

A WONDER STORY

Pluto



R.J. PALACIO

ALSO BY R. J. PALACIO

Wonder
The Julian Chapter
365 Days of Wonder

Pluto

A Wonder Story

R. J. Palacio



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v4.0

ep

Contemporary observations are changing our understanding of planetary systems, and it is important that our nomenclature for objects reflect our current understanding. This applies, in particular, to the designation “planets.” The word “planet” originally described “wanderers” that were known only as moving lights in the sky. Recent discoveries lead us to create a new definition, which we can make using currently available scientific information.

—International Astronomical Union
(IAU), excerpt from Resolution B5

*I guess there is no one to blame
We're leaving ground
Will things ever be the same?*

—Europe, “The Final Countdown”

It is such a mysterious place, the land of tears.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

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Also by R. J. Palacio

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Introductions

I was two days old the first time I met Auggie Pullman. I don't remember the occasion myself, obviously, but my mom told me about it. She and Dad had just brought me home from the hospital for the first time, and Auggie's parents had just brought him home from the hospital for the first time, too. But Auggie was already three months old by then. He had to stay in the hospital, because he needed some surgeries that would allow him to breathe and swallow. Breathing and swallowing are things most of us don't ever think about, because we do them automatically. But they weren't automatic for Auggie when he was born.

My parents took me over to Auggie's house so we could meet each other. Auggie was hooked up to a lot of medical equipment in their living room. My mom picked me up and brought me face to face with Auggie.

"August Matthew Pullman," she said, "this is Christopher Angus Blake, your new oldest friend."

And our parents applauded and toasted the happy occasion.

My mom and Auggie's mom, Isabel, became best friends before we were born. They met at the supermarket on Amesfort Avenue right after my parents moved to the neighborhood. Since both of them were having babies soon, and they lived across the street from each other, Mom and Isabel decided to form a mothers' group. A mothers' group is when a bunch of moms hang out together and have playdates with other kids' moms. There were about six or seven other moms in the mothers' group at first. They hung out together a couple of times before any of the babies were born. But after Auggie was born, only two other moms stayed in the mothers' group: Zachary's mom and Alex's mom. I don't know what happened to the other moms in the group.

Those first couple of years, the four moms in the mothers' group—along with us babies—hung out together almost every day. The moms would go jogging through the park with us in our strollers. They would take long walks along the riverfront with us in our baby slings. They would have lunch at the Heights Lounge with us in our baby chairs.

The only times Auggie and his mom didn't hang out with the mothers' group

was when Auggie was back in the hospital. He needed a lot of operations, because, just like with breathing and swallowing, there were other things that didn't come automatically to him. For instance, he couldn't eat. He couldn't talk. He couldn't really even close his mouth all the way. These were things that the doctors had to operate on him so that he could do them. But even after the surgeries, Auggie never really ate or talked or closed his mouth all the way like me and Zack and Alex did. Even after the surgeries, Auggie was very different from us.

I don't think I really understood *how* different Auggie was from everyone else until I was four years old. It was wintertime, and Auggie and I were wrapped in our parkas and scarves while we played outside in the playground. At one point, we climbed up the ladder to the ramp at the top of the jungle gym and waited in line to go down the tall slide. When we were almost next, the little girl in front of us got cold feet about going down the tall slide, so she turned around to let us pass. That's when she saw Auggie. Her eyes opened really wide and her jaw dropped down, and she started screaming and crying hysterically. She was so upset, she couldn't even climb down the ladder. Her mom had to climb up the ramp to get her. Then Auggie started to cry, because he knew the girl was crying because of him. He covered his face with his scarf so nobody could see him, and then his mom had to climb up the ramp to get him, too. I don't remember all the details, but I remember there was a big commotion. A little crowd had formed around the slide. People were whispering. I remember us leaving the playground very quickly. I remember seeing tears in Isabel's eyes as she carried Auggie home.

That was the first time I realized how different Auggie was from the rest of us. It wasn't the last time, though. Like breathing and swallowing, crying comes automatically to most kids, too.

7:08 a.m.

I don't know why I was thinking about Auggie this morning. It's been three years since we moved away, and I haven't even seen him since his bowling party in October. Maybe I'd had a dream about him. I don't know. But I was thinking about him when Mom came into my room a few minutes after I turned off my alarm clock.

"You awake, sweetie?" she said softly.

I pulled my pillow over my head as an answer.

"Time to wake up, Chris," she said cheerfully, opening the curtains of my window. Even under my pillow with my eyes closed, I could tell my room was way too bright now.

"Close the curtains!" I mumbled.

"Looks like it's going to rain all day today," she sighed, not closing the curtains. "Come on, you don't want to be late again today. And you have to take a shower this morning."

"I took a shower, like, two days ago."

"Exactly!"

"Ugh!" I groaned.

"Let's go, honeyboy," she said, patting the top of my pillow.

I pulled the pillow off my face. "Okay!" I yelled. "I'm up! Are you happy?"

"You're such a grump in the morning," she said, shaking her head. "What happened to my sweet fourth grader from last year?"

"Lisa!" I answered.

She hated when I called her by her first name. I thought she'd leave my room then, but she started picking some clothes off my floor and putting them in my hamper.

"Did something happen last night, by the way?" I said, my eyes still closed. "I heard you on the phone with Isabel when I was going to sleep last night. It sounded like something bad...."

She sat down on the edge of my bed. I rubbed my eyes awake.

“What?” I said. “Is it really bad? I think I had a dream about Auggie last night.”

“No, Auggie’s fine,” she answered, scrunching up her face a bit. She pushed some hair out of my eyes. “I was going to wait till later to—”

“What!” I interrupted.

“I’m afraid Daisy died last night, sweetie.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, honey.”

“Daisy!” I covered my face with my hands.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. I know how much you loved Daisy.”

Darth Daisy

I remember the day Auggie’s dad brought Daisy home for the first time. Auggie and I were playing Trouble in his room when, all of a sudden, we heard high-pitched squealing coming from the front door. It was Via, Auggie’s big sister. We could also hear Isabel and Lourdes, my babysitter, talking excitedly. So we ran downstairs to see what the commotion was about.

Nate, Auggie’s dad, was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, holding a squirming, crazy yellow dog in his lap. Via was kneeling down in front of the dog, trying to pet it, but the dog was kind of hyper and kept trying to lick her hand, which Via kept pulling away.

“A dog!” Auggie screamed excitedly, running over to his dad.

I ran over, too, but Lourdes grabbed me by the arm.

“Oh no, *papi*,” she said to me. She had just started babysitting me in those days, so I didn’t know her very well. I remember she used to put baby powder in my sneakers, which I still do now because it reminds me of her.

Isabel’s hands were on the sides of her face. It was obvious that Nate had just come through the door. “I can’t believe you did this, Nate,” she was saying over and over again. She was standing on the other side of the room next to Lourdes.

“Why can’t I pet him?” I asked Lourdes.

“Because Nate says three hours ago this dog lived on the street with a homeless man,” she answered quickly. “Is disgusting.”

“She’s not disgusting—she’s beautiful!” said Via, kissing the dog on her forehead.

“In my country, dogs stay outside,” said Lourdes.

“He’s so cute!” Auggie said.

“It’s a *she*!” Via said quickly, nudging Auggie.

