

they think so highly of you....”

“Why is it sad?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said it’s flattering but kind of sad, too.”

“Oh.” Mom nodded. “Well, apparently this boy has some sort of ... um, I guess there’s something wrong with his face ... or something like that. Not sure. Maybe he was in an accident. Mr. Tushman said he’d explain a bit more when you come to the school next week.”

“School doesn’t start till September!”

“He wants you to meet this kid before school starts.”

“Do I have to?”

Mom looked a bit surprised.

“Well, no, of course not,” she said, “but it would be the nice thing to do, Jack.”

“If I don’t have to do it,” I said, “I don’t want to do it.”

“Can you at least think about it?”

“I’m thinking about it and I don’t want to do it.”

“Well, I’m not going to force you,” she said, “but at least think about it some more, okay? I’m not calling Mr. Tushman back until tomorrow, so just sit with it a bit. I mean, Jack, I really don’t think it’s that much to ask that you spend a little extra time with some new kid....”

“It’s not just that he’s a new kid, Mom,” I answered. “He’s deformed.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say, Jack.”

“He is, Mom.”

“You don’t even know who it is!”

“Yeah, I do,” I said, because I knew the second she started talking about him that it was that kid named August.

Carvel

I remember seeing him for the first time in front of the Carvel on Amesfort Avenue when I was about five or six. Me and Veronica, my babysitter, were sitting on the bench outside the store with Jamie, my baby brother, who was sitting in his stroller facing us. I guess I was busy eating my ice cream cone, because I didn't even notice the people who sat down next to us.

Then at one point I turned my head to suck the ice cream out of the bottom of my cone, and that's when I saw him: August. He was sitting right next to me. I know it wasn't cool, but I kind of went "Uhh!" when I saw him because I honestly got scared. I thought he was wearing a zombie mask or something. It was the kind of "uhh" you say when you're watching a scary movie and the bad guy like jumps out of the bushes. Anyway, I know it wasn't nice of me to do that, and though the kid didn't hear me, I know his sister did.

"Jack! We have to go!" said Veronica. She had gotten up and was turning the stroller around because Jamie, who had obviously just noticed the kid, too, was about to say something embarrassing. So I jumped up kind of suddenly, like a bee had landed on me, and followed Veronica as she zoomed away. I could hear the kid's mom saying softly behind us: "Okay, guys, I think it's time to go," and I turned around to look at them one more time. The kid was licking his ice cream cone, the mom was picking up his scooter, and the sister was glaring at me like she was going to kill me. I looked away quickly.

"Veronica, what was wrong with that kid?" I whispered.

"Hush, boy!" she said, her voice angry. I love Veronica, but when she got mad, she got *mad*. Meanwhile, Jamie was practically spilling out of his stroller trying to get another look as Veronica pushed him

away.

“But, Vonica ...,” said Jamie.

“You boys were very naughty! Very naughty!” said Veronica as soon as we were farther down the block. “Staring like that!”

“I didn’t mean to!” I said.

“Vonica,” said Jamie.

“Us leaving like that,” Veronica was muttering. “Oh Lord, that poor lady. I tell you, boys. Every day we should thank the Lord for our blessings, you hear me?”

“Vonica!”

“What is it, Jamie?”

“Is it Halloween?”

“No, Jamie.”

“Then why was that boy wearing a mask?”

Veronica didn’t answer. Sometimes, when she was mad about something, she would do that.

“He wasn’t wearing a mask,” I explained to Jamie.

“Hush, Jack!” said Veronica.

“Why are you so mad, Veronica?” I couldn’t help asking.

I thought this would make her angrier, but actually she shook her head.

“It was bad how we did that,” she said. “Just getting up like that, like we’d just seen the devil. I was scared for what Jamie was going to say, you know? I didn’t want him to say anything that would hurt that little boy’s feelings. But it was very bad, us leaving like that. The momma knew what was going on.”

“But we didn’t mean it,” I answered.

“Jack, sometimes you don’t have to mean to hurt someone to hurt someone. You understand?”

That was the first time I ever saw August in the neighborhood, at least that I remember. But I’ve seen him around ever since then: a couple of times in the playground, a few times in the park. He used to wear an astronaut helmet sometimes. But I always knew it was him underneath the helmet. All the kids in the neighborhood knew it was him. Everyone has seen August at some point or another. We all know

his name, though he doesn't know ours.

And whenever I've seen him, I try to remember what Veronica said. But it's hard. It's hard not to sneak a second look. It's hard to act normal when you see him.

Why I Changed My Mind

“Who else did Mr. Tushman call?” I asked Mom later that night. “Did he tell you?”

“He mentioned Julian and Charlotte.”

“Julian!” I said. “Ugh. Why Julian?”

“You used to be friends with Julian!”

“Mom, that was like in kindergarten. Julian’s the biggest phony there is. And he’s trying so hard to be popular all the time.”

“Well,” said Mom, “at least Julian agreed to help this kid out. Got to give him credit for that.”

I didn’t say anything because she was right.

“What about Charlotte?” I asked. “Is she doing it, too?”

“Yes,” Mom said.

“Of course she is. Charlotte’s such a Goody Two-Shoes,” I answered.

“Boy, Jack,” said Mom, “you seem to have a problem with everybody these days.”

“It’s just ...,” I started. “Mom, you have no idea what this kid looks like.”

“I can imagine.”

“No! You can’t! You’ve never seen him. I have.”

