

waited for me to get it.

“Oh, yeah,” I said after a second.

“We can make this the ‘summer only’ lunch table,” she said. “Only kids with summer names can sit here. Let’s see, is there anyone here named June or July?”

“There’s a Maya,” I said.

“Technically, May is spring,” Summer answered, “but if she wanted to sit here, we could make an exception.” She said it as if she’d actually thought the whole thing through. “There’s Julian. That’s like the name Julia, which comes from July.”

I didn’t say anything.

“There’s a kid named Reid in my English class,” I said.

“Yeah, I know Reid, but how is Reid a summer name?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I just picture, like, a reed of grass being a summer thing.”

“Yeah, okay.” She nodded, pulling out her notebook. “And Ms. Petosa could sit here, too. That kind of sounds like the word ‘petal,’ which I think of as a summer thing, too.”

“I have her for homeroom,” I said.

“I have her for math,” she answered, making a face.

She started writing the list of names on the second-to-last page of her notebook.

“So, who else?” she said.

By the end of lunch, we had come up with a whole list of names of kids and teachers who could sit at our table if they wanted. Most of the names weren’t actually summer names, but they were names that had some kind of connection to summer. I even found a way of making Jack Will’s name work by pointing out that you could turn his name into a sentence about summer, like “Jack will go to the beach,” which Summer agreed worked fine.

“But if someone doesn’t have a summer name and wants to sit with us,” she said very seriously, “we’ll still let them if they’re nice, okay?”

“Okay.” I nodded. “Even if it’s a winter name.”

“Cool beans,” she answered, giving me a thumbs-up.

Summer looked like her name. She had a tan, and her eyes were

green like a leaf.

One to Ten

Mom always had this habit of asking me how something felt on a scale of one to ten. It started after I had my jaw surgery, when I couldn't talk because my mouth was wired shut. They had taken a piece of bone from my hip bone to insert into my chin to make it look more normal, so I was hurting in a lot of different places. Mom would point to one of my bandages, and I would hold up my fingers to show her how much it was hurting. One meant a little bit. Ten meant so, so, so much. Then she would tell the doctor when he made his rounds what needed adjusting or things like that. Mom got very good at reading my mind sometimes.

After that, we got into the habit of doing the one-to-ten scale for anything that hurt, like if I just had a plain old sore throat, she'd ask: "One to ten?" And I'd say: "Three," or whatever it was.

When school was over, I went outside to meet Mom, who was waiting for me at the front entrance like all the other parents or babysitters. The first thing she said after hugging me was: "So, how was it? One to ten?"

"Five," I said, shrugging, which I could tell totally surprised her.

"Wow," she said quietly, "that's even better than I hoped for."

"Are we picking Via up?"

"Miranda's mother is picking her up today. Do you want me to carry your backpack, sweetness?" We had started walking through the crowd of kids and parents, most of whom were noticing me, "secretly" pointing me out to each other.

"I'm fine," I said.

"It looks too heavy, Auggie." She started to take it from me.

"Mom!" I said, pulling my backpack away from her. I walked in front of her through the crowd.

“See you tomorrow, August!” It was Summer. She was walking in the opposite direction.

“Bye, Summer,” I said, waving at her.

As soon as we crossed the street and were away from the crowd, Mom said: “Who was that, Auggie?”

“Summer.”

“Is she in your class?”

“I have lots of classes.”

“Is she in *any* of your classes?” Mom said.

“I don’t know.”

Mom waited for me to say something else, but I just didn’t feel like talking.

“So it went okay?” said Mom. I could tell she had a million questions she wanted to ask me. “Everyone was nice? Did you like your teachers?”

“Yeah.”

“How about those kids you met last week? Were they nice?”

“Fine, fine. Jack hung out with me a lot.”

“That’s so great, sweetie. What about that boy Julian?”

I thought about that Darth Sidious comment. By now it felt like that had happened a hundred years ago.

“He was okay,” I said.

“And the blond girl, what was her name?”

“Charlotte. Mom, I said everyone was nice already.”

“Okay,” Mom answered.

I honestly don’t know why I was kind of mad at Mom, but I was. We crossed Amesfort Avenue, and she didn’t say anything else until we turned onto our block.

“So,” Mom said. “How did you meet Summer if she wasn’t in any of your classes?”

“We sat together at lunch,” I said.

I had started kicking a rock between my feet like it was a soccer ball, chasing it back and forth across the sidewalk.

“She seems very nice.”

“Yeah, she is.”

“She’s very pretty,” Mom said.

“Yeah, I know,” I answered. “We’re kind of like Beauty and the Beast.”

I didn’t wait to see Mom’s reaction. I just started running down the sidewalk after the rock, which I had kicked as hard as I could in front of me.

Padawan

That night I cut off the little braid on the back of my head. Dad noticed first.

“Oh good,” he said. “I never liked that thing.”

Via couldn’t believe I had cut it off.

“That took you years to grow!” she said, almost like she was angry. “Why did you cut it off?”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Did someone make fun of it?”

“No.”

“Did you tell Christopher you were cutting it off?”

“We’re not even friends anymore!”

“That’s not true,” she said. “I can’t believe you would just cut it off like that,” she added snottily, and then practically slammed my bedroom door shut as she left the room.

I was snuggling with Daisy on my bed when Dad came to tuck me in later. He scooped Daisy over gently and lay down next to me on the blanket.

“So, Auggie Doggie,” he said, “it was really an okay day?” He got that from an old cartoon about a dachshund named Auggie Doggie, by the way. He had bought it for me on eBay when I was about four, and we watched it a lot for a while—especially in the hospital. He would call me Auggie Doggie and I would call him “dear ol’ Dad,” like the puppy called the dachshund dad on the show.

