined.

"You'll hardly notice them," said Mom, trying to be cheerful. "They look like headphones."

"Headphones? Look at them, Mom!" I said angrily. "I'll look like Lobot!"

"Which one is Lobot?" said Mom calmly.

"Lobot?" The ear doctor smiled as he looked at the headphones and made some adjustments. "*The Empire Strikes Back*? The bald guy with the cool bionic radio-transmitter thing that wraps around the back of his skull?"

"I'm drawing a blank," said Mom.

"You know *Star Wars* stuff?" I asked the ear doctor.

"Know *Star Wars* stuff?" he answered, slipping the thing over my head. "I practically invented *Star Wars* stuff!" He leaned back in his chair to see how the headband fit and then took it off again.

"Now, Auggie, I want to explain what all this is," he said, pointing to the different parts of one of the hearing aids. "This curved piece of plastic over here connects to the tubing on the ear mold. That's why we took those impressions back in December, so that this part that goes inside your ear fits nice and snug. This part here is called the tone hook, okay? And this thing is the special part we've attached to this cradle here."

"The Lobot part," I said miserably.

"Hey, Lobot is cool," said the ear doctor. "It's not like we're saying you're going to look like Jar Jar, you know? That would be bad." He slid the earphones on my head again carefully. "There you go, August. So how's that?"

"Totally uncomfortable!" I said.

"You'll get used to them very quickly," he said.

I looked in the mirror. My eyes started tearing up. All I saw were these tubes jutting out from either side of my head—like antennas.

"Do I really have to wear this, Mom?" I said, trying not to cry. "I hate them. They don't make any difference!"

"Give it a second, buddy," said the doctor. "I haven't even turned

them on yet. Wait until you hear the difference: you'll want to wear them."

"No I won't!"

And then he turned them on.

## Hearing Brightly

How can I describe what I heard when the doctor turned on my hearing aids? Or what I didn't hear? It's too hard to think of words. The ocean just wasn't living inside my head anymore. It was gone. I could hear sounds like shiny lights in my brain. It was like when you're in a room where one of the lightbulbs on the ceiling isn't working, but you don't realize how dark it is until someone changes the lightbulb and then you're like, whoa, it's so bright in here! I don't know if there's a word that means the same as "bright" in terms of hearing, but I wish I knew one, because my ears were hearing brightly now.

"How does it sound, Auggie?" said the ear doctor. "Can you hear me okay, buddy?"

I looked at him and smiled but I didn't answer.

"Sweetie, do you hear anything different?" said Mom.

"You don't have to shout, Mom." I nodded happily.

"Are you hearing better?" asked the ear doctor.

"I don't hear that noise anymore," I answered. "It's so quiet in my ears."

"The white noise is gone," he said, nodding. He looked at me and winked. "I told you you'd like what you heard, August." He made more adjustments on the left hearing aid.

"Does it sound very different, love?" Mom asked.

"Yeah." I nodded. "It sounds ... lighter."

"That's because you have bionic hearing now, buddy," said the ear doctor, adjusting the right side. "Now touch here." He put my hand behind the hearing aid. "Do you feel that? That's the volume. You have to find the volume that works for you. We're going to do that next. Well, what do you think?" He picked up a small mirror and had

me look in the big mirror at how the hearing aids looked in the back. My hair covered most of the headband. The only part that peeked out was the tubing.

“Are you okay with your new bionic Lobot hearing aids?” the ear doctor asked, looking in the mirror at me.

“Yeah,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Thank you so much, Dr. James,” said Mom.

The first day I showed up at school with the hearing aids, I thought kids would make a big deal about it. But no one did. Summer was glad I could hear better, and Jack said it made me look like an FBI agent or something. But that was it. Mr. Browne asked me about it in English class, but it wasn’t like, what the heck is that thing on your head?! It was more like, “If you ever need me to repeat something, Auggie, make sure you tell me, okay?”

Now that I look back, I don’t know why I was so stressed about it all this time. Funny how sometimes you worry a lot about something and it turns out to be nothing.

## Via's Secret

A couple of days after spring break ended, Mom found out that Via hadn't told her about a school play that was happening at her high school the next week. And Mom was mad. Mom doesn't really get mad that much (though Dad would disagree with that), but she was really mad at Via for that. She and Via got into a huge fight. I could hear them yelling at each other in Via's room. My bionic Lobot ears could hear Mom saying: "But what is with you lately, Via? You're moody and taciturn and secretive...."

"What is so wrong with my not telling you about a stupid play?" Via practically screamed. "I don't even have a speaking part in it!"

"Your boyfriend does! Don't you want us to see him in it?"

"No! Actually, I don't!"

"Stop screaming!"

"You screamed first! Just leave me alone, okay? You've been really good about leaving me alone my whole life, so why you choose high school to suddenly be interested I have no idea...."

Then I don't know what Mom answered because it all got very quiet, and even my bionic Lobot ears couldn't pick up a signal.

## My Cave

By dinner they seemed to have made up. Dad was working late. Daisy was sleeping. She'd thrown up a lot earlier in the day, and Mom made an appointment to take her to the vet the next morning.

The three of us were sitting down and no one was talking.

Finally, I said: "So, are we going to see Justin in a play?"

Via didn't answer but looked down at her plate.

"You know, Auggie," said Mom quietly. "I hadn't realized what play it was, and it really isn't something that would be interesting to kids your age."

"So I'm not invited?" I said, looking at Via.

"I didn't say that," said Mom. "It's just I don't think it's something you'd enjoy."

"You'd get totally bored," said Via, like she was accusing me of something.

"Are you and Dad going?" I asked.

"Dad'll go," said Mom. "I'll stay home with you."

"What?" Via yelled at Mom. "Oh great, so you're going to punish me for being honest by not going?"

"You didn't want us to go in the first place, remember?" answered Mom.

"But now that you know about it, of course I want you to go!" said Via.

"Well, I've got to weigh *everyone's* feelings here, Via," said Mom.

"What are you two talking about?" I shouted.

"Nothing!" they both snapped at the same time.

"Just something about Via's school that has nothing to do with you," said Mom.

"You're lying," I said.