“It might not even be who you’re thinking it is.”

“Trust me, it is. And I’m telling you, it’s really, *really* bad. He’s deformed, Mom. His eyes are like down here.” I pointed to my cheeks. “And he has no ears. And his mouth is like ...”

Jamie had walked into the kitchen to get a juice box from the fridge.

“Ask Jamie,” I said. “Right, Jamie? Remember that kid we saw in the park after school last year? The kid named August? The one with the face?”

“Oh, that kid?” said Jamie, his eyes opening wide. “He gave me a nightmare!! Remember, Mommy? That nightmare about the zombies from last year?”

“I thought that was from watching a scary movie!” answered Mom.

“No!” said Jamie, “it was from seeing that kid! When I saw him, I was like, ‘Ahhh!’ and I ran away....”

“Wait a minute,” said Mom, getting serious. “Did you do that in front of him?”

“I couldn’t help it!” said Jamie, kind of whining.

“Of course you could help it!” Mom scolded. “Guys, I have to tell you, I’m really disappointed by what I’m hearing here.” And she looked like how she sounded. “I mean, honestly, he’s just a little boy—just like you! Can you imagine how he felt to see you running away from him, Jamie, screaming?”

“It wasn’t a scream,” argued Jamie. “It was like an ‘Ahhh!’ ” He put his hands on his cheeks and started running around the kitchen.

“Come on, Jamie!” said Mom angrily. “I honestly thought both my boys were more sympathetic than that.”

“What’s sympathetic?” said Jamie, who was only going into the second grade.

“You know exactly what I mean by sympathetic, Jamie,” said Mom.

“It’s just he’s so ugly, Mommy,” said Jamie.

“Hey!” Mom yelled, “I don’t like that word! Jamie, just get your juice box. I want to talk to Jack alone for a second.”

“Look, Jack,” said Mom as soon as he left, and I knew she was about to give me a whole speech.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” I said, which completely shocked her.

“You will?”

“Yes!”

“So I can call Mr. Tushman?”

“Yes! Mom, yes, I said yes!”

Mom smiled. “I knew you’d rise to the occasion, kiddo. Good for you. I’m proud of you, Jackie.” She messed up my hair.

So here’s why I changed my mind. It wasn’t so I wouldn’t have to hear Mom give me a whole lecture. And it wasn’t to protect this

August kid from Julian, who I knew would be a jerk about the whole thing. It was because when I heard Jamie talking about how he had run away from August going 'Ahhh,' I suddenly felt really bad. The thing is, there are always going to be kids like Julian who are jerks. But if a little kid like Jamie, who's usually a nice enough kid, can be that mean, then a kid like August doesn't stand a chance in middle school.

Four Things

First of all, you do get used to his face. The first couple of times I was like, whoa, I'm never going to get used to this. And then, after about a week, I was like, huh, it's not so bad.

Second of all, he's actually a really cool dude. I mean, he's pretty funny. Like, the teacher will say something and August will whisper something funny to me that no one else hears and totally make me crack up. He's also just, overall, a nice kid. Like, he's easy to hang out with and talk to and stuff.

Third of all, he's really smart. I thought he'd be behind everyone because he hadn't gone to school before. But in most things he's way ahead of me. I mean, maybe not as smart as Charlotte or Ximena, but he's up there. And unlike Charlotte or Ximena, he lets me cheat off of him if I really need to (though I've only needed to a couple of times). He also let me copy his homework once, though we both got in trouble for it after class.

"The two of you got the exact same answers wrong on yesterday's homework," Ms. Rubin said, looking at both of us like she was waiting for an explanation. I didn't know what to say, because the explanation would have been: Oh, that's because I copied August's homework.

But August lied to protect me. He was like, "Oh, that's because we did our homework together last night," which wasn't true at all.

"Well, doing homework together is a good thing," Ms. Rubin answered, "but you're supposed to still do it separately, okay? You could work side by side if you want, but you can't actually do your homework together, okay? Got it?"

After we left the classroom, I said: "Dude, thanks for doing that." And he was like, "No problem."

That was cool.

Fourthly, now that I know him, I would say I actually do want to be friends with August. At first, I admit it, I was only friendly to him because Mr. Tushman asked me to be especially nice and all that. But now I would choose to hang out with him. He laughs at all my jokes. And I kind of feel like I can tell August anything. Like he's a good friend. Like, if all the guys in the fifth grade were lined up against a wall and I got to choose anyone I wanted to hang out with, I would choose August.

Ex-Friends

Bleeding Scream? What the heck? Summer Dawson has always been a bit out there, but this was too much. All I did was ask her why August was acting like he was mad at me or something. I figured she would know. And all she said was “Bleeding Scream”? I don’t even know what that means.

It’s so weird because one day, me and August were friends. And the next day, whoosh, he was hardly talking to me. And I haven’t the slightest idea why. When I said to him, “Hey, August, you mad at me or something?” he shrugged and walked away. So I would take that as a definite yes. And since I know for a fact that I didn’t do anything to him to be mad about, I figured Summer could tell me what’s up. But all I got from her was “Bleeding Scream”? Yeah, big help. Thanks, Summer.

You know, I’ve got plenty of other friends in school. So if August wants to officially be my ex-friend, then fine, that is okay by me, see if I care. I’ve started ignoring him like he’s ignoring me in school now. This is actually kind of hard since we sit next to each other in practically every class.