“Yeah, it was totally okay,” I said, nodding.

“You’ve been so quiet all night long.”

“I guess I’m tired.”

“It was a long day, huh?”

I nodded.

“But it really was okay?”

I nodded again. He didn’t say anything, so after a few seconds, I said: “It was better than okay, actually.”

“That’s great to hear, Auggie,” he said quietly, kissing my forehead. “So it looks like it was a good call Mom made, your going to school.”

“Yeah. But I could stop going if I wanted to, right?”

“That was the deal, yes,” he answered. “Though I guess it would depend on why you wanted to stop going, too, you know. You’d have to let us know. You’d have to talk to us and tell us how you’re feeling, and if anything bad was happening. Okay? You promise you’d tell us?”

“Yeah.”

“So can I ask you something? Are you mad at Mom or something? You’ve been kind of huffy with her all night long. You know, Auggie, I’m as much to blame for sending you to school as she is.”

“No, she’s more to blame. It was her idea.”

Mom knocked on the door just then and peeked her head inside my room.

“Just wanted to say good night,” she said. She looked kind of shy for a second.

“Hi, Momma,” Dad said, picking up my hand and waving it at her.

“I heard you cut off your braid,” Mom said to me, sitting down at the edge of the bed next to Daisy.

“It’s not a big deal,” I answered quickly.

“I didn’t say it was,” said Mom.

“Why don’t you put Auggie to bed tonight?” Dad said to Mom, getting up. “I’ve got some work to do anyway. Good night, my son, my son.” That was another part of our Auggie Doggie routine, though I wasn’t in the mood to say Good night, dear ol’ Dad. “I’m so proud of you,” said Dad, and then he got up out of the bed.

Mom and Dad had always taken turns putting me to bed. I know it was a little babyish of me to still need them to do that, but that’s just how it was with us.

“Will you check in on Via?” Mom said to Dad as she lay down next to me.

He stopped by the door and turned around. "What's wrong with Via?"

"Nothing," said Mom, shrugging, "at least that she would tell me. But ... first day of high school and all that."

"Hmm," said Dad, and then he pointed his finger at me and winked. "It's always something with you kids, isn't it?" he said.

"Never a dull moment," said Mom.

"Never a dull moment," Dad repeated. "Good night, guys."

As soon as he closed the door, Mom pulled out the book she'd been reading to me for the last couple of weeks. I was relieved because I really was afraid she'd want to "talk," and I just didn't feel like doing that. But Mom didn't seem to want to talk, either. She just flipped through the pages until she got to where we had left off. We were about halfway through *The Hobbit*.

"*'Stop! stop!' shouted Thorin,*" said Mom, reading aloud, *"but it was too late, the excited dwarves had wasted their last arrows, and now the bows that Beorn had given them were useless.*

"They were a gloomy party that night, and the gloom gathered still deeper on them in the following days. They had crossed the enchanted stream; but beyond it the path seemed to straggle on just as before, and in the forest they could see no change."

I'm not sure why, but all of a sudden I started to cry.

Mom put the book down and wrapped her arms around me. She didn't seem surprised that I was crying. "It's okay," she whispered in my ear. "It'll be okay."

"I'm sorry," I said between sniffles.

"Shh," she said, wiping my tears with the back of her hand. "You have nothing to be sorry about...."

"Why do I have to be so ugly, Mommy?" I whispered.

"No, baby, you're not ..."

"I know I am."

She kissed me all over my face. She kissed my eyes that came down too far. She kissed my cheeks that looked punched in. She kissed my tortoise mouth.

She said soft words that I know were meant to help me, but words

can't change my face.

Wake Me Up when September Ends

The rest of September was hard. I wasn't used to getting up so early in the morning. I wasn't used to this whole notion of homework. And I got my first "quiz" at the end of the month. I never got "quizzes" when Mom homeschooled me. I also didn't like how I had no free time anymore. Before, I was able to play whenever I wanted to, but now it felt like I always had stuff to do for school.

And being at school was awful in the beginning. Every new class I had was like a new chance for kids to "not stare" at me. They would sneak peeks at me from behind their notebooks or when they thought I wasn't looking. They would take the longest way around me to avoid bumping into me in any way, like I had some germ they could catch, like my face was contagious.

In the hallways, which were always crowded, my face would always surprise some unsuspecting kid who maybe hadn't heard about me. The kid would make the sound you make when you hold your breath before going underwater, a little "uh!" sound. This happened maybe four or five times a day for the first few weeks: on the stairs, in front of the lockers, in the library. Five hundred kids in a school: eventually every one of them was going to see my face at some time. And I knew after the first couple of days that word had gotten around about me, because every once in a while I'd catch a kid elbowing his friend as they passed me, or talking behind their hands as I walked by them. I can only imagine what they were saying about me. Actually, I prefer not to even try to imagine it.

I'm not saying they were doing any of these things in a mean way, by the way: not once did any kid laugh or make noises or do anything

like that. They were just being normal dumb kids. I know that. I kind of wanted to tell them that. Like, it's okay, I know I'm weird-looking, take a look, I don't bite. Hey, the truth is, if a Wookiee started going to the school all of a sudden, I'd be curious, I'd probably stare a bit! And if I was walking with Jack or Summer, I'd probably whisper to them: Hey, there's the Wookiee. And if the Wookiee caught me saying that, he'd know I wasn't trying to be mean. I was just pointing out the fact that he's a Wookiee.

