

“Excuse me?” said Mom, kind of shocked. Even Via looked surprised.

“I said you’re lying!” I shouted. “You’re lying!” I screamed at Via, getting up. “You’re both liars! You’re both lying to my face like I’m an idiot!”

“Sit down, Auggie!” said Mom, grabbing my arm.

I pulled my arm away and pointed at Via.

“You think I don’t know what’s going on?” I yelled. “You just don’t want your brand-new fancy high school friends to know your brother’s a freak!”

“Auggie!” Mom yelled. “That’s not true!”

“Stop lying to me, Mom!” I shrieked. “Stop treating me like a baby! I’m not retarded! I know what’s going on!”

I ran down the hallway to my room and slammed the door behind me so hard that I actually heard little pieces of the wall crumble inside the door frame. Then I plopped onto my bed and pulled the covers up on top of me. I threw my pillows over my disgusting face and then piled all my stuffed animals on top of the pillows, like I was inside a little cave. If I could walk around with a pillow over my face all the time, I would.

I don’t even know how I got so mad. I wasn’t really mad at the beginning of dinner. I wasn’t even sad. But then all of a sudden it all kind of just exploded out of me. I knew Via didn’t want me to go to her stupid play. And I knew why.

I figured Mom would follow me into my room right away, but she didn’t. I wanted her to find me inside my cave of stuffed animals, so I waited a little more, but even after ten minutes she still didn’t come in after me. I was pretty surprised. She always checks on me when I’m in my room, upset about stuff.

I pictured Mom and Via talking about me in the kitchen. I figured Via was feeling really, really, really bad. I pictured Mom totally laying on the guilt. And Dad would be mad at her when he came home, too.

I made a little hole through the pile of pillows and stuffed animals and peeked at the clock on my wall. Half an hour had passed and

Mom still hadn't come into my room. I tried to listen for the sounds in the other rooms. Were they still having dinner? What was going on?

Finally, the door opened. It was Via. She didn't even bother coming over to my bed, and she didn't come in softly like I thought she would. She came in quickly.

Goodbye

“Auggie,” said Via. “Come quick. Mom needs to talk to you.”

“I’m not apologizing!”

“This isn’t about you!” she yelled. “Not everything in the world is about you, Auggie! Now hurry up. Daisy’s sick. Mom’s taking her to the emergency vet. Come say goodbye.”

I pushed the pillows off my face and looked up at her. That’s when I saw she was crying. “What do you mean ‘goodbye’?”

“Come on!” she said, holding out her hand.

I took her hand and followed her down the hall to the kitchen. Daisy was lying down sideways on the floor with her legs straight out in front of her. She was panting a lot, like she’d been running in the park. Mom was kneeling beside her, stroking the top of her head.

“What happened?” I asked.

“She just started whimpering all of a sudden,” said Via, kneeling down next to Mom.

I looked down at Mom, who was crying, too.

“I’m taking her to the animal hospital downtown,” she said. “The taxi’s coming to pick me up.”

“The vet’ll make her better, right?” I said.

Mom looked at me. “I hope so, honey,” she said quietly. “But I honestly don’t know.”

“Of course he will!” I said.

“Daisy’s been sick a lot lately, Auggie. And she’s old ...”

“But they can fix her,” I said, looking at Via to agree with me, but Via wouldn’t look up at me.

Mom’s lips were trembling. “I think it might be time we say goodbye to Daisy, Auggie. I’m sorry.”

“No!” I said.

“We don’t want her to suffer, Auggie,” she said.

The phone rang. Via picked it up, said, “Okay, thanks,” and then hung up.

“The taxi’s outside,” she said, wiping her tears with the backs of her hands.

“Okay, Auggie, open the door for me, sweetie?” said Mom, picking Daisy up very gently like she was a huge droopy baby.

“Please, no, Mommy?” I cried, putting myself in front of the door.

“Honey, please,” said Mom. “She’s very heavy.”

“What about Daddy?” I cried.

“He’s meeting me at the hospital,” Mom said. “He doesn’t want Daisy to suffer, Auggie.”

Via moved me away from the door and held it open for Mom.

“My cell phone’s on if you need anything,” Mom said to Via. “Can you cover her with the blanket?”

Via nodded, but she was crying hysterically now.

“Say goodbye to Daisy, kids,” Mom said, tears streaming down her face.

“I love you, Daisy,” Via said, kissing Daisy on the nose. “I love you so much.”

“Bye, little girlie ...,” I whispered into Daisy’s ear. “I love you....”

Mom carried Daisy down the stoop. The taxi driver had opened the back door and we watched her get in. Just before she closed the door, Mom looked up at us standing by the entrance to the building and she gave us a little wave. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look sadder.

“I love you, Mommy!” said Via.

“I love you, Mommy!” I said. “I’m sorry, Mommy!”

Mom blew a kiss to us and closed the door. We watched the car leave and then Via closed the door. She looked at me a second, and then she hugged me very, very tight while we both cried a million tears.

Daisy's Toys

Justin came over about half an hour later. He gave me a big hug and said: "Sorry, Auggie." We all sat down in the living room, not saying anything. For some reason, Via and I had taken all of Daisy's toys from around the house and had put them in a little pile on the coffee table. Now we just stared at the pile.

"She really is the greatest dog in the world," said Via.

"I know," said Justin, rubbing Via's back.

"She just started whimpering, like all of a sudden?" I said.

Via nodded. "Like two seconds after you left the table," she said. "Mom was going to go after you, but Daisy just started, like, whimpering."

"Like how?" I said.

"Just whimpering, I don't know," said Via.

"Like howling?" I asked.

"Auggie, like whimpering!" she answered impatiently. "She just started moaning, like something was really hurting her. And she was panting like crazy. Then she just kind of plopped down, and Mom went over and tried to pick her up, and whatever, she was obviously hurting. She bit Mom."