“Be careful, Auggie!” said Isabel. “Don’t let her lick you in the face.”

But the dog was already licking Auggie all over his face.

“The vet said she’s perfectly healthy, guys,” Nate said to both Isabel and Lourdes.

“Nate, she was living on the street!” Isabel answered quickly. “Who knows what she’s carrying.”

“The vet gave her all her shots, a tick bath, checked for worms,” answered Nate. “This puppy’s got a clean bill of health.”

“That is *not* a puppy, Nate!” Isabel pointed out.

That was true: The dog was definitely not a puppy. She wasn’t little, or soft and round, like puppies usually are. She was skinny and pointy and wild-eyed, and she had this crazy, long black tongue kind of pouring out of the side of her mouth. And she wasn’t a small dog, either. She was the same size as my grandmother’s labradoodle.

“Okay,” said Nate. “Well, she’s puppylike.”

“What kind of dog is she?” asked Auggie.

“The vet thinks a yellow lab mix,” answered Nate. “Maybe some chow?”

“More like pit bull,” said Isabel. “Did he at least tell you how old she is?”

Nate shrugged. “He couldn’t tell for sure,” he answered. “Two or three? Usually they judge from the teeth, but hers are in bad shape because, you know, she’s probably been eating junk food all her life.”

“Garbage and dead rats,” Lourdes said, like it was for sure.

“Oh God!” Isabel muttered, rubbing her hand over her face.

“Her breath does smell pretty bad,” said Via, waving her hand in front of her nose.

“Isabel,” said Nate, looking up at her. “She was destined for us.”

“Wait, you mean we’re *keeping* her?” Via said excitedly, her eyes opening up really wide. “I thought we were just babysitting her until we could find her a home!”

“I think we should be her home,” said Nate.

“Really, Daddy?” cried Auggie.

Nate smiled and pointed his chin at Isabel. “But it’s up to Mommy, guys,” he said.

“Are you kidding me, Nate?” cried Isabel as Via and Auggie ran over to her and started pleading with her, putting their hands together, like they were praying in church.

“Please please please please please please please please please please?” they kept saying over and over again. “Please pretty please please please please?”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this to me, Nate!” said Isabel, shaking her head. “Like our lives aren’t complicated enough?”

Nate smiled and looked down at the dog, who was looking at him. “Look at her, honey! She was starving and cold. The homeless guy offered to sell her to me for ten bucks. What was I going to do, say no?”

“Yes!” said Lourdes. “Very easy to do.”

“It’s good karma to save a dog’s life!” answered Nate.

“Don’t do it, Isabel!” said Lourdes. “Dogs are dirty, and smelly. And they have germs. And you know who will end up walking her all the time, picking up all the poo-poo?” She pointed at Isabel.

“That’s not true, Mommy!” said Via. “I promise I’ll walk her. Every day.”

“Me too, Mommy!” said Auggie.

“We’ll take care of her completely,” continued Via. “We’ll feed her. We’ll do everything.”

“Everything!” added Auggie. “Please please please, Mommy?”

“Please please please, Mommy?” Via said at the same time.

Isabel was rubbing her forehead with her fingers, like she had a headache. Finally she looked at Nate and shrugged. “I think this is crazy, but...Okay. Fine.”

“Really?” shrieked Via, hugging Isabel tightly. “Thank you, Mommy! Thank you so much! I promise we’ll take care of her.”

“Thank you, Mommy!” repeated Auggie, hugging Isabel.

“Yay! Thank you, Isabel!” said Nate, clapping the dog’s two front paws together.

“Can I please pet her now?” I said to Lourdes, pulling away from her grip before she could stop me again. I slid over between Auggie and Via.

Nate put the dog down on the rug then, and she literally turned over onto her back so that we would all scratch her tummy. She closed her eyes like she was smiling, her long black tongue hanging from the side of her mouth onto the rug.

“That’s exactly how I found her today,” Nate pointed out.

“I’ve never seen a longer tongue in my life,” said Isabel, crouching down next to us. She still hadn’t pet the dog yet, though. “She looks like the Tasmanian Devil.”

“I think she’s beautiful,” said Via. “What’s her name?”

“What do you want to name her?” asked Nate.

“I think we should name her Daisy!” answered Via without any hesitation at all. “She’s yellow, like a daisy.”

“That’s a nice name,” said Isabel, who started petting the dog. “Then again, she looks a little like a lion. We could call her Elsa.”

“I know what you should name her,” I said, nudging Auggie. “You should call her Darth Maul!”

“That is the stupidest name in the world for a dog!” Via answered, disgusted.

I ignored her. “Do you get it, Auggie? Darth...*maul*? Get it? Because dogs maul...”

“Ha ha!” Auggie said. “That’s so funny! Darth *Maul*!”

“We’re not calling her that!” Via said snottily to the two of us.

“Hi, Darth Maul!” Auggie said to the dog, kissing her on her pink nose. “We can call her Darth for short.”

Via looked at Nate. “Daddy, we’re not calling her that!”

“I think it’s kind of a fun name,” Nate answered, shrugging.

“Mommy!” Via said angrily, turning to Isabel.

“I agree with Via,” said Isabel. “I don’t think we should use the word ‘maul’ for a dog...especially one that looks like this one.”

“Then we’ll just name her Darth,” Auggie insisted.

“That’s idiotic,” said Via.

“I think, since Mommy’s letting us keep the dog,” answered Nate, “she should be the one who decides what to name her.”

“Can we call her Daisy, Mommy?” asked Via.

“Can we call her Darth Maul?” asked Auggie.

Isabel gave Nate a look. “You really are killing me, Nate.”

Nate laughed.

And that was how they ended up calling her Darth Daisy.

7:11 a.m.

“How did she die?” I asked Mom. “Was she hit by a car?”

“No.” She stroked my arm. “She was old, sweetie. It was her time.”

“She wasn’t that old.”

“She was sick.”

“What, so they put her to sleep?” I asked, incensed. “How could they do that?”

“Sweetie, she was in pain,” she answered. “They didn’t want her to suffer. Isabel said that she died very peacefully in Nate’s arms.”

I tried to picture what that would look like, Daisy dying in Nate’s arms. I wondered if Auggie had been there, too.

“As if that family hasn’t been through enough already,” Mom added.

I didn’t say anything. I just blinked and looked up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. Some of them were coming unstuck, hanging on by just one or two points. A few had fallen down on me, like little pointy raindrops.

“You never fixed the stars, by the way,” I said without thinking.

She had no idea what I was talking about. “What?”

“You said you were going to glue them back on,” I said, pointing to the ceiling. “They keep falling down on me.”

She looked up. “Oh, right,” she said, nodding. I think she hadn’t expected the conversation about Daisy to be over so quickly. But I didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

She got up on top of my bed, took one of the lightsabers leaning on my bookcase, and tried to jam one of the larger stars back into place with the end of the lightsaber.

“They need to be glued, Lisa,” I said just as the plastic star fell down on her head.

“Right,” she answered, picking the star out of her hair. She jumped down off my bed. “Can you not call me Lisa, please?”

“Okay, Lisa,” I answered.

She rolled her eyes and pointed the lightsaber at me, like she was going to jab me.

“Thanks for waking me up with really bad news, by the way,” I said sarcastically.

“Hey, you’re the one who asked me about it,” she answered, putting the lightsaber back. “I was going to wait until this afternoon to tell you.”