It took about one week for the kids in my class to get used to my face. These were the kids I'd see every day in all my classes.

It took about two weeks for the rest of the kids in my grade to get used to my face. These were the kids I'd see in the cafeteria, yard time, PE, music, library, computer class.

It took about a month for the rest of the kids in the entire school to get used to it. These were the kids in all the other grades. They were big kids, some of them. Some of them had crazy haircuts. Some of them had earrings in their noses. Some of them had pimples. None of them looked like me.

Jack Will

I hung out with Jack in homeroom, English, history, computer, music, and science, which were all the classes we had together. The teachers assigned seats in every class, and I ended up sitting next to Jack in every single class, so I figured either the teachers were told to put me and Jack together, or it was a totally incredible coincidence.

I walked to classes with Jack, too. I know he noticed kids staring at me, but he pretended not to notice. One time, though, on our way to history, this huge eighth grader who was zooming down the stairs two steps at a time accidentally bumped into us at the bottom of the stairs and knocked me down. As the guy helped me stand up, he got a look at my face, and without even meaning to, he just said: “Whoa!” Then he patted me on the shoulder, like he was dusting me off, and took off after his friends. For some reason, me and Jack started cracking up.

“That guy made the funniest face!” said Jack as we sat down at our desks.

“I know, right?” I said. “He was like, *whoa!*”

“I swear, I think he wet his pants!”

We were laughing so hard that the teacher, Mr. Roche, had to ask us to settle down.

Later, after we finished reading about how ancient Sumerians built sundials, Jack whispered: “Do you ever want to beat those kids up?”

I shrugged. “I guess. I don’t know.”

“I’d want to. I think you should get a secret squirt gun or something and attach it to your eyes somehow. And every time someone stares at you, you would squirt them in the face.”

“With some green slime or something,” I answered.

“No, no: with slug juice mixed with dog pee.”

“Yeah!” I said, completely agreeing.

“Guys,” said Mr. Roche from across the room. “People are still reading.”

We nodded and looked down at our books. Then Jack whispered: “Are you always going to look this way, August? I mean, can’t you get plastic surgery or something?”

I smiled and pointed to my face. “Hello? This is after plastic surgery!”

Jack clapped his hand over his forehead and started laughing hysterically.

“Dude, you should sue your doctor!” he answered between giggles.

This time the two of us were laughing so much we couldn’t stop, even after Mr. Roche came over and made us both switch chairs with the kids next to us.

Mr. Browne's October Precept

Mr. Browne's precept for October was:

YOUR DEEDS ARE YOUR MONUMENTS.

He told us that this was written on the tombstone of some Egyptian guy that died thousands of years ago. Since we were just about to start studying ancient Egypt in history, Mr. Browne thought this was a good choice for a precept.

Our homework assignment was to write a paragraph about what we thought the precept meant or how we felt about it.

This is what I wrote:

This precept means that we should be remembered for the things we do. The things we do are the most important things of all. They are more important than what we say or what we look like. The things we do outlast our mortality. The things we do are like monuments that people build to honor heroes after they've died. They're like the pyramids that the Egyptians built to honor the pharaohs. Only instead of being made out of stone, they're made out of the memories people have of you. That's why your deeds are like your monuments. Built with memories instead of with stone.

Apples

My birthday is October 10. I like my birthday: 10/10. It would've been great if I'd been born at exactly 10:10 in the morning or at night, but I wasn't. I was born just after midnight. But I still think my birthday is cool.

I usually have a little party at home, but this year I asked Mom if I could have a big bowling party. Mom was surprised but happy. She asked me who I wanted to ask from my class, and I said everyone in my homeroom plus Summer.

"That's a lot of kids, Auggie," said Mom.

"I have to invite everyone because I don't want anyone to get their feelings hurt if they find out other people are invited and they aren't, okay?"

"Okay," Mom agreed. "You even want to invite the 'what's the deal' kid?"

"Yeah, you can invite Julian," I answered. "Geez, Mom, you should forget about that already."

"I know, you're right."

A couple of weeks later, I asked Mom who was coming to my party, and she said: "Jack Will, Summer. Reid Kingsley. Both Maxes. And a couple of other kids said they were going to try to be there."

"Like who?"

"Charlotte's mom said Charlotte had a dance recital earlier in the day, but she was going to try to come to your party if time allowed. And Tristan's mom said he might come after his soccer game."

"So that's *it*?" I said. "That's like ... five people."

"That's more than five people, Auggie. I think a lot of people just had plans already," Mom answered. We were in the kitchen. She was cutting one of the apples we had just gotten at the farmers' market

into teensy-weensy bites so I could eat it.

“What kind of plans?” I asked.

“I don’t know, Auggie. We sent out the evites kind of late.”

“Like what did they tell you, though? What reasons did they give?”

“Everyone gave different reasons, Auggie.” She sounded a bit impatient. “Really, sweetie, it shouldn’t matter what their reasons were. People had plans, that’s all.”

“What did Julian give as his reason?” I asked.

“You know,” said Mom, “his mom was the only person who didn’t RSVP at all.” She looked at me. “I guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

I laughed because I thought she was making a joke, but then I realized she wasn’t.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Never mind. Now go wash your hands so you can eat.”

My birthday party turned out to be much smaller than I thought it would be, but it was still great. Jack, Summer, Reid, Tristan, and both Maxes came from school, and Christopher came, too—all the way from Bridgeport with his parents. And Uncle Ben came. And Aunt Kate and Uncle Po drove in from Boston, though Tata and Poppa were in Florida for the winter. It was fun because all the grown-ups ended up bowling in the lane next to ours, so it really felt like there were a lot of people there to celebrate my birthday.