"What?" I said.

"When Mom tried to touch her stomach, Daisy bit her hand," Via explained.

"Daisy never bites anybody!" I answered.

"She wasn't herself," said Justin. "She was obviously in pain."

"Daddy was right," said Via. "We shouldn't have let her get this bad."

"What do you mean?" I said. "He knew she was sick?"

"Auggie, Mom's taken her to the vet like three times in the last two

months. She's been throwing up left and right. Haven't you noticed?"

"But I didn't know she was sick!"

Via didn't say anything, but she put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer to her. I started to cry again.

"I'm sorry, Auggie," she said softly. "I'm really sorry about everything, okay? You forgive me? You know how much I love you, right?"

I nodded. Somehow that fight didn't matter much now.

"Was Mommy bleeding?" I asked.

"It was just a nip," said Via. "Right there." She pointed to the bottom of her thumb to show me exactly where Daisy had bitten Mom.

"Did it hurt her?"

"Mommy's okay, Auggie. She's fine."

Mom and Dad came home two hours later. We knew the second they opened the door and Daisy wasn't with them that Daisy was gone. We all sat down in the living room around the pile of Daisy's toys. Dad told us what happened at the animal hospital, how the vet took Daisy for some X-rays and blood tests, then came back and told them she had a huge mass in her stomach. She was having trouble breathing. Mom and Dad didn't want her to suffer, so Daddy picked her up in his arms like he always liked to do, with her legs straight up in the air, and he and Mom kissed her goodbye over and over again and whispered to her while the vet put a needle into her leg. And then after about a minute she died in Daddy's arms. It was so peaceful, Daddy said. She wasn't in any pain at all. Like she was just going to sleep. A couple of times while he talked, Dad's voice got trembly and he cleared his throat.

I've never seen Dad cry before, but I saw him cry tonight. I had gone into Mom and Dad's bedroom looking for Mom to put me to bed, but saw Dad sitting on the edge of the bed, taking off his socks. His back was to the door, so he didn't know I was there. At first I thought he was laughing because his shoulders were shaking, but then he put his palms on his eyes and I realized he was crying. It was the quietest crying I've ever heard. Like a whisper. I was going to go

over to him, but then I thought maybe he was whisper-crying because he didn't want me or anyone else to hear him. So I walked out and went to Via's room, and I saw Mom lying next to Via on the bed, and Mom was whispering to Via, who was crying.

So I went to my bed and put on my pajamas without anyone telling me to and put the night-light on and turned the light off and crawled into the little mountain of stuffed animals I had left on my bed earlier. It felt like that all had happened a million years ago. I took my hearing aids off and put them on the night table and pulled the covers up to my ears and imagined Daisy snuggling with me, her big wet tongue licking my face all over like it was her favorite face in the world. And that's how I fell asleep.

Heaven

I woke up later on and it was still dark. I got out of bed and walked into Mom and Dad's bedroom.

"Mommy?" I whispered. It was completely dark, so I couldn't see her open her eyes. "Mommy?"

"You okay, honey?" she said groggily.

"Can I sleep with you?"

Mom scooted over toward Daddy's side of the bed, and I snuggled up next to her. She kissed my hair.

"Is your hand okay?" I said. "Via told me Daisy bit you."

"It was only a nip," she whispered in my ear.

"Mommy ..." I started crying. "I'm sorry about what I said."

"Shhh ... There's nothing to be sorry about," she said, so quietly I could barely hear her. She was rubbing the side of her face against my face.

"Is Via ashamed of me?" I said.

"No, honey, no. You know she's not. She's just adjusting to a new school. It's not easy."

"I know."

"I know you know."

"I'm sorry I called you a liar."

"Go to sleep, sweet boy.... I love you so much."

"I love you so much, too, Mommy."

"Good night, honey," she said very softly.

"Mommy, is Daisy with Grans now?"

"I think so."

"Are they in heaven?"

"Yes."

"Do people look the same when they get to heaven?"

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Then how do people recognize each other?”

“I don’t know, sweetie.” She sounded tired. “They just feel it. You don’t need your eyes to love, right? You just feel it inside you. That’s how it is in heaven. It’s just love, and no one forgets who they love.”

She kissed me again.

“Now go to sleep, honey. It’s late. And I’m so tired.”

But I couldn’t go to sleep, even after I knew she had fallen asleep. I could hear Daddy sleeping, too, and I imagined I could hear Via sleeping down the hallway in her room. And I wondered if Daisy was sleeping in heaven right then. And if she was sleeping, was she dreaming about me? And I wondered how it would feel to be in heaven someday and not have my face matter anymore. Just like it never, ever mattered to Daisy.

Understudy

Via brought home three tickets to her school play a few days after Daisy died. We never mentioned the fight we had over dinner again. On the night of the play, right before she and Justin were leaving to get to their school early, she gave me a big hug and told me she loved me and she was proud to be my sister.

This was my first time in Via's new school. It was much bigger than her old school, and a thousand times bigger than my school. More hallways. More room for people. The only really bad thing about my bionic Lobot hearing aids was the fact that I couldn't wear a baseball cap anymore. In situations like these, baseball caps come in really handy. Sometimes I wish I could still get away with wearing that old astronaut helmet I used to wear when I was little. Believe it or not, people would think seeing a kid in an astronaut helmet was a lot less weird than seeing my face. Anyway, I kept my head down as I walked right behind Mom through the long bright hallways.

We followed the crowd to the auditorium, where students handed out programs at the front entrance. We found seats in the fifth row, close to the middle. As soon as we sat down, Mom started looking inside her pocketbook.

"I can't believe I forgot my glasses!" she said.