Other kids have noticed and have started asking if me and August have had a fight. Nobody asks August what’s going on. Hardly anyone ever talks to him, anyway. I mean, the only person he hangs out with, other than me, is Summer. Sometimes he hangs out with Reid Kingsley a little bit, and the two Maxes got him playing Dungeons & Dragons a couple of times at recess. Charlotte, for all her Goody Two-Shoeing, doesn’t ever do more than nod hello when she’s passing him in the hallway. And I don’t know if everyone’s still playing the Plague behind his back, because no one ever really told me about it directly, but my point is that it’s not like he has a whole lot of other friends he

could be hanging out with instead of me. If he wants to dis me, he's the one who loses—not me.

So this is how things are between us now. We only talk to each other about school stuff if we absolutely have to. Like, I'll say, "What did Rubin say the homework was?" and he'll answer. Or he'll be like, "Can I use your pencil sharpener?" and I'll get my sharpener out of my pencil case for him. But as soon as the bell rings, we go our separate ways.

Why this is good is because I get to hang out with a lot more kids now. Before, when I was hanging out with August all the time, kids weren't hanging out with me because they'd have to hang out with him. Or they would keep things from me, like the whole thing about the Plague. I think I was the only one who wasn't in on it, except for Summer and maybe the D&D crowd. And the truth is, though nobody's that obvious about it: nobody wants to hang out with him. Everyone's way too hung up on being in the popular group, and he's just as far from the popular group as you can get. But now I can hang out with anyone I want. If I wanted to be in the popular group, I could totally be in the popular group.

Why this is bad is because, well, (a) I don't actually enjoy hanging out with the popular group that much. And (b) I actually liked hanging out with August.

So this is kind of messed up. And it's all August's fault.

Snow

The first snow of winter hit right before Thanksgiving break. School was closed, so we got an extra day of vacation. I was glad about that because I was so bummed about this whole August thing and I just wanted some time to chill without having to see him every day. Also, waking up to a snow day is just about my favorite thing in the world. I love that feeling when you first open your eyes in the morning and you don't even know why everything seems different than usual. Then it hits you: Everything is quiet. No cars honking. No buses going down the street. Then you run over to the window, and outside everything is covered in white: the sidewalks, the trees, the cars on the street, your windowpanes. And when that happens on a school day and you find out your school is closed, well, I don't care how old I get: I'm always going to think that that's the best feeling in the world. And I'm never going to be one of those grown-ups that use an umbrella when it's snowing—ever.

Dad's school was closed, too, so he took me and Jamie sledding down Skeleton Hill in the park. They say a little kid broke his neck while sledding down that hill a few years ago, but I don't know if this is actually true or just one of those legends. On the way home, I spotted this banged-up wooden sled kind of propped up against the Old Indian Rock monument. Dad said to leave it, it was just garbage, but something told me it would make the greatest sled ever. So Dad let me drag it home, and I spent the rest of the day fixing it up. I super-glued the broken slats together and wrapped some heavy-duty white duct tape around them for extra strength. Then I spray painted the whole thing white with the paint I had gotten for the Alabaster Sphinx I was making for the Egyptian Museum project. When it was all dry, I painted LIGHTNING in gold letters on the middle piece of

wood, and I made a little lightning-bolt symbol above the letters. It looked pretty professional, I have to say. Dad was like, “Wow, Jackie! You were right about the sled!”

The next day, we went back to Skeleton Hill with *Lightning*. It was the fastest thing I’ve ever ridden—so, so, so much faster than the plastic sleds we’d been using. And because it had gotten warmer outside, the snow had become crunchier and wetter: good packing snow. Me and Jamie took turns on *Lightning* all afternoon. We were in the park until our fingers were frozen and our lips had turned a little blue. Dad practically had to drag us home.

By the end of the weekend, the snow had started turning gray and yellow, and then a rainstorm turned most of the snow to slush. When we got back to school on Monday, there was no snow left.

It was rainy and yucky the first day back from vacation. A slushy day. That’s how I was feeling inside, too.

I nodded “hey” to August the first time I saw him. We were in front of the lockers. He nodded “hey” back.

I wanted to tell him about *Lightning*, but I didn’t.

Fortune Favors the Bold

Mr. Browne's December precept was: Fortune favors the bold. We were all supposed to write a paragraph about some time in our lives when we did something very brave and how, because of it, something good happened to us.

I thought about this a lot, to be truthful. I have to say that I think the bravest thing I ever did was become friends with August. But I couldn't write about that, of course. I was afraid we'd have to read these out loud, or Mr. Browne would put them up on the bulletin board like he does sometimes. So, instead, I wrote this lame thing about how I used to be afraid of the ocean when I was little. It was dumb but I couldn't think of anything else.

I wonder what August wrote about. He probably had a lot of things to choose from.

Private School

My parents are not rich. I say this because people sometimes think that everyone who goes to private school is rich, but that isn't true with us. Dad's a teacher and Mom's a social worker, which means they don't have those kinds of jobs where people make gazillions of dollars. We used to have a car, but we sold it when Jamie started kindergarten at Beecher Prep. We don't live in a big townhouse or in one of those doorman buildings along the park. We live on the top floor of a five-story walk-up we rent from an old lady named Doña Petra all the way on the "other" side of Broadway. That's "code" for the section of North River Heights where people don't want to park their cars. Me and Jamie share a room. I overhear my parents talk about things like "Can we do without an air conditioner one more year?" or "Maybe I can work two jobs this summer."