“Why? I’m not a baby, Lisa,” I answered. “I mean, sure, I love Daisy, but it’s not like she was my dog. It’s not like I see her anymore.”

“I thought you’d be really upset,” she answered.

“I am!” I said. “I’m just not, like, going to start crying or anything.”

“Okay,” she answered, nodding and looking at me.

“What?” I said impatiently.

“Nothing,” she answered. “You’re right, you’re not a baby.” She looked at the plastic star that was still stuck on her thumb and then, without saying anything else, leaned down and stuck it on my forehead. “You should call Auggie this afternoon, by the way.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Why?” She raised her eyebrows. “To tell him how sorry you are about Daisy. To pay your condolences. Because he’s your best friend.”

“Oh, right,” I mumbled, nodding.

“Oh, right,” she repeated.

“Okay, Lisa. I get it!” I said.

“Grumpity grump grump,” she said on her way out. “You have three minutes, Chris. Then you’ve got to get up. I’ll turn on the shower for you.”

“Close the door behind you!” I called out after her.

“Please!” she yelled from the hallway.

“Close the door behind you, PLEASE!” I groaned.

She slammed the door shut.

She could be so annoying sometimes!

I picked the star off my forehead and looked at it. Mom had put those stars on the ceiling when we first moved in. That was back when she was trying to do everything she could to get me to like our new house in Bridgeport. She had even promised that we would get a dog after we got settled in. But we never got

a dog. We got a hamster. But that's hardly a dog. That's not even one quarter of a dog. A hamster is basically just a warm potato with fur. I mean, it moves and it's cute and all, but don't let anyone try to fool you that it's the same as a dog. I called my hamster Luke. But she's no Daisy.

Poor Daisy! It was hard to believe she was gone.

But I didn't want to think about her now.

I started thinking of all the things I had to do this afternoon. Band practice right after school. Study for the math test tomorrow. Start my book report for Friday. Play some *Halo*. Maybe catch up on *The Amazing Race* tonight.

I flicked the plastic star in the air and watched it spin across the room. It landed on the edge of my rug by the door.

Lots of stuff to do. It was going to be a long day.

But even as I was ticking off all the things I had to do today, I knew calling Auggie wasn't going to be one of them.

Friendships

I don't remember exactly when Zack and Alex stopped hanging out with me and Auggie. I think it was about the time we started kindergarten.

Before that, we all used to see each other almost every day. Our moms would usually bring us over to Auggie's house, since there were a lot of times when he couldn't go out because he was sick. Not a contagious kind of sick or anything, but the kind where he couldn't go outside. But we liked going to his house. His parents had turned their basement into a giant playroom. So, basically, it was like a toy store down there. Board games, train sets, air hockey and foosball tables, even a mini trampoline in the back. Zack and Alex and Auggie and I would literally spend hours running around down there, having all-day lightsaber duels and hop ball races. We would have balloon wars. We would pile cardboard bricks into giant mountains and play avalanche. Our moms called us the Four Musketeers, since we did everything together. And even after all the moms—except Isabel—went back to work, our babysitters got us together every day. They would take us on day trips to the Bronx Zoo, or to see the pirate ships at the South Street Seaport. We'd have picnics in the park. We even went all the way down to Coney Island a few times.

But once we started kindergarten, Zack and Alex started having playdates with other kids. They went to a different school than I did, since they lived on the other side of the park, so we didn't see them as much anymore. Auggie and I would bump into them in the park sometimes—Zack and Alex, hanging out with their new buddies—and we tried hanging out with them a couple of times. But their new friends didn't seem to like us. Okay, that's not exactly true. Their new friends didn't like *Auggie*. I know that for a fact, because Zack told me this. I remember telling this to my mom, and she explained that some kids might feel “uncomfortable” around Auggie because of the way he looks. That's how she put it. Uncomfortable. That's not how Zack and Alex had put it, though. They used the word “scared.”

But I knew that Zack and Alex weren't uncomfortable or scared of Auggie, so I didn't understand why *they* stopped hanging out with us. I mean, I had new

friends from my school, too, but I didn't stop hanging out with Auggie. Then again, I never hung out with Auggie and my new friends together, because, well, mixing friends can be a weird thing even under the best circumstances. I guess the truth is, I didn't want anyone to feel uncomfortable or scared, either.

Auggie had his own group of friends, too, by the way. These were kids who belonged to an organization for kids with "craniofacial differences," which is what Auggie has. Every year, all the kids and their families hang out together at Disneyland or some other fun place like that. Auggie loved going on these trips. He'd made friends all over the country. But these friends didn't live near us, so he hardly ever got to hang out with them.

I did meet one of his friends once, though. A kid named Hudson. He had a different syndrome than Auggie has. His eyes were spaced very far apart, and they kind of bulged out a bit. He and his parents were staying with Auggie's family for a couple of days while they were in the city meeting with doctors at Auggie's hospital. Hudson was the same age as me and Auggie. He was really into Pokémon, I remember.

Anyway, I had an okay time playing with him and Auggie that day, though Pokémon has never really been my thing. But then we all went out to dinner together—and that's when things got bad for me. I can't believe how much we got stared at! Like, usually when it was just me and Auggie, people would look at him and not even notice me. I was used to that. But with Hudson there, for some reason, it was just so much worse. People would look at Auggie first, and then they'd look at Hudson, and then they'd automatically look at me like they were wondering what was wrong with me, too. I saw one teenager staring at me like he was trying to figure out what was out of place on my face. It was so annoying! It made me want to scream. I couldn't wait to go home.

The next day, since I knew Hudson was still going to be there, I asked Lourdes if I could have a playdate over at Zack's house after school instead of going to Auggie's house. It's not that I didn't like Hudson, because I did. But I wasn't into Pokémon, and I definitely didn't want to get stared at again if we all went out somewhere.

I ended up having lots of fun at Zack's house. Alex came over, and the three of us played Four Square in front of his stoop. It really felt like old times again—except for the fact that Auggie wasn't there with us. But it was nice. No one stared at us. No one felt uncomfortable. No one got scared. Hanging out with Zack and Alex was just easy. That's when I realized why they didn't hang out

with us anymore. Being friends with Auggie could be hard sometimes.

Luckily, Auggie never asked me why I didn't come over to his house that day. I was glad about that. I didn't know how to tell him that being friends with him could be hard for me sometimes, too.

8:26 a.m.

I don't know why, but it's almost impossible for me to get to school on time. Honestly, I don't know why. Every day, it's the same thing. I sleep through my alarm. Mom or Dad wakes me up. Whether I take a shower or not, whether I have a big breakfast or a Pop-Tart, we end up scrambling before we leave, Mom or Dad yelling at me to hurry up and get my coat, hurry up and tie my shoelaces. And even in those rare moments when we do get out the door on time, I'll forget something, so we end up having to turn back anyway. Sometimes it's my homework folder I forget. Sometimes it's my trombone. I don't know why, I really don't. It's just the way it is. Whether I'm sleeping at my mom's house or my dad's house, I'm always running late.

Today, I took a quick shower, got dressed super fast, popped my Pop-Tart, and managed to get out the door on time. It wasn't until we had driven the fifteen minutes it takes to get to school and had pulled into the school parking lot that I realized I had forgotten my science paper, my gym shorts, *and* my trombone. A new record for forgetting things.