Dad shook his head. Mom was always forgetting her glasses, or her keys, or something or other. She is flaky that way.

"You want to move closer?" said Dad.

Mom squinted at the stage. "No, I can see okay."

"Speak now or forever hold your peace," said Dad.

"I'm fine," answered Mom.

"Look, there's Justin," I said to Dad, pointing out Justin's picture in the program.

"That's a nice picture of him," he answered, nodding.

"How come there's no picture of Via?" I said.

"She's an understudy," said Mom. "But, look: here's her name."

"Why do they call her an understudy?" I asked.

"Wow, look at Miranda's picture," said Mom to Dad. "I don't think I would have recognized her."

"Why do they call it understudy?" I repeated.

"It's what they call someone who replaces an actor if he can't perform for some reason," answered Mom.

"Did you hear Martin's getting remarried?" Dad said to Mom.

"Are you kidding me?!" Mom answered, like she was surprised.

"Who's Martin?" I asked.

"Miranda's father," Mom answered, and then to Dad: "Who told you?"

"I ran into Miranda's mother in the subway. She's not happy about it. He has a new baby on the way and everything."

"Wow," said Mom, shaking her head.

"What are you guys talking about?" I said.

"Nothing," answered Dad.

"But why do they call it understudy?" I said.

"I don't know, Auggie Doggie," Dad answered. "Maybe because the actors kind of study under the main actors or something? I really don't know."

I was going to say something else but then the lights went down. The audience got very quiet very quickly.

"Daddy, can you please not call me Auggie Doggie anymore?" I whispered in Dad's ear.

Dad smiled and nodded and gave me a thumbs-up.

The play started. The curtain opened. The stage was completely empty except for Justin, who was sitting on an old rickety chair tuning his fiddle. He was wearing an old-fashioned type of suit and a straw hat.

"This play is called 'Our Town,' " he said to the audience. "It was written by Thornton Wilder; produced and directed by Philip Davenport.... The name of the town is Grover's Corners, New

Hampshire—just across the Massachusetts line: latitude 42 degrees 40 minutes; longitude 70 degrees 37 minutes. The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7, 1901. The time is just before dawn.”

I knew right then and there that I was going to like the play. It wasn't like other school plays I've been to, like *The Wizard of Oz* or *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. No, this was grown-up seeming, and I felt smart sitting there watching it.

A little later in the play, a character named Mrs. Webb calls out for her daughter, Emily. I knew from the program that that was the part Miranda was playing, so I leaned forward to get a better look at her.

“That's Miranda,” Mom whispered to me, squinting at the stage when Emily walked out. “She looks so different....”

“It's not Miranda,” I whispered. “It's Via.”

“Oh my God!” said Mom, lurching forward in her seat.

“Shh!” said Dad.

“It's Via,” Mom whispered to him.

“I know,” whispered Dad, smiling. “Shhh!”

The Ending

The play was so amazing. I don't want to give away the ending, but it's the kind of ending that makes people in the audience teary. Mom totally lost it when Via-as-Emily said:

"Good-by, Good-by world! Good-by, Grover's Corners ... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths ... and sleeping and waking up. Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you!"

Via was actually crying while she was saying this. Like real tears: I could see them rolling down her cheeks. It was totally awesome.

After the curtain closed, everyone in the audience started clapping. Then the actors came out one by one. Via and Justin were the last ones out, and when they appeared, the whole audience rose to their feet.

"Bravo!" I heard Dad yelling through his hands.

"Why is everyone getting up?" I said.

"It's a standing ovation," said Mom, getting up.

So I got up and clapped and clapped. I clapped until my hands hurt. For a second, I imagined how cool it would be to be Via and Justin right then, having all these people standing up and cheering for them. I think there should be a rule that everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their lives.

Finally, after I don't know how many minutes, the line of actors onstage stepped back and the curtain closed in front of them. The clapping stopped and the lights went up and the audience started getting up to leave.

Me and Mom and Dad made our way to the backstage. Crowds of people were congratulating the performers, surrounding them, patting

them on the back. We saw Via and Justin at the center of the crowd, smiling at everyone, laughing and talking.

“Via!” shouted Dad, waving as he made his way through the crowd. When he got close enough, he hugged her and lifted her off the floor a little. “You were amazing, sweetheart!”

“Oh my God, Via!” Mom was screaming with excitement. “Oh my God, oh my God!” She was hugging Via so hard I thought Via would suffocate, but Via was laughing.

“You were brilliant!” said Dad.

“Brilliant!” Mom said, kind of nodding and shaking her head at the same time.

“And you, Justin,” said Dad, shaking Justin’s hand and giving him a hug at the same time. “You were fantastic!”

“Fantastic!” Mom repeated. She was, honestly, so emotional she could barely talk.

“What a shock to see you up there, Via!” said Dad.

“Mom didn’t even recognize you at first!” I said.

“I didn’t recognize you!” said Mom, her hand over her mouth.

“Miranda got sick right before the show started,” said Via, all out of breath. “There wasn’t even time to make an announcement.” I have to say she looked kind of strange, because she was wearing all this makeup and I’d never seen her like this before.

“And you just stepped in there right at the last minute?” said Dad. “Wow.”

“She was amazing, wasn’t she?” said Justin, his arm around Via.

“There wasn’t a dry eye in the house,” said Dad.

“Is Miranda okay?” I said, but no one heard me.

At that moment, a man who I think was their teacher came over to Justin and Via, clapping his hands.

“Bravo, bravo! Olivia and Justin!” He kissed Via on both cheeks.

“I flubbed a couple of lines,” said Via, shaking her head.

“But you got through it,” said the man, smiling ear to ear.

“Mr. Davenport, these are my parents,” said Via.

“You must be so proud of your girl!” he said, shaking their hands with both his hands.

“We are!”

“And this is my little brother, August,” said Via.