So today at recess I was hanging out with Julian and Henry and Miles. Julian, who everyone knows is rich, was like, "I hate that I have to go back to Paris this Christmas. It's so boring!"

"Dude, but it's, like, *Paris*," I said like an idiot.

"Believe me, it's so boring," he said. "My grandmother lives in this house in the middle of nowhere. It's like an hour away from Paris in this tiny, tiny, tiny village. I swear to God, *nothing* happens there! I mean, it's like, oh wow, there's another fly on the wall! Look, there's a new dog sleeping on the sidewalk. Yippee."

I laughed. Sometimes Julian could be very funny.

"Though my parents are talking about throwing a big party this year instead of going to Paris. I hope so. What are you doing over break?" said Julian.

"Just hanging out," I said.

"You're so lucky," he said.

"I hope it snows again," I answered. "I got this new sled that is so amazing." I was about to tell them about *Lightning* but Miles started talking first.

"I got a new sled, too!" he said. "My dad got it from Hammacher Schlemmer. It's so state of the art."

"How could a sled be state of the art?" said Julian.

"It was like eight hundred dollars or something."

"Whoa!"

"We should all go sledding and have a race down Skeleton Hill," I said.

"That hill is so lame," answered Julian.

"Are you kidding?" I said. "Some kid broke his neck there. That's why it's called Skeleton Hill."

Julian narrowed his eyes and looked at me like I was the biggest moron in the world. "It's called Skeleton Hill because it was an ancient Indian burial ground, duh," he said. "Anyway, it should be called Garbage Hill now, it's so freakin' junky. Last time I was there it was so gross, like with soda cans and broken bottles and stuff." He shook his head.

"I left my old sled there," said Miles. "It was the crappiest piece of junk—and someone took it, too!"

"Maybe a hobo wanted to go sledding!" laughed Julian.

"Where did you leave it?" I said.

"By the big rock at the bottom of the hill. And I went back the next day and it was gone. I couldn't believe somebody actually took it!"

"Here's what we can do," said Julian. "Next time it snows, my dad could drive us all up to this golf course in Westchester that makes Skeleton Hill look like nothing. Hey, Jack, where are you going?"

I had started to walk away.

"I've got to get a book out of my locker," I lied.

I just wanted to get away from them fast. I didn't want anyone to know that I was the "hobo" who had taken the sled.

In Science

I'm not the greatest student in the world. I know some kids actually like school, but I honestly can't say I do. I like some parts of school, like PE and computer class. And lunch and recess. But all in all, I'd be fine without school. And the thing I hate the most about school is all the homework we get. It's not enough that we have to sit through class after class and try to stay awake while they fill our heads with all this stuff we will probably never need to know, like how to figure out the surface area of a cube or what the difference is between kinetic and potential energy. I'm like, who cares? I've never, ever heard my parents say the word "kinetic" in my entire life!

I hate science the most out of all my classes. We get so much work it's not even funny! And the teacher, Ms. Rubin, is so strict about everything—even the way we write our headings on the top of our papers! I once got two points off a homework assignment because I didn't put the date on top. Crazy stuff.

When me and August were still friends, I was doing okay in science because August sat next to me and always let me copy his notes. August has the neatest handwriting of anybody I've ever seen who's a boy. Even his script is neat: up and down perfectly, with really small round loopy letters. But now that we're ex-friends, it's bad because I can't ask him to let me copy his notes anymore.

So I was kind of scrambling today, trying to take notes about what Ms. Rubin was saying (my handwriting is awful), when all of a sudden she started talking about the fifth-grade science-fair project, how we all had to choose a science project to work on.

While she was saying this, I was thinking, We just finished the freakin' Egypt project, now we have to start a whole new thing? And then in my head I was going, Oh noooooo! like that kid in *Home Alone*

with his mouth hanging open and his hands on his face. That was the face I was making on the inside. And then I thought of those pictures of melting ghost faces I've seen somewhere, where the mouths are open wide and they're screaming. And then all of a sudden this picture flew into my head, this memory, and I knew what Summer had meant by "bleeding scream." It's so weird how it all just came to me in this flash. Someone in homeroom had dressed up in a Bleeding Scream costume on Halloween. I remember seeing him a few desks away from me. And then I remember not seeing him again.

Oh man. It was August!

All of this hit me in science class while the teacher was talking.

Oh man.

I'd been talking to Julian about August. Oh man. Now I understood! I was so mean. I don't even know why. I'm not even sure what I said, but it was bad. It was only a minute or two. It's just that I knew Julian and everybody thought I was so weird for hanging out with August all the time, and I felt stupid. And I don't know why I said that stuff. I just was going along. I was stupid. I am stupid. Oh God. He was supposed to come as Boba Fett! I would never have said that stuff in front of Boba Fett. But that was him, that Bleeding Scream sitting at the desk looking over at us. The long white mask with the fake squirting blood. The mouth open wide. Like the ghoul was crying. That was him.

I felt like I was going to puke.

Partners

I didn't hear a word of what Ms. Rubin was saying after that. Blah blah blah. Science-fair project. Blah blah blah. Partners. Blah blah. It was like the way grown-ups talk in Charlie Brown movies. Like someone talking underwater. *Mwah-mwah-mwahhh, mwah mwahh.*

Then all of a sudden Ms. Rubin started pointing to kids around the class. "Reid and Tristan, Maya and Max, Charlotte and Ximena, August and Jack." She pointed to us when she said this. "Miles and Amos, Julian and Henry, Savanna and ..." I didn't hear the rest.

