

A WONDER STORY

The Julian Chapter



R.J. PALACIO

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Julian

Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.

—Ian Maclaren

Before

Perhaps I have created the stars and the sun and this enormous house,
but I no longer remember.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The House of Asterion”

• • •

Fear can't hurt you any more than a dream.

—William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*

Ordinary

Okay, okay, okay.

I know, I know, I know.

I haven't been nice to August Pullman!

Big deal. It's not the end of the world, people! Let's stop with the drama, okay? There's a whole big world out there, and not everyone is nice to everyone else. That's just the way it is. So, can you please get over it? I think it's time to move on and get on with your life, don't you?

Jeez!

I don't get it. I really don't. One minute, I'm like, the most popular kid in the fifth grade. And the next minute, I'm like, I don't know. Whatever. This bites. This whole year bites! I wish Auggie Pullman had never come to Beecher Prep in the first place! I wish he had kept his creepy little face hidden away like in *The Phantom of the Opera* or something. Put a mask on, Auggie! Get your face out of my face, please. Everything would be a lot easier if you would just disappear.

At least for me. I'm not saying it's a picnic for him, either, by the way. I know it can't be easy for him to look in the mirror every day, or walk down the street. But that's not my problem. My problem is that everything's different since he's been coming to my school. The kids are different. I'm different. And it sucks big-time.

I wish everything was the way it used to be in the fourth grade. We had so, so, so much fun back then. We would play tackle-tag in the yard, and not to brag, but everyone always wanted a piece of me, you know? I'm just sayin'. Everyone always wanted to be my partner when we'd do social studies projects. And everyone always laughed when I said something funny.

At lunchtime, I'd always sit with my peeps, and we were like, it. We were totally *it*. Henry. Miles. Amos. Jack. We were it! It was so cool. We

had all these secret jokes. Little hand signals for stuff.

I don't know why that had to change. I don't know why everyone got so stupid about stuff.

Actually, I *do* know why: it was because of Auggie Pullman. The moment he showed up, that's when things stopped being the way they used to be. Everything was totally ordinary. And now things are messed up. And it's because of him.

And Mr. Tushman. In fact, it's kind of totally Mr. Tushman's fault.

The Call

I remember Mom made a big deal about the call we got from Mr. Tushman. At dinner that night, she went on and on about what a big honor it was. The middle-school director had called us at home to ask if I could be a welcome buddy to some new kid in school. Wow! Big news! Mom acted like I won an Oscar or something. She said it showed her that the school really did recognize who the “special” kids were, which she thought was awesome. Mom had never met Mr. Tushman before, because he was the middle-school director and I was still in the lower school, but she couldn’t stop raving about how nice he’d been on the phone.

Mom’s always been kind of a bigwig at school. She’s on this board of trustees thing, which I don’t even know what it is but apparently it’s a big deal. She’s always volunteering for stuff, too. Like, she’s always been the class mom for every grade I’ve been in at Beecher. Always. She does a lot for the school.

So, the day I was supposed to be a welcome buddy, she dropped me off in front of the middle school. She wanted to take me inside, but I was like, “Mom, it’s middle school!” She took the hint and drove off before I went inside.

Charlotte Cody and Jack Will were already in the front lobby, and we said hello to each other. Jack and I did our peeps’ handshake and we said hello to the security guard. Then we went up to Mr. Tushman’s office. It was so weird being in the school when there was no one there!

“Dude, we could totally skateboard in here and no one would know!” I said to Jack, running and gliding on the smooth floor of the hallway after the security guard couldn’t see us anymore.

“Ha, yeah,” said Jack, but I noticed that the closer we got to Mr. Tushman’s office, the quieter Jack got. In fact, he kind of looked like he was going to blow chunks.

As we got near the top of the stairs, he stopped.

“I don’t want to do this!” he said.

I stopped next to him. Charlotte had already gotten to the top landing.

“Come on!” she said.

“You’re not the boss!” I answered.

She shook her head and rolled her eyes at me. I laughed and nudged Jack with my elbow. We loved egging Charlotte Cody on. She was always such a Goody Two-shoes!

“This is so messed up,” said Jack, rubbing his hand over his face.

“What is?” I asked.

“Do you know who this new kid is?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“You know who he is, right?” Jack said to Charlotte, looking up at her.

Charlotte walked down the stairs toward us. “I think so,” she said. She made a face, like she had just tasted something bad.

Jack shook his head and then smacked it three times with his palm.

“I’m such an idiot for saying yes to this!” he said, his teeth clenched.

“Wait, who is it?” I said. I pushed Jack’s shoulder so he’d look at me.

“It’s that kid called August,” he said to me. “You know, the kid with the face?”

I had no idea who he was talking about.

“Are you kidding me?” said Jack. “You’ve never seen that kid before? He lives in this neighborhood! He hangs out in the playground sometimes. You have to have seen him. Everyone has!”

“He doesn’t live in this neighborhood,” answered Charlotte.

“Yes he does!” Jack answered impatiently.

“No, *Julian* doesn’t live in this neighborhood,” she answered, just as impatiently.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I said.

“Whatever!” Jack interrupted. “It doesn’t matter. Trust me, dude, you’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“Please don’t be mean, Jack,” Charlotte said. “It’s not nice.”

“I’m not being mean!” said Jack. “I’m just being truthful.”

“What, exactly, does he look like?” I asked.

Jack didn’t answer. He just stood there, shaking his head. I looked at Charlotte, who frowned.

“You’ll see,” she said. “Let’s just go already, okay?” She turned around and went up the stairs and disappeared down the hall to Mr. Tushman’s office.

“Let’s just go already, okay?” I said to Jack, imitating Charlotte perfectly. I thought this would totally make him laugh, but it didn’t.

“Jack, dude, come on!” I said.

I pretended to give him a hard slap in the face. This actually did make him laugh a bit, and he threw a slow-motion punch back at me. This led to a quick game of “spleen,” which is where we try to jab each other in the rib cage.

“Guys, let’s go!” Charlotte commanded from the top of the stairs. She had come back to get us.

“Guys, let’s go!” I whispered to Jack, and this time he did kind of laugh.

But as soon as we rounded the corner of the hallway and got to Mr. Tushman’s office, we all got pretty serious.

When we went inside, Mrs. Garcia told us to wait in Nurse Molly’s office, which was a small room to the side of Mr. Tushman’s office. We didn’t say anything to each other while we waited. I resisted the temptation to make a balloon out of the latex gloves that were in a box by the exam table, though I know it would have made everyone laugh.

Mr. Tushman

Mr. Tushman came into the office. He was tall, kind of thin, with messy gray hair.

“Hey, guys,” he said, smiling. “I’m Mr. Tushman. You must be Charlotte.” He shook Charlotte’s hand. “And you are ...?” He looked at me.

“Julian,” I said.

“Julian,” he repeated, smiling. He shook my hand.

“And you’re Jack Will,” he said to Jack, and shook his hand, too.

He sat down on the chair next to Nurse Molly’s desk. “First of all, I just want to thank you guys so much for coming here today. I know it’s a hot day and you probably have other stuff you want to do. How’s the summer been treating you? Okay?”

We all kind of nodded, looking at each other.

“How’s the summer been for you?” I asked him.

“Oh, so nice of you to ask, Julian!” he answered. “It’s been a great summer, thank you. Though I am seriously looking forward to the fall. I hate this hot weather.” He pulled his shirt. “I’m so ready for the winter.”

All three of us were bobbing our heads up and down like doofballs at this point. I don’t know why grown-ups ever bother chitchatting with kids. It just makes us feel weird. I mean, I personally am pretty okay talking to adults—maybe because I travel a lot and I’ve talked to a lot of adults before—but most kids really don’t like talking to grown-ups. That’s just the way it is. Like, if I see the parent of some friend of mine and we’re not actually *in* school, I try to avoid eye contact so I don’t have to talk to them. It’s too weird. It’s also really weird when you bump into a teacher outside of school. Like, one time I saw my third-grade teacher at a restaurant with her boyfriend, and I was like, *ewww!* I don’t want to see my teacher hanging out with her boyfriend, you know?

Anyway, so there we were, me, Charlotte, and Jack, nodding away

like total bobbleheads as Mr. Tushman went on and on about the summer. But finally—*finally!*—he got to the point.

“So, guys,” he said, kind of slapping his hands against his thighs. “It’s really nice of you to give up your afternoon to do this. In a few minutes, I’m going to introduce you to the boy who’s coming to my office, and I just wanted to give you a heads-up about him beforehand. I mean, I told your moms a little bit about him—did they talk to you?”

Charlotte and Jack both nodded, but I shook my head.

“My mom just said he’d had a bunch of surgeries,” I said.

“Well, yes,” answered Mr. Tushman. “But did she explain about his face?”

I have to say, this is the point when I started thinking, *Okay, what the heck am I doing here?*

“I mean, I don’t know,” I said, scratching my head. I tried to think back to what Mom had told me. I hadn’t really paid attention. I think most of the time she was going on and on about what an honor it was that I’d been chosen: she really didn’t emphasize that there was something wrong with the kid. “She said that *you* said the kid had a lot of scars and stuff. Like he’d been in a fire.”

“I didn’t quite say that,” said Mr. Tushman, raising his eyebrows. “What I told your mom is that this boy has a severe craniofacial difference—”

“Oh, right right right!” I interrupted, because now I remembered. “She did use that word. She said it was like a cleft lip or something.”

Mr. Tushman scrunched up his face.

“Well,” he said, lifting his shoulders and tilting his head left and right, “it’s a little more than that.” He got up and patted my shoulder. “I’m sorry if I didn’t make that clear to your mom. In any case, I don’t mean to make this awkward for you. In fact, it’s exactly because I don’t want it to be awkward that I’m talking to you right now. I just wanted to give you a heads-up that this boy definitely looks very different from other children. And that’s not a secret. He knows he looks different. He was born that way. He gets that. He’s a great kid. Very smart. Very nice. He’s never gone to a regular school before because he was homeschooled, you know, because of all his surgeries. So that’s why I just want you guys to show him around a bit, get to know him, be his welcome buddies. You can totally ask him questions, if you want. Talk to him normally. He’s

really just a normal kid with a face that ... you know, is not so normal.” He looked at us and took a deep breath. “Oh boy, I think I’ve just made you all more nervous, haven’t I?”

We shook our heads. He rubbed his forehead.

“You know,” he said, “one of the things you learn when you get old like me is that sometimes, a new situation will come along, and you’ll have no idea what to do. There’s no rule book that tells you how to act in every given situation in life, you know? So what I always say is that it’s always better to err on the side of kindness. That’s the secret. If you don’t know what to do, just be kind. You can’t go wrong. Which is why I asked you three to help me out here, because I’d heard from your lower-school teachers that you’re all really nice kids.”

We didn’t know what to say to this, so we all just kind of smiled like goobers.

“Just treat him like you would treat any kid you’ve just met,” he said. “That’s all I’m trying to say. Okay, guys?”

We nodded at the same time now, too. Bobbling heads.

“You guys rock,” he said. “So, relax, wait here a bit, and Mrs. Garcia will come and get you in a few minutes.” He opened the door. “And, guys, really, thanks again for doing this. It’s good karma to do good. It’s a mitzvah, you know?”

With that, he smiled, winked at us, and left the room.

All three of us exhaled at the same time. We looked at each other, our eyes kind of wide.

“Okay,” Jack said, “I don’t know what the heck karma is and I don’t know what the heck mitzvah is!”

This made us all laugh a little, though it was kind of a nervous type of laugh.

First Look

I'm not going to go into detail about the rest of what happened that day. I'm just going to point out that, for the first time in his life, Jack had not exaggerated. In fact, he had done the opposite. Is there a word that means the opposite of exaggerated? "Unexaggerated"? I don't know. But Jack had totally *not* exaggerated about this kid's face.

The first look I got of August, well, it made me want to cover my eyes and run away screaming. Bam. I know that sounds mean, and I'm sorry about that. But it's the truth. And anyone who says that that's not *their* first reaction when seeing Auggie Pullman isn't being honest. Seriously.

I totally would have walked out the door after I saw him, but I knew I would get in trouble if I did. So I just kept looking at Mr. Tushman, and I tried to listen to what he was saying, but all I heard was yak yak yak yak because my ears were burning. In my head, I was like, *Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude!*

Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude!

I think I said that word a thousand times to myself. I don't know why.

At some point, he introduced us to Auggie. Ahh! I think I actually shook his hand. Triple ahh! I wanted to zoom out of there so fast and wash my hand. But before I knew what was happening, we were headed out the door, down the hallway, and up the stairs.

Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude! Dude!

I caught Jack's eye as we were going up the stairs to homeroom. I opened my eyes really wide at him and mouthed the words, "No way!"

Jack mouthed back, "I told you!"

