

Be Kind to Nature

An announcement came over the huge speakers next to the stadium lights:

“Welcome, everyone. Welcome to the twenty-third annual Big Movie Night at the Broarwood Nature Reserve. Welcome, teachers and students from ... MS 342: the William Heath School....” A big cheer went up on the left side of the field. “Welcome, teachers and students from Glover Academy....” Another cheer went up, this time from the right side of the field. “And welcome, teachers and students from ... the Beecher Prep School!” Our whole group cheered as loudly as we could. “We’re thrilled to have you as our guests here tonight, and thrilled that the weather is cooperating—in fact, can you believe what a beautiful night this is?” Again, everyone whooped and hollered. “So as we prepare the movie, we do ask that you take a few moments to listen to this important announcement. The Broarwood Nature Reserve, as you know, is dedicated to preserving our natural resources and the environment. We ask that you leave no litter behind. Clean up after yourselves. Be kind to nature and it will be kind to you. We ask that you keep that in mind as you walk around the grounds. Do not venture beyond the orange cones at the edges of the fairgrounds. Do not go into the cornfields or the woods. Please keep the free roaming to a minimum. Even if you don’t feel like watching the movie, your fellow students may feel otherwise, so please be courteous: no talking, no playing music, no running around. The restrooms are located on the other side of the concession stands. After the movie is over, it will be quite dark, so we ask that all of you stay with your schools as you make your way back to your buses. Teachers, there’s usually at least one lost party on Big Movie Nights at Broarwood: don’t let it happen to you! Tonight’s movie presentation

will be ... *The Sound of Music!*”

I immediately started clapping, even though I’d seen it a few times before, because it was Via’s favorite movie of all time. But I was surprised that a whole bunch of kids (not from Beecher) booed and hissed and laughed. Someone from the right side of the field even threw a soda can at the screen, which seemed to surprise Mr. Tushman. I saw him stand up and look in the direction of the can thrower, though I knew he couldn’t see anything in the dark.

The movie started playing right away. The stadium lights dimmed. Maria the nun was standing at the top of the mountain twirling around and around. It had gotten chilly all of a sudden, so I put on my yellow Montauk hoodie and adjusted the volume on my hearing aids and leaned against my backpack and started watching.

The hills are alive ...

The Woods Are Alive

Somewhere around the boring part where the guy named Rolf and the oldest daughter are singing *You are sixteen, going on seventeen*, Jack nudged me.

“Dude, I’ve got to pee,” he said.

We both got up and kind of hopscotched over the kids who were sitting or lying down on the sleeping bags. Summer waved as we passed and I waved back.

There were lots of kids from the other schools walking around by the food trucks, playing the carnival games, or just hanging out.

Of course, there was a huge line for the toilets.

“Forget this, I’ll just find a tree,” said Jack.

“That’s gross, Jack. Let’s just wait,” I answered.

But he headed off to the row of trees at the edge of the field, which was past the orange cones that we were specifically told not to go past. And of course I followed him. And of course we didn’t have our flashlights because we forgot to bring them. It was so dark now we literally couldn’t see ten steps ahead of us as we walked toward the woods. Luckily, the movie gave off some light, so when we saw a flashlight coming toward us out of the woods, we knew immediately that it was Henry, Miles, and Amos. I guess they hadn’t wanted to wait on line to use the toilets, either.

Miles and Henry were still not talking to Jack, but Amos had let go of the war a while ago. And he nodded hello to us as they passed by.

“Be careful of the bears!” shouted Henry, and he and Miles laughed as they walked away.

Amos shook his head at us like, Don’t pay attention to them.

Jack and I walked a little farther until we were just inside the woods. Then Jack hunted around for the perfect tree and finally did

his business, though it felt like he was taking forever.

The woods were loud with strange sounds and chirps and croaks, like a wall of noise coming out of the trees. Then we started hearing loud snaps not far from us, almost like cap gun pops, that definitely weren't insect noises. And far away, like in another world, we could hear *Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens*.

"Ah, that's much better," said Jack, zipping up.

"Now I have to pee," I said, which I did on the nearest tree. No way I was going farther in like Jack did.

"Do you smell that? Like firecrackers," he said, coming over to me.

"Oh yeah, that's what that is," I answered, zipping up. "Weird."

"Let's go."

Alien

We headed back the way we came, in the direction of the giant screen. That's when we walked straight into a group of kids we didn't know. They'd just come out of the woods, doing stuff I'm sure they didn't want their teachers to know about. I could smell the smoke now, the smell of both firecrackers and cigarettes. They pointed a flashlight at us. There were six of them: four boys and two girls. They looked like they were in the seventh grade.

"What school are you from?" one of the boys called out.

"Beecher Prep!" Jack started to answer, when all of a sudden one of the girls started screaming.

"Oh my God!" she shrieked, holding her hand over her eyes like she was crying. I figured maybe a huge bug had just flown into her face or something.

"No way!" one of the boys cried out, and he started flicking his hand in the air like he'd just touched something hot. And then he covered his mouth. "No freakin' way, man! No freakin' way!"

All of them started half laughing and half covering their eyes now, pushing each other and cursing loudly.

"What is that?" said the kid who was pointing the flashlight at us, and it was only then that I realized that the flashlight was pointed right at my face, and what they were talking about—screaming about—was me.

"Let's get out of here," Jack said to me quietly, and he pulled me by my sweatshirt sleeve and started walking away from them.

"Wait wait wait!" yelled the guy with the flashlight, cutting us off. He pointed the flashlight right in my face again, and now he was only about five feet away. "Oh man! Oh man!!" he said, shaking his head, his mouth wide open. "What happened to your face?"

“Stop it, Eddie,” said one of the girls.

“I didn’t know we were watching *Lord of the Rings* tonight!” he said.
“Look, guys, it’s Gollum!”

This made his friends hysterical.

Again we tried to walk away from them, and again the kid named Eddie cut us off. He was at least a head taller than Jack, who was about a head taller than me, so the guy looked huge to me.

“No man, it’s *Alien*!” said one of the other kids.

“No, no, no, man. It’s an orc!” laughed Eddie, pointing the flashlight in my face again. This time he was right in front of us.

“Leave him alone, okay?” said Jack, pushing the hand holding the flashlight away.

“Make me,” answered Eddie, pointing the flashlight in Jack’s face now.

“What’s your problem, dude?” said Jack.

“Your boyfriend’s my problem!”

“Jack, let’s just go,” I said, pulling him by the arm.

“Oh man, it talks!” screamed Eddie, shining the flashlight in my face again. Then one of the other guys threw a firecracker at our feet.

Jack tried to push past Eddie, but Eddie shoved his hands into Jack’s shoulders and pushed him hard, which made Jack fall backward.

“Eddie!” screamed one of the girls.

“Look,” I said, stepping in front of Jack and holding my hands up in the air like a traffic cop. “We’re a lot smaller than you guys ...”

“Are you talking to me, Freddie Krueger? I don’t think you want to mess with me, you ugly freak,” said Eddie. And this was the point where I knew I should run away as fast as I could, but Jack was still on the ground and I wasn’t about to leave him.

“Yo, dude,” said a new voice behind us. “What’s up, man?”

Eddie spun around and pointed his flashlight toward the voice. For a second, I couldn’t believe who it was.

“Leave them alone, dude,” said Amos, with Miles and Henry right behind him.

“Says who?” said one of the guys with Eddie.

“Just leave them alone, dude,” Amos repeated calmly.

“Are you a freak, too?” said Eddie.

“They’re all a bunch of freaks!” said one of his friends.