Halloween

At lunch the next day, Summer asked me what I was going to be for Halloween. Of course, I'd been thinking about it since last Halloween, so I knew right away.

"Boba Fett."

"You know you can wear a costume to school on Halloween, right?"

"No way, really?"

"So long as it's politically correct."

"What, like no guns and stuff?"

"Exactly."

"What about blasters?"

"I think a blaster's like a gun, Auggie."

"Oh man ...," I said, shaking my head. Boba Fett has a blaster.

"At least, we don't have to come like a character in a book anymore. In the lower school that's what you had to do. Last year I was the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz*."

"But that's a movie, not a book."

"Hello?" Summer answered. "It was a book first! One of my favorite books in the world, actually. My dad used to read it to me every night in the first grade."

When Summer talks, especially when she's excited about something, her eyes squint like she's looking right at the sun.

I hardly ever see Summer during the day, since the only class we have together is English. But ever since that first lunch at school, we've sat at the summer table together every day, just the two of us.

"So, what are you going to be?" I asked her.

"I don't know yet. I know what I'd really want to go as, but I think it might be too dorky. You know, Savanna's group isn't even wearing

costumes this year. They think we're too old for Halloween."

"What? That's just dumb."

"I know, right?"

"I thought you didn't care what those girls think."

She shrugged and took a long drink of her milk.

"So, what dorky thing do you want to dress up as?" I asked her, smiling.

"Promise not to laugh?" She raised her eyebrows and her shoulders, embarrassed. "A unicorn."

I smiled and looked down at my sandwich.

"Hey, you promised not to laugh!" she laughed.

"Okay, okay," I said. "But you're right: that is too dorky."

"I know!" she said. "But I have it all planned out: I'd make the head out of papier-mâché, and paint the horn gold and make the mane gold, too.... It would be so awesome."

"Okay." I shrugged. "Then you should do it. Who cares what other people think, right?"

"Maybe what I'll do is just wear it for the Halloween Parade," she said, snapping her fingers. "And I'll just be, like, a Goth girl for school. Yeah, that's it, that's what I'll do."

"Sounds like a plan." I nodded.

"Thanks, Auggie," she giggled. "You know, that's what I like best about you. I feel like I can tell you anything."

"Yeah?" I answered, nodding. I gave her a thumbs-up sign. "Cool beans."

School Pictures

I don't think anyone will be shocked to learn I don't want to have my school picture taken on October 22. No way. No thank you. I stopped letting anyone take pictures of me a while ago. I guess you could call it a phobia. No, actually, it's not a phobia. It's an "aversion," which is a word I just learned in Mr. Browne's class. I have an aversion to having my picture taken. There, I used it in a sentence.

I thought Mom would try to get me to drop my aversion to having my picture taken for school, but she didn't. Unfortunately, while I managed to avoid having the portrait taken, I couldn't get out of being part of the class picture. Ugh. The photographer looked like he'd just sucked on a lemon when he saw me. I'm sure he thought I ruined the picture. I was one of the ones in the front, sitting down. I didn't smile, not that anyone could tell if I had.

The Cheese Touch

I noticed not too long ago that even though people were getting used to me, no one would actually touch me. I didn't realize this at first because it's not like kids go around touching each other that much in middle school anyway. But last Thursday in dance class, which is, like, my least favorite class, Mrs. Atanabi, the teacher, tried to make Ximena Chin be my dance partner. Now, I've never actually seen someone have a "panic attack" before, but I have heard about it, and I'm pretty sure Ximena had a panic attack at that second. She got really nervous and turned pale and literally broke into a sweat within a minute, and then she came up with some lame excuse about really having to go to the bathroom. Anyway, Mrs. Atanabi let her off the hook, because she ended up not making anyone dance together.

Then yesterday in my science elective, we were doing this cool mystery-powder investigation where we had to classify a substance as an acid or a base. Everyone had to heat their mystery powders on a heating plate and make observations, so we were all huddled around the powders with our notebooks. Now, there are eight kids in the elective, and seven of them were squished together on one side of the plate while one of them—me—had loads of room on the other side. So of course I noticed this, but I was hoping Ms. Rubin wouldn't notice this, because I didn't want her to say something. But of course she did notice this, and of course she said something.

"Guys, there's plenty of room on that side. Tristan, Nino, go over there," she said, so Tristan and Nino scooted over to my side. Tristan and Nino have always been okay-nice to me. I want to go on record as saying that. Not super-nice, like they go out of their way to hang out with me, but okay-nice, like they say hello to me and talk to me like normal. And they didn't even make a face when Ms. Rubin told

them to come on my side, which a lot of kids do when they think I'm not looking. Anyway, everything was going fine until Tristan's mystery powder started melting. He moved his foil off the plate just as my powder began to melt, too, which is why I went to move mine off the plate, and then my hand accidentally bumped his hand for a fraction of a second. Tristan jerked his hand away so fast he dropped his foil on the floor while also knocking everyone else's foil off the heating plate.

"Tristan!" yelled Ms. Rubin, but Tristan didn't even care about the spilled powder on the floor or that he ruined the experiment. What he was most concerned about was getting to the lab sink to wash his hands as fast as possible. That's when I knew for sure that there was this thing about touching me at Beecher Prep.

I think it's like the Cheese Touch in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*. The kids in that story were afraid they'd catch the cooties if they touched the old moldy cheese on the basketball court. At Beecher Prep, I'm the old moldy cheese.