Scared

When I was about five, I remember watching an episode of *SpongeBob* one night, and a commercial came on TV that totally freaked me out. It was a few days before Halloween. A lot of commercials came on during that time of year that were kind of scary, but this one was for a new teen thriller I'd never heard about before. Suddenly, while I was watching the commercial, a close-up of a zombie's face popped up on the screen. Well, it totally and completely terrified me. I mean, terrified me like the kind of terrified where you actually run out of the room screaming with your arms in the air. TERRRRR-IFFF-FIED!

After that, I was so scared of seeing that zombie face again, I stopped watching any TV until Halloween was over and the movie was no longer playing in theaters. Seriously, I stopped watching TV completely—*that's* how scared I was!

Not too long after that, I was on a playdate with some kid whose name I don't even remember. And this kid was really into Harry Potter, so we started watching one of the Harry Potter movies (I'd never seen any of them before). Well, when I saw Voldemort's face for the first time, the same thing happened that had happened when the Halloween commercial came on. I started screaming hysterically, wailing like a total baby. It was so bad, the kid's mother couldn't calm me down, and she had to call my mother to come pick me up. My mom got really annoyed at the kid's mom for letting me watch the movie, so they ended up getting into an argument and—long story short—I never had another playdate there again. But anyway, between the Halloween zombie commercial and Voldemort's noseless face, I was kind of a mess.

Then, unfortunately, my dad took me to the movies at around that same time. Again, I was only about five. Maybe six by now. It shouldn't have been an issue: the movie we went to see was rated G, totally fine, not scary at all. But one of the trailers that came on was for *Scary Fairy*,

a movie about demon fairies. I know—fairies are so lame!—and when I look back I can't believe I was so scared of this stuff, but I freaked out at this trailer. My dad had to take me out of the theater because—yet again!—I couldn't stop crying. It was so embarrassing! I mean, being scared of fairies? What's next? Flying ponies? Cabbage Patch dolls? Snowflakes? It was crazy! But there I was, shaking and screaming as I left the movie theater, hiding my face in my dad's coat. I'm sure there were three-year-olds in the audience who were looking at me like I was the biggest loser!

That's the thing about being scared, though. You can't control it. When you're scared, you're scared. And when you're scared, everything seems scarier than it ordinarily would be—even things that aren't. Everything that scares you kind of mushes together to become this big, terrifying feeling. It's like you're covered in this blanket of fear, and this blanket is made out of broken glass and dog poop and oozy pus and bloody zombie zits.

I started having awful nightmares. Every night, I'd wake up screaming. It got to a point where I was afraid to go to sleep because I didn't want to have another nightmare, so then I started sleeping in my parents' bed. I wish I could say this was just for a couple of nights, but it went like this for six weeks. I wouldn't let them turn off the lights. I had a panic attack every time I started drifting off to sleep. I mean, my palms would literally start to sweat and my heart would start to race, and I'd start to cry and scream before going to bed.

My parents took me to see a “feelings” doctor, which I only later realized was a child psychologist. Dr. Patel helped me a little bit. She said what I was experiencing were “night terrors,” and it did help me to talk about them with her. But I think what really got me over the nightmares were the Discovery Channel nature videos my mom brought home for me one day. Woo-hoo for those nature videos! Every night, we'd pop one of them into the DVD player and I'd fall asleep to the sound of some guy with an English accent talking about meerkats or koalas or jellyfish.

Eventually, I did get over the nightmares, though. Everything went back to normal. But every once in a while, I'd have what Mom would call a “minor setback.” Like, for instance, although I love *Star Wars* now, the very first time I saw *Star Wars: Episode II*, which was at a birthday

sleepover when I was eight, I had to text my mom to come get me at two a.m. because I couldn't fall asleep: every time I'd close my eyes, Darth Sidious's face would pop into my head. It took about three weeks of nature videos to get over that setback (and I stopped going to sleepovers for about a year after that, too). Then, when I was nine, I saw *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* for the first time, and the same thing happened to me again, though this time it only took me about a week to get over Gollum.

By the time I turned ten, though, all those nightmares had pretty much gone away. Even the fear of having a nightmare was gone by then, too. Like, if I was at Henry's house and he would say, "Hey, let's watch a scary movie," my first reaction wasn't to think, *No, I might have a nightmare!* (which is what it used to be). My first reaction would be like, *Yeah, cool! Where's the popcorn?* I finally started being able to see all kinds of movies again. I even started getting into zombie apocalypse stuff, and none of it ever bothered me. That nightmare stuff was all behind me.

Or at least I thought it was.

But then, the night after I met Auggie Pullman, I started having nightmares again. I couldn't believe it. Not just passing bad dreams, but the full-blown, heart-pounding, wake-up-screaming kind of nightmares I used to have when I was a little kid. Only, I wasn't a little kid anymore.

I was in the fifth grade! Eleven years old! This wasn't supposed to be happening to me anymore!

But there I was again—watching nature videos to help me fall asleep.

Class Picture

I tried to describe what Auggie looked like to my mom, but she didn't get it until the school pictures arrived in the mail. Up until then, she'd never really seen him. She'd been away on a business trip during the Thanksgiving Sharing Festival, so she didn't see him then. On Egyptian Museum day, Auggie's face had been covered with mummy gauze. And there hadn't been any after-school concerts yet. So, the first time Mom saw Auggie and *finally* started understanding my nightmare situation was when she opened that large envelope with my class picture in it.

It was actually kind of funny. I can tell you exactly how she reacted because I was watching her as she opened it. First, she excitedly slit open the top of the envelope with a letter opener. Then, she pulled out my individual portrait. She put her hand on her chest.

"Awww, Julian, you look so handsome!" she said. "I'm so glad you wore that tie Grandmère sent you."

I was eating some ice cream at the kitchen table, and just smiled and nodded at her.

Then I watched her take the class picture out of the envelope. In lower school, every class would get its own picture taken with its own teacher, but in middle school, it's just one group picture of the entire fifth grade. So sixty kids standing in front of the entrance to the school. Fifteen kids in each row. Four rows. I was in the back row, in between Amos and Henry.

Mom was looking at the photo with a smile on her face.

"Oh, there you are!" she said when she spotted me.

She continued looking at the picture with a smile on her face.

"Oh my, look at how big Miles got!" said Mom. "And is that Henry? He looks like he's getting a mustache! And who is—"

And then she stopped talking. The smile on her face stayed frozen for a second or two, and then her face slowly transformed into a state of

shock.

She put the photo down and stared blankly in front of her. Then she looked at the photo again.

Then she looked at me. She wasn't smiling.

"This is the kid you've been talking about?" she asked me. Her voice had completely changed from the way it sounded moments before.

"I told you," I answered.

She looked at the picture again. "This isn't just a cleft palate."

"No one ever said it *was* a cleft palate," I said to her. "Mr. Tushman never said that."

"Yes he did. On the phone that time."

"No, Mom," I answered her. "What he said was 'facial issues,' and you just assumed that he meant cleft palate. But he never actually said 'cleft palate.' "

"I could swear he said the boy had a cleft palate," she answered, "but this is so much worse than that." She really looked stunned. She couldn't stop staring at the photo. "What does he have, exactly? Is he developmentally delayed? He looks like he might be."

"I don't think so," I said, shrugging.

"Does he talk okay?"

"He kind of mumbles," I answered. "He's hard to understand sometimes."

Mom put the picture down on the table and sat down. She started tapping her fingers on the table.

"I'm trying to think of who his mother is," she said, shaking her head. "There are so many new parents in the school, I can't think of who it might be. Is she blond?"

"No, she has dark hair," I answered. "I see her at drop-off sometimes."

"Does she look ... like the son?"

"Oh no, not at all," I said. I sat down next to her and picked up the picture, squinting at it so my eyes wouldn't see it too clearly. Auggie was in the front row, all the way on the left. "I told you, Mom. You didn't believe me, but I told you."

"It's not that I didn't believe you," she answered defensively. "I'm just kind of ... surprised. I didn't realize it was this severe. Oh, I think I know who she is, his mom. Is she very pretty, kind of exotic, has dark wavy hair?"

“What?” I said, shrugging. “I don’t know. She’s a mom.”

“I think I know who she is,” answered Mom, nodding to herself. “I saw her on parents’ night. Her husband’s handsome, too.”

“I have no idea,” I said, shaking my head.

“Oh, those poor people!” She put her hand over her heart.

“Now you get why I’ve been having nightmares again?” I asked her.

She ran her hands through my hair.

“But are you still having nightmares?” she asked.

“Yes. Not every night like I did for the first month of school, but yeah!” I said, throwing the picture down on the tabletop. “Why did he have to come to Beecher Prep, anyway?”

I looked at Mom, who didn’t know what to say. She started putting the picture back into the envelope.

“Don’t even think of putting that in my school album, by the way,” I said loudly. “You should just burn it or something.”

“Julian,” she said.

Then, out of the blue, I started crying.

“Oh, my darling!” said Mom, kind of surprised. She hugged me.

“I can’t help it, Mom,” I said through my tears. “I hate that I have to see him every day!”

That night, I had the same nightmare I’ve been having since the start of school. I’m walking down the main hallway, and all the kids are in front of their lockers, staring at me, whispering about me as I walk past them. I keep walking up the stairwell until I get to the bathroom, and then I look in the mirror. When I see myself, though, it’s not me I’m seeing. It’s Auggie. And then I scream.

Photoshop

The next morning, I overheard Mom and Dad talking as they were getting ready for work. I was getting dressed for school.

“They should have done more to prepare the kids,” Mom said to Dad. “The school should have sent home a letter or something, I don’t know.”

“Come on,” answered Dad. “Saying what? What can they possibly say? There’s a homely kid in your class? Come on.”

“It’s much more than that.”

“Let’s not make too big a deal about it, Melissa.”

“You haven’t seen him, Jules,” said Mom. “It’s quite severe. Parents should have been told. I should have been told! Especially with Julian’s anxiety issues.”

“Anxiety issues?” I yelled from my room. I ran into their bedroom. “You think I have anxiety issues?”

“No, Julian,” said Dad. “No one’s saying that.”

“Mom just said that!” I answered, pointing at Mom. “I just heard her say ‘anxiety issues.’ What, so you guys think I have mental problems?”

“No!” they both said.

“Just because I get nightmares?”

“No!” they yelled.

“It’s not my fault he goes to my school!” I cried. “It’s not my fault his face freaks me out!”

“Of course it’s not, darling,” said Mom. “No one is saying that. All I meant is that because of your history of nightmares, the school should have alerted me. Then at least I would have known better about the nightmares you’re having. I would have known what triggered them.”

I sat down on the edge of their bed. Dad had the class picture in his hands and had obviously just been looking at it.

“I hope you’re planning on burning that,” I said. And I wasn’t joking.

“No, darling,” said Mom, sitting on the other side of me. “We don’t need to burn anything. Look what I’ve done.”

She picked up a different photo from the nightstand and handed it to me to look at. At first, I thought it was just another copy of the class picture, because it was exactly the same size as the class picture Dad had in his hands, and everything in it was exactly the same. I started to look away in disgust, but Mom pointed to a place on the photo—the place where Auggie used to be! He was nowhere in the photo.

I couldn’t believe it! There was no trace of him!

I looked up at Mom, who was beaming.

“The magic of Photoshop!” she said happily, clapping her hands. “Now you can look at this picture and not have to have your memory of fifth grade tarnished,” she said.

“That’s so cool!” I said. “How did you do that?”

“I’ve gotten pretty good at Photoshop,” she answered. “Remember last year, how I made all the skies blue in the Hawaii pictures?”

“You would never have known it rained every day,” answered Dad, shaking his head.

“Laugh if you want,” said Mom. “But now, when I look at those pictures, I don’t have to be reminded of the bad weather that almost ruined our trip. I can remember it for the beautiful vacation that it was! Which is exactly how I want you to remember your fifth-grade year at Beecher Prep. Okay, Julian? Good memories. Not ugly ones.”

“Thanks, Mom!” I said, hugging her tightly.

I didn’t say it, of course, but even though she changed the skies to light blue on the photos, all I ever really remembered about our Hawaii trip was how cold and wet it was when we were there—despite the magic of Photoshop.

Mean

Look, I didn't start out being mean. I mean, I'm not a mean kid! Sure, sometimes I make jokes, but they're not mean jokes. They're just teasing jokes. People have to lighten up a little! Okay, maybe sometimes my jokes are a little mean, but I only make those jokes behind someone's back. I never say stuff to anyone's face that will actually hurt someone. I'm not a bully like that! I'm not a hater, dudes!

Attention, people! Stop being so sensitive!

Some people totally got the whole Photoshop thing, and some didn't. Henry and Miles thought it was so cool and wanted my mom to email their moms the photo. Amos thought it was "weird." Charlotte completely disapproved. I don't know what Jack thought, because he had gone over to the dark side by now. It's like he totally abandoned his peeps this year and only hangs out with Auggie now. Which bugged me, because that meant I couldn't hang out with him anymore. No way was I going to catch the "plague" from that freak. That was the name of the game I invented. The Plague. It was simple. If you touched Auggie, and you didn't wash off the contamination, you died. Everyone in the whole grade played. Except Jack.