"You're kidding, right?" said Mom when I told her. She was looking at me in the rearview mirror.

"No!" I said, biting my nails nervously. "Can we go back?"

"Chris, you're already running late! In this rain, it'll take forty minutes by the time we got home and back. No. You go to class, and I'll write you a note or something."

"I can't show up without my science paper!" I argued. "I have science first period!"

"You should have thought of that before you left the house this morning!" she answered. "Now come on, get out or you'll be late on top of everything. Look, even the school buses are leaving!" She pointed to where the school buses had started driving out of the parking lot.

"Lisa!" I said, panicked.

"What, Chris?" she shot back. "What do you want me to do? I can't teleport."

“Can’t you go home and get them for me?”

She passed her fingers through her hair, which had gotten wet from the rain. “How many times have I told you to pack up your stuff the night before so you don’t forget anything, huh?”

“Lisa!”

“Fine,” she said. “Just go to class, and I’ll bring you your stuff. Now go, Chris.”

“But you have to hurry!”

“Go!” She turned around and gave me that look she gives me sometimes, when her eyeballs get super big and she kind of looks like an angry bird. “Get out of the car and go to school already!”

“Fine!” I said. I stomped out of the car. It had started raining harder, and of course I didn’t have an umbrella.

She lowered the driver’s side window. “Be careful walking to the sidewalk!”

“Trombone, science paper, gym shorts,” I said to her, counting on my fingers.

“Careful where you’re walking,” she said, nodding. “This is a parking lot, Chris!”

“Mrs. Kastor will deduct five points off my grade if I don’t hand my paper in by the end of first period!” I answered. “You have to be back before first period ends!”

“I know, Chris,” she answered quickly. “Now walk to the sidewalk, sweetie.”

“Trombone, science paper, gym shorts!” I said, walking backward toward the sidewalk.

“Watch where you’re walking, Chris!” she shrieked just as a bike swerved around to avoid hitting me.

“Sorry!” I said to the bicyclist, who had a baby bundled up in the front bike carrier. The guy shook his head and pedaled away.

“Chris! You have to watch where you’re going!” Mom screamed.

“Will you stop yelling?” I yelled.

She took a deep breath and rubbed her forehead. “Walk. To. The. Sidewalk. PLEASE.” This she said through gritted teeth.

I turned around, looked both ways in an exaggerated way, and crossed the parking lot to the path leading to the school entrance. By now, the last of the school buses was pulling out of the parking lot.

“Happy now?” I said when I reached the sidewalk.

I could hear her sighing from twenty feet away. “I’ll leave your stuff at the front desk in the main office,” she answered, turning on the ignition and looking behind her as she started slowly backing out of the parking space. “Bye, honey. Have a nice—”

“Wait!” I ran over to the car while it was still moving.

The car screeched to a stop. “Chris!”

“I forgot my backpack,” I said, opening the car door to get the backpack that I had left in the backseat. I could see her shaking her head out of the corner of my eye.

I closed the door, looked both ways in a super-obvious way again, and sprinted back toward the sidewalk. By now, the rain was coming down really hard. I pulled my hood over my head.

“Trombone! Science paper! Gym shorts!” I shouted, not looking back at her. I started jogging up the sidewalk to the school entrance.

“Love you!” I heard her call out.

“Bye, Lisa!”

I made it inside just before first bell rang.

9:14 a.m.

I kept looking at the clock all through science class. Then, about ten minutes before the bell, I asked for the bathroom pass. I ran over to the main office as fast as I could and asked Ms. Denis, the nice old lady behind the main desk, for the stuff my mother had dropped off.

“Sorry, Christopher,” she said. “Your mother hasn’t dropped anything off.”

“What?” I said.

“Was she supposed to come at a certain time?” she asked, looking at her watch. “I’ve been here all morning. I’m sure I haven’t missed her.”

She must have seen the expression on my face, because she waved me to come to the other side of her desk. She pointed to the phone. “Why don’t you give her a call, honey?”

I called Mom’s cell phone and got her voice mail.

“Hi, Mom. It’s me and...um, you’re not here and it’s...” I looked at the big clock on the wall. “It’s nine-fourteen. I’m totally screwed if you don’t show up in the next ten minutes, so, yeah. Thanks a lot, Lisa.”

I hung up.

“I’m sure she’ll be here any minute now,” said Ms. Denis. “There’s a lot of traffic on the highway because of all the construction. And it’s really pouring outside now...”

“Yeah.” I nodded and headed back to class.

At first, I thought maybe I’d gotten lucky. Mrs. Kastor didn’t mention anything about the paper for the rest of the class. Then, just as the bell rang, she reminded us to drop off our science papers at her desk on the way out.

I waited until everyone else had left and walked over to her at the whiteboard.

“Um, Mrs. Kastor?” I said.

“Yes, Christopher?”

“Yeah, um, sorry, but I left my science paper at home this morning?”

She continued erasing the whiteboard.

“My mom’s bringing it to school, but she got caught in the rain?” I said.

I don’t know why, but when I talk to teachers and get a little nervous, my voice goes up at the end of every sentence.

“That’s the fourth time this semester you’ve forgotten an assignment, Christopher,” she said.

“I know,” I answered. Then I raised my shoulders and smiled. “But I didn’t know *you* knew! Ha.”

She didn’t even crack a smile at my attempt at humor.

“I just meant I didn’t know you were keeping track...,” I started to say.

“It’s five points off, Chris,” she said.

“Even if I get it to you next period?” I know I sounded whiny at this point.

“Rules are rules.”

“So unfair,” I muttered under my breath, shaking my head.

The second bell rang, and I ran to my next class before she could respond.

10:05 a.m.

Mr. Wren, my music teacher, was just as annoyed at me for forgetting my trombone as Mrs. Kastor had been about my science paper. For one thing, I had told Mr. Wren that Katie McAnn, the first trombonist, could take my trombone home today to practice her solo for the spring concert on Wednesday night. Katie's trombone was getting repaired, and the only other spare trombone was so banged up, you couldn't even push the slide past fourth position. So not only was Mr. Wren angry, but Katie was, too. And Katie is the kind of girl you don't want getting mad at you. She's a head taller than everyone else, and she gives really scary dirty looks to people she's mad at.

Anyway, I told Katie that my mom was on her way back to school with my trombone, so she didn't give me the dirty look right away. Mr. Wren gave her the dented trombone to use during class, so she didn't even have to sit out of music. When people forget their instruments, Mr. Wren usually makes them sit quietly off to the side and watch the orchestra rehearse. You're not allowed to read anything, or do homework. You just have to sit and listen to the orchestra rehearse. Not exactly the most thrilling experience in the world. I, of course, did have to sit music out today, since there was no trombone left for me to play.

During break, I ran over to the main office to pick up the stuff Mom should have dropped off by now. But she still hadn't shown up.

"I'm sure she just got stuck in traffic," offered Ms. Denis.

I shook my head. "No, I think I know what happened," I answered grumpily.

It had occurred to me while I was watching the band rehearse.

Isabel.

Duh, of course! Daisy just died. Something else must have happened. Maybe something to do with Auggie. And Isabel called Mom. And Mom, like she always does, dropped whatever she was doing to go help the Pullmans.