Amos didn’t answer them but looked at us. “Come on, guys, let’s go. Mr. Tushman’s waiting for us.”

I knew that was a lie, but I helped Jack get up, and we started walking over to Amos. Then out of the blue, the Eddie guy grabbed my hood as I passed by him, yanking it really hard so I was pulled backward and fell flat on my back. It was a hard fall, and I hurt my elbow pretty bad on a rock. I couldn’t really see what happened afterward, except that Amos rammed into the Eddie guy like a monster truck and they both fell down to the ground next to me.

Everything got really crazy after that. Someone pulled me up by my sleeve and yelled, “Run!” and someone else screamed, “Get ’em!” at the same time, and for a few seconds I actually had two people pulling the sleeves of my sweatshirt in opposite directions. I heard them both cursing, until my sweatshirt ripped and the first guy yanked me by my arm and started pulling me behind him as we ran, which I did as fast as I could. I could hear footsteps just behind us, chasing us, and voices shouting and girls screaming, but it was so dark I didn’t know whose voices they were, only that everything felt like we were underwater. We were running like crazy, and it was pitch black, and whenever I started to slow down, the guy pulling me by my arm would yell, “Don’t stop!”

Voices in the Dark

Finally, after what seemed like a forever of running, someone yelled:
“I think we lost them!”

“Amos?”

“I’m right here!” said Amos’s voice a few feet behind us.

“We can stop!” Miles yelled from farther up.

“Jack!” I yelled.

“Whoa!” said Jack. “I’m here.”

“I can’t see a thing!”

“Are you sure we lost them?” Henry asked, letting go of my arm. That’s when I realized that he’d been the one who was pulling me as we ran.

“Yeah.”

“Shh! Let’s listen!”

We all got super quiet, listening for footsteps in the dark. All we could hear were the crickets and frogs and our own crazy panting. We were out of breath, stomachs hurting, bodies bent over our knees.

“We lost them,” said Henry.

“Whoa! That was intense!”

“What happened to the flashlight?”

“I dropped it!”

“How did you guys know?” said Jack.

“We saw them before.”

“They looked like jerks.”

“You just rammed into him!” I said to Amos.

“I know, right?” laughed Amos.

“He didn’t even see it coming!” said Miles.

“He was like, ‘Are you a freak, too?’ and you were like, *bam!*” said Jack.

“Bam!” said Amos, throwing a fake punch in the air. “But after I tackled him, I was like, run, Amos, you schmuck, he’s ten times bigger than you! And I got up and started running as fast as I could!”

We all started laughing.

“I grabbed Auggie and I was like, ‘Run!’ ” said Henry.

“I didn’t even know it was you pulling me!” I answered.

“That was wild,” said Amos, shaking his head.

“Totally wild.”

“Your lip is bleeding, dude.”

“I got in a couple of good punches,” answered Amos, wiping his lip.

“I think they were seventh graders.”

“They were huge.”

“Losers!” Henry shouted really loudly, but we all shushed him.

We listened for a second to make sure no one had heard him.

“Where the heck are we?” asked Amos. “I can’t even see the screen.”

“I think we’re in the cornfields,” answered Henry.

“Duh, we’re in the cornfields,” said Miles, pushing a cornstalk at Henry.

“Okay, I know exactly where we are,” said Amos. “We have to go back in this direction. That’ll take us to the other side of the field.”

“Yo, dudes,” said Jack, hand high in the air. “That was really cool of you guys to come back for us. Really cool. Thanks.”

“No problem,” answered Amos, high-fiving Jack. And then Miles and Henry high-fived him, too.

“Yeah, dudes, thanks,” I said, holding my palm up like Jack just had, though I wasn’t sure if they’d high-five me, too.

Amos looked at me and nodded. “It was cool how you stood your ground, little dude,” he said, high-fiving me.

“Yeah, Auggie,” said Miles, high-fiving me, too. “You were like, ‘We’re littler than you guys’ ...”

“I didn’t know what else to say!” I laughed.

“Very cool,” said Henry, and he high-fived me, too. “Sorry I ripped your sweatshirt.”

I looked down, and my sweatshirt was completely torn down the

middle. One sleeve was ripped off, and the other was so stretched out it was hanging down to my knees.

“Hey, your elbow’s bleeding,” said Jack.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. It was starting to hurt a lot.

“You okay?” said Jack, seeing my face.

I nodded. Suddenly I felt like crying, and I was trying really hard not to do that.

“Wait, your hearing aids are gone!” said Jack.

“What!” I yelled, touching my ears. The hearing aid band was definitely gone. That’s why I felt like I was underwater! “Oh no!” I said, and that’s when I couldn’t hold it in anymore. Everything that had just happened kind of hit me and I couldn’t help it: I started to cry. Like big crying, what Mom would call “the waterworks.” I was so embarrassed I hid my face in my arm, but I couldn’t stop the tears from coming.

The guys were really nice to me, though. They patted me on the back.

“You’re okay, dude. It’s okay,” they said.

“You’re one brave little dude, you know that?” said Amos, putting his arm around my shoulders. And when I kept on crying, he put both his arms around me like my dad would have done and let me cry.

The Emperor's Guard

We backtracked through the grass for a good ten minutes to see if we could find my hearing aids, but it was way too dark to see anything. We literally had to hold on to each other's shirts and walk in single file so we wouldn't trip over one another. It was like black ink had been poured all around.

"This is hopeless," said Henry. "They could be anywhere."

"Maybe we can come back with a flashlight," answered Amos.

"No, it's okay," I said. "Let's just go back. Thanks, though."

We walked back toward the cornfields, and then cut through them until the back of the giant screen came into view. Since it was facing away from us, we didn't get any light from the screen at all until we'd walked around to the edge of the woods again. That's where we finally started seeing a little light.

There was no sign of the seventh graders anywhere.

"Where do you think they went?" said Jack.

"Back to the food trucks," said Amos. "They're probably thinking we're going to report them."

"Are we?" asked Henry.

They looked at me. I shook my head.

"Okay," said Amos, "but, little dude, don't walk around here alone again, okay? If you need to go somewhere, tell us and we'll go with you."

"Okay." I nodded.

As we got closer to the screen, I could hear *High on a hill was a lonely goatherd*, and could smell the cotton candy from one of the concession stands near the food trucks. There were lots of kids milling around in this area, so I pulled what was left of my hoodie over my head and kept my face down, hands in pockets, as we made our way

through the crowd. It had been a long time since I'd been out without my hearing aids, and it felt like I was miles under the earth. It felt like that song Miranda used to sing to me: *Ground Control to Major Tom, your circuit's dead, there's something wrong ...*

I did notice as I walked that Amos had stayed right next to me. And Jack was close on the other side of me. And Miles was in front of us and Henry was in back of us. They were surrounding me as we walked through the crowds of kids. Like I had my own emperor's guard.

Sleep

Then they came out of the narrow valley and at once she saw the reason. There stood Peter and Edmund and all the rest of Aslan's army fighting desperately against the crowd of horrible creatures whom she had seen last night; only now, in the daylight, they looked even stranger and more evil and more deformed.

I stopped there. I'd been reading for over an hour and sleep still didn't come. It was almost two a.m. Everyone else was asleep. I had my flashlight on under the sleeping bag, and maybe the light was why I couldn't sleep, but I was too afraid to turn it off. I was afraid of how dark it was outside the sleeping bag.