Costumes

For me, Halloween is the best holiday in the world. It even beats Christmas. I get to dress up in a costume. I get to wear a mask. I get to go around like every other kid with a mask and nobody thinks I look weird. Nobody takes a second look. Nobody notices me. Nobody knows me.

I wish every day could be Halloween. We could all wear masks all the time. Then we could walk around and get to know each other before we got to see what we looked like under the masks.

When I was little, I used to wear an astronaut helmet everywhere I went. To the playground. To the supermarket. To pick Via up from school. Even in the middle of summer, though it was so hot my face would sweat. I think I wore it for a couple of years, but I had to stop wearing it when I had my eye surgery. I was about seven, I think. And then we couldn't find the helmet after that. Mom looked everywhere for it. She figured that it had probably ended up in Grans's attic, and she kept meaning to look for it, but by then I had gotten used to not wearing it.

I have pictures of me in all my Halloween costumes. My first Halloween I was a pumpkin. My second I was Tigger. My third I was Peter Pan (my dad dressed up as Captain Hook). My fourth I was Captain Hook (my dad dressed up as Peter Pan). My fifth I was an astronaut. My sixth I was Obi-Wan Kenobi. My seventh I was a clone trooper. My eighth I was Darth Vader. My ninth I was the Bleeding Scream, the one that has fake blood oozing out over the skull mask.

This year I'm going to be Boba Fett: not Boba Fett the kid in *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, but Boba Fett the man from *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. Mom searched everywhere for the costume but couldn't find one in my size, so she bought me a

Jango Fett costume—since Jango was Boba’s dad and wore the same armor—and then painted the armor green. She did some other stuff to it to make it look worn, too. Anyway, it looks totally real. Mom’s good at costumes.

In homeroom we all talked about what we were going to be for Halloween. Charlotte was going as Hermione from Harry Potter. Jack was going as a wolfman. I heard that Julian was going as Jango Fett, which was a weird coincidence. I don’t think he liked hearing that I was going as Boba Fett.

On the morning of Halloween, Via had this big crying meltdown about something. Via’s always been so calm and cool, but this year she’s had a couple of these kinds of fits. Dad was late for work and was like, “Via, let’s go! Let’s go!” Usually Dad is super patient about things, but not when it comes to his being late for work, and his yelling just stressed out Via even more, and she started crying louder, so Mom told Dad to take me to school and that she’d deal with Via. Then Mom kissed me goodbye quickly, before I even put on my costume, and disappeared into Via’s room.

“Auggie, let’s go now!” said Dad. “I have a meeting I can’t be late for!”

“I haven’t put my costume on yet!”

“So put it on, already. Five minutes. I’ll meet you outside.”

I rushed to my room and started to put on the Boba Fett costume, but all of a sudden I didn’t feel like wearing it. I’m not sure why—maybe because it had all these belts that needed to be tightened and I needed someone’s help to put it on. Or maybe it was because it still smelled a little like paint. All I knew was that it was a lot of work to put the costume on, and Dad was waiting and would get super impatient if I made him late. So, at the last minute, I threw on the Bleeding Scream costume from last year. It was such an easy costume: just a long black robe and a big white mask. I yelled goodbye from the door on my way out, but Mom didn’t even hear me.

“I thought you were going as Jango Fett,” said Dad when I got outside.

“Boba Fett!”

“Whatever,” said Dad. “This is a better costume anyway.”
“Yeah, it’s cool,” I answered.

The Bleeding Scream

Walking through the halls that morning on my way to the lockers was, I have to say, absolutely awesome. Everything was different now. I was different. Where I usually walked with my head down, trying to avoid being seen, today I walked with my head up, looking around. I wanted to be seen. One kid wearing the same exact costume as mine, long white skull face oozing fake red blood, high-fived me as we passed each other on the stairs. I have no idea who he was, and he had no idea who I was, and I wondered for a second if he would have ever done that if he'd known it was me under the mask.

I was starting to think this was going to go down as one of the most awesome days in the history of my life, but then I got to homeroom. The first costume I saw as I walked inside the door was Darth Sidious. It had one of the rubber masks that are so realistic, with a big black hood over the head and a long black robe. I knew right away it was Julian, of course. He must have changed his costume at the last minute because he thought I was coming as Jango Fett. He was talking to two mummies who must have been Miles and Henry, and they were all kind of looking at the door like they were waiting for someone to come through it. I knew it wasn't a Bleeding Scream they were looking for. It was a Boba Fett.

I was going to go and sit at my usual desk, but for some reason, I don't know why, I found myself walking over to a desk near them, and I could hear them talking.

One of the mummies was saying: "It really does look like him."

"Like this part especially ...," answered Julian's voice. He put his fingers on the cheeks and eyes of his Darth Sidious mask.

"Actually," said the mummy, "what he really looks like is one of those shrunken heads. Have you ever seen those? He looks exactly

like that.”

“I think he looks like an orc.”

“Oh yeah!”

“If I looked like that,” said the Julian voice, kind of laughing, “I swear to God, I’d put a hood over my face every day.”

“I’ve thought about this a lot,” said the second mummy, sounding serious, “and I really think ... if I looked like him, seriously, I think that I’d kill myself.”

“You would not,” answered Darth Sidious.

“Yeah, for real,” insisted the same mummy. “I can’t imagine looking in the mirror every day and seeing myself like that. It would be too awful. And getting stared at all the time.”

“Then why do you hang out with him so much?” asked Darth Sidious.