For all I knew, she was probably at the Pullman house right now! I bet she'd been on her way back to school with my trombone, science paper, and gym shorts in the backseat of the car when Isabel called, and bam, Mom completely forgot about me. Duh, of course that's what happened! It wouldn't be the first

time, either.

“You want to call her again?” said Ms. Denis sweetly, handing me the phone.

“No thanks,” I mumbled.

Katie came over to me when I got back to music class.

“Where’s the trombone?” she said. Her eyebrows were practically touching in the middle of her forehead. “You said your mom was bringing it!”

“She’s stuck in traffic?” I said apologetically. “She’ll have it when she picks me up from school today, though?” I guess Katie made me as nervous as teachers did. “Can you meet me after school at five-thirty?”

“Why would I want to wait around till five-thirty?” she answered, making a clucking sound with her tongue. She gave me the same look she gave me when I accidentally emptied my spit valve in her Dixie cup a few weeks ago. “Gee, thanks, Chris! Now I’m going to totally mess up my solo at the spring concert. And it’s totally going to be your fault!”

“It’s not my fault?” I said. “My mother was supposed to bring me my stuff?”

“You’re such a...moron,” she mumbled.

“No, you are” was my brilliant comeback.

“Your ears stick out.” She made both her hands into little fists and walked away with her arms straight at her sides.

“Ugh!” I answered her, rolling my eyes.

And for the rest of the class, she shot me the dirtiest looks you can imagine over her music stand. If looks really could kill, Katie McAnn would be a serial murderer.

All of this could have been avoided if Mom hadn’t abandoned me today! I was so mad at her for that. Boy, was she going to be sorry tonight. I could picture it already, how she would pick me up after school and be all, “I’m so sorry, honey! I had to drive over to the Pullmans’, because they needed help with yadda yadda yadda.”

And I would be like, “Yadda yadda yadda.”

And she would be like, “Come on, honey. You know they need our help sometimes.”

“Yadda! Yadda! Yadda!”

Space

When Auggie turned five, someone gave him an astronaut helmet as a birthday present. I don't remember who. But Auggie started wearing that helmet all the time. Everywhere. Every day. I know people thought it was because he wanted to cover his face—and maybe part of it was that. But I think it was more because Auggie really loved outer space. Stars and planets. Black holes. Anything to do with the Apollo missions. He started telling everyone he was going to be an astronaut when he grew up. In the beginning, I didn't get why he was so obsessed with this stuff. But then one weekend, our moms took us to the planetarium at the natural history museum—and that's when I got sucked into it, too. That was the beginning of what we called our space phase.

Auggie and I had gone through a lot of phases by then. ZoobiePlushies. PopBopBots. Dinosaurs. Ninjas. Power Rangers (I'm embarrassed to say). But, until then, nothing had been as intense as our space phase. We watched every DVD we could find about the universe. Space videos. Picture books about the Milky Way. Making 3-D solar systems. Building model rocket ships. We would spend hours playing pretend games about missions to deep space, or landing on Pluto. That became our favorite planet to travel to. Pluto was our Tatooine.

We were still deep into our space phase when my sixth birthday rolled around, so my parents decided to have my party at the planetarium. Auggie and I were so excited! The new space show had just come out, and we hadn't seen it yet. I invited my entire first grade class. And Zack and Alex, of course. I even invited Via, but she couldn't come because she had a different birthday party to go to that same day.

But then, the morning of my birthday, Isabel called Mom and told her that she and Nate had to take Auggie to the hospital. He had woken up with a high fever, and his eyelids were swollen shut. A few days before, he had had a "minor" surgery to correct a previous surgery to make his lower eyelids less droopy, and now it had become infected. So Auggie had to go to the hospital instead of going to my sixth birthday party.

I was so bummed! But I got even more bummed when Mom told me that

Isabel had asked her if she would be able to drop Via off at the other birthday party before going to my party.

Before even checking with me first, Mom had said, “Yes, of course, whatever we can do to help!” Even though that meant that she might end up being a little late to *my* birthday party!

“But why can’t Nate drop Via off at the other party?” I asked Mom.

“Because he’s driving Auggie to the hospital, along with Isabel,” Mom answered. “It’s not a big deal, Chris. I’ll take Via in a taxi and then hop on a train.”

“But can’t someone else take Via? Why does it have to be you?”

“Isabel doesn’t have the time to start calling other moms, Chris! So if we don’t take Via, she’ll have to just go with them to the hospital. Poor Via is always missing out—”

“Mommy!” I interrupted. “I don’t care about Via! I don’t want you to be late to my birthday party!”

“Chris, what do you want me to say?” Mom answered. “They’re our friends. Isabel is my good friend, just like Auggie is your good friend. And when good friends need us, we do what we can to help them, right? We can’t just be friends when it’s convenient. Good friendships are worth a little extra effort!”

When I didn’t say anything, she kissed my hand.

“I promise I’ll only be a few minutes late,” she said.

But she wasn’t just a few minutes late. She ended up being more than an hour late.

“I’m so sorry, honey.... The A train was out of service.... No taxis anywhere...So sorry...”

I knew she felt terrible. But I was so angry. I remember even Dad was annoyed.

She was so late, she even missed the space show.

3:50 p.m.

The rest of the day ended up being pretty much as bad as the beginning of the day. I had to sit out of gym, because I didn't have my gym shorts and I didn't have a spare set in my locker. Katie McAnn's entire table kept shooting me dirty looks at lunch. I don't even remember my other classes. Then math was the last class of the day. I knew we were having a big math test tomorrow, which I hadn't studied for over the weekend like I was supposed to. But it wasn't until Ms. Medina started going over the material for tomorrow's test that I realized I was in deep trouble. I didn't understand what the heck we were doing. I mean, seriously, it was like Ms. Medina was suddenly talking in a made-up language that everyone else in class seemed to understand but me. *Gadda badda quotient. Patta beeboo divisor.* At the end of class, she offered to meet with any kids who needed a little extra help studying right after school. *Um, that would be me, thank you!* But I had band practice then, so I couldn't go.

I raced down to the auditorium right after dismissal. The after-school rock band meets every Monday and Tuesday afternoon. I had only joined a few months ago, at the beginning of the spring semester, but I was really into it. I'd been taking guitar lessons since last summer, and my dad, who's a really good guitar player, had been teaching me all these great guitar licks. So when *Santa* gave me an electric guitar for Christmas, I figured I was ready to join the after-school rock band. I was a little nervous in the beginning. I knew the three guys who were already in the band were really good musicians. But then I found out there was a fourth grader named John who was also joining the band in the spring semester, so I knew I wouldn't be the only new kid. John played guitar, too. He wore John Lennon glasses.

The other three guys in the band were Ennio, who plays the drums and is considered to be this prodigy drummer, Harry on lead guitar, and Elijah on bass guitar. Elijah's also the lead singer, and he's kind of the leader of the band. The three of them are all in the sixth grade. They've been in the after-school rock band since they were in the fourth grade, so they're a pretty tight group.

I can't say they were thrilled when John and I first joined the band. Not that

they weren't *nice*, but they weren't *nice* nice. They didn't treat us like we were equal members of the band. It was pretty obvious that they didn't think we played as well as they did—and, to be truthful, we really didn't. But still, we were trying really hard to get better.

“So, Mr. B,” Elijah said after we had all jammed on our own a bit. “We’re thinking we want to play ‘Seven Nation Army’ for the spring concert on Wednesday.”