He looked like he was about to say something but suddenly froze when he looked at me.

“Mr. D,” said Justin, pulling him by the arm, “come meet my mom.”

Via was about to say something to me, but then someone else came over and started talking to her, and before I knew it, I was kind of alone in the crowd. I mean, I knew where Mom and Dad were, but there were so many people all around us, and people kept bumping into me, spinning me around a bit, giving me that one-two look, which made me feel kind of bad. I don’t know if it was because I was feeling hot or something, but I kind of started getting dizzy. People’s faces were blurring in my head. And their voices were so loud it was almost hurting my ears. I tried to turn the volume down on my Lobot ears, but I got confused and turned them louder at first, which kind of shocked me. And then I looked up and I didn’t see Mom or Dad or Via anywhere.

“Via?” I yelled out. I started pushing through the crowd to find Mom. “Mommy!” I really couldn’t see anything but people’s stomachs and ties all around me. “Mommy!”

Suddenly someone picked me up from behind.

“Look who’s here!” said a familiar voice, hugging me tight. I thought it was Via at first, but when I turned around, I was completely surprised. “Hey, Major Tom!” she said.

“Miranda!” I answered, and I gave her the tightest hug I could give.

Part Seven



MIRANDA

I forgot that I might see
So many beautiful things
I forgot that I might need
To find out what life could bring
—Andain, “Beautiful Things”

Camp Lies

My parents got divorced the summer before ninth grade. My father was with someone else right away. In fact, though my mother never said so, I think this was the reason they got divorced.

After the divorce, I hardly ever saw my father. And my mother acted stranger than ever. It's not that she was unstable or anything: just distant. Remote. My mother is the kind of person who has a happy face for the rest of the world but not a lot left over for me. She's never talked to me much—not about her feelings, her life. I don't know much about what she was like when she was my age. Don't know much about the things she liked or didn't like. The few times she mentioned her own parents, who I've never met, it was mostly about how she wanted to get as far away from them as she could once she'd grown up. She never told me why. I asked a few times, but she would pretend she hadn't heard me.

I didn't want to go to camp that summer. I had wanted to stay with her, to help her through the divorce. But she insisted I go away. I figured she wanted the alone time, so I gave it to her.

Camp was awful. I hated it. I thought it would be better being a junior counselor, but it wasn't. No one I knew from the previous year had come back, so I didn't know anyone—not a single person. I'm not even sure why, but I started playing this little make-believe game with the girls in the camp. They'd ask me stuff about myself, and I'd make things up: my parents are in Europe, I told them. I live in a huge townhouse on the nicest street in North River Heights. I have a dog named Daisy.

Then one day I blurted out that I had a little brother who was deformed. I have absolutely no idea why I said this: it just seemed like an interesting thing to say. And, of course, the reaction I got from

the little girls in the bungalow was dramatic. Really? So sorry! That must be tough! Et cetera. Et cetera. I regretted saying this the moment it escaped from my lips, of course: I felt like such a fake. If Via ever found out, I thought, she'd think I was such a weirdo. And I felt like a weirdo. But, I have to admit, there was a part of me that felt a little entitled to this lie. I've known Auggie since I was six years old. I've watched him grow up. I've played with him. I've watched all six episodes of *Star Wars* for his sake, so I could talk to him about the aliens and bounty hunters and all that. I'm the one that gave him the astronaut helmet he wouldn't take off for two years. I mean, I've kind of earned the right to think of him as my brother.

And the strangest thing is that these lies I told, these fictions, did wonders for my popularity. The other junior counselors heard it from the campers, and they were all over it. Never in my life have I ever been considered one of the "popular" girls in anything, but that summer in camp, for whatever reason, I was the girl everybody wanted to hang out with. Even the girls in bungalow 32 were totally into me. These were the girls at the top of the food chain. They said they liked my hair (though they changed it). They said they liked the way I did my makeup (though they changed that, too). They showed me how to turn my T-shirts into halter tops. We smoked. We snuck out late at night and took the path through the woods to the boys' camp. We hung out with boys.

When I got home from camp, I called Ella right away to make plans with her. I don't know why I didn't call Via. I guess I just didn't feel like talking about stuff with her. She would have asked me about my parents, about camp. Ella never really asked me about things. She was an easier friend to have in that way. She wasn't serious like Via. She was fun. She thought it was cool when I dyed my hair pink. She wanted to hear all about those trips through the woods late at night.

School

I hardly saw Via at school this year, and when I did it was awkward. It felt like she was judging me. I knew she didn't like my new look. I knew she didn't like my group of friends. I didn't much like hers. We never actually argued: we just drifted away. Ella and I badmouthed her to each other: She's such a prude, she's so this, she's so that. We knew we were being mean, but it was easier to ice her out if we pretended she had done something to us. The truth is she hadn't changed at all: we had. We'd become these other people, and she was still the person she'd always been. That annoyed me so much and I didn't know why.

Once in a while I'd look to see where she was sitting in the lunchroom, or check the elective lists to see what she'd signed up for. But except for a few nods in the hallway and an occasional "hello," we never really spoke to each other.

I noticed Justin about halfway through the school year. I hadn't noticed him at all before then, other than that he was this skinny cutish dude with thick glasses and longish hair who carried a violin everywhere. Then one day I saw him in front of the school with his arm around Via. "So Via has a boyfriend!" I said to Ella, kind of mocking. I don't know why it surprised me that she'd have a boyfriend. Out of the three of us, she was totally the prettiest: blue, blue eyes and long wavy dark hair. But she'd just never acted like she was at all interested in boys. She acted like she was too smart for that kind of stuff.

I had a boyfriend, too: a guy named Zack. When I told him I was choosing the theater elective, he shook his head and said: "Careful you don't turn into a drama geek." Not the most sympathetic dude in the world, but very cute. Very high up on the totem pole. A varsity

jock.