And Summer.

So here's the strange thing. I've known Summer since we were in third grade, and I never really paid any attention to her, but this year Henry started liking Savanna and they were like, "going out." Now, by "going out" I don't mean like high school stuff, which would be kind of gross barf disgusting. All it means when you're "going out" is that you hang out together and meet each other at the lockers and sometimes go to the ice cream shop on Amesfort Avenue after school. So, first Henry started going out with Savanna, and then Miles started going out with Ximena. And I was like, "yo, what about me?" And then Amos said, "I'm going to ask Summer out," and I was like, "no way, I'm asking her out!" So that's

when I started kind of liking Summer.

But it totally bit that Summer, like Jack, was on Team Auggie. It meant I couldn't hang out with her at all. I couldn't even say "wassup" to her because the freak might think I was talking to him or something. So I told Henry to have Savanna invite Summer to the Halloween party at her house. I figured I could hang out with her and maybe even ask her to go out with me. That didn't work, though, because she ended up leaving the party early. And ever since then, she's been spending all her time with the freak.

Okay, okay. I know it's not nice to call him "the freak," but like I said before, people have to start being a little less sensitive around here! It's only a joke, everyone! Don't take me so seriously! I'm not being mean. I'm just being funny.

And that's all I was doing, being totally funny, the day that Jack Will punched me. I had been totally joking! Fooling around.

I didn't see it coming at *all!*

The way I remember it, we were just goofing together, and all of a sudden, he whacks me in the mouth for no reason! Boom!

And I was like, *Owwwww! You crazy jerkface! You punched me? You actually punched me?*

And the next thing I know, I'm in Nurse Molly's office, holding one of my teeth in my hand, and Mr. Tushman is there, and I hear him on the phone with my mom saying they're taking me to the hospital. I could hear my mom screaming on the other end of the line. Then Ms. Rubin, the dean, is leading me into the back of an ambulance and we're on the way to a hospital! Crazy stuff!

When we were riding in the ambulance, Ms. Rubin asked me if I knew why Jack hit me. I was like, *duh, because he's totally insane!* Not that I could talk much, because my lips were swollen and there was blood all over my mouth.

Ms. Rubin stayed with me in the hospital until Mom showed up. Mom was more than a little hysterical, as you can imagine. She was crying kind of dramatically every time she saw my face. It was, I have to admit, a little embarrassing.

Then Dad showed up.

"Who did this?" was the first thing he said, shouting at Ms. Rubin.

"Jack Will," answered Ms. Rubin calmly. "He's with Mr. Tushman

now.”

“Jack Will?” cried Mom in shock. “We know the Wills! How could that happen?”

“There will be a thorough investigation,” answered Ms. Rubin. “Right now, what’s most important is that Julian’s going to be fine....”

“Fine?” yelled Mom. “Look at his face! Do you think that’s fine? I don’t think that’s fine. This is outrageous. What kind of school is this? I thought kids didn’t punch each other at a school like Beecher Prep. I thought that’s why we pay forty thousand dollars a year, so that our kids don’t get hurt.”

“Mrs. Albans,” said Ms. Rubin, “I know you’re upset....”

“I’m assuming the kid will get expelled, right?” said Dad.

“Dad!” I yelled.

“We will definitely deal with this matter in the appropriate way, I promise,” answered Ms. Rubin, trying to keep her voice calm. “And now, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll leave you guys alone for a bit. The doctor will be back and you can check in with him, but he said that nothing was broken. Julian’s fine. He lost a lower first molar, but that was on its way out anyway. He’s going to give him some pain medication and you should keep icing it. Let’s talk more in the morning.”

It was only then that I realized that poor Ms. Rubin’s blouse and skirt were completely covered in my blood. Boy, mouths do bleed a lot!

Later that night, when I could finally talk again without it hurting, Mom and Dad wanted to know every detail of what had happened, starting with what Jack and I had been talking about right before he hit me.

“Jack wath upthet becauth he wath paired up with the deformed kid,” I answered. “I told him he could thwutch partnerth if he wanted to. And then he punched me!”

Mom shook her head. That was it for her. She was literally madder than I’d ever seen her before (and I’ve seen my mom pretty mad before, believe me!).

“This is what happens, Jules!” she said to Dad, crossing her arms and nodding quickly. “This is what happens when you make little kids deal with issues they’re not equipped to deal with! They’re just too young to be exposed to this kind of stuff! That Tushman is an *idiot!*”

And she said a whole bunch of other things, too, but those are kind of

too inapro-pro (if you know what I mean) for me to repeat.

“But, Dad, I don’t want Jack to get ecthpelled from thkool,” I said later on in the night. He was putting more ice on my mouth because the painkiller they had given me at the hospital was wearing off.

“That’s not up to us,” he answered. “But I wouldn’t trouble myself about it if I were you. Whatever happens, Jack will get what he deserves for this.”

I have to admit, I started feeling kind of bad for Jack. I mean, sure, he was a total dipstick for punching me, and I wanted him to get in trouble—but I really didn’t want him to get kicked out of school or anything.

But Mom, I could tell, was on one of her missions now (as Dad would say). She gets like that sometimes, when she gets so outraged about something that there’s just no stopping her. She was like that a few years ago when a kid got hit by a car a couple of blocks away from Beecher Prep, and she had like a million people sign a petition to have a traffic light installed. That was a super-mom moment. She was also like that last month when our favorite restaurant changed its menu and they no longer made my favorite dish the way I liked it. That was another super-mom moment because after she talked to the new owner, they agreed to special-order the dish—just for me! But Mom also gets like that for not-so-nice stuff, like when a waiter messes up a food order. That’s a not-so-super-mom moment because, well, you know, it can get kind of weird when your mom starts talking to a waiter like he’s five years old. *Awkward!* Also, like Dad says, you don’t want to get a waiter mad at you, you know? They have *your* food in *their* hands—duh!

So, I wasn’t totally clear on how I felt when I realized that my mom was declaring war on Mr. Tushman, Auggie Pullman, and all of Beecher Prep. Was it going to be a super-mom moment or a not-so-super-mom moment? Like, would it end up with Auggie going to a different school—yay!—or with Mr. Tushman blowing his nose in my cafeteria food—ugh!

Party

It took about two weeks for the swelling to go completely down. Because of that, we ended up not going to Paris over winter break. Mom didn't want our relatives to see me looking like I'd been in a "prize fight." She also wouldn't take any pictures of me over the holidays because she said she didn't want to remember me looking like that. For our annual Christmas card, we used one of the rejects from last year's photo shoot.

Even though I wasn't having a lot of nightmares anymore, the fact that I had started having nightmares again really worried Mom. I could tell she was totally stressed out about it. Then, the day before our Christmas party, she found out from one of the other moms that Auggie had not been through the same kind of admissions screening that the rest of us had been. See, every kid who applies to Beecher Prep is supposed to be interviewed and take a test at the school—but some kind of exception had been made for Auggie. He didn't come to the school for the interview and he got to take the admissions test at home. Mom thought that was really unfair!

"This kid should not have gotten into the school," I heard her telling a group of other moms at the party. "Beecher Prep is just not set up to handle situations like this! We're not an inclusion school! We don't have the psychologists needed to deal with how it affects the other kids. Poor Julian had nightmares for a whole month!"

Ugh, Mom! I hate your telling people about my nightmares!

"Henry was upset as well," Henry's mom said, and the other moms nodded.

"They didn't even prepare us beforehand!" Mom went on. "That's what gets me the most. If they're not going to provide additional psychological support, at least warn the parents ahead of time!"

"Absolutely!" said Miles's mom, and the other moms nodded again.

“Obviously, Jack Will could have used some therapy,” Mom said, rolling her eyes.

“I was surprised they didn’t expel him,” said Henry’s mom.

“Oh, they would have!” answered Mom, “but we asked them not to. We’ve known the Will family since kindergarten. They’re good people. We don’t blame Jack, really. I think he just cracked under the pressure of having to be this kid’s caretaker. That’s what happens when you put little kids into these kinds of situations. I honestly don’t know what Tushman was thinking!”

“I’m sorry, I just have to step in here,” said another mom (I think it was Charlotte’s mom because she had the same bright blond hair and big blue eyes). “It’s not like there’s anything wrong with this kid, Melissa. He’s a great kid, who just happens to *look* different, but ...”

“Oh, I know!” Mom answered, and she put her hand over her heart. “Oh, Brigit, no one’s saying he’s not a great kid, believe me. I’m sure he is. And I hear the parents are lovely people. That’s not the issue. To me, ultimately, the simple fact of the matter is that Tushman didn’t follow protocol. He flagrantly disregarded the applications process by not having the boy come to Beecher Prep for the interview—or take the test like every one of our kids did. He broke the rules. And rules are rules. That’s it.” Mom made a sad face at Brigit. “Oh dear, Brigit. I can see you totally disapprove!”

“No, Melissa, not at all,” Charlotte’s mom said, shaking her head. “It’s a tough situation all around. Look, the fact is, your son got punched in the face. You have every right to feel angry and demand some answers.”

“Thank you.” Mom nodded and crossed her arms. “I just think the whole thing’s been handled terribly, that’s all. And I blame Tushman. Completely.”

“Absolutely,” said Henry’s mom.

“He’s got to go,” agreed Miles’s mom.

I looked at Mom, surrounded by nodding moms, and I thought, *okay, so maybe this is going to turn out to be one of those really super-mom moments*. Maybe everything she was doing would make it so that Auggie ended up going to a different school, and then things could go back to the way it used to be at Beecher Prep. That would be so awesome!

But a part of me was thinking, *maybe this is going to turn into a not-so-super-mom moment*. I mean, some of the stuff she was saying sounded

kind of ... I don't know. Kind of harsh, I guess. It's like when she gets mad at a waiter. You end up feeling sorry for the waiter. The thing is, I know she's on this anti-Tushman mission because of me. If I hadn't started getting nightmares again, and if Jack hadn't punched me, none of this would be happening. She wouldn't be making a big deal about Auggie, or Tushman, and she'd be concentrating all her time and energy on good stuff, like raising money for the school and volunteering at the homeless shelter. Mom does good stuff like that all the time!

So I don't know. On the one hand, I'm happy she's trying to help me. And on the other hand, I would love for her to stop.

Team Julian

The thing that annoyed me the most when we got back from winter break was that Jack had gone back to being friends with Auggie again. They had had some kind of fight after Halloween, which is why Jack and I started being bros again. But after winter break was over, they were best buds again.

It was so lame!

I told everyone we needed to really ice Jack out, for his own good. He had to choose, once and for all, whether he wanted to be on Team Auggie or Team Julian and the Rest of the World. So we started completely ignoring Jack: not talking to him, not answering his questions. It was like he didn't exist.

That'll show him!

And that's when I started leaving my little notes. One day, someone had left some Post-it notes on one of the benches in the yard, which is what gave me the idea. I wrote in this really psycho-killer handwriting:

Nobody likes you anymore!

I slipped it into the slits in Jack's locker when no one was looking. I watched him out of the corner of my eye when he found it. He turned around and saw Henry opening his locker nearby.

"Did Julian write this?" he asked.

But Henry was one of my peeps, you know? He just iced Jack out, pretended like no one was even talking to him. Jack crumpled the Post-it and flicked it into his locker and banged the door shut.

After Jack left, I went over to Henry.

"Hollah!" I said, giving him the devil's sign, which made Henry laugh.

Over the next couple of days, I left a few more notes in Jack's locker. And then I started leaving some in Auggie's locker.

They were not—I repeat, *not*—a big deal. They were mostly stupid stuff. I didn't think anyone would ever take them seriously. I mean, they

were actually kind of funny!

Well, kind of. At least, some of them were.

You stink, big cheese!

Freak!

Get out of our school, orc!

No one but Henry and Miles knew that I was writing these notes. And they were sworn to secrecy.

Dr. Jansen's Office

I don't know how the heck Mr. Tushman found out about them. I don't think Jack or Auggie would have been dumb enough to rat on me, because they had started leaving me notes in my locker, too. I mean, how stupid would you have to be to rat someone out about something that you were doing, too?

So, here's what happened. A few days before the Fifth-Grade Nature Retreat, which I was totally looking forward to, Mom got a phone call from Dr. Jansen, the headmaster of Beecher Prep. He said he wanted to discuss something with her and Dad, and asked for a meeting.

Mom assumed it probably had to do with Mr. Tushman, that maybe he was getting fired. So she was actually kind of excited about the meeting!

They showed up for the appointment at ten a.m., and they were waiting in Dr. Jansen's office when, all of a sudden, they see me walking into the office, too. Ms. Rubin had taken me out of class, asked me to follow her, and brought me there: I had no idea what was up. I'd never even been to the headmaster's office before, so when I saw Mom and Dad there, I looked as confused as they looked.