Mr. Bowles was the after-school rock band adviser. He had gray hair that he kept in a ponytail, and had been a member of a famous folk-rock band in the '80s that my dad, for one, had never heard of. But Mr. Bowles was super nice, and he was always trying to get the other guys to include me and John. This, of course, just got the other guys even more annoyed at us. And it also made them really dislike Mr. Bowles. They made fun of the way he sometimes talked with his eyes closed. They made fun of his ponytail and his taste in music.

“‘Seven Nation Army’?” answered Mr. Bowles, like he was impressed by the song choice. “That’s an awesome song, Elijah.”

“Is that by Europe, too?” John asked, since we’d all agreed a few weeks ago—after much arguing—to play “The Final Countdown” by Europe at the spring concert.

Elijah snickered and made a face. “Dude,” he answered, not looking at John or me. “It’s the White Stripes.”

Elijah had long blond hair that he was really good at talking through.

“Never heard of them!” John said cheerfully, which I wished he hadn’t said. Truth is, I hadn’t heard of them, either, but I knew enough to pretend I knew them—at least until I could download the song tonight. John wasn’t so great at the social stuff that goes on inside a rock band. Lots of group dynamic stuff to sort out. You have to kind of just nod and go along if you want to fit in. Then again, John wasn’t very good at fitting in that way.

Elijah laughed and turned around to tune his guitar.

John looked at me over his little round glasses and made an “Is it me, or are they crazy?” face.

I shrugged in response.

John and I had become our own little group inside this rock band. We hung out together during breaks and made jokes, especially since the other three guys hung out together and made their own jokes. Every Thursday after school, I’d go

over to John's house and we'd practice together, or we'd listen to some classic rock songs so we could sound like we knew as much about rock music as the other guys. And then we'd make suggestions about what songs we could play. So far, we had suggested "Yellow Submarine" and "Eye of the Tiger." But Elijah, Harry, and Ennio had nixed them both.

That was fine, though, because I was really into "The Final Countdown," which had been Mr. Bowles's suggestion. *It's the final countdown!*

"I don't know, guys," Mr. Bowles said. "I'm not sure there's going to be enough time between today and Wednesday to learn a brand-new song. Maybe we should stick to 'The Final Countdown' for now?" He played the opening notes of that song on the keyboard, and John started bopping his head.

Then Elijah started playing a great riff on his bass, which turned out to be the opening of "Seven Nation Army." As if on cue, Harry and Ennio started playing, too. It was pretty obvious that they had practiced the song a lot of times before today. I have to say, they sounded amazing.

Somewhere in the second chorus, Mr. Bowles put his hand up for them to stop jamming.

"Okay, dudes," he said, nodding. "You're sounding absolutely awesome. Killer bass, Elijah. But everyone's got to be able to play the song for the spring concert, right? These two dudes need a chance to learn the song, too." He pointed at me and John.

"But it's just basic chords!" said Elijah. "Like C and G! B. D. You do know D, right?" He looked at us like we were an alien species. "You seriously can't do that?"

"I can do that," I answered quickly, forming the chords with my fingers.

"I hate the B chord!" said John.

"It's so easy!" said Elijah.

"But what about 'The Final Countdown'?" John whined. "I've been practicing that for weeks!"

He started playing the same opening part that Mr. B had just played, but he honestly didn't sound that good.

"Dude, that was awesome!" said Mr. B, high-fiving John.

I noticed Elijah smiled at Harry, who looked down like he was trying not to laugh.

"Guys, we have to be fair here," said Mr. B to Elijah.

“Here’s the thing,” answered Elijah. “We can only play one song at the spring concert, and we want it to be ‘Seven Nation Army.’ Majority rules.”

“But it’s not what we *said* we were going to play!” yelled John. “It’s not fair that you guys agreed to play ‘The Final Countdown,’ and me and Chris have spent a lot of time learning it....”

I have to admit, John had guts talking back to a sixth grader like that.

“Sorry, dude,” said Elijah, fiddling with his amp. But he didn’t seem sorry.

“Okay, let’s settle down, guys,” said Mr. B with his eyes closed.

“Mr. B?” said Ennio, holding up his hand like he was in class. “The thing is, this is going to be our last spring concert before the three of us graduate.” He pointed his drumstick at Harry and Elijah and himself.

“Yeah, we’re going to middle school next year!” agreed Elijah.

“We want to play a song that we feel really good about,” Ennio finished. “‘The Final Countdown’ doesn’t represent us musically.”

“But that’s not fair!” said John. “This is an after-school rock band. Not just *your* band! You can’t just do that!”

“Dude, you can play whatever you want next year,” Elijah answered. He looked like he wanted to flick John’s glasses off his face. “You can play ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ for all I care.”

This made the other guys laugh.

Mr. Bowles finally opened his eyes. “Okay, guys, enough,” he said, holding up his hands. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Let’s see how well you two pick up ‘Seven Nation Army’ today and tomorrow.” He said this while pointing at me and John. “We’ll practice it a little today. We’ll also tighten up ‘The Final Countdown.’ Then, tomorrow, we’ll see which song sounds better. But I’m going to be the one to make the final decision which song we play, okay? Sound good?”

John nodded yes eagerly, but Elijah rolled his eyes.

“So, let’s start with ‘The Final Countdown,’ ” said Mr. Bowles. He clapped his hands twice. “From the beginning. Let’s go, guys. ‘The Final Countdown’! From the top. Ennio, wake up! Harry! Elijah, get us going, man! On four. A one. Two. Three...”

We played the song. Even though Elijah and the other guys weren’t into it, they totally rocked it. In fact, we sounded pretty amazing together, I thought.

“That sounded awesome!” said John when it was over. He held his hand in the

air to high-five me, which I did a little reluctantly.

“Whatever,” said Elijah, shaking his hair off his face.

We spent the rest of the class running through “Seven Nation Army.” But John kept making mistakes and asking us to start over. It didn’t sound good at all.

“You guys sound terrific!” said John’s mother, who had just come in the band room. She tried to clap while holding her wet umbrella.

Mr. B looked at his watch. “Whoa, it’s five-thirty? Oh man! Dudes, I’ve got a gig tonight. We have to wrap this up. Let’s go. Everything in the lock room.”

I started putting my guitar in the case.

“Step on it, guys!” said Mr. B, putting the mics away.

We all hurried up and put our instruments in the lock room.

“See you tomorrow, Mr. B!” said John, who was the first to be ready to leave. “Bye, Elijah, bye, Ennio, bye, Harry!” He waved at them. “See you tomorrow!”

I saw the three of them shoot each other looks, but they nodded goodbye to John.

“Bye, Chris!” John said loudly from the door.

“Bye,” I mumbled. I liked the guy, I really did. One on one he was awesome. But he could be so clueless, too. It was like being friends with SpongeBob.

After John and his mother had left, Elijah went up to Mr. Bowles, who was wrapping up the mic cords.

“Mr. B,” he said, ultra politely. “Can we please play ‘Seven Nation Army’ on Wednesday night?”

At that moment, Ennio’s mom arrived to pick up the three of them.

“We’ll see tomorrow, dude,” Mr. Bowles answered distractedly, throwing the last of the equipment into the lock room.

“Yeah, you’re just gonna choose ‘The Final Countdown,’ ” said Elijah, and then he walked out the door.