I wasn't planning on taking theater at first. Then I saw Via's name on the sign-up sheet and just wrote my name down on the list. I don't even know why. We managed to avoid one another throughout most of the semester, like we didn't even know each other. Then one day I got to theater class a little early, and Davenport asked me to run off additional copies of the play he was planning on having us do for the spring production: *The Elephant Man*. I'd heard about it but I didn't really know what it was about, so I started skimming through the pages while I was waiting for the xerox machine. It was about a man who lived more than a hundred years ago named John Merrick who was terribly deformed.

"We can't do this play, Mr. D," I told him when I got back to class, and I told him why: my little brother has a birth defect and has a deformed face and this play would hit too close to home. He seemed annoyed and a little unsympathetic, but I kind of said that my parents would have a real issue with the school doing this play. So anyway, he ended up switching to *Our Town*.

I think I went for the role of Emily Gibbs because I knew Via was going to go for it, too. It never occurred to me that I'd beat her for the role.

What I Miss Most

One of the things I miss the most about Via's friendship is her family. I loved her mom and dad. They were always so welcoming and nice to me. I knew they loved their kids more than anything. I always felt safe around them: safer than anywhere else in the world. How pathetic that I felt safer in someone else's house than in my own, right? And, of course, I loved Auggie. I was never afraid of him: even when I was little. I had friends that couldn't believe I'd ever go over to Via's house. "His face creeps me out," they'd say. "You're stupid," I'd tell them. Auggie's face isn't so bad once you get used to it.

I called Via's house once just to say hello to Auggie. Maybe part of me was hoping Via would answer, I don't know.

"Hey, Major Tom!" I said, using my nickname for him.

"Miranda!" He sounded so happy to hear my voice it actually kind of took me by surprise. "I'm going to a regular school now!" he told me excitedly.

"Really? Wow!" I said, totally shocked. I guess I never thought he'd go to a regular school. His parents have always been so protective of him. I guess I thought he'd always be that little kid in the astronaut helmet I gave him. Talking to him, I could tell he had no idea that Via and I weren't close anymore. "It's different in high school," I explained to him. "You end up hanging out with loads of different people."

"I have some friends in my new school," he told me. "A kid named Jack and a girl named Summer."

"That's awesome, Auggie," I said. "Well, I was just calling to tell you I miss you and hope you're having a good year. Feel free to call me whenever you want, okay, Auggie? You know I love you always."

"I love you, too, Miranda!"

“Say hi to Via for me. Tell her I miss her.”

“I will. Bye!”

“Bye!”

Extraordinary, but No One There to See

Neither my mother nor my father could come see the play on opening night: my mother because she had this thing at work, and my dad because his new wife was going to have her baby any second now, and he had to be on call.

Zack couldn't come to opening night, either: he had a volleyball game against Collegiate he couldn't miss. In fact, he had wanted me to miss the opening night so I could come cheer him on. My "friends" all went to the game, of course, because all their boyfriends were playing. Even Ella didn't come. Given a choice, she chose the crowd.

So on opening night no one that was remotely close to me was even there. And the thing is, I realized in my third or fourth rehearsal that I was good at this acting thing. I felt the part. I understood the words I spoke. I could read the lines as if they were coming from my brain and my heart. And on opening night, I can honestly say I knew I was going to be more than good: I was going to be great. I was going to be extraordinary, but there would be no one there to see.

We were all backstage, nervously running through our lines in our heads. I peeked through the curtain at the people taking their seats in the auditorium. That's when I saw Auggie walking down the aisle with Isabel and Nate. They took three seats in the fifth row, near the middle. Auggie was wearing a bow tie, looking around excitedly. He had grown up a bit since I'd last seen him, almost a year ago. His hair was shorter, and he was wearing some kind of hearing aid now. His face hadn't changed a bit.

Davenport was running through some last-minute changes with the set decorator. I saw Justin pacing off stage left, mumbling his lines nervously.

"Mr. Davenport," I said, surprising myself as I spoke. "I'm sorry, but

I can't go on tonight."

Davenport turned around slowly.

"What?" he said.

"I'm sorry."

"Are you kidding?"

"I'm just ...," I muttered, looking down, "I don't feel well. I'm sorry. I feel like I'm going to throw up." This was a lie.

"It's just last-minute jitters...."

"No! I can't do it! I'm telling you."

Davenport looked furious. "Miranda, this is outrageous."

"I'm sorry!"

Davenport took a deep breath, like he was trying to restrain himself. To be truthful, I thought he looked like he was going to explode. His forehead turned bright pink. "Miranda, this is absolutely unacceptable! Now go take a few deep breaths and—"

"I'm *not* going on!" I said loudly, and the tears came to my eyes fairly easily.

"Fine!" he screamed, not looking at me. Then he turned to a kid named David, who was a set decorator. "Go find Olivia in the lighting booth! Tell her she's filling in for Miranda tonight!"

"What?" said David, who wasn't too swift.

"Go!" shouted Davenport in his face. "Now!" The other kids had caught on to what was happening and gathered around.

"What's going on?" said Justin.

"Last-minute change of plans," said Davenport. "Miranda doesn't feel well."

"I feel sick," I said, trying to sound sick.

"So why are you still here?" Davenport said to me angrily. "Stop talking, take off your costume, and give it to Olivia! Okay? Come on, everybody! Let's go! Go! Go!"

I ran backstage to the dressing room as quickly as I could and started peeling off my costume. Two seconds later there was a knock and Via half opened the door.

"*What* is going on?" she said.

"Hurry up, put it on," I answered, handing her the dress.

“You’re sick?”

“Yeah! Hurry up!”