When we got back to our section in front of the movie screen, no one had even noticed we'd been gone. Mr. Tushman and Ms. Rubin and Summer and all the rest of the kids were just watching the movie. They had no clue how something bad had almost happened to me and Jack. It's so weird how that can be, how you could have a night that's the worst in your life, but to everybody else it's just an ordinary night. Like, on my calendar at home, I would mark this as being one of the most horrific days of my life. This and the day Daisy died. But for the rest of the world, this was just an ordinary day. Or maybe it was even a good day. Maybe somebody won the lottery today.

Amos, Miles, and Henry brought me and Jack over to where we'd been sitting before, with Summer and Maya and Reid, and then they went and sat where they had been sitting before, with Ximena and Savanna and their group. In a way, everything was exactly as we had left it before we went looking for the toilets. The sky was the same. The movie was the same. Everyone's faces were the same. Mine was the same.

But something was different. Something had changed.

I could see Amos and Miles and Henry telling their group what had just happened. I knew they were talking about it because they kept looking over at me while they were talking. Even though the movie was still playing, people were whispering about it in the dark. News like that spreads fast.

It was what everyone was talking about on the bus ride back to the cabins. All the girls, even girls I didn't know very well, were asking me if I was okay. The boys were all talking about getting revenge on the group of seventh-grade jerks, trying to figure out what school they were from.

I wasn't planning on telling the teachers about any of what had happened, but they found out anyway. Maybe it was the torn sweatshirt and the bloody elbow. Or maybe it's just that teachers hear everything.

When we got back to the camp, Mr. Tushman took me to the first-aid office, and while I was getting my elbow cleaned and bandaged up by the camp nurse, Mr. Tushman and the camp director were in the next room talking with Amos and Jack and Henry and Miles, trying to get a description of the troublemakers. When he asked me about them a little later, I said I couldn't remember their faces at all, which wasn't true.

It's their faces I kept seeing every time I closed my eyes to sleep. The look of total horror on the girl's face when she first saw me. The way the kid with the flashlight, Eddie, looked at me as he talked to me, like he hated me.

Like a lamb to the slaughter. I remember Dad saying that ages ago, but tonight I think I finally got what it meant.

Aftermath

Mom was waiting for me in front of the school along with all the other parents when the bus arrived. Mr. Tushman told me on the bus ride home that they had called my parents to tell them there had been a “situation” the night before but that everyone was fine. He said the camp director and several of the counselors went looking for the hearing aid in the morning while we all went swimming in the lake, but they couldn’t find it anywhere. Broarwood would reimburse us the cost of the hearing aids, he said. They felt bad about what happened.

I wondered if Eddie had taken my hearing aids with him as a kind of souvenir. Something to remember the orc.

Mom gave me a tight hug when I got off the bus, but she didn’t slam me with questions like I thought she might. Her hug felt good, and I didn’t shake it off like some of the other kids were doing with their parents’ hugs.

The bus driver started unloading our duffel bags, and I went to find mine while Mom talked to Mr. Tushman and Ms. Rubin, who had walked over to her. As I rolled my bag toward her, a lot of kids who don’t usually say anything to me were nodding hello, or patting my back as I walked by them.

“Ready?” Mom said when she saw me. She took my duffel bag, and I didn’t even try to hold on to it: I was fine with her carrying it. If she had wanted to carry me on her shoulders, I would have been fine with that, too, to be truthful.

As we started to walk away, Mr. Tushman gave me a quick, tight hug but didn’t say anything.

Home

Mom and I didn't talk much the whole walk home, and when we got to the front stoop, I automatically looked in the front bay window, because I forgot for a second that Daisy wasn't going to be there like always, perched on the sofa with her front paws on the windowsill, waiting for us to come home. It made me kind of sad when we walked inside. As soon as we did, Mom dropped my duffel bag and wrapped her arms around me and kissed me on my head and on my face like she was breathing me in.

"It's okay, Mom, I'm fine," I said, smiling.

She nodded and took my face in her hands. Her eyes were shiny.

"I know you are," she said. "I missed you so much, Auggie."

"I missed you, too."

I could tell she wanted to say a lot of things but she was stopping herself.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Starving. Can I have a grilled cheese?"

"Of course," she answered, and immediately started to make the sandwich while I took my jacket off and sat down at the kitchen counter.

"Where's Via?" I asked.

"She's coming home with Dad today. Boy, did she miss you, Auggie," Mom said.

"Yeah? She would have liked the nature reserve. You know what movie they played? *The Sound of Music*."

"You'll have to tell her that."

"So, do you want to hear about the bad part or the good part first?" I asked after a few minutes, leaning my head on my hand.

"Whatever you want to talk about," she answered.

“Well, except for last night, I had an awesome time,” I said. “I mean, it was just awesome. That’s why I’m so bummed. I feel like they ruined the whole trip for me.”

“No, sweetie, don’t let them do that to you. You were there for more than forty-eight hours, and that awful part lasted one hour. Don’t let them take that away from you, okay?”

“I know.” I nodded. “Did Mr. Tushman tell you about the hearing aids?”

“Yes, he called us this morning.”

“Was Dad mad? Because they’re so expensive?”

“Oh my gosh, of course not, Auggie. He just wanted to know that you were all right. That’s all that matters to us. And that you don’t let those ... thugs ... ruin your trip.”

I kind of laughed at the way she said the word “thugs.”

“What?” she asked.

“*Thugs*,” I teased her. “That’s kind of an old-fashioned word.”

“Okay, jerks. Morons. Imbeciles,” she said, flipping over the sandwich in the pan. “*Cretinos*, as my mother would have said. Whatever you want to call them, if I saw them on the street, I would ...” She shook her head.

“They were pretty big, Mom.” I smiled. “Seventh graders, I think.”

She shook her head. “Seventh graders? Mr. Tushman didn’t tell us that. Oh my goodness.”

“Did he tell you how Jack stood up for me?” I said. “And Amos was like, bam, he rammed right into the leader. They both crashed to the ground, like in a real fight! It was pretty awesome. Amos’s lip was bleeding and everything.”

“He told us there was a fight, but ...,” she said, looking at me with her eyebrows raised. “I’m just ... *phew* ... I’m just so grateful you and Amos and Jack are fine. When I think about what could have happened ...,” she trailed off, flipping the grilled cheese again.

“My Montauk hoodie got totally shredded.”

“Well, that can be replaced,” she answered. She lifted the grilled cheese onto a plate and put the plate in front of me on the counter. “Milk or white grape juice?”

“Chocolate milk, please?” I started devouring the sandwich. “Oh, can you do it that special way you make it, with the froth?”

“How did you and Jack end up at the edge of the woods in the first place?” she said, pouring the milk into a tall glass.

“Jack had to go to the bathroom,” I answered, my mouth full. As I was talking, she spooned in the chocolate powder and started rolling a small whisk between her palms really fast. “But there was a huge line and he didn’t want to wait. So we went toward the woods to pee.” She looked up at me while she was whisking. I know she was thinking we shouldn’t have done that. The chocolate milk in the glass now had a two-inch froth on top. “That looks good, Mom. Thanks.”

“And then what happened?” she said, putting the glass in front of me.

I took a long drink of the chocolate milk. “Is it okay if we don’t talk about it anymore right now?”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I promise I’ll tell you all about it later, when Dad and Via come home. I’ll tell you all every detail. I just don’t want to have to tell the whole story over and over, you know?”

“Absolutely.”

I finished my sandwich in two more bites and gulped down the chocolate milk.

“Wow, you practically inhaled that sandwich. Do you want another one?” she said.

I shook my head and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Mom? Am I always going to have to worry about jerks like that?” I asked. “Like when I grow up, is it always going to be like this?”