“Bye, guys,” I said to Harry and Ennio as they followed Elijah out.

“Bye, dude,” they both said to me.

Mr. B turned the key in the lock room. Then he looked at me, like he was surprised I was still there.

“Where’s your mom?”

“I guess she’s running late.”

“Don’t you have a cell phone?”

I nodded, fished my phone out of my backpack, and turned it on. There were no texts or missed calls from Mom.

“Just call her!” he said after a few minutes. “I’ve got to get out of here, dude.”

5:48 p.m.

Just as I was about to call, my dad knocked on the band room door. I was totally surprised. He's never picked me up from school on a Monday before.

"Dad!" I said.

He smiled and walked in. "Sorry I'm late," he said, shaking out his umbrella.

"This is Mr. Bowles," I said to him.

"Nice to meet you!" said Mr. B quickly, but he'd already started out the door. "Sorry, I can't stay and chat. You've got a nice kid there!" Then he left.

"Don't forget to lock the door behind you, Chris!" he yelled out a second later from down the hallway.

"I will!" I said, loud enough for him to hear me.

I turned to Dad. "What are you doing here?"

"Mom asked me to get you," he answered, picking up my backpack.

"Let me guess," I said sarcastically, putting on my jacket. "She went to Auggie's house today, right?"

Dad looked surprised. "No," he said. "Everything is fine, Chris. Pull your hood up—it's raining hard." We started walking out the door.

"Then where is she? Why didn't she bring me my stuff?" I said angrily.

He put his hand on my shoulder as we kept walking. "I don't want you to worry at all, but...Mommy got in a little car accident today."

I stopped walking. "What?"

"She's totally fine," he said, squeezing my shoulder. "Nothing to worry about. Promise." He motioned for me to keep walking.

"So, where is she?" I asked.

"She's still in the hospital."

"Hospital?" I yelled. Once again, I stopped walking.

"Chris, she's fine, I promise," he answered, pulling me by the elbow. "She broke her leg, though. She has a huge cast."

"Seriously?"

“Yes.” He held the exit door open for me while opening his umbrella. “Pull your hood up, Chris.”

I pulled my hood over my head as we hurried across the parking lot. It was really pouring. “Was she hit by a car?”

“No, she was driving,” he answered. “Apparently, the rain caused some flooding on the parkway, and a construction truck hit a ditch, and Mom swerved to avoid hitting it but then got sideswiped by the car in the left lane. The woman in the other car was fine, too. Mommy’s fine. Her leg will be fine. Everyone is fine, thank God.”

He stopped at a red hatchback I had never seen before.

“Is this new?” I said, confused.

“It’s a rental,” he answered quickly. “Mom’s car got totaled. Come on, get in.”

I got into the backseat. By now my sneakers were soaking wet. “Where’s your car?”

“I went to the hospital straight from the train station,” he answered.

“We should sue whoever was driving that construction truck,” I said, putting my seat belt on.

“It was a freak accident,” he muttered. He started driving out of the parking lot.

“When did it happen?” I asked.

“This morning.”

“What time this morning?”

“I don’t know. About nine? I had just gotten to work when they called me from the hospital.”

“Wait, did the person who called you know that you and Mom are getting a divorce?”

He looked at me in the rearview mirror. “Chris,” he said. “Your mom and I will always be there for one another. You know that.”

“Right,” I said, shrugging.

I looked out the window. It was that time of day when the sun’s gone down but the streetlights haven’t come on yet. The streets were black and shiny because of the rain. You could see the reflections of all the red and white lights of the cars in the puddles along the highway.

I pictured Mom driving in the rain this morning. Did it happen right after she dropped me off, or when she was driving back to school with my stuff?

“Why did you think she was on her way to Auggie’s house?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered, still looking out the window. “Because Daisy died. I thought maybe—”

“Daisy died?” he said. “Oh no, I didn’t know that. When did that happen?”

“They put her to sleep last night.”

“Had she been sick?”

“Dad, I don’t know any details!”

“Okay, don’t bite my head off.”

“It’s just...I wish you had told me about the accident earlier in the day! Someone should have told me.”

Dad looked at me in the rearview mirror again. “There was no need to alarm you, Chris. Everything was under control. There was nothing you could have done anyway.”

“I was waiting for Mom to come back with my stuff all morning!” I said, crossing my arms.

“It was a crazy day for all of us, Chris,” he answered. “I spent the day dealing with accident reports and insurance forms, rental cars, going back and forth to the hospital....”

“I could have gone to the hospital with you,” I said.

“Well, you’re in luck,” he said, drumming the steering wheel. “Because that’s where we’re going right now.”

“Wait, we’re going to the hospital?” I said.

“Mom just got discharged, so we’re picking her up.” He looked at me in the mirror again, but I looked away. “Isn’t that great?”

“Yeah.”

We drove quietly for a few seconds. The rain was coming down in sheets. Dad made the windshield wipers go faster. I leaned my head against the window.

“This day sucked,” I said quietly. I blew some hot air on the window and drew a sad face with my finger.

“You okay, Chris?”

“Yes,” I mumbled. “I hate hospitals, that’s all.”

The Hospital Visit

The first and only time I'd ever been to a hospital before was to visit Auggie. This was when we were about six years old. Auggie had had like a million surgeries before then, but this was the first time my mom thought I was old enough to go and visit him.

The surgery had been to remove the "buttonhole" on his neck. This is what he used to call his trach tube, a little plastic thingy that was literally inserted into his neck below his Adam's apple. The "buttonhole" is what the doctors put inside Auggie when he was born to allow him to breathe. The doctors were removing it now, because they were pretty sure Auggie could breathe on his own.

Auggie was really excited about this surgery. He hated his buttonhole. And when I say he hated it, I mean he *haaaated* it. He hated that it was so noticeable, since he wasn't allowed to cover it up. He hated that he couldn't go swimming in a pool because of it. Most of all, he hated how sometimes it would get blocked up, for no reason, and he would start to cough like he was choking, like he couldn't breathe. Then Isabel or Nate would have to jab a tube into the hole, to suction it, so that he could breathe again. I watched this happen a couple of times, and it was pretty scary.

I remember I was really happy about visiting Auggie after his surgery. The hospital was downtown, and Mom surprised me by stopping off at FAO Schwarz so I could pick out a nice big present to bring to Auggie (a Star Wars Lego set) and a small present for me (an Ewok plushie). After we bought the toys, Mom and I got lunch at my favorite restaurant, which makes the best foot-long hot dogs and iced hot chocolate milk shakes on the planet.

And then, after lunch, we went to the hospital.

"Chris, there are going to be other kids who are having facial surgeries," Mom told me quietly as we walked through the hospital doors. "Like Auggie's friend Hudson, okay? Remember not to stare."

"I would never stare!" I answered. "I hate when kids stare at Auggie, Mommy."

As we walked down the hall to Auggie's room, I remember seeing lots of

balloons everywhere, and posters of Disney princesses and superheroes taped to the hallway walls. I thought it was cool. It felt like a giant birthday party.

I peeked into some of the hospital rooms as we passed, and that's when I realized what my mom meant. These were kids like Auggie. Not that they looked like him, though a couple of them did, but they had other facial differences. Some of them had bandages on their faces. One girl, I saw quickly, had a huge lump on her cheek that was the size of a lemon.