Via, looking stunned, took off her T-shirt and jeans and pulled the long dress over her head. I pulled it down for her, and then zipped up the back. Luckily, Emily Webb didn’t go on until ten minutes into the play, so the girl handling hair and makeup had time to put Via’s hair up in a twist and do a quick makeup job. I’d never seen Via with a lot of makeup on: she looked like a model.

“I’m not even sure I’ll remember my lines,” Via said, looking at herself in the mirror. “*Your* lines.”

“You’ll do great,” I said.

She looked at me in the mirror. “Why are you doing this, Miranda?”

“Olivia!” It was Davenport, hush-shouting from the door. “You’re on in two minutes. It’s now or never!”

Via followed him out the door, so I never got the chance to answer her question. I don’t know what I would have said, anyway. I wasn’t sure what the answer was.

The Performance

I watched the rest of the play from the wings just offstage, next to Davenport. Justin was amazing, and Via, in that heartbreaking last scene, was awesome. There was one line she flubbed a bit, but Justin covered for her, and no one in the audience even noticed. I heard Davenport muttering under his breath: “Good, good, good.” He was more nervous than all of the students put together: the actors, the set decorators, the lighting team, the guy handling the curtains. Davenport was a wreck, frankly.

The only time I felt any regret, if you could even call it that, was at the end of the play when everyone went out for their curtain calls. Via and Justin were the last of the actors walking out onstage, and the audience rose to their feet when they took their bows. That, I admit, was a little bittersweet for me. But just a few minutes later I saw Nate and Isabel and Auggie make their way backstage, and they all seemed so happy. Everyone was congratulating the actors, patting them on the back. It was that crazy backstage theater mayhem where sweaty actors stand euphoric while people come worship them for a few seconds. In that crush of people, I noticed Auggie looking kind of lost. I cut through the crowd as fast as I could and came up behind him.

“Hey!” I said. “Major Tom!”

After the Show

I can't say why I was so happy to see August again after so long, or how good it felt when he hugged me.

"I can't believe how big you've gotten," I said to him.

"I thought you were going to be in the play!" he said.

"I wasn't up to it," I said. "But Via was great, don't you think?"

He nodded. Two seconds later Isabel found us.

"Miranda!" she said happily, giving me a kiss on the cheek. And then to August: "Don't ever disappear like that again."

"You're the one who disappeared," Auggie answered back.

"How are you feeling?" Isabel said to me. "Via told us you got sick. ..."

"Much better," I answered.

"Is your mom here?" said Isabel.

"No, she had work stuff, so it's actually not a big deal for me," I said truthfully. "We have two more shows anyway, though I don't think I'll be as good an Emily as Via was tonight."

Nate came over and we had basically the same exact conversation. Then Isabel said: "Look, we're going to have a late-night dinner to celebrate the show. Are you feeling up to joining us? We'd love to have you!"

"Oh, no ...," I started to say.

"Pleeease?" said Auggie.

"I should go home," I said.

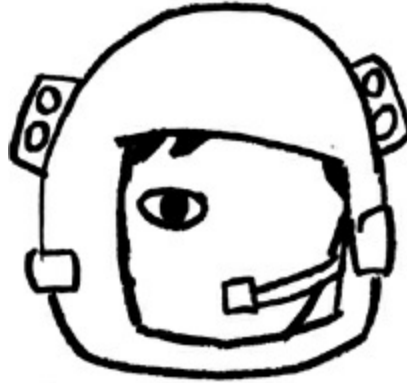
"We insist," said Nate.

By now Via and Justin had come over with Justin's mom, and Via put her arm around me.

"You're definitely coming," she said, smiling her old smile at me. They started leading me out of the crowd, and I have to admit, for the

first time in a very, very long time, I felt absolutely happy.

Part Eight



AUGUST

You're gonna reach the sky

Fly ... Beautiful child

—Eurythmics, “Beautiful Child”

The Fifth-Grade Nature Retreat

Every year in the spring, the fifth graders of Beecher Prep go away for three days and two nights to a place called the Broarwood Nature Reserve in Pennsylvania. It's a four-hour bus drive away. The kids sleep in cabins with bunk beds. There are campfires and s'mores and long walks through the woods. The teachers have been prepping us about this all year long, so all the kids in the grade are excited about it—except for me. And it's not even that I'm not excited, because I kind of am—it's just I've never slept away from home before and I'm kind of nervous.

Most kids have had sleepovers by the time they're my age. A lot of kids have gone to sleepaway camps, or stayed with their grandparents or whatever. Not me. Not unless you include hospital stays, but even then Mom or Dad always stayed with me overnight. But I never slept over Tata and Poppa's house, or Aunt Kate and Uncle Po's house. When I was really little, that was mainly because there were too many medical issues, like my trache tube needing to be cleared every hour, or reinserting my feeding tube if it got detached. But when I got bigger, I just never felt like sleeping anywhere else. There was one time when I half slept over Christopher's house. We were about eight, and we were still best friends. Our family had gone for a visit to his house, and me and Christopher were having such a great time playing Legos *Star Wars* that I didn't want to leave when it was time to go. We were like, "Please, please, please can we have a sleepover?" So our parents said yes, and Mom and Dad and Via drove home. And me and Christopher stayed up till midnight playing, until Lisa, his mom, said: "Okay, guys, time to go to bed." Well, that's when I kind of panicked a bit. Lisa tried to help me go to sleep, but I just started crying that I wanted to go home. So at one a.m. Lisa called Mom and

Dad, and Dad drove all the way back out to Bridgeport to pick me up. We didn't get home until three a.m. So my one and only sleepover, up until now, was pretty much of a disaster, which is why I'm a little nervous about the nature retreat.

On the other hand, I'm really excited.