She didn’t answer right away, but took my plate and glass and put them in the sink and rinsed them with water.

“There are always going to be jerks in the world, Auggie,” she said, looking at me. “But I really believe, and Daddy really believes, that there are more good people on this earth than bad people, and the good people watch out for each other and take care of each other. Just like Jack was there for you. And Amos. And those other kids.”

“Oh yeah, Miles and Henry,” I answered. “They were awesome, too.”

It's weird because Miles and Henry haven't even really been very nice to me at all during the year."

"Sometimes people surprise us," she said, rubbing the top of my head.

"I guess."

"Want another glass of chocolate milk?"

"No, I'm good," I said. "Thanks, Mom. Actually, I'm kind of tired. I didn't sleep too good last night."

"You should take a nap. Thanks for leaving me Baboo, by the way."

"You got my note?"

She smiled. "I slept with him both nights." She was about to say something else when her cell phone rang, and she answered. She started beaming as she listened. "Oh my goodness, really? What kind?" she said excitedly. "Yep, he's right here. He was about to take a nap. Want to say hi? Oh, okay, see you in two minutes." She clicked it off.

"That was Daddy," she said excitedly. "He and Via are just down the block."

"He's not at work?" I said.

"He left early because he couldn't wait to see you," she said. "So don't take a nap quite yet."

Five seconds later Dad and Via came through the door. I ran into Dad's arms, and he picked me up and spun me around and kissed me. He didn't let me go for a full minute, until I said, "Dad, it's okay." And then it was Via's turn, and she kissed me all over like she used to do when I was little.

It wasn't until she stopped that I noticed the big white cardboard box they had brought in with them.

"What is that?" I said.

"Open it," said Dad, smiling, and he and Mom looked at each other like they knew a secret.

"Come on, Auggie!" said Via.

I opened the box. Inside was the cutest little puppy I've ever seen in my life. It was black and furry, with a pointy little snout and bright black eyes and small ears that flopped down.

Bear

We called the puppy Bear because when Mom first saw him, she said he looked just like a little bear cub. I said: “That’s what we should call him!” and everyone agreed that that was the perfect name.

I took the next day off from school—not because my elbow was hurting me, which it was, but so I could play with Bear all day long. Mom let Via stay home from school, too, so the two of us took turns cuddling with Bear and playing tug-of-war with him. We had kept all of Daisy’s old toys, and we brought them out now, to see which ones he’d like best.

It was fun hanging out with Via all day, just the two of us. It was like old times, like before I started going to school. Back then, I couldn’t wait for her to come home from school so she could play with me before starting her homework. Now that we’re older, though, and I’m going to school and have friends of my own that I hang out with, we never do that anymore.

So it was nice hanging out with her, laughing and playing. I think she liked it, too.

The Shift

When I went back to school the next day, the first thing I noticed was that there was a big shift in the way things were. A monumental shift. A seismic shift. Maybe even a cosmic shift. Whatever you want to call it, it was a big shift. Everyone—not just in our grade but every grade—had heard about what had happened to us with the seventh graders, so suddenly I wasn't known for what I'd always been known for, but for this other thing that had happened. And the story of what happened had gotten bigger and bigger each time it was told. Two days later, the way the story went was that Amos had gotten into a major fistfight with the kid, and Miles and Henry and Jack had thrown some punches at the other guys, too. And the escape across the field became this whole long adventure through a cornfield maze and into the deep dark woods. Jack's version of the story was probably the best because he's so funny, but in whatever version of the story, and no matter who was telling it, two things always stayed the same: I got picked on because of my face and Jack defended me, and those guys—Amos, Henry, and Miles—protected me. And now that they'd protected me, I was different to them. It was like I was one of them. They all called me “little dude” now—even the jocks. These big dudes I barely even knew before would knuckle-punch me in the hallways now.

Another thing to come out of it was that Amos became super popular and Julian, because he missed the whole thing, was really out of the loop. Miles and Henry were hanging out with Amos all the time now, like they switched best friends. I'd like to be able to say that Julian started treating me better, too, but that wouldn't be true. He still gave me dirty looks across the room. He still never talked to me or Jack. But he was the only one who was like that now. And me and

Jack, we couldn't care less.

Ducks

The day before the last day of school, Mr. Tushman called me into his office to tell me they had found out the names of the seventh graders from the nature retreat. He read off a bunch of names that didn't mean anything to me, and then he said the last name: "Edward Johnson."

I nodded.

"You recognize the name?" he said.

"They called him Eddie."

"Right. Well, they found this in Edward's locker." He handed me what was left of my hearing aid headband. The right piece was completely gone and the left one was mangled. The band that connected the two, the Lobot part, was bent down the middle.

"His school wants to know if you want to press charges," said Mr. Tushman.

I looked at my hearing aid.

"No, I don't think so." I shrugged. "I'm being fitted for new ones anyway."

"Hmm. Why don't you talk about it with your parents tonight? I'll call your mom tomorrow to talk about it with her, too."

"Would they go to jail?" I asked.

"No, not jail. But they'd probably go to juvie court. And maybe they'll learn a lesson that way."

"Trust me: that Eddie kid is not learning any lessons," I joked.

He sat down behind his desk.

"Auggie, why don't you sit down a second?" he said.

I sat down. All the things on his desk were the same as when I first walked into his office last summer: the same mirrored cube, the same little globe floating in the air. That felt like ages ago.

“Hard to believe this year’s almost over, huh?” he said, almost like he was reading my mind.

“Yeah.”

“Has it been a good year for you, Auggie? Has it been okay?”

“Yeah, it’s been good.” I nodded.

“I know academically it’s been a great year for you. You’re one of our top students. Congrats on the High Honor Roll.”

“Thanks. Yeah, that’s cool.”

“But I know it’s had its share of ups and downs,” he said, raising his eyebrows. “Certainly, that night at the nature reserve was one of the low points.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “But it was also kind of good, too.”

“In what way?”

“Well, you know, how people stood up for me and stuff?”

“That was pretty wonderful,” he said, smiling.

“Yeah.”

“I know in school things got a little hairy with Julian at times.”

I have to admit: he surprised me with that one.

“You know about that stuff?” I asked him.

“Middle-school directors have a way of knowing about a lot of stuff.”

“Do you have, like, secret security cameras in the hallways?” I joked.

“And microphones everywhere,” he laughed.

“No, seriously?”

He laughed again. “No, not seriously.”

“Oh!”

“But teachers know more than kids think, Auggie. I wish you and Jack had come to me about the mean notes that were left in your lockers.”

“How do you know about that?” I said.

“I’m telling you: middle-school directors know *all*.”

“It wasn’t that big a deal,” I answered. “And we wrote notes, too.”

He smiled. “I don’t know if it’s public yet,” he said, “though it will be soon anyway, but Julian Albans is not coming back to Beecher

Prep next year.”

“What!” I said. I honestly couldn’t hide how surprised I was.

“His parents don’t think Beecher Prep is a good fit for him,” Mr. Tushman continued, raising his shoulders.

“Wow, that’s big news,” I said.

“Yeah, I thought you should know.”

Then suddenly I noticed that the pumpkin portrait that used to be behind his desk was gone and my drawing, my *Self-Portrait as an Animal* that I drew for the New Year Art Show, was now framed and hanging behind his desk.

“Hey, that’s mine!” I pointed.

Mr. Tushman turned around like he didn’t know what I was talking about. “Oh, that’s right!” he said, tapping his forehead. “I’ve been meaning to show this to you for months now.”

“My self-portrait as a duck.” I nodded.