"What's going on?" Mom said to Ms. Rubin. Before Ms. Rubin could say anything, Mr. Tushman and Dr. Jansen came into the office.

Everyone shook hands and they were all smiles as they greeted one another. Ms. Rubin said she had to go back to class but that she would call Mom and Dad later to check in. This surprised Mom. I could tell she started thinking that maybe this wasn't about Mr. Tushman getting fired, after all.

Then Dr. Jansen asked us to sit on the sofa opposite his desk. Mr. Tushman sat down in a chair next to us, and Dr. Jansen sat behind his desk.

"Well, thank you so much for coming, Melissa and Jules," Dr. Jansen said to my parents. It was strange hearing him call them by their first

names. I knew they all knew each other from being on the board, but it sounded weird. “I know how busy you are. And I’m sure you’re wondering what this is all about.”

“Well, yes ...,” said Mom, but her voice drifted off. Dad coughed into his hand.

“The reason we asked you here today is because, unfortunately,” Dr. Jansen continued, “we have a serious matter on our hands, and we’d like to figure out the best way to resolve it. Julian, do you have any inkling of what I might be talking about?” He looked at me.

I opened my eyes wide.

“Me?” I snapped my head back and made a face. “No.”

Dr. Jansen smiled and sighed at me at the same time. He took off his glasses.

“You understand,” he said, looking at me, “we take bullying very seriously at Beecher Prep. There’s zero tolerance for any kind of bullying. We feel that every single one of our students deserves the right to learn in a caring and respectful atmosphere—”

“Excuse me, but can someone tell me what’s going on here?” Mom interrupted, looking at Dr. Jansen impatiently. “We obviously know the mission statement at Beecher Prep, Hal: we practically wrote it! Let’s cut to the chase—what’s going on?”

Evidence

Dr. Jansen looked at Mr. Tushman. “Why don’t you explain, Larry?” he said.

Mr. Tushman handed an envelope to Mom and Dad. Mom opened it and pulled out the last three Post-it notes I had left in Auggie’s locker. I knew immediately that’s what they were because these were actually pink Post-its and not yellow ones like all the others had been.

So, I thought: *Ah-ha! So it was Auggie who told Mr. Tushman about the Post-it notes! What a turd!!*

Mom read through the notes quickly, raised her eyebrows, and passed them to Dad. He read them and looked at me.

“You wrote these, Julian?” he said, holding the notes out for me.

I swallowed. I looked at him kind of blankly. He handed me the notes, and I just stared at them.

“Um ... well,” I answered. “Yeah, I guess. But, Dad, *they* were writing notes, too!”

“Who was writing notes?” asked Dad.

“Jack and Auggie,” I answered. “They were writing notes to me, too! It wasn’t just me!”

“But you started the note writing, didn’t you?” asked Mr. Tushman.

“Excuse me,” Mom interjected angrily. “Let’s not forget that it was Jack Will who punched Julian in the mouth, not the other way around. Obviously, there’s going to be residual anger—”

“How many of these notes did you write, Julian?” Dad interrupted, tapping on the Post-its I was holding.

“I don’t know,” I said. It was hard for me to get the words out. “Like, six or something. But the other ones weren’t this ... you know, bad. These notes are worse than the other ones I wrote. The other ones weren’t so ...” My voice kind of drifted off as I reread what I’d written on the three notes:

Yo, Darth Hideous. You're so ugly you should wear a mask every day!

And:

I h8 u, Freak!

And the last one:

I bet your mother wishes you'd never been born. You should do everybody a favor—and die.

Of course, looking at them now, they seemed a lot worse than when I wrote them. But I was mad then—super mad. I had just gotten one of their notes and ...

“Wait!” I said, and I reached into my pocket. I found the last Post-it that Auggie and Jack had left for me in my locker, just yesterday. It was kind of crumpled up now, but I held it out to Mr. Tushman to read. “Look! They wrote mean stuff to me, too!”

Mr. Tushman took the Post-it, read it quickly, and handed it to my parents. My mom read it and then looked at the floor. My dad read it and shook his head, puzzled.

He handed me the Post-it and I reread it.

Julian, you're so hot! Summer doesn't like you, but I want to have your babies! Smell my armpits! Love, Beulah

“Who the heck is Beulah?” asked Dad.

“Never mind,” I answered. “I can’t explain.” I handed the Post-it back to Mr. Tushman, who gave it to Dr. Jansen to read. I noticed he actually tried to hide a smile.

“Julian,” said Mr. Tushman, “the three notes you wrote don’t compare at all to this note in content.”

“I don’t think it’s for anyone else to judge the semantics of a note,” said Mom. “It doesn’t matter whether *you* think one note is worse than the other—it’s how the person reading the note reads it. The fact is, Julian’s had a little crush on this Summer girl all year long, and it probably hurt his feelings—”

“Mom!” I yelled, and I covered my face with my hands. “That’s so embarrassing!”

“All I’m saying is that a note can be hurtful to a child—whether *you* see it or not,” Mom said to Mr. Tushman.

“Are you kidding me?” answered Mr. Tushman, shaking his head. He sounded angrier than I had ever heard him before. “Are you telling me you don’t find the Post-its your son wrote completely horrifying?”

Because I do!”

“I’m not defending the notes!” answered Mom. “I’m just reminding you that it was a two-way street. You have to realize that Julian was obviously writing those notes as a reaction to something.”

“Look,” said Dr. Jansen, holding his hand out in front of him like a crossing guard. “There’s no doubt there’s some history here.”

“Those notes hurt my feelings!” I said, and I didn’t mind that I sounded like I was going to cry.

“I don’t doubt that their notes hurt your feelings, Julian,” Dr. Jansen answered. “And you were trying to hurt their feelings. That’s the problem with stuff like this—everyone keeps trying to top one another, and then things escalate out of control.”

“Exactly!” said Mom, and it almost sounded like she screamed it.

“But the fact is,” Dr. Jansen continued, holding up his finger, “there is a line, Julian. There is a line. And your notes crossed that line. They’re completely unacceptable. If Auggie had read these notes, how do you think he’d feel?”

He was looking at me so intensely that I felt like disappearing under the sofa.

“You mean he hasn’t read them?” I asked.

“No,” answered Dr. Jansen. “Thank goodness someone reported the notes to Mr. Tushman yesterday, and he opened Auggie’s locker and intercepted them before Auggie ever saw them.”

I nodded and lowered my head. I have to admit—I was glad Auggie hadn’t read them. I guess I knew what Dr. Jansen meant about “crossing the line.” But then I thought, *so if it wasn’t Auggie who ratted me out, who was it?*

We were all quiet for a minute or two. It was awkward beyond belief.

The Verdict

“Okay,” said Dad finally, rubbing his palm over his face. “Obviously, we understand the seriousness of the situation now, and we will ... do something about it.”

I don’t think I’d ever seen Dad look so uncomfortable. I’m sorry, Dad!

“Well, we have some recommendations,” answered Dr. Jansen. “Obviously, we want to help everyone involved...”

“Thank you for understanding,” said Mom, getting her pocketbook ready as if she were getting up.

“But there *are* consequences!” said Mr. Tushman, looking at Mom.

“Excuse me?” she shot back at him.

“As I said in the beginning,” Dr. Jansen interjected, “the school has a very strict anti-bullying policy.”

“Yeah, we saw how strict it was when you *didn’t* expel Jack Will for punching Julian in the mouth,” Mom answered quickly. Yeah, take that, Mr. Tushman!

“Oh, come on! That was completely different,” Mr. Tushman answered dismissively.

“Oh?” answered Mom. “Punching someone in the face *isn’t* bullying to you?”

“Okay, okay,” said Dad, raising his hand to keep Mr. Tushman from answering. “Let’s just cut to the chase, okay? What exactly are your recommendations, Hal?”

Dr. Jansen looked at him.

“Julian is being suspended for two weeks,” he said.

“What?” yelled Mom, looking at Dad. But Dad didn’t look back.

“In addition,” said Dr. Jansen, “we’re recommending counseling. Nurse Molly has the names of several therapists who we think Julian should see—”

“This is outrageous,” interrupted Mom, steaming.

“Wait,” I said. “You mean, I can’t go to school?”

“Not for two weeks,” answered Mr. Tushman. “Starting immediately.”

“But what about the trip to the nature retreat?” I asked.

“You can’t go,” he answered coldly.

“No!” I said, and now I really was about to cry. “I want to go to the nature retreat!”

“I’m sorry, Julian,” Dr. Jansen said gently.

“This is absolutely ridiculous,” said Mom, looking at Dr. Jansen. “Don’t you think you’re overreacting a little? That kid didn’t even read the notes!”

“That’s not the point!” answered Mr. Tushman.

“I’ll tell you what I think!” said Mom. “This is because *you* admitted a kid into the school who shouldn’t have been admitted into the school in the first place. And you broke the rules to do it. And now you’re just taking this out on my kid because I’m the one who had the guts to call you on it!”

“Melissa,” said Dr. Jansen, trying to calm her down.

“These children are too young to deal with things like this ... facial deformities, disfigurement,” Mom continued, talking to Dr. Jansen. “You must see that! Julian’s had nightmares because of that boy. Did you know that? Julian has anxiety issues.”

“Mom!” I said, clenching my teeth.

“The board should have been consulted about whether Beecher Prep was the right place for a child like that,” Mom continued. “That’s all I’m saying! We’re just not set up for it. There are other schools that are, but we’re not!”

“You can choose to believe that if you want,” answered Mr. Tushman, not looking at her.

Mom rolled her eyes.

“This is a witch hunt,” she muttered quietly, looking out the window. She was fuming.

I had no idea what she was talking about. Witches? What witches?

“Okay, Hal, you said you had some recommendations,” Dad said to Dr. Jansen. He sounded gruff. “Is that it? Two-week suspension and counseling?”

“We’d also like for Julian to write a letter of apology to August Pullman,” said Mr. Tushman.

“Apology for what exactly?” answered Mom. “He wrote some stupid notes. Surely he’s not the only kid in the world who’s ever written a stupid note.”

“It’s more than a stupid note!” answered Mr. Tushman. “It’s a pattern of behavior.” He started counting on his fingers. “It’s the making faces behind the kid’s back. It’s the ‘game’ he initiated, where if someone touches Auggie he has to wash his hands....”

I couldn’t believe Mr. Tushman even knew about the Plague game! How do teachers know so much?

“It’s social isolation,” Mr. Tushman continued. “It’s creating a hostile atmosphere.”

“And you know for a fact that it’s Julian who initiated all this?” asked Dad. “Social isolation? Hostile atmosphere? Are you saying that Julian was the *only* kid who wasn’t nice to this boy? Or are you suspending every kid who stuck his tongue out at this kid?”

Good one, Dad! Score one for the Albanses!

“Doesn’t it trouble you at all that Julian doesn’t seem to be showing the least bit of remorse?” said Mr. Tushman, squinting at Dad.

“Okay, let’s just stop right here,” Dad said quietly, pointing his finger in Mr. Tushman’s face.

“Please, everyone,” said Dr. Jansen. “Let’s calm down a bit. Obviously, this is difficult.”

“After all we’ve done for this school,” Mom answered, shaking her head. “After all the money and the time we’ve put into this school, you would think we’d get just a little bit of consideration.” She put her thumb and her index finger together. “Just a little.”

Dad nodded. He was still looking angrily at Mr. Tushman, but then he looked at Dr. Jansen. “Melissa’s right,” he said. “I think we deserved a little better than this, Hal. A friendly warning would have been nice. Instead, you call us in here like children...” He stood up. “We deserved better.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” said Dr. Jansen, standing up as well.

“The board of trustees will hear about this,” said Mom. She got up, too.

“I’m sure they will,” answered Dr. Jansen, crossing his arms and nodding.

Mr. Tushman was the only adult still sitting down.

“The point of the suspension isn’t punitive,” he said quietly. “We’re trying to help Julian, too. He can’t fully understand the ramifications of his actions if you keep trying to justify them away. We want him to feel some empathy—”

“You know, I’ve heard just about enough!” said Mom, holding her palm in front of Mr. Tushman’s face. “I don’t need parenting advice. Not from someone who doesn’t have kids of his own. You don’t know what it’s like to see your kid having a panic attack every time he shuts his eyes to go to sleep, okay? You don’t know what it’s like.” Her voice cracked a bit, like she was going to cry. She looked at Dr. Jansen. “This affected Julian deeply, Hal. I’m sorry if that’s not politically correct to say, but it’s the truth, and I’m just trying to do what I think is best for my son! That’s all. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Melissa,” Dr. Jansen answered softly.

Mom nodded. Her chin quivered. “Are we done here? Can we go now?”

“Sure,” he answered.

“Come on, Julian,” she said, and she walked out of the office.

I stood up. I admit, I wasn’t exactly sure what was going on.

“Wait, is that it?” I asked. “But what about my things? All my stuff’s in my locker.”