Known For

I asked Mom to buy me a new rolling duffel bag because my old one had *Star Wars* stuff on it, and there was no way I was going to take that to the fifth-grade nature retreat. As much as I love *Star Wars*, I don't want that to be what I'm known for. Everyone's known for something in middle school. Like Reid is known for really being into marine life and the oceans and things like that. And Amos is known for being a really good baseball player. And Charlotte is known for having been in a TV commercial when she was six. And Ximena's known for being really smart.

My point is that in middle school you kind of get known for what you're into, and you have to be careful about stuff like that. Like Max G and Max W will never live down their Dungeons & Dragons obsession.

So I was actually trying to ease out of the whole *Star Wars* thing a bit. I mean, it'll always be special to me, like it is with the doctor who put in my hearing aids. It's just not the thing I wanted to be known for in middle school. I'm not sure what I want to be known for, but it's not that.

That's not exactly true: I do know what I'm *really* known for. But there's nothing I can do about that. A *Star Wars* duffel bag I could do something about.

Packing

Mom helped me pack the night before the big trip. We put all the clothes I was taking on my bed, and she folded everything neatly and put it inside the bag while I watched. It was a plain blue rolling duffel, by the way: no logos or artwork.

“What if I can’t sleep at night?” I asked.

“Take a book with you. Then if you can’t sleep, you can pull out your flashlight, and read for a bit until you get sleepy,” she answered.

I nodded. “What if I have a nightmare?”

“Your teachers will be there, sweetie,” she said. “And Jack. And your friends.”

“I can bring Baboo,” I said. That was my favorite stuffed animal when I was little. A small black bear with a soft black nose.

“You don’t really sleep with him anymore, do you?” said Mom.

“No, but I keep him in my closet in case I wake up in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep,” I said. “I could hide him in my bag. No one would know.”

“Then let’s do that.” Mom nodded, getting Baboo from inside my closet.

“I wish they allowed cell phones,” I said.

“I know, me too!” she said. “Though I know you’re going to have a great time, Auggie. You sure you want me to pack Baboo?”

“Yeah, but way down where no one can see him,” I said.

She stuck Baboo deep inside the bag and then stuffed the last of my T-shirts on top of him. “So many clothes for just two days!”

“Three days and two nights,” I corrected her.

“Yep.” She nodded, smiling. “Three days and two nights.” She zipped up the duffel bag and picked it up. “Not too heavy. Try it.”

I picked up the bag. “Fine.” I shrugged.

She sat on the bed. "Hey, what happened to your *Empire Strikes Back* poster?"

"Oh, I took that down ages ago," I answered.

She shook her head. "Huh, I didn't notice that before."

"I'm trying to, you know, change my image a bit," I explained.

"Okay." She smiled, nodding like she understood. "Anyway, honey, you have to promise me you won't forget to put on the bug spray, okay? On the legs, especially when you're hiking through the woods. It's right here in the front compartment."

"Uh-huh."

"And put on your sunscreen," she said. "You do not want to get a sunburn. And don't, I repeat, do *not* forget to take your hearing aids off if you go swimming."

"Would I get electrocuted?"

"No, but you'd be in real hot water with Daddy because those things cost a fortune!" she laughed. "I put the rain poncho in the front compartment, too. Same thing goes if it rains, Auggie, okay? Make sure you cover the hearing aids with the hood."

"Aye, aye, sir," I said, saluting.

She smiled and pulled me over.

"I can't believe how much you've grown up this year, Auggie," she said softly, putting her hands on the sides of my face.

"Do I look taller?"

"Definitely." She nodded.

"I'm still the shortest one in my grade."

"I'm not really even talking about your height," she said.

"Suppose I hate it there?"

"You're going to have a great time, Auggie."

I nodded. She got up and gave me a quick kiss on the forehead. "Okay, so I say we get to bed now."

"It's only nine o'clock, Mom!"

"Your bus leaves at six a.m. tomorrow. You don't want to be late. Come on. Chop chop. Your teeth are brushed?"

I nodded and climbed into bed. She started to lie down next to me.

"You don't need to put me to bed tonight, Mom," I said. "I'll read

on my own till I get sleepy.”

“Really?” She nodded, impressed. She squeezed my hand and gave it a kiss. “Okay then, goodnight, love. Have sweet dreams.”

“You too.”

She turned on the little reading light beside the bed.

“I’ll write you letters,” I said as she was leaving. “Even though I’ll probably be home before you guys even get them.”

“Then we can read them together,” she said, and threw me a kiss.

When she left my room, I took my copy of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* off the night table and started reading until I fell asleep.

... though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation.

Daybreak

The next day I woke up really early. It was still dark inside my room and even darker outside, though I knew it would be morning soon. I turned over on my side but didn't feel at all sleepy. That's when I saw Daisy sitting near my bed. I mean, I knew it wasn't Daisy, but for a second I saw a shadow that looked just like her. I didn't think it was a dream then, but now, looking back, I know it must have been. It didn't make me sad to see her at all: it just filled me up with nice feelings inside. She was gone after a second, and I couldn't see her again in the darkness.

The room slowly started lightening. I reached for my hearing aid headband and put it on, and now the world was really awake. I could hear the garbage trucks clunking down the street and the birds in our backyard. And down the hallway I heard Mom's alarm beeping. Daisy's ghost made me feel super strong inside, knowing wherever I am, she'd be there with me.

I got up out of bed and went to my desk and wrote a little note to Mom. Then I went into the living room, where my packed bag was by the door. I opened it up and fished inside until I found what I was looking for.