“I love this piece, Auggie,” he said. “When your art teacher showed it to me, I asked her if I could keep it for my wall. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“Oh, yeah! Sure. What happened to the pumpkin portrait?”

“Right behind you.”

“Oh, yeah. Nice.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you since I hung this up ...,” he said, looking at it. “Why did you choose to represent yourself as a duck?”

“What do you mean?” I answered. “That was the assignment.”

“Yes, but why a duck?” he said. “Is it safe to assume that it was because of the story of the ... um, the duckling that turns into a swan?”

“No,” I laughed, shaking my head. “It’s because I think I look like a duck.”

“Oh!” said Mr. Tushman, his eyes opening wide. He started laughing. “Really? Huh. Here I was looking for symbolism and metaphors and, um ... sometimes a duck is just a duck!”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, not quite getting why he thought that was so funny. He laughed to himself for a good thirty seconds.

“Anyway, Auggie, thanks for chatting with me,” he said, finally. “I

just want you to know it's truly a pleasure having you here at Beecher Prep, and I'm really looking forward to next year." He reached across the desk and we shook hands. "See you tomorrow at graduation."

"See you tomorrow, Mr. Tushman."

The Last Precept

This was written on Mr. Browne's chalkboard when we walked into English class for the last time:

MR. BROWNE'S JUNE PRECEPT:

JUST FOLLOW THE DAY AND REACH FOR THE SUN!

(The Polyphonic Spree)

Have a great summer vacation, Class 5B!

It's been a great year and you've been a wonderful group of students.

If you remember, please send me a postcard this summer with YOUR personal precept. It can be something you made up for yourself or something you've read somewhere that means something to you. (If so, don't forget the attribution, please!) I really look forward to getting them.

Tom Browne
563 Sebastian Place
Bronx, NY 10053

The Drop-Off

The graduation ceremony was held in the Beecher Prep Upper School auditorium. It was only about a fifteen-minute walk from our house to the other campus building, but Dad drove me because I was all dressed up and had on new shiny black shoes that weren't broken in yet and I didn't want my feet to hurt. Students were supposed to arrive at the auditorium an hour before the ceremony started, but we got there even earlier, so we sat in the car and waited. Dad turned on the CD player, and our favorite song came on. We both smiled and started bobbing our heads to the music.

Dad sang along with the song: *"Andy would bicycle across town in the rain to bring you candy."*

"Hey, is my tie on straight?" I said.

He looked and straightened it a tiny bit as he kept on singing: *"And John would buy the gown for you to wear to the prom ..."*

"Does my hair look okay?" I said.

He smiled and nodded. "Perfect," he said. "You look great, Auggie."

"Via put some gel in it this morning," I said, pulling down the sun visor and looking in the little mirror. "It doesn't look too puffy?"

"No, it's very, very cool, Auggie. I don't think you've ever had it this short before, have you?"

"No, I got it cut yesterday. I think it makes me look more grown-up, don't you?"

"Definitely!" He was smiling, looking at me and nodding. *"But I'm the luckiest guy on the Lower East Side, 'cause I got wheels, and you want to go for a ride."*

"Look at you, Auggie!" he said, smiling from ear to ear. "Look at you, looking so grown-up and spiffy. I can't believe you're graduating from the fifth grade!"

"I know, it's pretty awesome, right?" I nodded.

"It feels like just yesterday that you started."

"Remember I still had that *Star Wars* braid hanging from the back of my head?"

"Oh my gosh, that's right," he said, rubbing his palm over his forehead.

"You hated that braid, didn't you, Dad?"

"Hate is too strong a word, but I definitely didn't love it."

"You hated it, come on, admit it," I teased.

"No, I didn't hate it." He smiled, shaking his head. "But I will admit to hating that astronaut helmet you used to wear, do you remember?"

"The one Miranda gave me? Of course I remember! I used to wear that thing all the time."

"Good God, I hated that thing," he laughed, almost more to himself.

"I was so bummed when it got lost," I said.

"Oh, it didn't get lost," he answered casually. "I threw it out."

"Wait. What?" I said. I honestly didn't think I heard him right.

"*The day is beautiful, and so are you,*" he was singing.

"Dad!" I said, turning the volume down.

"What?" he said.

"You threw it out?!"

He finally looked at my face and saw how mad I was. I couldn't believe he was being so matter-of-fact about the whole thing. I mean, to me this was a major revelation, and he was acting like it was no big deal.

"Auggie, I couldn't stand seeing that thing cover your face anymore," he said clumsily.

"Dad, I loved that helmet! It meant a lot to me! I was bummed beyond belief when it got lost—don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember, Auggie," he said softly. "Ohh, Auggie, don't be mad. I'm sorry. I just couldn't stand seeing you wear that thing on your head anymore, you know? I didn't think it was good for you." He was trying to look me in the eye, but I wouldn't look at him.

"Come on, Auggie, please try to understand," he continued, putting his hand under my chin and tilting my face toward him. "You were

wearing that helmet all the time. And the real, real, real, real truth is: I missed seeing your face, Auggie. I know *you* don't always love it, but you have to understand ... *I* love it. I *love* this face of yours, Auggie, completely and passionately. And it kind of broke my heart that you were always covering it up."

He was squinting at me like he really wanted me to understand.

"Does Mom know?" I said.

He opened his eyes wide. "No way. Are you kidding? She would have killed me!"

"She tore the place apart looking for that helmet, Dad," I said. "I mean, she spent like a week looking for it in every closet, in the laundry room, everywhere."

"I know!" he said, nodding. "That's why she'd kill me!"

And then he looked at me, and something about his expression made me start laughing, which made him open his mouth wide like he'd just realized something.

"Wait a minute, Auggie," he said, pointing his finger at me. "You have to promise me you will *never* tell Mommy anything about this."

I smiled and rubbed my palms together like I was about to get very greedy.

"Let's see," I said, stroking my chin. "I'll be wanting that new Xbox when it comes out next month. And I'll definitely be wanting my own car in about six years, a red Porsche would be nice, and ..."

He started laughing. I love it when I'm the one who makes Dad laugh, since he's usually the funnyman that gets everybody else laughing.

"Oh boy, oh boy," he said, shaking his head. "You really have grown up."

The part of the song we love to sing the most started to play, and I turned up the volume. We both started singing.

"I'm the ugliest guy on the Lower East Side, but I've got wheels and you want to go for a ride. Want to go for a ride. Want to go for a ride. Want to go for a riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiide."

We always sang this last part at the top of our lungs, trying to hold that last note as long as the guy who sang the song, which always

made us crack up. While we were laughing, we noticed Jack had arrived and was walking over to our car. I started to get out.

“Hold on,” said Dad. “I just want to make sure you’ve forgiven me, okay?”

“Yes, I forgive you.”

He looked at me gratefully. “Thank you.”

“But don’t ever throw anything else of mine out again without telling me!”

“I promise.”

I opened the door and got out just as Jack reached the car.

“Hey, Jack,” I said.

“Hey, Auggie. Hey, Mr. Pullman,” said Jack.

“How you doin’, Jack?” said Dad.

“See you later, Dad,” I said, closing the door.

“Good luck, guys!” Dad called out, rolling down the front window.

“See you on the other side of fifth grade!”

We waved as he turned on the ignition and started to pull away, but then I ran over and he stopped the car. I put my head in the window so Jack wouldn’t hear what I was saying.

“Can you guys not kiss me a lot after graduation?” I asked quietly. “It’s kind of embarrassing.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“Tell Mom, too?”