"Huh?" I said.

The bell rang.

"So don't forget to get together with your partners to choose a project from the list, guys!" said Ms. Rubin as everyone started taking off. I looked up at August, but he had already put his backpack on and was practically out the door.

I must have had a stupid look on my face because Julian came over and said: "Looks like you and your best bud are partners." He was smirking when he said this. I hated him so much right then.

"Hello, earth to Jack Will?" he said when I didn't answer him.

"Shut up, Julian." I was putting my loose-leaf binder away in my backpack and just wanted him away from me.

"You must be so bummed you got stuck with him," he said. "You should tell Ms. Rubin you want to switch partners. I bet she'd let you."

"No she wouldn't," I said.

"Ask her."

"No, I don't want to."

"Ms. Rubin?" Julian said, turning around and raising his hand at the same time.

Ms. Rubin was erasing the chalkboard at the front of the room. She turned when she heard her name.

“No, Julian!” I whisper-screamed.

“What is it, boys?” she said impatiently.

“Could we switch partners if we wanted to?” said Julian, looking very innocent. “Me and Jack had this science-fair project idea we wanted to work on together....”

“Well, I guess we could arrange that ...,” she started to say.

“No, it’s okay, Ms. Rubin,” I said quickly, heading out the door. “Bye!”

Julian ran after me.

“Why’d you do that?” he said, catching up to me at the stairs. “We could have been partners. You don’t have to be friends with that freak if you don’t want to be, you know....”

And that’s when I punched him. Right in the mouth.

Detention

Some things you just can't explain. You don't even try. You don't know where to start. All your sentences would jumble up like a giant knot if you opened your mouth. Any words you used would come out wrong.

"Jack, this is very, very serious," Mr. Tushman was saying. I was in his office, sitting on a chair across from his desk and looking at this picture of a pumpkin on the wall behind him. "Kids get expelled for this kind of thing, Jack! I know you're a good kid and I don't want that to happen, but you have to explain yourself."

"This is so not like you, Jack," said Mom. She had come from work as soon as they had called her. I could tell she was going back and forth between being really mad and really surprised.

"I thought you and Julian were friends," said Mr. Tushman.

"We're not friends," I said. My arms were crossed in front of me.

"But to punch someone in the mouth, Jack?" said Mom, raising her voice. "I mean, what were you thinking?" She looked at Mr. Tushman. "Honestly, he's never hit anyone before. He's just not like that."

"Julian's mouth was bleeding, Jack," said Mr. Tushman. "You knocked out a tooth, did you know that?"

"It was just a baby tooth," I said.

"Jack!" said Mom, shaking her head.

"That's what Nurse Molly said!"

"You're missing the point!" Mom yelled.

"I just want to know why," said Mr. Tushman, raising his shoulders.

"It'll just make everything worse," I sighed.

"Just tell me, Jack."

I shrugged but I didn't say anything. I just couldn't. If I told him

that Julian had called August a freak, then he'd go talk to Julian about it, then Julian would tell him how I had badmouthed August, too, and everybody would find out about it.

"Jack!" said Mom.

I started to cry. "I'm sorry ..."

Mr. Tushman raised his eyebrows and nodded, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he kind of blew into his hands, like you do when your hands are cold. "Jack," he said, "I don't really know what to say here. I mean, you punched a kid. We have rules about that kind of thing, you know? Automatic expulsion. And you're not even trying to explain yourself."

I was crying a lot by now, and the second Mom put her arms around me, I started to bawl.

"Let's, um ..., " said Mr. Tushman, taking his glasses off to clean them, "let's do this, Jack. We're out for winter break as of next week anyway. How about you stay home for the rest of this week, and then after winter break you'll come back and everything will be fresh and brand new. Clean slate, so to speak."

"Am I being suspended?" I sniffled.

"Well," he said, shrugging, "technically yes, but it's only for a couple of days. And I'll tell you what. While you're at home, you take the time to think about what's happened. And if you want to write me a letter explaining what happened, and a letter to Julian apologizing, then we won't even put any of this in your permanent record, okay? You go home and talk about it with your mom and dad, and maybe in the morning you'll figure it all out a bit more."

"That sounds like a good plan, Mr. Tushman," said Mom, nodding. "Thank you."

"Everything is going to be okay," said Mr. Tushman, walking over to the door, which was closed. "I know you're a nice kid, Jack. And I know that sometimes even nice kids do dumb things, right?" He opened the door.

"Thank you for being so understanding," said Mom, shaking his hand at the door.

"No problem." He leaned over and told her something quietly that I

couldn't hear.

"I know, thank you," said Mom, nodding.

"So, kiddo," he said to me, putting his hands on my shoulders. "Think about what you've done, okay? And have a great holiday. Happy Chanukah! Merry Christmas! Happy Kwanzaa!"

I wiped my nose with my sleeve and started walking out the door.

"Say thank you to Mr. Tushman," said Mom, tapping my shoulder.

I stopped and turned around, but I couldn't look at him. "Thank you, Mr. Tushman," I said.

"Bye, Jack," he answered.

Then I walked out the door.