“I don’t know,” answered the mummy. “Tushman asked me to hang out with him at the beginning of the year, and he must have told all the teachers to put us next to each other in all our classes, or something.” The mummy shrugged. I knew the shrug, of course. I knew the voice. I knew I wanted to run out of the class right then and there. But I stood where I was and listened to Jack Will finish what he was saying. “I mean, the thing is: he always follows me around. What am I supposed to do?”

“Just ditch him,” said Julian.

I don’t know what Jack answered because I walked out of the class without anyone knowing I had been there. My face felt like it was on fire while I walked back down the stairs. I was sweating under my costume. And I started crying. I couldn’t keep it from happening. The tears were so thick in my eyes I could barely see, but I couldn’t wipe them through the mask as I walked. I was looking for a little tiny spot to disappear into. I wanted a hole I could fall inside of: a little black hole that would eat me up.

Names

Rat boy. Freak. Monster. Freddy Krueger. E.T. Gross-out. Lizard face. Mutant. I know the names they call me. I've been in enough playgrounds to know kids can be mean. I know, I know, I know.

I ended up in the second-floor bathroom. No one was there because first period had started and everyone was in class. I locked the door to my stall and took off my mask and just cried for I don't know how long. Then I went to the nurse's office and told her I had a stomach ache, which was true, because I felt like I'd been kicked in the gut. Nurse Molly called Mom and had me lie down on the sofa next to her desk. Fifteen minutes later, Mom was at the door.

"Sweetness," she said, coming over to hug me.

"Hi," I mumbled. I didn't want her to ask anything until afterward.

"You have a stomach ache?" she asked, automatically putting her hand on my forehead to check for my temperature.

"He said he feels like throwing up," said Nurse Molly, looking at me with very nice eyes.

"And I have a headache," I whispered.

"I wonder if it's something you ate," said Mom, looking worried.

"There's a stomach bug going around," said Nurse Molly.

"Oh geez," said Mom, her eyebrows going up as she shook her head. She helped me to my feet. "Should I call a taxi or are you okay walking home?"

"I can walk."

"What a brave kid!" said Nurse Molly, patting me on the back as she walked us toward the door. "If he starts throwing up or runs a temperature, you should call the doctor."

"Absolutely," said Mom, shaking Nurse Molly's hand. "Thank you so much for taking care of him."

“My pleasure,” answered Nurse Molly, putting her hand under my chin and tilting my face up. “You take care of yourself, okay?”

I nodded and mumbled “Thank you.” Mom and I hug-walked the whole way home. I didn’t tell her anything about what had happened, and later when she asked me if I felt well enough to go trick-or-treating after school, I said no. This worried her, since she knew how much I usually loved trick-or-treating.

I heard her say to Dad on the phone: “... He doesn’t even have the energy to go trick-or-treating.... No, no fever at all ... Well, I will if he doesn’t feel better by tomorrow.... I know, poor thing ... Imagine his missing Halloween.”

I got out of going to school the next day, too, which was Friday. So I had the whole weekend to think about everything. I was pretty sure I would never go back to school again.

Part Two



Far above the world

Planet Earth is blue

And there's nothing I can do

—David Bowie, “Space Oddity”

A Tour of the Galaxy

August is the Sun. Me and Mom and Dad are planets orbiting the Sun. The rest of our family and friends are asteroids and comets floating around the planets orbiting the Sun. The only celestial body that doesn't orbit August the Sun is Daisy the dog, and that's only because to her little doggy eyes, August's face doesn't look very different from any other human's face. To Daisy, all our faces look alike, as flat and pale as the moon.

I'm used to the way this universe works. I've never minded it because it's all I've ever known. I've always understood that August is special and has special needs. If I was playing too loudly and he was trying to take a nap, I knew I would have to play something else because he needed his rest after some procedure or other had left him weak and in pain. If I wanted Mom and Dad to watch me play soccer, I knew that nine out of ten times they'd miss it because they were busy shuttling August to speech therapy or physical therapy or a new specialist or a surgery.

Mom and Dad would always say I was the most understanding little girl in the world. I don't know about that, just that I understood there was no point in complaining. I've seen August after his surgeries: his little face bandaged up and swollen, his tiny body full of IVs and tubes to keep him alive. After you've seen someone else going through that, it feels kind of crazy to complain over not getting the toy you had asked for, or your mom missing a school play. I knew this even when I was six years old. No one ever told it to me. I just knew it.

So I've gotten used to not complaining, and I've gotten used to not bothering Mom and Dad with little stuff. I've gotten used to figuring things out on my own: how to put toys together, how to organize my

life so I don't miss friends' birthday parties, how to stay on top of my schoolwork so I never fall behind in class. I've never asked for help with my homework. Never needed reminding to finish a project or study for a test. If I was having trouble with a subject in school, I'd go home and study it until I figured it out on my own. I taught myself how to convert fractions into decimal points by going online. I've done every school project pretty much by myself. When Mom or Dad ask me how things are going in school, I've always said "good"—even when it hasn't always been so good. My worst day, worst fall, worst headache, worst bruise, worst cramp, worst mean thing anyone could say has always been nothing compared to what August has gone through. This isn't me being noble, by the way: it's just the way I know it is.

And this is the way it's always been for me, for the little universe of us. But this year there seems to be a shift in the cosmos. The galaxy is changing. Planets are falling out of alignment.

Before August

I honestly don't remember my life before August came into it. I look at pictures of me as a baby, and I see Mom and Dad smiling so happily, holding me. I can't believe how much younger they looked back then: Dad was this hipster dude and Mom was this cute Brazilian fashionista. There's one shot of me at my third birthday: Dad's right behind me while Mom's holding the cake with three lit candles, and in back of us are Tata and Poppa, Grans, Uncle Ben, Aunt Kate, and Uncle Po. Everyone's looking at me and I'm looking at the cake. You can see in that picture how I really was the first child, first grandchild, first niece. I don't remember what it felt like, of course, but I can see it plain as can be in the pictures.