“I don’t think she’ll be able to resist, Auggie, but I’ll pass it along.”

“Bye, dear ol’ Dad.”

He smiled. “Bye, my son, my son.”

Take Your Seats, Everyone

Jack and I walked right behind a couple of sixth graders into the building, and then followed them to the auditorium.

Mrs. G was at the entrance, handing out the programs and telling kids where to go.

“Fifth graders down the aisle to the left,” she said. “Sixth graders go to the right. Everyone come in. Come in. Good morning. Go to your staging areas. Fifth graders to the left, sixth grade to the right ...”

The auditorium was huge inside. Big sparkly chandeliers. Red velvet walls. Rows and rows and rows of cushioned seats leading up to the giant stage. We walked down the wide aisle and followed the signs to the fifth-grade staging area, which was in a big room to the left of the stage. Inside were four rows of folding chairs facing the front of the room, which is where Ms. Rubin was standing, waving us in as soon as we walked in the room.

“Okay, kids, take your seats. Take your seats,” she was saying, pointing to the rows of chairs. “Don’t forget, you’re sitting alphabetically. Come on, everybody, take your seats.” Not too many kids had arrived yet, though, and the ones who had weren’t listening to her. Me and Jack were sword-fighting with our rolled-up programs.

“Hey, guys.”

It was Summer walking over to us. She was wearing a light pink dress and, I think, a little makeup.

“Wow, Summer, you look awesome,” I told her, because she really did.

“Really? Thanks, you do, too, Auggie.”

“Yeah, you look okay, Summer,” said Jack, kind of matter-of-factly. And for the first time, I realized that Jack had a crush on her.

“This is so exciting, isn’t it?” said Summer.

“Yeah, kind of,” I answered, nodding.
“Oh man, look at this program,” said Jack, scratching his forehead.
“We’re going to be here all freakin’ day.”
I looked at my program.

***Headmaster’s Opening Remarks:
Dr. Harold Jansen***

***Middle-School Director’s Address:
Mr. Lawrence Tushman***

***“Light and Day”:
Middle-School Choir***

***Fifth-Grade Student Commencement Address:
Ximena Chin***

***Pachelbel: “Canon in D”:
Middle-School Chamber Music Ensemble***

***Sixth-Grade Student Commencement Address:
Mark Antoniak***

***“Under Pressure”:
Middle-School Choir***

***Middle-School Dean’s Address:
Ms. Jennifer Rubin***

Awards Presentation (see back)

Roll Call of Names

“Why do you think that?” I asked.
“Because Mr. Jansen’s speeches go on forever,” said Jack. “He’s even worse than Tushman!”
“My mom said she actually dozed off when he spoke last year,”

Summer added.

“What’s the awards presentation?” I asked.

“That’s where they give medals to the biggest brainiacs,” Jack answered. “Which would mean Charlotte and Ximena will win everything in the fifth grade, just like Charlotte in the fourth grade and in the third grade.”

“Not in the second grade?” I laughed.

“They didn’t give those awards out in the second grade,” he answered.

“Maybe *you’ll* win this year,” I joked.

“Not unless they give awards for the most Cs!” he laughed.

“Everybody, take your seats!” Ms. Rubin started yelling louder now, like she was getting annoyed that nobody was listening. “We have a lot to get through, so take your seats. Don’t forget you’re sitting in alphabetical order! A through G is the first row! H through N is the second row; O through Q is the third row; R through Z is the last row. Let’s go, people.”

“We should go sit down,” said Summer, walking toward the front section.

“You guys are definitely coming over my house after this, right?” I called out after her.

“Definitely!” she said, taking her seat next to Ximena Chin.

“When did Summer get so hot?” Jack muttered in my ear.

“Shut up, dude,” I said, laughing as we headed toward the third row.

“Seriously, when did that happen?” he whispered, taking the seat next to mine.

“Mr. Will!” Ms. Rubin shouted. “Last time I checked, W came between R and Z, yes?”

Jack looked at her blankly.

“Dude, you’re in the wrong row!” I said.

“I am?” And the face he made as he got up to leave, which was a mixture of looking completely confused and looking like he’s just played a joke on someone, totally cracked me up.

A Simple Thing

About an hour later we were all seated in the giant auditorium waiting for Mr. Tushman to give his “middle-school address.” The auditorium was even bigger than I imagined it would be—bigger even than the one at Via’s school. I looked around, and there must have been a million people in the audience. Okay, maybe not a million, but definitely a lot.

“Thank you, Headmaster Jansen, for those very kind words of introduction,” said Mr. Tushman, standing behind the podium on the stage as he talked into the microphone. “Welcome, my fellow teachers and members of the faculty....

“Welcome, parents and grandparents, friends and honored guests, and most especially, welcome to my fifth- and sixth-grade students....

“Welcome to the Beecher Prep Middle School graduation ceremonies!!!”

Everyone applauded.

“Every year,” continued Mr. Tushman, reading from his notes with his reading glasses way down on the tip of his nose, “I am charged with writing two commencement addresses: one for the fifth- and sixth-grade graduation ceremony today, and one for the seventh- and eighth-grade ceremony that will take place tomorrow. And every year I say to myself, Let me cut down on my work and write just one address that I can use for both situations. Seems like it shouldn’t be such a hard thing to do, right? And yet each year I still end up with two different speeches, no matter what my intentions, and I finally figured out why this year. It’s not, as you might assume, simply because tomorrow I’ll be talking to an older crowd with a middle-school experience that is largely behind them—whereas your middle-school experience is largely in front of you. No, I think it has to do

more with this particular age that you are right now, this particular moment in your lives that, even after twenty years of my being around students this age, still moves me. Because you're at the cusp, kids. You're at the edge between childhood and everything that comes after. You're in transition.

"We are all gathered here together," Mr. Tushman continued, taking off his glasses and using them to point at all of us in the audience, "all your families, friends, and teachers, to celebrate not only your achievements of this past year, Beecher middle schoolers—but your endless possibilities.

"When you reflect on this past year, I want you all to look at where you are now and where you've been. You've all gotten a little taller, a little stronger, a little smarter ... I hope."

Here some people in the audience chuckled.

"But the best way to measure how much you've grown isn't by inches or the number of laps you can now run around the track, or even your grade point average—though those things are important, to be sure. It's what you've done with your time, how you've chosen to spend your days, and whom you have touched this year. That, to me, is the greatest measure of success.

"There's a wonderful line in a book by J. M. Barrie—and no, it's not *Peter Pan*, and I'm not going to ask you to clap if you believe in fairies...."

Here everyone laughed again.

"But in another book by J. M. Barrie called *The Little White Bird* ... he writes ..." He started flipping through a small book on the podium until he found the page he was looking for, and then he put on his reading glasses. " 'Shall we make a new rule of life ... always to try to be a little kinder than is necessary?' "

Here Mr. Tushman looked up at the audience. "Kinder than is necessary," he repeated. "What a marvelous line, isn't it? Kinder than is *necessary*. Because it's not enough to be kind. One should be kinder than needed. Why I love that line, that concept, is that it reminds me that we carry with us, as human beings, not just the capacity to be kind, but the very choice of kindness. And what does that mean? How

is that measured? You can't use a yardstick. It's like I was saying just before: it's not like measuring how much you've grown in a year. It's not exactly quantifiable, is it? How do we know we've been kind? What is being kind, anyway?"

He put on his reading glasses again and started flipping through another small book.