Season's Greetings

Weirdly enough, when we got back home and Mom brought in the mail, there were holiday cards from both Julian's family and August's family. Julian's holiday card was a picture of Julian wearing a tie, looking like he was about to go to the opera or something. August's holiday card was of a cute old dog wearing reindeer antlers, a red nose, and red booties. There was a cartoon bubble above the dog's head that read: "Ho-Ho-Ho!" On the inside of the card it read:

To the Will family,

Peace on Earth.

Love, Nate, Isabel, Olivia, August (and Daisy)

"Cute card, huh?" I said to Mom, who had hardly said a word to me all the way home. I think she honestly just didn't know what to say. "That must be their dog," I said.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on inside your head, Jack?" she answered me seriously.

"I bet you they put a picture of their dog on the card every year," I said.

She took the card from my hands and looked at the picture carefully. Then she raised her eyebrows and her shoulders and gave me back the card. "We're very lucky, Jack. There's so much we take for granted...."

"I know," I said. I knew what she was talking about without her having to say it. "I heard that Julian's mom actually Photoshopped August's face out of the class picture when she got it. She gave a copy to a couple of the other moms."

"That's just awful," said Mom. "People are just ... they're not

always so great.”

“I know.”

“Is that why you hit Julian?”

“No.”

And then I told her why I punched Julian. And I told her that August was my ex-friend now. And I told her about Halloween.

Letters, Emails, Facebook, Texts

December 18

Dear Mr. Tushman,

I am very, very sorry for punching Julian. It was very, very wrong for me to do that. I am writing a letter to him to tell him that, too. If it's okay, I would really rather not tell you why I did what I did because it doesn't really make it right anyway. Also, I would rather not make Julian get in trouble for having said something he should not have said.

Very sincerely,
Jack Will

December 18

Dear Julian,

I am very, very, very sorry for hitting you. It was wrong of me. I hope you are okay. I hope your grown-up tooth grows in fast. Mine always do.

Sincerely,
Jack Will

December 26

Dear Jack,

Thank you so much for your letter. One thing I've learned after being a middle-school director for twenty years: there are almost always more than two sides to every story. Although I don't know the details, I have an inkling about what may have sparked

the confrontation with Julian.

While nothing justifies striking another student—ever—I also know good friends are sometimes worth defending. This has been a tough year for a lot of students, as the first year of middle school usually is.

Keep up the good work, and keep being the fine boy we all know you are.

All the best,
Lawrence Tushman
Middle-School Director

To: ltushman@beecherschool.edu
Cc: johnwill@phillipsacademy.edu; amandawill@copperbeech.org
Fr: melissa.albans@rmail.com
Subject: Jack Will

Dear Mr. Tushman,

I spoke with Amanda and John Will yesterday, and they expressed their regret at Jack's having punched our son, Julian, in the mouth. I am writing to let you know that my husband and I support your decision to allow Jack to return to Beecher Prep after a two-day suspension. Although I think hitting a child would be valid grounds for expulsion in other schools, I agree such extreme measures aren't warranted here. We have known the Will family since our boys were in kindergarten, and are confident that every measure will be taken to ensure this doesn't happen again. To that end, I wonder if Jack's unexpectedly violent behavior might have been a result of too much pressure being placed on his young shoulders? I am speaking specifically of the new child with special needs who both Jack and Julian were asked to "befriend." In retrospect, and having now seen the child in question at various school functions and in the class pictures, I think it may have been too much to ask of our children to be able to process all that. Certainly, when Julian

mentioned he was having a hard time befriending the boy, we told him he was “off the hook” in that regard. We think the transition to middle school is hard enough without having to place greater burdens or hardships on these young, impressionable minds. I should also mention that, as a member of the school board, I was a little disturbed that more consideration was not given during this child’s application process to the fact that Beecher Prep is not an inclusion school. There are many parents—myself included—who question the decision to let this child into our school at all. At the very least, I am somewhat troubled that this child was not held to the same stringent application standards (i.e. interview) that the rest of the incoming middle-school students were.

Best,
Melissa Perper Albans

To: melissa.albans@rmail.com
Fr: ltushman@beecherschool.edu
Cc: johnwill@phillipsacademy.edu; amandawill@copperbeech.org
Subject: Jack Will

Dear Mrs. Albans,

Thanks for your email outlining your concerns. Were I not convinced that Jack Will is extremely sorry for his actions, and were I not confident that he would not repeat those actions, rest assured that I would not be allowing him back to Beecher Prep.

As for your other concerns regarding our new student August, please note that he does not have special needs. He is neither disabled, handicapped, nor developmentally delayed in any way, so there was no reason to assume anyone would take issue with his admittance to Beecher Prep—whether it is an inclusion school or not. In terms of the application process, the admissions director and I both felt it within our right to hold the interview off-site at August’s home for reasons that are obvious. We felt

that this slight break in protocol was warranted but in no way prejudicial—in one way or another—to the application review. August is an extremely good student, and has secured the friendship of some truly exceptional young people, including Jack Will.

At the beginning of the school year, when I enlisted certain children to be a “welcoming committee” to August, I did so as a way of easing his transition into a school environment. I did not think asking these children to be especially kind to a new student would place any extra “burdens or hardships” on them. In fact, I thought it would teach them a thing or two about empathy, and friendship, and loyalty.

As it turns out, Jack Will didn’t need to learn any of these virtues—he already had them in abundance.

Thank you again for being in touch.