“Ms. Rubin will get your things ready and she’ll get them to you later this week,” answered Dr. Jansen. He looked at Dad. “I’m really sorry it came to this, Jules.” He held out his hand for a handshake.

Dad looked at his hand but didn’t shake it. He looked at Dr. Jansen.

“Here’s the only thing I want from you, Hal,” he said quietly. “I want that this—all of this—be kept confidential. Is that clear? It doesn’t go beyond this room. I don’t want Julian turned into some kind of anti-bullying poster boy by the school. No one is to know he’s been suspended. We’ll make up some excuse about why he’s not in school, and that’s it. Are we clear, Hal? I don’t want him made into an example. I’m not going to stand by while this school drags my family’s reputation through the mud.”

Oh, by the way, in case I hadn’t mentioned it before: Dad’s a lawyer.

Dr. Jansen and Mr. Tushman exchanged looks.

“We are not looking to make an example of any of our students,” Dr. Jansen answered. “This suspension really is about a reasonable response

to unreasonable behavior.”

“Give me a break,” answered Dad, looking at his watch. “It’s a massive overreaction.”

Dr. Jansen looked at Dad, and then he looked at me.

“Julian,” he said, looking me right in the eye. “Can I ask you something point-blank?”

I looked at Dad, who nodded. I shrugged.

“Do you feel at all remorseful for what you’ve done?” Dr. Jansen asked me.

I thought about it a second. I could tell all the grown-ups were watching me, waiting for me to answer something magical that would make this whole situation better.

“Yes,” I said quietly. “I’m really sorry I wrote those last notes.”

Dr. Jansen nodded. “Is there anything else you feel remorse for?” he asked.

I looked at Dad again. I’m not an idiot. I knew what he was dying for me to say. I just wasn’t going to say it. So I looked down and shrugged.

“Can I ask you this, then?” said Dr. Jansen. “Will you consider writing Auggie a letter of apology?”

I shrugged again. “How many words does it have to be?” was all I could think to say.

I knew the moment I said it that I probably shouldn’t have. Dr. Jansen looked at my dad, who just looked down.

“Julian,” said Dad. “Go find Mom. Wait for me by the reception area. I’ll be out in a second.”

Just as I closed the door on my way out, Dad started whispering something to Dr. Jansen and Mr. Tushman. It was a hushed, angry whisper.

When I got to the reception area, I found Mom sitting on a chair with her sunglasses on. I sat down next to her. She rubbed my back but she didn’t say anything. I think she had been crying.

I looked at the clock: 10:20 a.m. Right about now, Ms. Rubin was probably going over the results of yesterday’s quiz in science class. As I looked around the lobby, I had a blip of a memory—that day before school started, when me, Jack Will, and Charlotte had met up here before meeting our “welcome buddy” for the first time. I remember how nervous Jack had been that day, and how I didn’t even know who

Auggie was.

So much had happened since then.

Out of School

Dad didn't say anything when he met us in the lobby. We just walked out the doors without saying goodbye—even to the security guard at the reception desk. It was weird leaving the school when everyone was still inside. I wondered what Miles and Henry would think when I didn't come back to class. I hated that I was going to miss PE that afternoon.

My parents were quiet the whole way back to the house. We live on the Upper West Side, which is about a half-hour drive from Beecher Prep, but it felt like it took forever to get home.

"I can't believe I got suspended," I said, just as we pulled into the parking garage in our building.

"It's not your fault, honey," answered Mom. "They have it in for us."

"Melissa!" Dad yelled, which surprised Mom a bit. "Yes, of course it's his fault. This whole situation is his fault! Julian, what the heck were you thinking, writing notes like that?"

"He was goaded into writing them!" answered Mom.

We had pulled to a stop inside the garage. The parking-garage attendant was waiting for us to get out of the car, but we didn't get out.

Dad turned around and looked at me. "I'm not saying I think the school handled this right," he said. "Two weeks' suspension is ridiculous. But, Julian, you should know better!"

"I know!" I said. "It was a mistake, Dad!"

"We all make mistakes," said Mom.

Dad turned back around. He looked at Mom. "Jansen's right, Melissa. If you keep trying to justify his actions—"

"That's not what I'm doing, Jules."

Dad didn't answer right away. Then he said, "I told Jansen that we're pulling Julian out of Beecher Prep next year."

Mom was literally speechless. It took a second for what he said to hit me. "You *what?*" I said.

“Jules,” Mom said slowly.

“I told Jansen that we’ll finish out this year at Beecher Prep,” Dad continued calmly. “But next year, Julian’s going to a different school.”

“I can’t believe this!” I cried. “I love Beecher Prep, Dad! I have friends! Mom!”

“I’m not sending you back to that school, Julian,” Dad said firmly. “No way am I spending another dime on that school. There are plenty of other great private schools in New York City.”

“Mom!” I said.

Mom wiped her hand across her face. She shook her head. “Don’t you think we should have talked about this first?” she said to Dad.

“You don’t agree?” he countered.

She rubbed her forehead with her fingers.

“No, I do agree,” she said softly, nodding.

“Mom!” I screamed.

She turned around in her seat. “Honey, I think Daddy’s right.”

“I can’t believe this!” I yelled, punching the car seat.

“They have it in for us now,” she continued. “Because we complained about the situation with that boy ...”

“But that was your fault!” I said through clenched teeth. “I didn’t tell you to try and get Auggie thrown out of the school. I didn’t want you to get Tushman fired. That was you!”

“And I’m sorry about that, sweetheart,” she said meekly.

“Julian!” said Dad. “Your mom did everything she did to try and protect you. It’s not her fault you wrote those notes, is it?”

“No, but if she hadn’t made such a big stink about everything ...,” I started to say.

“Julian, do you hear yourself?” said Dad. “Now you’re blaming your mom. Before you were blaming the other boys for writing those notes. I’m starting to wonder if what they were saying is right! Don’t you feel any remorse for what you’ve done?”

“Of course he does!” said Mom.

“Melissa, let him answer for himself!” Dad said loudly.

“No, okay?” I yelled. “I’m not sorry! I know everybody thinks I should be all, *I’m sorry for being mean to Auggie, I’m sorry I talked smack about him, I’m sorry I dissed him.* But I’m not. So sue me.”

Before Dad could respond, the garage attendant knocked on the car

window. Another car had pulled into the garage and they needed us to get out.

Spring

I didn't tell anyone about the suspension. When Henry texted me a few days later asking why I wasn't in school, I told him I had strep throat. That's what we told everyone.

It turns out, two weeks' suspension isn't so bad, by the way. I spent most of my time at home watching *SpongeBob* reruns and playing *Knights of the Old Republic*. I was still supposed to keep up on my schoolwork, though, so it's not like I totally got to goof off. Ms. Rubin dropped by the apartment one afternoon with all my locker stuff: my textbooks, my loose-leaf book, and all the assignments I would need to make up. And there was a lot!

Everything went really well with social studies and English, but I had so much trouble doing the math homework that Mom got me a math tutor.

Despite all the time off, I really was excited about going back. Or at least I thought I was. The night before my first day back, I had one of my nightmares again. Only this time, it wasn't me who looked like Auggie—it was everyone else!

I should have taken that as a premonition. When I got back to school, as soon as I arrived, I could tell something was up. Something was different. The first thing I noticed is that no one was really excited about seeing me again. I mean, people said hello and asked me how I was feeling, but no one was like, "dude, I missed you!"

I would have thought Miles and Henry would be like that, but they weren't. In fact, at lunchtime, they didn't even sit at our usual table. They sat with Amos. So I had to take my tray and find a place to squeeze in at Amos's table, which was kind of humiliating. Then I overheard the three of them talking about hanging out at the playground after school and shooting hoops, but no one asked me to come!

The thing that was weirdest of all, though, was that everyone was being really nice to Auggie. Like, ridiculously nice. It was like I had entered the portal to a different dimension, an alternate universe in which Auggie and I had changed places. Suddenly, he was the popular one, and I was the outsider.

Right after last period, I pulled Henry over to talk to him.

“Yo, dude, why is everyone being so nice to the freak all of a sudden?” I asked.

“Oh, um,” said Henry, looking around kind of nervously. “Yeah, well, people don’t really call him that anymore.”

And then he told me all about the stuff that had gone down at the nature retreat. Basically, what had happened was that Auggie and Jack got picked on by some seventh-grade bullies from another school. Henry, Miles, and Amos had rescued them, got into a fight with the bullies—like with real punches flying—and then they all escaped through a corn maze. It sounded really exciting, and as he was telling me, I got mad all over again that Mr. Tushman had made me miss it.

“Oh man,” I said excitedly. “I wish I’d been there! I totally would have creamed those jerks.”

“Wait, which jerks?”

“The seventh graders!”

“Really?” He looked puzzled, though Henry always looked a little puzzled. “Because, I don’t know, Julian. I kind of think that if you had been there, we might not have rescued them at all. You probably would have been cheering for the seventh graders!”

I looked at him like he was an idiot. “No I wouldn’t,” I said.

“Seriously?” he said, giving me a look.

“No!” I said.

“Okay!” he answered, shrugging.

“Yo, Henry, are you coming?” Amos called out from down the hallway.

“Look, I gotta go,” said Henry.

“Wait,” I said.

“Gotta go.”

“Want to hang out tomorrow after school?”

“Not sure,” he answered, backing away. “Text me tonight and we’ll see.”

As I watched him jog away, I had this terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. Did he really think I was *that* awful that I would have been rooting for some seventh graders while they beat Auggie up? Is that what other people think? That I would have been that much of dirtwad?

Look, I'm the first one to say I don't like Auggie Pullman, but I would never want to see him get beat up or anything! I mean, come on! I'm not a psycho. It really annoyed me that that's what people thought about me.

I texted Henry later on: "Yo, btw, I would *never* have just stood by and let those creeps beat Auggie and Jack up!"

But he never texted me back.

Mr. Tushman

That last month in school was awful. It's not like anyone was out-and-out mean to me, but I felt iced out by Amos and Henry and Miles. I just didn't feel popular anymore. No one really ever laughed at my jokes. No one wanted to hang out with me. I felt like I could disappear from the school and nobody would miss me. Meanwhile, Auggie was walking down the hallways like some cool dude, getting high-fived by all the jocks in the upper grades.

Whatever.

Mr. Tushman called me into his office one day.

"How's it going, Julian?" he asked me.

"Fine."

"Did you ever write that apology letter I asked you to write?"

"My dad says I'm leaving the school, so I don't have to write anything," I answered.

"Oh," he said, nodding. "I guess I was hoping you'd want to write it on your own."

"Why?" I said back. "Everyone thinks I'm this big dirtbag now anyway. What the heck is writing a letter going to accomplish?"

"Julian—"

"Look, I know everyone thinks I'm this unfeeling kid who doesn't feel 'remorse'!" I said, using air quotes.

"Julian," said Mr. Tushman. "No one—"

Suddenly, I felt like I was about to cry, so I just interrupted him. "I'm really late for class and I don't want to get in trouble, so can I please go?"

Mr. Tushman looked sad. He nodded. Then I left his office without looking back.

A few days later, we received an official notice from the school telling us that they had withdrawn their invitation to re-enroll in the fall.

I didn't think it mattered, since Dad had told them we weren't going back anyway. But we still hadn't heard from the other schools I had applied to, and if I didn't get into any of them, we had planned on my going back to Beecher Prep. But now that was impossible.

Mom and Dad were furious at the school. Like, *crazy* mad. Mostly because they had already paid the tuition for the next year in advance. And the school wasn't planning on returning the money. See, that's the thing with private schools: they can kick you out for any reason.

Luckily, a few days later, we did find out that I'd gotten into my first-choice private school, not far from where I lived. I'd have to wear a uniform, but that was okay. Better than having to go to Beecher Prep every day!

Needless to say, we skipped the graduation ceremony at the end of the year.

After

“That is only tears such as men use,” said Bagheera.
“Now I know thou art a man, and a man’s cub no longer.
The jungle is shut indeed to thee henceforward.
Let them fall, Mowgli. They are only tears.”
—Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book*

• • •

Oh, the wind, the wind is blowing,
through the graves the wind is blowing,
freedom soon will come;
then we’ll come from the shadows.
—Leonard Cohen, “The Partisan”

Summer Vacation

My parents and I went to Paris in June. The original plan was that we would return to New York in July, since I was supposed to go to rock-and-roll camp with Henry and Miles. But after everything that happened, I didn't want to do that anymore. My parents decided to let me stay with my grandmother for the rest of the summer.

Usually, I hated staying with Grandmère, but I was okay about it this time. I knew that after my parents went home, I could spend the entire day in my PJs playing *Halo*, and Grandmère wouldn't care in the least. I could pretty much do whatever I wanted.