"There's another passage in a different book I'd like to share with you," he said. "If you'll bear with me while I find it.... Ah, here we go. In *Under the Eye of the Clock*, by Christopher Nolan, the main character is a young man who is facing some extraordinary challenges. There's this one part where someone helps him: a kid in his class. On the surface, it's a small gesture. But to this young man, whose name is Joseph, it's ... well, if you'll permit me ..."

He cleared his throat and read from the book: " 'It was at moments such as these that Joseph recognized the face of God in human form. It glimmered in their kindness to him, it glowed in their keenness, it hinted in their caring, indeed it caressed in their gaze.' "

He paused and took off his reading glasses again.

"It glimmered in their kindness to him," he repeated, smiling. "Such a simple thing, kindness. Such a simple thing. A nice word of encouragement given when needed. An act of friendship. A passing smile."

He closed the book, put it down, and leaned forward on the podium.

"Children, what I want to impart to you today is an understanding of the value of that simple thing called kindness. And that's all I want to leave you with today. I know I'm kind of infamous for my ... um ... verbosity ..."

Here everybody laughed again. I guess he knew he was known for his long speeches.

"... but what I want you, my students, to take away from your middle-school experience," he continued, "is the sure knowledge that, in the future you make for yourselves, anything is possible. If every single person in this room made it a rule that wherever you are, whenever you can, you will try to act a little kinder than is necessary

—the world really would be a better place. And if you do this, if you act just a little kinder than is necessary, someone else, somewhere, someday, may recognize in you, in every single one of you, the face of God.”

He paused and shrugged.

“Or whatever politically correct spiritual representation of universal goodness you happen to believe in,” he added quickly, smiling, which got a lot of laughs and loads of applause, especially from the back of the auditorium, where the parents were sitting.

Awards

I liked Mr. Tushman's speech, but I have to admit: I kind of zoned out a little during some of the other speeches.

I tuned in again as Ms. Rubin started reading off the names of the kids who'd made the High Honor Roll because we were supposed to stand up when our names were called. So I waited and listened for my name as she went down the list alphabetically. Reid Kingsley. Maya Markowitz. August Pullman. I stood up. Then when she finished reading off the names, she asked us all to face the audience and take a bow, and everyone applauded.

I had no idea where in that huge crowd my parents might be sitting. All I could see were the flashes of light from people taking photos and parents waving at their kids. I pictured Mom waving at me from somewhere even though I couldn't see her.

Then Mr. Tushman came back to the podium to present the medals for academic excellence, and Jack was right: Ximena Chin won the gold medal for "overall academic excellence in the fifth grade." Charlotte won the silver. Charlotte also won a gold medal for music. Amos won the medal for overall excellence in sports, which I was really happy about because, ever since the nature retreat, I considered Amos to be like one of my best friends in school. But I was really, really thrilled when Mr. Tushman called out Summer's name for the gold medal in creative writing. I saw Summer put her hand over her mouth when her name was called, and when she walked up onto the stage, I yelled: "Woo-hoo, Summer!" as loudly as I could, though I don't think she heard me.

After the last name was called, all the kids who'd just won awards stood next to each other onstage, and Mr. Tushman said to the audience: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am very honored to present to you

this year's Beecher Prep School scholastic achievers. Congratulations to all of you!"

I applauded as the kids onstage bowed. I was so happy for Summer.

"The final award this morning," said Mr. Tushman, after the kids onstage had returned to their seats, "is the Henry Ward Beecher medal to honor students who have been notable or exemplary in certain areas throughout the school year. Typically, this medal has been our way of acknowledging volunteerism or service to the school."

I immediately figured Charlotte would get this medal because she organized the coat drive this year, so I kind of zoned out a bit again. I looked at my watch: 10:56. I was getting hungry for lunch already.

"... Henry Ward Beecher was, of course, the nineteenth-century abolitionist—and fiery sermonizer for human rights—after whom this school was named," Mr. Tushman was saying when I started paying attention again.

"While reading up on his life in preparation for this award, I came upon a passage that he wrote that seemed particularly consistent with the themes I touched on earlier, themes I've been ruminating upon all year long. Not just the nature of kindness, but the nature of *one's* kindness. The power of *one's* friendship. The test of *one's* character. The strength of *one's* courage—"

And here the weirdest thing happened: Mr. Tushman's voice cracked a bit, like he got all choked up. He actually cleared his throat and took a big sip of water. I started paying attention, for real now, to what he was saying.

"The strength of one's courage," he repeated quietly, nodding and smiling. He held up his right hand like he was counting off. "Courage. Kindness. Friendship. Character. These are the qualities that define us as human beings, and propel us, on occasion, to greatness. And this is what the Henry Ward Beecher medal is about: recognizing greatness.

"But how do we do that? How do we measure something like greatness? Again, there's no yardstick for that kind of thing. How do we even define it? Well, Beecher actually had an answer for that."

He put his reading glasses on again, leafed through a book, and

started to read. “ ‘Greatness,’ wrote Beecher, ‘lies not in being strong, but in the right using of strength.... He is the greatest whose strength carries up the most hearts ...’ ”

And again, out of the blue, he got all choked up. He put his two index fingers over his mouth for a second before continuing.

“ ‘He is the greatest,’ ” he finally continued, “ ‘whose strength carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own.’ Without further ado, this year I am very proud to award the Henry Ward Beecher medal to the student whose quiet strength has carried up the most hearts.

“So will August Pullman please come up here to receive this award?”

Floating

People started applauding before Mr. Tushman's words actually registered in my brain. I heard Maya, who was next to me, give a little happy scream when she heard my name, and Miles, who was on the other side of me, patted my back. "Stand up, get up!" said kids all around me, and I felt lots of hands pushing me upward out of my seat, guiding me to the edge of the row, patting my back, high-fiving me. "Way to go, Auggie!" "Nice going, Auggie!" I even started hearing my name being chanted: "Aug-gie! Aug-gie! Aug-gie!" I looked back and saw Jack leading the chant, fist in the air, smiling and signaling for me to keep going, and Amos shouting through his hands: "Woo-hoo, little dude!"

Then I saw Summer smiling as I walked past her row, and when she saw me look at her, she gave me a secret little thumbs-up and mouthed a silent "cool beans" to me. I laughed and shook my head like I couldn't believe it. I really couldn't believe it.

I think I was smiling. Maybe I was beaming, I don't know. As I walked up the aisle toward the stage, all I saw was a blur of happy bright faces looking at me, and hands clapping for me. And I heard people yelling things out at me: "You deserve it, Auggie!" "Good for you, Auggie!" I saw all my teachers in the aisle seats, Mr. Browne and Ms. Petosa and Mr. Roche and Mrs. Atanabi and Nurse Molly and all the others: and they were cheering for me, *woo-hooing* and whistling.

I felt like I was floating. It was so weird. Like the sun was shining full force on my face and the wind was blowing. As I got closer to the stage, I saw Ms. Rubin waving at me in the front row, and then next to her was Mrs. G, who was crying hysterically—a happy crying—smiling and clapping the whole time. And as I walked up the steps to the stage, the most amazing thing happened: everyone started

standing up. Not just the front rows, but the whole audience suddenly got up on their feet, whooping, hollering, clapping like crazy. It was a standing ovation. For me.

I walked across the stage to Mr. Tushman, who shook my hand with both his hands and whispered in my ear: “Well done, Auggie.” Then he placed the gold medal over my head, just like they do in the Olympics, and had me turn to face the audience. It felt like I was watching myself in a movie, almost, like I was someone else. It was like that last scene in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* when Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Chewbacca are being applauded for destroying the Death Star. I could almost hear the *Star Wars* theme music playing in my head as I stood on the stage.