I took Baboo back to my room, and I laid him in my bed and taped the little note to Mom on his chest. And then I covered him with my blanket so Mom would find him later. The note read:

Dear Mom, I won't need Baboo, but if you miss me, you can cuddle with him yourself. XO Auggie

Day One

The bus ride went really fast. I sat by the window and Jack was next to me in the aisle seat. Summer and Maya were in front of us. Everyone was in a good mood. Kind of loud, laughing a lot. I noticed right away that Julian wasn't on our bus, even though Henry and Miles were. I figured he must be on the other bus, but then I overheard Miles tell Amos that Julian ditched the grade trip because he thought the whole nature-retreat thing was, quote unquote, dorky. I got totally pumped because dealing with Julian for three days in a row—and two nights—was a major reason that I was nervous about this whole trip. So now without him there, I could really just relax and not worry about anything.

We got to the nature reserve at around noon. The first thing we did was put our stuff down in the cabins. There were three bunk beds to every room, so me and Jack did rock, paper, scissors for the top bunk and I won. Woo-hoo. And the other guys in the room were Reid and Tristan, and Pablo and Nino.

After we had lunch in the main cabin, we all went on a two-hour guided nature hike through the woods. But these were not woods like the kind they have in Central Park: these were real woods. Giant trees that almost totally blocked out the sunlight. Tangles of leaves and fallen tree trunks. Howls and chirps and really loud bird calls. There was a slight fog, too, like a pale blue smoke all around us. So cool. The nature guide pointed everything out to us: the different types of trees we were passing, the insects inside the dead logs on the trail, the signs of deer and bears in the woods, what types of birds were whistling and where to look for them. I realized that my Lobot hearing aids actually made me hear better than most people, because I was usually the first person to hear a new bird call.

It started to rain as we headed back to camp. I pulled on my rain poncho and pulled the hood up so my hearing aids wouldn't get wet, but my jeans and shoes got soaked by the time we reached our cabins. Everyone got soaked. It was fun, though. We had a wet-sock fight in the cabin.

Since it rained for the rest of the day, we spent most of the afternoon goofing off in the rec room. They had a Ping-Pong table and old-style arcade games like *Pac-Man* and *Missile Command* that we played until dinnertime. Luckily, by then it had stopped raining, so we got to have a real campfire cookout. The log benches around the campfire were still a little damp, but we threw our jackets over them and hung out by the fire, toasting s'mores and eating the best roasted hot dogs I have ever, ever tasted. Mom was right about the mosquitoes: there were tons of them. But luckily I had spritzed myself before I left the cabin, and I wasn't eaten alive like some of the other kids were.

I loved hanging out by the campfire after dark. I loved the way bits of fire dust would float up and disappear into the night air. And how the fire lit up people's faces. I loved the sound the fire made, too. And how the woods were so dark that you couldn't see anything around you, and you'd look up and see a billion stars in the sky. The sky doesn't look like that in North River Heights. I've seen it look like that in Montauk, though: like someone sprinkled salt on a shiny black table.

I was so tired when I got back to the cabin that I didn't need to pull out the book to read. I fell asleep almost as fast as my head hit the pillow. And maybe I dreamed about the stars, I don't know.

The Fairgrounds

The next day was just as great as the first day. We went horseback riding in the morning, and in the afternoon we rappelled up some ginormous trees with the help of the nature guides. By the time we got back to the cabins for dinner, we were all really tired again. After dinner they told us we had an hour to rest, and then we were going to take a fifteen-minute bus ride to the fairgrounds for an outdoor movie night.

I hadn't had the chance to write a letter to Mom and Dad and Via yet, so I wrote one telling them all about the stuff we did that day and the day before. I pictured myself reading it to them out loud when I got back, since there was just no way the letter would get home before I did.

When we got to the fairgrounds, the sun was just starting to set. It was about seven-thirty. The shadows were really long on the grass, and the clouds were pink and orange. It looked like someone had taken sidewalk chalk and smudged the colors across the sky with their fingers. It's not that I haven't seen nice sunsets before in the city, because I have—slivers of sunsets between buildings—but I wasn't used to seeing so much sky in every direction. Out here in the fairgrounds, I could understand why ancient people used to think the world was flat and the sky was a dome that closed in on top of it. That's what it looked like from the fairgrounds, in the middle of this huge open field.

Because we were the first school to arrive, we got to run around the field all we wanted until the teachers told us it was time to lay out our sleeping bags on the ground and get good viewing seats. We unzipped our bags and laid them down like picnic blankets on the grass in front of the giant movie screen in the middle of the field.

Then we went to the row of food trucks parked at the edge of the field to load up on snacks and sodas and stuff like that. There were concession stands there, too, like at a farmers' market, selling roasted peanuts and cotton candy. And up a little farther was a short row of carnival-type stalls, the kind where you can win a stuffed animal if you throw a baseball into a basket. Jack and I both tried—and failed—to win anything, but we heard Amos won a yellow hippo and gave it to Ximena. That was the big gossip that went around: the jock and the brainiac.

From the food trucks, you could see the cornstalks in back of the movie screen. They covered about a third of the entire field. The rest of the field was completely surrounded by woods. As the sun sank lower in the sky, the tall trees at the entrance to the woods looked dark blue.

By the time the other school buses pulled into the parking lots, we were back in our spots on the sleeping bags, right smack in front of the screen: the best seats in the whole field. Everyone was passing around snacks and having a great time. Me and Jack and Summer and Reid and Maya played Pictionary. We could hear the sounds of the other schools arriving, the loud laughing and talking of kids coming out on the field on both sides of us, but we couldn't really see them. Though the sky was still light, the sun had gone down completely, and everything on the ground had turned deep purple. The clouds were shadows now. We had trouble even seeing the Pictionary cards in front of us.

Just then, without any announcement, all the lights at the ends of the field went on at once. They were like big bright stadium lights. I thought of that scene in *Close Encounters* when the alien ship lands and they're playing that music: *duh-dah-doo-da-dunnn*. Everyone in the field started applauding and cheering like something great had just happened.