Grandmère wasn't exactly the typical "grandma" type. No baking cookies for Grandmère. No knitting sweaters. She was, as Dad always said, something of a "character." Even though she was in her eighties, she dressed like a fashion model. Super glamorous. Lots of makeup and perfume. High heels. She never woke up until two in the afternoon, and then she'd take at least two hours to get dressed. Once she was up, she would take me out shopping or to a museum or a fancy restaurant. She wasn't into doing kid stuff, if you know what I mean. She'd never sit through a PG movie with me, for instance, so I ended up seeing a lot of movies that were totally age-inappropriate. Mom, I knew, would go completely ballistic if she got wind of some of the movies Grandmère took me to see. But Grandmère was French, and was always saying my parents were too "American" anyway.

Grandmère also didn't talk to me like I was a little kid. Even when I was younger, she never used baby words or talked to me the way grown-ups usually talk to little kids. She used regular words to describe everything. Like, if I would say, "*Je veux faire pipi*," meaning "I want to make pee-pee," she would say, "You need to urinate? Go to the lavatory."

And she cursed sometimes, too. Boy, she could curse! And if I didn't

know what a curse word meant, all I had to do was ask her and she would explain it to me—in detail. I can't even tell you some of the words she explained to me!

Anyway, I was glad to be away from NYC for the whole summer. I was hoping that I would get all those kids out of my head. Auggie. Jack. Summer. Henry. Miles. All of them. If I never saw any of those kids again, seriously, I would be the happiest kid in Paris.

Mr. Browne

The only thing I was a little bummed about is that I never got to say goodbye to any of my teachers at Beecher Prep. I really liked some of them. Mr. Browne, my English teacher, was probably my favorite teacher of all time. He had always been really nice to me. I loved writing, and he was really complimentary about it. And I never got to tell him I wasn't coming back to Beecher Prep.

At the beginning of the year, Mr. Browne had told all of us that he wanted us to send him one of our own precepts over the summer. So, one afternoon, while Grandmère was sleeping, I started thinking about sending him a precept from Paris. I went to one of the tourist shops down the block and bought a postcard of a gargoyle, one of those at the top of Notre-Dame. The first thing I thought when I saw it was that it reminded me of Auggie. And then I thought, *Ugh! Why am I still thinking about him? Why do I still see his face wherever I go? I can't wait to start over!*

And that's when it hit me: my precept. I wrote it down really quickly.
Sometimes it's good to start over.

There. Perfect. I loved it. I got Mr. Browne's address from his teacher page on the Beecher Prep website, and dropped it in the mail that same day.

But then, after I sent it, I realized he wasn't going to understand what it meant. Not really. He didn't have the whole background story about why I was so happy to be leaving Beecher Prep and starting over somewhere new. So, I decided to write him an email to tell him everything that had happened last year. I mean, not *everything*. Dad had specifically told me not to ever tell anyone at the school about the mean stuff I did to Auggie—for legal reasons. But I wanted Mr. Browne to know enough so that he would understand my precept. I also wanted him to know that I thought he was a great teacher. Mom had told

everyone that I wasn't going back to Beecher Prep because we were unhappy with the academics—and the teachers. I felt kind of bad about that because I didn't want Mr. Browne to ever think I was unhappy with him.

So, anyway, I decided to send Mr. Browne an email.

To: tbrowne@beecherschool.edu

Fr: julianalbans@ezmail.com

Re: My precept

Hi, Mr. Browne! I just sent you my precept in the mail: "Sometimes it's good to start over." It's on a postcard of a gargoyle. I wrote this precept because I'm going to a new school in September. I ended up hating Beecher Prep. I didn't like the students. But I DID like the teachers. I thought your class was great. So don't take my not going back personally.

I don't know if you know the whole long story, but basically the reason I'm not going back to Beecher Prep is ... well, not to name names, but there was one student I really didn't get along with. Actually, it was two students. (You can probably guess who they are because one of them punched me in the mouth.) Anyway, these kids were not my favorite people in the world. We started writing mean notes to each other. I repeat: *each* other. It was a 2-way street! But I'm the one who got in trouble for it! Just me! It was so unfair! The truth is, Mr. Tushman had it in for me because my mom was trying to get him fired. Anyway, long story short: I got suspended for two weeks for writing the notes! (No one knows this, though. It's a secret so please don't tell anyone.) The school said it had a "zero tolerance" policy against bullying. But I don't think what I did was bullying! My parents got so mad at the school! They decided to enroll me in a different school next year. So, yeah, that's the story.

I really wish that that "student" had never come to Beecher Prep! My whole year would have been so much better! I hated having to be in his classes. He gave me nightmares. I would still be going to Beecher Prep if he hadn't been there. It's a bummer.

I really liked your class, though. You were a great teacher. I wanted you to know that.

I thought it was good that I hadn't named "names." But I figured he'd know who I was talking about. I really didn't expect to hear back from him, but the very next day, when I checked my in-box, there was an email from Mr. Browne. I was so excited!

To: julianalbans@ezmail.com
Fr: tbrowne@beecherschool.edu
Re: re: My precept

Hi, Julian. Thanks so much for your email! I'm looking forward to getting the gargoyle postcard. I was sorry to hear you wouldn't be coming back to Beecher Prep. I always thought you were a great student and a gifted writer.

By the way, I love your precept. I agree, sometimes it's good to start over. A fresh start gives us the chance to reflect on the past, weigh the things we've done, and apply what we've learned from those things to the future. If we don't examine the past, we don't learn from it.

As for the "kids" you didn't like, I do think I know who you're talking about. I'm sorry the year didn't turn out to be a happy one for you, but I hope you take a little time to ask yourself why. Things that happen to us, even the bad stuff, can often teach us a little bit about ourselves. Do you ever wonder why you had such a hard time with these two students? Was it, perhaps, their friendship that bothered you? Were you troubled by Auggie's physical appearance? You mentioned that you started having nightmares. Did you ever consider that maybe you were just a little afraid of Auggie, Julian? Sometimes fear can make even the nicest kids say and do things they wouldn't ordinarily say or do. Perhaps you should explore these feelings further?

In any case, I wish you the best of luck in your new school, Julian. You're a good kid. A natural leader. Just remember to use your leadership for good, huh? Don't forget: always choose kind!

I don't know why, but I was so, so, so happy to get that email from Mr. Browne! I knew he would be understanding! I was so tired of everyone thinking I was this demon-child, you know? It was obvious that Mr. Browne knew I wasn't. I reread his email like, ten times. I was smiling from ear to ear.

"So?" Grandmère asked me. She had just woken up and was having her breakfast: a croissant and *café au lait* delivered from downstairs. "I haven't seen you this happy all summer long. What is it that you are reading, *mon cher*?"

"Oh, I got an email from one of my teachers," I answered. "Mr. Browne."

"From your old school?" she asked. "I thought they were all bad, those teachers. I thought it was 'good riddance' to all of them!" Grandmère had a thick French accent that was hard to understand sometimes.

“What?”

“Good riddance!” she repeated. “Never mind. I thought the teachers were all stupid.” The way she pronounced “stupid” was funny: like stew-peed!

“Not all. Not Mr. Browne,” I answered.

“So, what did he write to make you so happy?”

“Oh, nothing much,” I said. “It’s just ... I thought everyone hated me, but now I know Mr. Browne doesn’t.”

Grandmère looked at me.

“Why would everyone hate you, Julian?” she asked. “You are such a good boy.”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Read me the email,” she said.

“No, Grandmère ...,” I started to say.

“Read,” she commanded, pointing her finger at the screen.

So I read Mr. Browne’s letter aloud to her. Now, Grandmère knew a little bit about what had happened at Beecher Prep, but I don’t think she knew the whole story. I mean, I think Mom and Dad told her the version of the story they told everyone else, with maybe a few more details. Grandmère knew there were a couple of kids who had made my life miserable, for instance, but she didn’t know the specifics. She knew I’d gotten punched in the mouth, but she didn’t know why. If anything, Grandmère probably assumed I had gotten bullied, and that’s why I was leaving the school.

So, there were parts of Mr. Browne’s email she really didn’t understand.

“What does he mean,” she said, squinting as she tried to read off my screen. “Auggie’s ‘physical appearance’? *Qu’est-ce que c’est?*”

“One of the kids that I didn’t like, Auggie, he had like this awful ... facial deformity,” I answered. “It was really bad. He looked like a gargoyle!”

“Julian!” she said. “That is not very nice.”

“Sorry.”

“And this boy, he was not *sympathique?*” she asked innocently. “He was not nice to you? Was he a bully?”

I thought about that. “No, he wasn’t a bully.”

“So, why did you not like him?”

I shrugged. "I don't know. He just got on my nerves."

"What do you mean, you don't know?" she answered quickly. "Your parents told me you were leaving school because of some bullies, no? You got punched in the face? No?"

"Well, yeah, I got punched, but not by the deformed kid. By his friend."

"Ah! So his friend was the bully!"

"No, not exactly," I said. "I can't say they were bullies, Grandmère. I mean, it wasn't like that. We just didn't get along, that's all. We hated each other. It's kind of hard to explain, you kind of had to be there. Here, let me show you what he looked like. Then maybe you'll understand a little better. I mean, not to sound mean, but it was really hard having to look at him every day. He gave me nightmares."

I logged on to Facebook and found our class picture, and zoomed in on Auggie's face so she could see. She put her glasses on to look at it and spent a long time studying his face on the computer screen. I thought she would react the way Mom had reacted when she first saw that picture of Auggie, but she didn't. She just nodded to herself. And then she closed the laptop.

"Pretty bad, huh?" I said to her.

She looked at me.

"Julian," she said. "I think maybe your teacher is right. I think you were afraid of this boy."

"What? No way!" I answered. "I'm not afraid of Auggie! I mean, I didn't like him—in fact, I kind of hated him—but not because I was afraid of him."

"Sometimes we hate the things we are afraid of," she said.

I made a face like she was talking crazy.

She took my hand.

"I know what it is like to be afraid, Julian," she said, holding her finger up to my face. "There was a little boy that I was afraid of when I was a little girl."

"Let me guess," I answered, sounding bored. "I bet he looked just like Auggie."

Grandmère shook her head. "No. His face was fine."

"So, why were you afraid of him?" I asked. I tried to make my voice sound as disinterested as possible, but Grandmère ignored my bad

attitude.

She just sat back in her chair, her head slightly tilted, and I could tell by looking into her eyes that she had gone somewhere far away.

Grandmère's Story

"I was a very popular girl when I was young, Julian," said Grandmère. "I had many friends. I had pretty clothes. As you can see, I have always liked pretty clothes." She waved her hands down her sides to make sure I noticed her dress. She smiled.

"I was a frivolous girl," she continued. "Spoiled. When the Germans came to France, I hardly took any notice. I knew that some Jewish families in my village were moving away, but my family was so cosmopolitan. My parents were intellectuals. Atheists. We didn't even go to synagogue."

She paused here and asked me to bring her a wine glass, which I did. She served herself a full glass and, as she always did, offered me some, too. And, as I always did, I said, "*Non, merci.*" Like I said, Mom would go ballistic if she knew the stuff Grandmère did sometimes!

"There was a boy in my school called ... well, they called him Tourteau," she continued. "He was ... how do you say the word ... a crippled? Is that how you say it?"

"I don't think people use that word anymore, Grandmère," I said. "It's not exactly politically correct, if you know what I mean."

She flicked her hand at me. "Americans are always coming up with new words we can't say anymore!" she said. "*Alors*, well, Tourteau's legs were deformed from the polio. He needed two canes to walk with. And his back was all twisted. I think that's why he was called *tourteau*, crab: he walked sideways like a crab. I know, it sounds very harsh. Children were meaner in those days."

I thought about how I called August "the freak" behind his back. But at least I never called him that to his face!

Grandmère continued talking. I have to admit: at first I wasn't into her telling me one of her long stories, but I was getting into this one.

“Tourteau was a little thing, a skinny thing. None of us ever talked to him because he made us uncomfortable. He was so different! I never even looked at him! I was afraid of him. Afraid to look at him, to talk to him. Afraid he would accidentally touch me. It was easier to pretend he didn’t exist.”

She took a long sip of her wine.

“One morning, a man came running into our school. I knew him. Everyone did. He was a Maquis, a partisan. Do you know what that is? He was against the Germans. He rushed into the school and told the teachers that the Germans were coming to take all the Jewish children away. What? What is this? I could not believe what I was hearing! The teachers in the school went around to all the classes and gathered the Jewish children together. We were told to follow the Maquis into the woods. We were going to go hide. Hurry hurry hurry! I think there were maybe ten of us in all! Hurry hurry hurry! Escape!”

Grandmère looked at me, to make sure I was listening—which, of course, I was.

“It was snowing that morning, and very cold. And all I could think was, *If I go into the woods, I will ruin my shoes!* I was wearing these beautiful new red shoes that Papa had brought me, you see. As I said before, I was a frivolous girl—perhaps even a little stupid! But this is what I was thinking. I did not even stop to think, Well, where is Maman and Papa? If the Germans were coming for the Jewish children, had they come for the parents already? This did not occur to me. All I could think about were my beautiful shoes. So, instead of following the Maquis into the woods, I snuck away from the group and went to hide inside the bell tower of the school. There was a tiny room up there, full of crates and books, and there I hid. I remember thinking I would go home in the afternoon after the Germans came, and tell Maman and Papa all about it. This is how stupid I was, Julian!”