I don't remember the day they brought August home from the hospital. I don't remember what I said or did or felt when I saw him for the first time, though everyone has a story about it. Apparently, I just looked at him for a long time without saying anything at all, and then finally I said: "It doesn't look like Lilly!" That was the name of a doll Grans had given me when Mom was pregnant so I could "practice" being a big sister. It was one of those dolls that are incredibly lifelike, and I had carried it everywhere for months, changing its diaper, feeding it. I'm told I even made a baby sling for it. The story goes that after my initial reaction to August, it only took a few minutes (according to Grans) or a few days (according to Mom) before I was all over him: kissing him, cuddling him, baby talking to him. After that I never so much as touched or mentioned Lilly ever again.

Seeing August

I never used to see August the way other people saw him. I knew he didn't look exactly normal, but I really didn't understand why strangers seemed so shocked when they saw him. Horrified. Sickened. Scared. There are so many words I can use to describe the looks on people's faces. And for a long time I didn't get it. I'd just get mad. Mad when they stared. Mad when they looked away. "What the heck are you looking at?" I'd say to people—even grown-ups.

Then, when I was about eleven, I went to stay with Grans in Montauk for four weeks while August was having his big jaw surgery. This was the longest I'd ever been away from home, and I have to say it was so amazing to suddenly be free of all that stuff that made me so mad. No one stared at Grans and me when we went to town to buy groceries. No one pointed at us. No one even noticed us.

Grans was one of those grandmothers who do everything with their grandkids. She'd run into the ocean if I asked her to, even if she had nice clothes on. She would let me play with her makeup and didn't mind if I used it on her face to practice my face-painting skills. She'd take me for ice cream even if we hadn't eaten dinner yet. She'd draw chalk horses on the sidewalk in front of her house. One night, while we were walking back from town, I told her that I wished I could live with her forever. I was so happy there. I think it might have been the best time in my life.

Coming home after four weeks felt very strange at first. I remember very vividly stepping through the door and seeing August running over to welcome me home, and for this tiny fraction of a moment I saw him not the way I've always seen him, but the way other people see him. It was only a flash, an instant while he was hugging me, so happy that I was home, but it surprised me because I'd never seen

him like that before. And I'd never felt what I was feeling before, either: a feeling I hated myself for having the moment I had it. But as he was kissing me with all his heart, all I could see was the drool coming down his chin. And suddenly there I was, like all those people who would stare or look away.

Horrificed. Sickened. Scared.

Thankfully, that only lasted for a second: the moment I heard August laugh his raspy little laugh, it was over. Everything was back the way it had been before. But it had opened a door for me. A little peephole. And on the other side of the peephole there were two Augusts: the one I saw blindly, and the one other people saw.

I think the only person in the world I could have told any of this to was Grans, but I didn't. It was too hard to explain over the phone. I thought maybe when she came for Thanksgiving, I'd tell her what I felt. But just two months after I stayed with her in Montauk, my beautiful Grans died. It was so completely out of the blue. Apparently, she had checked herself into the hospital because she'd been feeling nauseous. Mom and I drove out to see her, but it's a three-hour drive from where we live, and by the time we got to the hospital, Grans was gone. A heart attack, they told us. Just like that.

It's so strange how one day you can be on this earth, and the next day not. Where did she go? Will I really ever see her again, or is that a fairy tale?

You see movies and TV shows where people receive horrible news in hospitals, but for us, with all our many trips to the hospital with August, there had always been good outcomes. What I remember the most from the day Grans died is Mom literally crumpling to the floor in slow, heaving sobs, holding her stomach like someone had just punched her. I've never, ever seen Mom like that. Never heard sounds like that come out of her. Even through all of August's surgeries, Mom always put on a brave face.

On my last day in Montauk, Grans and I had watched the sun set on the beach. We had taken a blanket to sit on, but it had gotten chilly, so we wrapped it around us and cuddled and talked until there wasn't even a sliver of sun left over the ocean. And then Grans told me she

had a secret to tell me: she loved me more than anyone else in the world.

“Even August?” I had asked.

She smiled and stroked my hair, like she was thinking about what to say.

“I love Auggie very, very much,” she said softly. I can still remember her Portuguese accent, the way she rolled her *r*’s. “But he has many angels looking out for him already, Via. And I want you to know that you have *me* looking out for *you*. Okay, *menina querida*? I want you to know that you are number one for me. You are my ...” She looked out at the ocean and spread her hands out, like she was trying to smooth out the waves, “You are my everything. You understand me, Via? *Tu es meu tudo*.”

I understood her. And I knew why she said it was a secret. Grandmothers aren’t supposed to have favorites. Everyone knows that. But after she died, I held on to that secret and let it cover me like a blanket.