Sincerely,
Lawrence Tushman

To: melissa.albans@rmail.com
Fr: johnwill@phillipsacademy.edu
Cc: ltushman@beecherschool.edu; amandawill@copperbeech.org
Subject: Jack

Hi Melissa,

Thank you for being so understanding about this incident with Jack. He is, as you know, extremely sorry for his actions. I hope you do accept our offer to pay Julian’s dental bills.

We are very touched by your concern regarding Jack’s friendship with August. Please know we have asked Jack if he felt any undue pressure about any of this, and the answer was a resolute “no.” He enjoys August’s company and feels like he has made a good friend.

Hope you have a
Happy New Year!
John and Amanda Will

Hi August,

Jackalope Will wants to be friends with you on Facebook.

Jackalope Will
32 mutual friends
Thanks,
The Facebook Team

To: auggiedoggiepullman@email.com

Subject: Sorry ! ! ! ! !

Message:

Hey august. Its me Jack Will. I noticed im not on ur friends list anymore. Hope u friend me agen cuz im really sorry. I jus wanted 2 say that. Sorry. I know why ur mad at me now Im sorry I didn't mean the stuff I said. I was so stupid. I hope u can 4give me

Hope we can b friends agen.
Jack

1 New Text Message

From: AUGUST

Dec 31 4:47PM

got ur message u know why im mad at u now?? did Summer tell u?

1 New Text Message

From: JACKWILL

Dec 31 4:49PM

She told me bleeding scream as hint but didn't get it at first then I remember seeing bleeding scream in homeroom on Hallween. didn't know it was you thought u were coming as Boba Fett.

1 New Text Message

From: AUGUST

Dec 31 4:51PM

I changed my mind at the last minute. Did u really punch Julian?

1 New Text Message

From: JACKWILL

Dec 31 4:54PM

Yeah i punchd him knocked out a tooth in the back. A baby tooth.

1 New Text Message

From: AUGUST

Dec 31 4:55PM

whyd u punch him????????

1 New Text Message

From: JACKWILL

Dec 31 4:56PM

I dunno

1 New Text Message

From: AUGUST

Dec 31 4:58PM

liar. I bet he said something about me right?

1 New Text Message

From: JACKWILL

Dec 31 5:02PM

he's a jerk. but I was a jerk too. really really really sorry for wat I said dude, Ok? can we b frenz agen?

1 New Text Message

From: AUGUST
Dec 31 5:03PM

ok

1 New Text Message
From: JACKWILL
Dec 31 5:04PM

awsum!!!!

1 New Text Message
From: AUGUST
Dec 31 5:06PM

but tell me the truth, ok?

wud u really wan to kill urself if u wer me???

1 New Text Message
From: JACKWILL
Dec 31 5:08PM

no!!!!

I swear on my life
but dude-

I would want 2 kill myself if I were Julian ;)

1 New Text Message
From: AUGUST
Dec 31 5:10PM

lol

yes dude we'r frenz agen.

Back from Winter Break

Despite what Tushman said, there was no “clean slate” when I went back to school in January. In fact, things were totally weird from the second I got to my locker in the morning. I’m next to Amos, who’s always been a pretty straight-up kid, and I was like, “Yo, what up?” and he basically just nodded a half hello and closed his locker door and left. I was like, okay, that was bizarre. And then I said: “Hey, what up?” to Henry, who didn’t even bother half-smiling but just looked away.

Okay, so something’s up. Dissed by two people in less than five minutes. Not that anyone’s counting. I thought I’d try one more time, with Tristan, and boom, same thing. He actually looked nervous, like he was afraid of talking to me.

I’ve got a form of the Plague now, is what I thought. This is Julian’s payback.

And that’s pretty much how it went all morning. Nobody talked to me. Not true: the girls were totally normal with me. And August talked to me, of course. And, actually, I have to say both Maxes said hello, which made me feel kind of bad for never, ever hanging out with them in the five years I’ve been in their class.

I hoped lunch would be better, but it wasn’t. I sat down at my usual table with Luca and Isaiah. I guess I thought since they weren’t in the super-popular group but were kind of middle-of-the-road jock kids that I’d be safe with them. But they barely nodded when I said hello. Then, when our table was called, they got their lunches and never came back. I saw them find a table way over at the other end of the cafeteria. They weren’t at Julian’s table, but they were near him, like on the fringe of popularity. So anyway, I’d been ditched. I knew table switching was something that happened in the fifth grade, but I never

thought it would happen to me.

It felt really awful being at the table by myself. I felt like everyone was watching me. It also made me feel like I had no friends. I decided to skip lunch and go read in the library.

The War

It was Charlotte who had the inside scoop on why everyone was dissing me. I found a note inside my locker at the end of the day.

Meet me in room 301 right after school. Come by yourself! Charlotte.

She was already inside the room when I walked in. “Sup,” I said.

“Hey,” she said. She went over to the door, looked left and right, and then closed the door and locked it from the inside. Then she turned to face me and started biting her nail as she talked. “Look, I feel bad about what’s going on and I just wanted to tell you what I know. Promise you won’t tell anyone I talked to you?”

“Promise.”

“So Julian had this huge holiday party over winter break,” she said. “I mean, *huge*. My sister’s friend had had her sweet sixteen at the same place last year. There were like two hundred people there, so I mean it’s a *huge* place.”

“Yeah, and?”

“Yeah, and ... well, pretty much everybody in the whole grade was there.”

“Not everybody,” I joked.

“Right, not everybody. Duh. But like even parents were there, you know. Like my parents were there. You know Julian’s mom is the vice president of the school board, right? So she knows a *lot* of people. Anyway, so basically what happened at the party was that Julian went around telling everyone that you punched him because you had emotional problems....”