I wasn’t even sure why I was getting this medal, really.

No, that’s not true. I knew why.

It’s like people you see sometimes, and you can’t imagine what it would be like to be that person, whether it’s somebody in a wheelchair or somebody who can’t talk. Only, I know that I’m that person to other people, maybe to every single person in that whole auditorium.

To me, though, I’m just me. An ordinary kid.

But hey, if they want to give me a medal for being me, that’s okay. I’ll take it. I didn’t destroy a Death Star or anything like that, but I did just get through the fifth grade. And that’s not easy, even if you’re not me.

Pictures

Afterward there was a reception for the fifth and sixth graders under a huge white tent in the back of the school. All the kids found their parents, and I didn't mind at all when Mom and Dad hugged me like crazy, or when Via wrapped her arms around me and swung me left and right about twenty times. Then Poppa and Tata hugged me, and Aunt Kate and Uncle Po, and Uncle Ben—everyone kind of teary-eyed and wet-cheeked. But Miranda was the funniest: she was crying more than anyone and squeezed me so tight that Via had to practically pry her off of me, which made them both laugh.

Everyone started taking pictures of me and pulling out their Flips, and then Dad got me, Summer, and Jack together for a group shot. We put our arms around each other's shoulders, and for the first time I can remember, I wasn't even thinking about my face. I was just smiling a big fat happy smile for all the different cameras clicking away at me. *Flash, flash, click, click*: smiling away as Jack's parents and Summer's mom started clicking. Then Reid and Maya came over. *Flash, flash, click, click*. And then Charlotte came over and asked if she could take a picture with us, and we were like, "Sure, of course!" And then Charlotte's parents were snapping away at our little group along with everyone else's parents.

And the next thing I knew, the two Maxes had come over, and Henry and Miles, and Savanna. Then Amos came over, and Ximena. And we were all in this big tight huddle as parents clicked away like we were on a red carpet somewhere. Luca. Isaiah. Nino. Pablo. Tristan. Ellie. I lost track of who else came over. Everybody, practically. All I knew for sure is that we were all laughing and squeezing in tight against each other, and no one seemed to care if it was my face that was next to theirs or not. In fact, and I don't mean

to brag here, but it kind of felt like everyone wanted to get close to me.

The Walk Home

We walked to our house for cake and ice cream after the reception. Jack and his parents and his little brother, Jamie. Summer and her mother. Uncle Po and Aunt Kate. Uncle Ben, Tata and Poppa. Justin and Via and Miranda. Mom and Dad.

It was one of those great June days when the sky is completely blue and the sun is shining but it isn't so hot that you wish you were on the beach instead. It was just the perfect day. Everyone was happy. I still felt like I was floating, the *Star Wars* hero music in my head.

I walked with Summer and Jack, and we just couldn't stop cracking up. Everything made us laugh. We were in that giggly kind of mood where all someone has to do is look at you and you start laughing.

I heard Dad's voice up ahead and looked up. He was telling everyone a funny story as they walked down Amesfort Avenue. The grown-ups were all laughing, too. It was like Mom always said: Dad could be a comedian.

I noticed Mom wasn't walking with the group of grown-ups, so I looked behind me. She was hanging back a bit, smiling to herself like she was thinking of something sweet. She seemed happy.

I took a few steps back and surprised her by hugging her as she walked. She put her arm around me and gave me a squeeze.

"Thank you for making me go to school," I said quietly.

She hugged me close and leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"Thank *you*, Auggie," she answered softly.

"For what?"

"For everything you've given us," she said. "For coming into our lives. For being you."

She bent down and whispered in my ear. "You really are a wonder,

Auggie. You are a wonder.”

APPENDIX

MR. BROWNE'S PRECEPTS

SEPTEMBER

When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind. —Dr. Wayne W. Dyer

OCTOBER

Your deeds are your monuments. —inscription on an Egyptian tomb

NOVEMBER

Have no friends not equal to yourself. —Confucius

DECEMBER

Audentes fortuna iuvat. (Fortune favors the bold.) —Virgil

JANUARY

No man is an island, entire of itself. —John Donne

FEBRUARY

It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers. —James Thurber

MARCH

Kind words do not cost much. Yet they accomplish much.
—Blaise Pascal

APRIL

What is beautiful is good, and who is good will soon be beautiful.
—Sappho

MAY

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you ever can.
—John Wesley's Rule

JUNE

Just follow the day and reach for the sun! —The Polyphonic Spree,
“Light and Day”

POSTCARD PRECEPTS

CHARLOTTE CODY'S PRECEPT

It's not enough to be friendly. You have to be a friend.

REID KINGSLEY'S PRECEPT

Save the oceans, save the world! —Me!

TRISTAN FIEDLEHOLTZEN'S PRECEPT

If you really want something in this life, you have to work for it. Now
quiet, they're about to announce the lottery numbers! —Homer
Simpson

SAVANNA WITTENBERG'S PRECEPT

Flowers are great, but love is better. —Justin Bieber

HENRY JOPLIN'S PRECEPT

Don't be friends with jerks. —Henry Joplin

MAYA MARKOWITZ'S PRECEPT

All you need is love. —The Beatles

AMOS CONTI'S PRECEPT

Don't try too hard to be cool. It always shows, and that's uncool. —
Amos Conti

XIMENA CHIN'S PRECEPT

To thine own self be true. —*Hamlet*, Shakespeare

JULIAN ALBANS'S PRECEPT

Sometimes it's good to start over. —Julian Albans

SUMMER DAWSON'S PRECEPT

If you can get through middle school without hurting anyone's feelings, that's really cool beans. —Summer Dawson

JACK WILL'S PRECEPT

Keep calm and carry on! —some saying from World War II

AUGUST PULLMAN'S PRECEPT

Everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their life because we all overcometh the world. —Auggie

Some Vital Resources

Here are a few of the organizations with which I've been in touch that are doing wonders for children with craniofacial differences. I thank them for their support and urge readers of *Wonder* to support their beautiful work.

Beyond Differences—beyonddifferences.org

Changing Faces—changingfaces.org.uk

Children's Craniofacial Association—ccakids.org

National Foundation for Facial Reconstruction—nffr.org

Rachel's Challenge—rachelschallenge.org

Additional Internet Resources

Bullying: What You Can Do

Anti-Defamation League—adl.org

International Bullying Prevention Association
—stopbullyingworld.org

StopBullying.gov
—stopbullying.gov/kids/what-you-can-do/index.html

Stop Bullying Now—stopbullyingnow.com

Teaching Tolerance,
a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center
—tolerance.org

Children and Pet Loss

Eden Memorial Pet Care—

edenmemorialpetcare.com/children-pet-loss-article.htm

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—R.J.



R. J. Palacio lives in New York City with her husband, two sons, and two dogs. For more than twenty years, she was an editorial director, an art director, and a graphic designer, working on books for other people while waiting for the perfect time in her life to start writing her own novel. But one day several years ago, a chance encounter with an extraordinary child in front of an ice cream store made R. J. realize that the perfect time to write that book had finally come. *Wonder* is her first novel. She did not design the cover, but she sure does love it.

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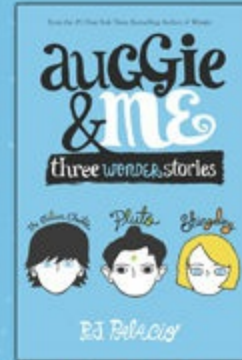
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are worth a little
extra effort.



It's not enough
to be friendly.
You have to be a friend.



Does Auggie's bully
have a chance for
redemption?



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