I nodded. I couldn’t believe I had never heard this story before!

“And then the Germans came,” she said. “There was a narrow window in the tower, and I could see them perfectly. I watched them run into the woods after the children. It did not take them very long to find them. They all came back together: the Germans, the children, the Maquis soldier.”

Grandmère paused and blinked a few times, and then she took a deep

breath.

“They shot the Maquis in front of all the children,” she said quietly. “He fell so softly, Julian, in the snow. The children cried. They cried as they were led away in a line. One of the teachers, Mademoiselle Petitjean, went with them—even though she was not Jewish! She said she would not leave her children! No one ever saw her again, poor thing. By now, Julian, I had awakened from my stupidity. I was not thinking of my red shoes anymore. I was thinking of my friends who had been taken away. I was thinking of my parents. I was waiting until it was nighttime so I could go home to them!

“But not all the Germans had left. Some had stayed behind, along with the French police. They were searching the school. And then I realized, they were looking for me! Yes, for me, and for the one or two other Jewish children who had not gone into the woods. I realized then that my friend Rachel had not been among the Jewish children who were marched away. Nor Jakob, a boy from another village who all the girls wanted to marry because he was so handsome. Where were they? They must have been hiding, just like I was!

“Then I heard creaking, Julian. Up the stairs, I heard footsteps up the stairs, coming closer to me. I was so scared! I tried to make myself as small as possible behind the crate, and hid my head beneath a blanket.”

Here, Grandmère covered her head with her arms, as if to show me how she was hiding.

“And then I heard someone whisper my name,” she said. “It was not a man’s voice. It was a child’s voice.

“*Sara?* the voice whispered again.

“I peeked out from the blanket.

“*Tourteau!* I answered, astonished. I was so surprised, because in all the years I had known him, I don’t think I had ever said a word to him, nor him to me. And yet, there he was, calling my name.

“*They will find you here,* he said. *Follow me.*

“And I did follow him, for by now I was terrified. He led me down a hallway into the chapel of the school, which I had never really been to before. We went to the back of the chapel, where there was a crypt—all this was new to me, Julian! And we crawled through the crypt so the Germans would not see us through the windows, because they were looking for us still. I heard when they had found Rachel. I heard her

screaming in the courtyard as they took her away. Poor Rachel!

“Tourteau took me down to the basement beneath the crypt. There must have been one hundred steps at least. These were not easy for Tourteau, as you can imagine, with his terrible limp and his two canes, but he hopped down the steps two at a time, looking behind him to make sure I was following.

“Finally, we arrived at a passage. It was so narrow we had to walk sideways to get through. And then we were in the sewers, Julian! Can you imagine? I knew instantly because of the smell, of course. We were knee-deep in refuse. You can imagine the smell. So much for my red shoes!

“We walked all night. I was so cold, Julian! Tourteau was such a kind boy, though. He gave me his coat to wear. It was, to this day, the most noble act anyone has ever done for me. He was freezing, too—but he gave me his coat. I was so ashamed for the way I had treated him. Oh, Julian, I was so ashamed!”

She covered her mouth with her fingers, and swallowed. Then she finished the glass of wine and poured herself another.

“The sewers lead to Dannevilliers, a small village about fifteen kilometers away from Aubervilliers. Maman and Papa had always avoided this town because of the smell: the sewers from Paris drained onto the farmland there. We wouldn’t even eat apples grown in Dannevilliers! But it’s where Tourteau lived. He took me to his house, and we cleaned ourselves by the well, and then Tourteau brought me to the barn behind his house. He wrapped me up in a horse blanket and told me to wait. He was going to get his parents.

“No, I pleaded. *Please don’t tell them.* I was so frightened. I wondered if, when they saw me, they would call the Germans. You know, I had never met them before!

“But Tourteau left, and a few minutes later, he returned with his parents. They looked at me. I must have seemed quite pathetic there—all wet and shivering. The mother, Vivienne, put her arms around me to comfort me. Oh, Julian, that hug was the warmest hug I have ever felt! I cried so hard in this woman’s arms, because I knew then, I knew I would never cry in my own maman’s arms again. I just knew it in my heart, Julian. And I was right. They had taken Maman that same day, along with all the other Jews in the city. My father, who had been at work,

had been warned that the Germans were coming and managed to escape. He was smuggled to Switzerland. But it was too late for Maman. She was deported that day. To Auschwitz. I never saw her again. My beautiful maman!”

She took a deep breath here, and shook her head.

Tourteau

Grandmère was silent for a few seconds. She was looking into the air like she could see it all happening again right in front of her. Now I understood why she'd never talked about this before: it was too hard for her.

“Tourteau’s family hid me for two years in that barn,” she continued slowly. “Even though it was so dangerous for them. We were literally surrounded by Germans, and the French police had a large headquarters in Dannevilliers. But every day, I thanked my maker for the barn that was my home, and the food that Tourteau managed to bring me—even when there was hardly any food to go around. People were starving in those days, Julian. And yet they fed me. It was a kindness that I will never forget. It is always brave to be kind, but in those days, such kindnesses could cost you your life.”

Grandmère started to get teary-eyed at this point. She took my hand.

“The last time I saw Tourteau was two months before the liberation. He had brought me some soup. It wasn’t even soup. It was water with a little bit of bread and onions in it. We had both lost so much weight. I was in rags. So much for my pretty clothes! Even so, we managed to laugh, Tourteau and I. We laughed about things that happened in our school. Even though I could not go there anymore, of course, Tourteau still went every day. At night, he would tell me everything he had learned so that I would stay smart. He would tell me about all my old friends, too, and how they were doing. They all still ignored him, of course. And he never revealed to any of them that I was still alive. No one could know. No one could be trusted! But Tourteau was an excellent narrator, and he made me laugh a lot. He could do wonderful imitations, and he even had funny nicknames for all my friends. Imagine that, Tourteau was making fun of them!

“I had no idea you were so mischievous! I told him. All those years, you

were probably laughing at me behind my back, too!

“Laughing at you? he said. Never! I had a crush on you; I never laughed at you. Besides, I only laughed at the kids who made fun of me. You never made fun of me. You simply ignored me.

“I called you *Tourteau*.

“And so? Everyone called me that. I really don’t mind. I like crabs!

“Oh, *Tourteau*, I am so ashamed! I answered, and I remember I covered my face with both my hands.”

At this point, Grandmère covered her face with her hands. Although her fingers were bent with arthritis now, and I could see her veins, I pictured her young hands covering her young face so many years ago.

“*Tourteau* took my hands with his own hands,” she continued, slowly removing her hands from her face. “And he held my hands for a few seconds. I was fourteen years old then, and I had never kissed a boy, but he kissed me that day, Julian.”

Grandmère closed her eyes. She took a deep breath.

“After he kissed me, I said to him, *I don’t want to call you Tourteau anymore. What is your name?*”

Grandmère opened her eyes and looked at me.

“Can you guess what he said?” she asked.

I raised my eyebrows as if to say “no, how would I know?”

Then she closed her eyes again and smiled.

“He said, *My name is Julian.*”

Julian

“Oh my God!” I cried. “That’s why you named Dad Julian?” Even though everyone called him Jules, that was his name.

“*Oui*,” she said, nodding.

“And I’m named after Dad!” I said. “So I’m named after this kid! That is so cool!”

She smiled and ran her fingers through my hair. But she didn’t say anything.

Then I remembered her saying, “The last time I saw Tourteau ...”

“So what happened to him?” I asked. “To Julian?”

Almost instantaneously, tears rolled down Grandmère’s cheeks.

“The Germans took him,” she said, “that same day. He was on his way to school. They were making another sweep of the village that morning. By now, Germany was losing the war and they knew it.”

“But ...,” I said, “he wasn’t even Jewish!”

“They took him because he was crippled,” she said between sobs. “I’m sorry, I know you told me that word is a bad word, but I don’t know another word in English. He was an *invalidé*. That is the word in French. And that is why they took him. He was not perfect.” She practically spat out the word. “They took all the imperfects from the village that day. It was a purge. The Gypsies. The shoemaker’s son, who was ... simple. And Julian. My *tourteau*. They put him in a cart with the others. And then he was put on a train to Drancy. And from there to Auschwitz, like my mother. We heard later from someone who saw him there that they sent him to the gas chambers right away. Just like that, poof, he was gone. My savior. My little Julian.”

She stopped to wipe her eyes with a handkerchief, and then drank the rest of the wine.

“His parents were devastated, of course, M. Beaumier and Mme. Beaumier,” she continued. “We didn’t find out he was dead until after

the liberation. But we knew. We knew.” She dabbed her eyes. “I lived with them for another year after the war. They treated me like a daughter. They were the ones who helped track down Papa, although it took some time to find him. So much chaos in those days. When Papa finally was able to return to Paris, I went to live with him. But I always visited the Beaumiers—even when they were very old. I never forgot the kindness they showed me.”

She sighed. She had finished her story.

“Grandmère,” I said, after a few minutes. “That’s like, the saddest thing I’ve ever heard! I didn’t even know you were in the war. I mean, Dad’s never talked about any of this.”

She shrugged. “I think it’s very possible that I never told your father this story,” she said. “I don’t like to talk about sad things, you know. In some ways, I am still the frivolous girl I used to be. But when I heard you talking about that little boy in your school, I could not help but think of Tourteau, of how afraid I had once been of him, of how badly we had treated him because of his deformity. Those children had been so mean to him, Julian. It breaks my heart to think of it.”

When she said that, I don’t know, something just really broke inside of me. Completely unexpected. I looked down and, all of a sudden, I started to cry. And when I say I started to cry, I don’t mean a few tears rolling down my cheeks—I mean like, full-scale, snot-filled crying.

“Julian,” she said softly.

I shook my head and covered my face with my hands.

“I was terrible, Grandmère,” I whispered. “I was so mean to Auggie. I’m so sorry, Grandmère!”

“Julian,” she said again. “Look at me.”

“No!”

“Look at me, *mon cher*.” She took my face in her hands and forced me to look at her. I felt so embarrassed. I really couldn’t look her in the eyes. Suddenly, that word that Mr. Tushman had used, that word that everyone kept trying to force on me, came to me like a shout. REMORSE!

Yeah, there it was. That word in all its glory.

REMORSE. I was shaking with remorse. I was crying with remorse.

“Julian,” said Grandmère. “We all make mistakes, *mon cher*.”

“No, you don’t understand!” I answered. “It wasn’t just one mistake. I

was those kids who were mean to Tourteau... I was the bully, Grandmère. It was me!”

She nodded.

“I called him a freak. I laughed behind his back. *I left mean notes!*” I screamed. “Mom kept making excuses for why I did that stuff ... but there wasn’t any excuse. I just did it! And I don’t even know why. I don’t even know.”

I was crying so hard I couldn’t even speak.

Grandmère stroked my head and hugged me.

“Julian,” she said softly. “You are so young. The things you did, you know they were not right. But that does not mean you are not capable of doing right. It only means that you chose to do wrong. This is what I mean when I say you made a mistake. It was the same with me. I made a mistake with Tourteau.

“But the good thing about life, Julian,” she continued, “is that we can fix our mistakes sometimes. We learn from them. We get better. I never made a mistake like the one I made with Tourteau again, not with anyone in my life. And I have had a very, very long life. You will learn from your mistake, too. You must promise yourself that you will never behave like that with anyone else again. One mistake does not define you, Julian. Do you understand me? You must simply act better next time.”

I nodded, but I still cried for a long, long time after that.

My Dream

That night, I dreamt about Auggie. I don't remember the details of the dream, but I think we were being chased by Nazis. Auggie was captured, but I had a key to let him out. And in my dream, I think I saved him. Or maybe that's what I told myself when I woke up. Sometimes, it's hard to know with dreams. I mean, in this dream the Nazis all looked like Darth Vader's Imperial officers anyway, so it's hard to put too much meaning into dreams.

But what was really interesting to me, when I thought about it, is that it had been a dream—not a nightmare. And in the dream, Auggie and I were on the same side.

I woke up super early because of the dream, and didn't go back to sleep. I kept thinking about Auggie, and Tourteau—Julian—the heroic boy I was named for. It's weird: This whole time I had been thinking about Auggie like he was my enemy, but when Grandmère told me that story, I don't know, it all kind of just sank in with me. I kept thinking of how ashamed the original Julian would be to know that someone who carried his name had been so mean.

I kept thinking about how sad Grandmère was when she told the story. How she could remember all the details, even though it happened like, seventy years ago. Seventy years! Would Auggie remember me in seventy years? Would he still remember the mean things I called him?

I don't want to be remembered for stuff like that. I would want to be remembered the way Grandmère remembers Tourteau!