“What?!”

“And that you would have gotten expelled, but his parents begged the school not to expel you ...”

“What?!”

“And that none of it would have happened in the first place if Tushman hadn’t forced you to be friends with Auggie. He said his mom thinks that you, quote unquote, snapped under the pressure....”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “No one bought into that, right?” I said.

She shrugged. “That’s not even the point. The point is he’s really popular. And, you know, my mom heard that his mom is actually pushing the school to review Auggie’s application to Beecher.”

“Can she do that?”

“It’s about Beecher not being an inclusion school. That’s a type of school that mixes normal kids with kids with special needs.”

“That’s just stupid. Auggie doesn’t have special needs.”

“Yeah, but she’s saying that if the school is changing the way they usually do things in some ways ...”

“But they’re not changing anything!”

“Yeah, they did. Didn’t you notice they changed the theme of the New Year Art Show? In past years fifth graders painted self-portraits, but this year they made us do those ridiculous self-portraits as animals, remember?”

“So big freakin’ deal.”

“I know! I’m not saying I agree, I’m just saying that’s what she’s saying.”

“I know, I know. This is just so messed up....”

“I know. Anyway, Julian said that he thinks being friends with Auggie is bringing you down, and that for your own good you need to stop hanging out with him so much. And if you start losing all your old friends, it’ll be like a big wake-up call. So basically, for your own good, he’s going to stop being your friend completely.”

“News flash: I stopped being his friend completely first!”

“Yeah, but he’s convinced all the boys to stop being your friend—for your own good. That’s why nobody’s talking to you.”

“You’re talking to me.”

“Yeah, well, this is more of a boy thing,” she explained. “The girls are staying neutral. Except Savanna’s group, because they’re going out with Julian’s group. But to everybody else this is really a boy war.”

I nodded. She tilted her head to one side and pouted like she felt sorry for me.

“Is it okay that I told you all this?” she said.

“Yeah! Of course! I don’t care who talks to me or not,” I lied. “This is all just so dumb.”

She nodded.

“Hey, does Auggie know any of this?”

“Of course not. At least, not from me.”

“And Summer?”

“I don’t think so. Look, I better go. Just so you know, my mom thinks Julian’s mom is a total idiot. She said she thinks people like her are more concerned about what their kids’ class pictures look like than doing the right thing. You heard about the Photoshopping, right?”

“Yeah, that was just sick.”

“Totally,” she answered, nodding. “Anyway, I better go. I just wanted you to know what was up and stuff.”

“Thanks, Charlotte.”

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything else,” she said. Before she went out, she looked left and right outside the door to make sure no one saw her leaving. I guess even though she was neutral, she didn’t want to be seen with me.

Switching Tables

The next day at lunch, stupid me, I sat down at a table with Tristan, Nino, and Pablo. I thought maybe they were safe because they weren't really considered popular, but they weren't out there playing D&D at recess, either. They were sort of in-betweeners. And, at first, I thought I scored because they were basically too nice to not acknowledge my presence when I walked over to the table. They all said "Hey," though I could tell they looked at each other. But then the same thing happened that happened yesterday: our lunch table was called, they got their food, and then headed toward a new table on the other side of the cafeteria.

Unfortunately, Mrs. G, who was the lunch teacher that day, saw what happened and chased after them.

"That's not allowed, boys!" she scolded them loudly. "This is not that kind of school. You get right back to your table."

Oh great, like that was going to help. Before they could be forced to sit back down at the table, I got up with my tray and walked away really fast. I could hear Mrs. G call my name, but I pretended not to hear and just kept walking to the other side of the cafeteria, behind the lunch counter.

"Sit with us, Jack."

It was Summer. She and August were sitting at their table, and they were both waving me over.

Why I Didn't Sit with August the First Day of School

Okay, I'm a total hypocrite. I know. That very first day of school I remember seeing August in the cafeteria. Everybody was looking at him. Talking about him. Back then, no one was used to his face or even knew that he was coming to Beecher, so it was a total shocker for a lot of people to see him there on the first day of school. Most kids were even afraid to get near him.

So when I saw him going into the cafeteria ahead of me, I knew he'd have no one to sit with, but I just couldn't bring myself to sit with him. I had been hanging out with him all morning long because we had so many classes together, and I guess I was just kind of wanting a little normal time to chill with other kids. So when I saw him move to a table on the other side of the lunch counter, I purposely found a table as far away from there as I could find. I sat down with Isaiah and Luca even though I'd never met them before, and we talked about baseball the whole time, and I played basketball with them at recess. They became my lunch table from then on.

I heard Summer had sat down with August, which surprised me because I knew for a fact she wasn't one of the kids that Tushman had talked to about being friends with Auggie. So I knew she was doing it *just* to be nice, and that was pretty brave, I thought.

So now here I was sitting with Summer and August, and they were being totally nice to me as always. I filled them in about everything Charlotte had told me, except for the whole big part about my having "snapped" under the pressure of being Auggie's friend, or the part about Julian's mom saying that Auggie had special needs, or the part about the school board. I guess all I really told them about was how

Julian had had a holiday party and managed to turn the whole grade against me.

“It just feels so weird,” I said, “to not have people talking to you, pretending you don’t even exist.”

Auggie started smiling.

“Ya think?” he said sarcastically. “Welcome to my world!”