August Through the Peephole

His eyes are about an inch below where they should be on his face, almost to halfway down his cheeks. They slant downward at an extreme angle, almost like diagonal slits that someone cut into his face, and the left one is noticeably lower than the right one. They bulge outward because his eye cavities are too shallow to accommodate them. The top eyelids are always halfway closed, like he's on the verge of sleeping. The lower eyelids sag so much they almost look like a piece of invisible string is pulling them downward: you can see the red part on the inside, like they're almost inside out. He doesn't have eyebrows or eyelashes. His nose is disproportionately big for his face, and kind of fleshy. His head is pinched in on the sides where the ears should be, like someone used giant pliers and crushed the middle part of his face. He doesn't have cheekbones. There are deep creases running down both sides of his nose to his mouth, which gives him a waxy appearance. Sometimes people assume he's been burned in a fire: his features look like they've been melted, like the drippings on the side of a candle. Several surgeries to correct his lip have left a few scars around his mouth, the most noticeable one being a jagged gash running from the middle of his upper lip to his nose. His upper teeth are small and splay out. He has a severe overbite and an extremely undersized jawbone. He has a very small chin. When he was very little, before a piece of his hip bone was surgically implanted into his lower jaw, he really had no chin at all. His tongue would just hang out of his mouth with nothing underneath to block it. Thankfully, it's better now. He can eat, at least: when he was younger, he had a feeding tube. And he can talk. And he's learned to

keep his tongue inside his mouth, though that took him several years to master. He's also learned to control the drool that used to run down his neck. These are considered miracles. When he was a baby, the doctors didn't think he'd live.

He can hear, too. Most kids born with these types of birth defects have problems with their middle ears that prevent them from hearing, but so far August can hear well enough through his tiny cauliflower-shaped ears. The doctors think that eventually he'll need to wear hearing aids, though. August hates the thought of this. He thinks the hearing aids will get noticed too much. I don't tell him that the hearing aids would be the least of his problems, of course, because I'm sure he knows this.

Then again, I'm not really sure what August knows or doesn't know, what he understands and doesn't understand.

Does August see how other people see him, or has he gotten so good at pretending not to see that it doesn't bother him? Or does it bother him? When he looks in the mirror, does he see the Auggie Mom and Dad see, or does he see the Auggie everyone else sees? Or is there another August he sees, someone in his dreams behind the misshapen head and face? Sometimes when I looked at Grans, I could see the pretty girl she used to be underneath the wrinkles. I could see the girl from Ipanema inside the old-lady walk. Does August see himself as he might have looked without that single gene that caused the catastrophe of his face?

I wish I could ask him this stuff. I wish he would tell me how he feels. He used to be easier to read before the surgeries. You knew that when his eyes squinted, he was happy. When his mouth went straight, he was being mischievous. When his cheeks trembled, he was about to cry. He looks better now, no doubt about that, but the signs we used to gauge his moods are all gone. There are new ones, of course. Mom and Dad can read every single one. But I'm having trouble keeping up. And there's a part of me that doesn't want to keep trying: why can't he just say what he's feeling like everyone else? He doesn't have a trache tube in his mouth anymore that keeps him from talking. His jaw's not wired shut. He's ten years old. He can use his words. But

we circle around him like he's still the baby he used to be. We change plans, go to plan B, interrupt conversations, go back on promises depending on his moods, his whims, his needs. That was fine when he was little. But he needs to grow up now. We need to let him, help him, make him grow up. Here's what I think: we've all spent so much time trying to make August think he's normal that he actually thinks he is normal. And the problem is, he's not.

High School

What I always loved most about middle school was that it was separate and different from home. I could go there and be Olivia Pullman—not Via, which is my name at home. Via was what they called me in elementary school, too. Back then, everyone knew all about us, of course. Mom used to pick me up after school, and August was always in the stroller. There weren't a lot of people who were equipped to babysit for Auggie, so Mom and Dad brought him to all my class plays and concerts and recitals, all the school functions, the bake sales and the book fairs. My friends knew him. My friends' parents knew him. My teachers knew him. The janitor knew him. ("Hey, how ya doin', Auggie?" he'd always say, and give August a high five.) August was something of a fixture at PS 22.

But in middle school a lot of people didn't know about August. My old friends did, of course, but my new friends didn't. Or if they knew, it wasn't necessarily the first thing they knew about me. Maybe it was the second or third thing they'd hear about me. "Olivia? Yeah, she's nice. Did you hear she has a brother who's deformed?" I always hated that word, but I knew it was how people described Auggie. And I knew those kinds of conversations probably happened all the time out of earshot, every time I left the room at a party, or bumped into groups of friends at the pizza place. And that's okay. I'm always going to be the sister of a kid with a birth defect: that's not the issue. I just don't always want to be defined that way.

The best thing about high school is that hardly anybody knows me at all. Except Miranda and Ella, of course. And they know not to go around talking about it.

Miranda, Ella, and I have known each other since the first grade. What's so nice is we never have to explain things to one another.

When I decided I wanted them to call me Olivia instead of Via, they got it without my having to explain.

They've known August since he was a little baby. When we were little, our favorite thing to do was play dress up with Auggie; load him up with feather boas and big hats and Hannah Montana wigs. He used to love it, of course, and we thought he was adorably cute in his own way. Ella said he reminded her of E.T. She didn't say this to be mean, of course (though maybe it was a little bit mean). The truth is, there's a scene in the movie when Drew Barrymore dresses E.T. in a blond wig: and that was a ringer for Auggie in our Miley Cyrus heyday.

Throughout middle school, Miranda, Ella, and I were pretty much our own little group. Somewhere between super popular and well-liked: not brainy, not jocks, not rich, not druggies, not mean, not goody-goody, not huge, not flat. I don't know if the three of us found each other because we were so alike in so many ways, or that because we found each other, we've become so alike in so many ways. We were so happy when we all got into Faulkner High School. It was such a long shot that all three of us would be accepted, especially when almost no one else from our middle school was. I remember how we screamed into our phones the day we got our acceptance letters.

This is why I haven't understood what's been going on with us lately, now that we're actually in high school. It's nothing like how I thought it would be.