Mr. Tushman, I get it now! R. E. M. O. R. S. E.

I got up as soon as it was light out, and wrote this note.

Dear Auggie,

I want to apologize for the stuff I did last year. I've been thinking about it a lot. You didn't deserve it. I wish I could have a do-over. I

would be nicer. I hope you don't remember how mean I was when you're eighty years old. Have a nice life.

Julian

PS: If you're the one who told Mr. Tushman about the notes, don't worry. I don't blame you.

When Grandmère woke up that afternoon, I read her the note.

"I'm proud of you, Julian," she said, squeezing my shoulder.

"Do you think he'll forgive me?"

She thought about it.

"That's up to him," she answered. "In the end, *mon cher*, all that matters is that you forgive yourself. You are learning from your mistake. Like I learned with Tourteau."

"Do you think Tourteau would forgive me?" I asked. "If he knew his namesake had been so mean?"

She kissed my hand.

"Tourteau would forgive you," she answered. And I could tell she meant it.

Going Home

I realized I didn't have Auggie's address, so I wrote another email to Mr. Browne asking him if I could send him my note to Auggie and have him mail it to him for me. Mr. Browne emailed me back immediately. He was happy to do it. He also said he was proud of me.

I felt good about that. I mean like, *really* good. And it felt good to feel good. Kind of hard to explain, but I guess I was tired of feeling like I was this awful kid. I'm not. Like I keep saying over and over again, I'm just an ordinary kid. A typical, normal, ordinary kid. Who made a mistake.

But now, I was trying to make it right.

My parents arrived a week later. Mom couldn't stop hugging and kissing me. This was the longest I'd ever been away from home.

I was excited to tell them about the email from Mr. Browne, and the note I had written to Auggie. But they told me their news first.

"We're suing the school!" said Mom excitedly.

"What?" I cried.

"Dad is suing them for breach of contract," she said. She was practically chirping.

I looked at Grandmère, who didn't say anything. We were all having dinner.

"They had no right to withdraw the enrollment contract," Dad explained calmly, like a lawyer. "Not before we had been placed in another school. Hal told me—in his office—that they would wait to rescind their enrollment offer until *after* we had gotten accepted into another school. And they would return the money. We had a verbal agreement."

"But I was going to another school anyway!" I said.

"Doesn't matter," he said. "Even if they returned the money, it's the principle of the thing."

“What principle?” said Grandmère. She got up from the table. “This is nonsense, Jules. Stupid. *Stew-peed!* Complete and utter nonsense!”

“Maman!” said Dad. He looked really surprised. So did Mom.

“You should drop this stupidity!” said Grandmère.

“You don’t really know the details, Maman,” said Dad.

“I know *all* the details!” she yelled, shaking her fist in the air. She looked fierce. “The boy was wrong, Jules! *Your* boy was in the wrong! He knows it. You know it. He did bad things to that other boy and he is sorry for them, and you should let it be.”

Mom and Dad looked at each other.

“With all due respect, Sara,” said Mom, “I think we know what’s best for—”

“No, you don’t know anything!” yelled Grandmère. “You don’t know. You two are too busy with lawsuits and stupid things like that.”

“Maman,” said Dad.

“She’s right, Dad,” I said. “It was all my fault. All that stuff with Auggie. It was *my* fault. I was mean to him, for no reason. It was my fault Jack punched me. I had just called Auggie a freak.”

“What?” said Mom.

“I wrote those awful notes,” I said quickly. “I did mean stuff. It was my fault! I was the bully, Mom! It wasn’t anyone else’s fault but mine!”

Mom and Dad didn’t seem to know what to answer.

“Instead of sitting there like two idiots,” said Grandmère, who always said things like they were, “you should be praising Julian for this admission! He is taking responsibility! He is owning up to his mistakes. It takes much courage to do this kind of thing.”

“Yes, of course,” said Dad, rubbing his chin and looking at me. “But ... I just don’t think you understand all the legal ramifications. The school took our tuition and refused to return it, which—”

“Blah! Blah! Blah!” said Grandmère, waving him away.

“I wrote him an apology,” I said. “To Auggie. I wrote him an apology and I sent it to him in the mail! I apologized for the way I acted.”

“You what?” said Dad. He was getting mad now.

“And I told Mr. Browne the truth, too,” I added. “I wrote Mr. Browne a long email telling him the whole story.”

“Julian ...,” said Dad, frowning angrily. “Why did you do that? I told you I didn’t want you to write anything that acknowledged—”

“Jules!” said Grandmère loudly, waving her hand in front of Dad’s face. *“Tu as un cerveau comme un sandwich au fromage!”*

I couldn’t help but laugh at this. Dad cringed.

“What did she say?” asked Mom, who didn’t know French.

“Grandmère just told Dad he has a brain like a cheese sandwich,” I said.

“Maman!” Dad said sternly, like someone who was about to begin a long lecture.

But Mom reached out and put her hand on Dad’s arm.

“Jules,” she said quietly. “I think your mom is right.”

Unexpected

Sometimes people surprise you. Never in a million years would I have thought my mom would be the one to back down from anything, so I was completely shocked by what she had just said. I could tell Dad was, too. He looked at Mom like he couldn't believe what she was saying. Grandmère was the only one who didn't seem surprised.

"Are you kidding me?" Dad said to Mom.

Mom shook her head slowly. "Jules, we should end this. We should move on. Your mother's right."

Dad raised his eyebrows. I knew he was mad but trying not to show it. "You're the one who got us on this warpath, Melissa!"

"I know!" she answered, taking her glasses off. Her eyes were really shiny. "I know, I know. And I thought it was the right thing to do at the time. I still don't think Tushman was right, the way he handled everything, but ... I'm ready to put all this behind us now, Jules. I think we should just ... let go and move forward." She shrugged. She looked at me. "It was very big of Julian to reach out to that boy, Jules. It takes a lot of guts to do that." She looked back at Dad. "We should be supportive."

"I am supportive, of course," said Dad. "But this is such a complete about-face, Melissa! I mean ..." He shook his head and rolled his eyes at the same time.

Mom sighed. She didn't know what to say.

"Look here," said Grandmère. "Whatever Melissa did, she did it because she wanted Julian to be happy. And that is all. *C'est tout*. And he's happy now. You can see it in his eyes. For the first time in a long time, your son looks completely happy."

"That's exactly right," said Mom, wiping a tear from her face.

I felt kind of sorry for Mom at that moment. I could tell she felt bad

about some of the things she had done.

“Dad,” I said, “please don’t sue the school. I don’t want that. Okay, Dad? Please?”

Dad leaned back in his chair and made a soft whistle sound, like he was blowing out a candle in slow motion. Then he started clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It was a long minute that he stayed like that. We just watched him.

Finally he sat back up in his chair and looked at us. He shrugged.

“Okay,” he said, his palms up. “I’ll drop the lawsuit. We’ll just walk away from the tuition money. Are you sure that’s what you want, Melissa?”

Mom nodded. “I’m sure.”

Grandmère sighed. “Victory at last,” she mumbled into her wine glass.

Starting Over

We went home a week later, but not before Grandmère took us to a very special place: the village she grew up in. It seemed amazing to me, that she had never told Dad the whole Tourteau story. The only thing he knew was that a family in Dannevilliers had helped her during the war, but she had never told him any of the details. She had never told him that his own grandmother had died in a concentration camp.

“Maman, how come you never told me any of this?” Dad asked her while we were driving in the car to her village.

“Oh, you know me, Jules,” she answered. “I do not like to dwell on the past. Life is ahead of us. If we spend too much time looking backward, we can’t see where we are going!”

Much of the village had changed. Too many bombs and grenades had been dropped. Most of the original houses had been destroyed in the war. Grandmère’s school was gone. There was really nothing much to see. Just Starbucks and shoe stores.

But then we drove to Dannevilliers, which is where Julian had lived: that village was intact. She took us to the barn where she had stayed for two years. The old farmer who lived there now let us walk around and take a look. Grandmère found her initials scrawled in a little nook in one of the horse stalls, which is where she would hide under piles of hay whenever the Nazis were nearby. Grandmère stood in the middle of the barn, with one hand on her face as she looked around. She seemed so tiny there.

“How are you doing, Grandmère?” I asked.

“Me? Ah! Well,” she said, smiling. She tilted her head. “I lived. I remember thinking, when I was staying here, that the smell of horse manure would never leave my nostrils. But I lived. And Jules was born because I lived. And you were born. So what is the smell of horse

manure against all that? Perfume and time make everything easier to bear. Now, there's one more place I want to visit..."

We drove about ten minutes away to a tiny cemetery on the outskirts of the village. Grandmère took us directly to a tombstone at the edge of the graveyard.

There was a small white ceramic plaque on the tombstone. It was in the shape of a heart, and it read:

ICI REPOSENT

**Vivienne Beaumier
née le 27 de avril 1905
décédée le 21 de novembre 1985**

**Jean-Paul Beaumier
né le 15 de mai 1901
décédé le 5 de juillet 1985**

**Mère et père de
Julian Auguste Beaumier
né le 10 de octobre 1930
tombé en juin 1944**

Puisse-t-il toujours marcher le front haut dans le jardin de Dieu

I looked at Grandmère as she stood looking at the plaque. She kissed her fingers and then reached down to touch it. She was trembling.

"They treated me like their daughter," she said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

She started sobbing. I took her hand and kissed it.

Mom took Dad's hand. "What does the plaque say?" she asked softly.

Dad cleared his throat.

"Here rests Vivienne Beaumier ...," he translated softly. "And Jean-Paul Beaumier. Mother and father of Julian Auguste Beaumier, born October 10, 1930. Killed June 1944. May he walk forever tall in the garden of God."

New York

We got back to NYC a week before my new school was scheduled to start. It was nice, being in my room again. My things were all the same. But I felt, I don't know, a little different. I can't explain it. I felt like I really was starting over.

"I'll help you unpack in a minute," said Mom, running off to the bathroom as soon as we stepped through the door.

"I'm good," I answered. I could hear Dad in the living room listening to our answering-machine messages. I started unpacking my suitcase. Then I heard a familiar voice on the machine.

I stopped what I was doing and walked into the living room. Dad looked up and paused the machine. Then he replayed the message for me to hear.

It was Auggie Pullman.

"Oh, hi, Julian," said the message. "Yeah, so ... umm ... I just wanted to tell you I got your note. And, um ... yeah, thanks for writing it. No need to call me back. I just wanted to say hey. We're good. Oh, and by the way, it wasn't me who told Tushman about the notes, just so you know. Or Jack or Summer. I really don't know how he found out, not that it matters anyway. So, okay. Anyway. I hope you like your new school. Good luck. Bye!"

Click.

Dad looked at me to see how I would react.

"Wow," I said. "I didn't expect that at all."

"Are you going to call him back?" asked Dad.

I shook my head. "Nah," I answered. "I'm too chicken."

Dad walked over to me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"I think you've proven that you're anything *but* chicken," he said. "I'm proud of you, Julian. Very proud of you." He leaned over and hugged me. "*Tu marches toujours le front haut.*"

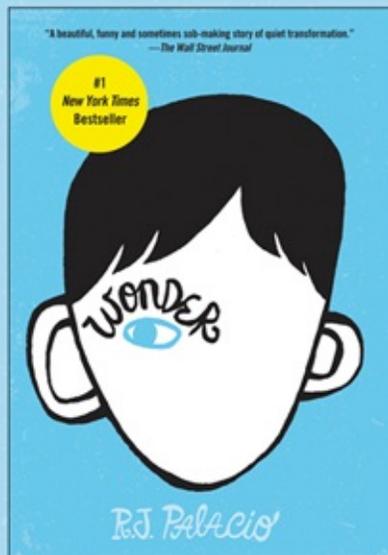
I smiled. "I hope so, Dad."
I hope so.

THE END

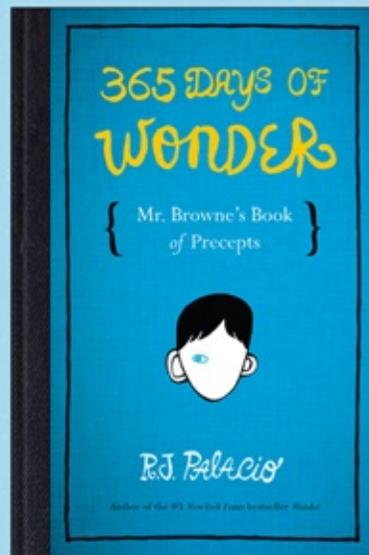


R. J. Palacio lives in New York City with her husband, two sons, and two dogs. For more than twenty years, she was an editorial director, an art director, and a graphic designer, working on books for other people while waiting for the perfect time in her life to start writing her own novel. But one day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

The extraordinary #1 *New York Times* bestseller that inspired a movement!



You can't **blend in** when you were **born to stand out.**



A collection of words to live by, every day of the year

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