I squeezed my mom's hand and remembered not to stare, so I looked down at my feet as we walked and held on tight to my Ewok plushie.

When we reached Auggie's room, I was glad to see that Isabel and Via were already there. They both came over to the door when they saw us and kissed us hello happily.

They walked us over to Auggie, who was in the bed by the window. As we passed the bed closest to the door, I got the impression that Isabel was trying to block me from looking at the kid lying in that bed. So I took a quick peek behind me after we had passed. The boy in the bed, who was probably only about four, was watching me. Under his nose, where the top of his mouth was supposed to be, was an enormous red hole, and inside the hole was what looked like a piece of raw meat. There seemed to be teeth stuck into the meat, and pieces of jagged skin hanging over the hole. I looked away as quickly as I could.

Auggie was asleep. He seemed so tiny in the big hospital bed! His neck was wrapped up in white gauze, and there was blood on the gauze. He had some tubes sticking out of his arm, and one sticking into his nose. His mouth was wide open, and his tongue was kind of hanging out of his mouth onto his chin. It looked a little yellow and was all dried up. I've seen Auggie asleep before, but I'd never seen him sleep like that before.

I heard my mom and Isabel talking about the surgery in their quiet voices, which they used when they didn't want me or Auggie to hear what they were saying. Something about "complications" and how it had been "touch and go" for a while. My mom hugged Isabel. I stopped listening.

I stared at Auggie, wishing he would close his mouth in his sleep.

Via came over and stood next to me. She was about ten years old then. "It was nice of you to come visit Auggie," she said.

I nodded. "Is he going to die?" I whispered.

"No," she whispered back.

“Why is he bleeding?” I asked.

“It’s where they operated on him,” she answered. “It’ll heal.”

I nodded. “Why is his mouth open?”

“He can’t help it.”

“What’s wrong with the little boy in the other bed?”

“He’s from Bangladesh. He has a cleft lip and palate. His parents sent him here to have surgery. He doesn’t speak any English.”

I thought of the big empty red hole on the boy’s face. The jagged flap of skin.

“Are you okay, Chris?” Via asked gently, nudging me. “Lisa? Lisa, I don’t think Chris is looking so good....”

That’s when the foot-long hot dog and iced hot chocolate milk shake kind of just exploded out of me. I threw up all over myself, the giant Lego box I’d gotten for Auggie, and most of the floor in front of his bed.

“Oh my goodness!” cried Mom as she looked around for paper towels. “Oh, sweetie!”

Isabel found a towel and started cleaning me with it. My mom, meanwhile, was frantically wiping the floor with a newspaper.

“No, Lisa! Don’t worry about that,” said Isabel. “Via, sweetie, go find a nurse and tell her we need a cleanup here.” She said this as she was picking hot dog chunks off my chin.

Via, who looked like she might throw up herself, turned around calmly and headed out the door. Within a few minutes, some nurses had come into the room with mops and buckets.

“Can we go home, Mommy?” I remember saying, the vomit taste still fresh in my mouth.

“Yes, honey,” said Mom, taking over for Isabel and cleaning me off.

“I’m so sorry, Lisa,” said Isabel, wetting another towel at the sink. She dabbed my face with it.

By now, I was sweating profusely. I turned to leave even before Mom and Isabel had finished cleaning me off. But then I accidentally caught a glimpse of the little boy in the bed, who was still looking at me. I started to cry when I looked into the big empty red hole above his mouth.

At that point, Mom kind of hugged me and glided me out the door at the same time. When we got outside the room, she half carried me to the lobby by the

elevators. My face was buried in her coat, and I was crying hysterically.

Isabel and Via followed us out.

“I’m so sorry,” Isabel said to us.

“I’m so sorry,” said Mom. They were both kind of mumbling sorries to each other at the same time. “Please tell Auggie we’re sorry we couldn’t stay.”

“Of course,” said Isabel. She knelt down in front of me and started wiping my tears. “Are you okay, honey? I’m so sorry. I know it’s a lot to process.”

I shook my head. “It’s not Auggie,” I tried to say.

Her eyes got very wet suddenly. “I know,” she whispered. Then she put both her hands on my face, like she was cradling it. “Auggie’s lucky to have a friend like you.”

The elevator came, Isabel hugged me and Mom, and then we got inside the elevator.

I saw Via waving at me as the elevator doors closed. Even though I was only six at the time, I remember thinking I felt sorry for her that she couldn’t leave with us.

As soon as we were outside, Mom sat me down on a bench and hugged me for a long time. She didn’t say anything. She just kissed the top of my head over and over again.

When I finally calmed down, I handed her the Ewok.

“Can you go back and give it to him?” I said.

“Oh, honey,” she answered. “That’s so sweet of you. But Isabel can clean the Lego set. It’ll be good as new for Auggie, don’t worry.”

“No, for the other kid,” I answered.

She looked at me a second, like she didn’t know what to say.

“Via said he doesn’t speak any English,” I said. “It must be really scary for him, being in the hospital.”

She nodded slowly. “Yeah,” she whispered. “It must be.”

She closed her eyes and hugged me again. And then she took me over to the security desk, where I waited until she went back up the elevator and, after about five minutes, came back down again.

“Did he like it?” I asked.

“Honeyboy,” she said softly, brushing the hair out of my eyes. “You made his day.”

7:04 p.m.

When we got to Mom's hospital room, we found her sitting up in a wheelchair watching TV. She had a huge cast that started from her thigh and went all the way down to her ankle.

"There's my guy!" she said happily as soon as she saw me. She held her arms out to me, and I went over and hugged her. I was relieved to see that Daddy had told the truth: except for the cast and a couple of scratches on her face, Mom looked totally fine. She was dressed and ready to go.

"How are you feeling, Lisa?" said Dad, leaning over and kissing her cheek.

"Much better," she answered, clicking off the TV set. She smiled at us. "Totally ready to go home."

"We got you these," I said, giving her the vase of flowers we had bought downstairs in the gift store.

"Thank you, sweetie!" she said, kissing me. "They're so pretty!"

I looked down at her cast. "Does it hurt?" I asked her.

"Not too much," she answered quickly.

"Mommy's very brave," said Dad.

"What I am is very lucky," Mom said, knocking the side of her head.

"We're all very lucky," added Dad quietly. He reached over and squeezed Mom's hand.

For a few seconds, no one said anything.

"So, do you need to sign any discharge papers or anything?" asked Dad.

"All done," she answered. "I'm ready to go home."

Dad got behind the wheelchair.

"Wait, can I push her?" I said to Dad, grabbing one of the handles.

"Let me just get her out the door here," answered Dad. "It's a little hard to maneuver with her leg."

"How was your day, Chris?" asked Mom as we wheeled her into the hallway.

I thought about what an awful day it had been. All of it, from beginning to

end. Science, music, math, rock band. Worst day ever.

“Fine,” I answered.

“How was band practice? Is Elijah being any nicer these days?” she asked.

“It was good. He’s fine.” I shrugged.

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring your stuff,” she said, stroking my arm. “You must have been wondering what happened to me!”

“I figured you were running errands,” I answered.

“He thought you went to Isabel’s house,” laughed Dad.

“I did not!” I said to him.

We had reached the nurses’ station and Mom was saying goodbye to the nurses, who were waving back, so she didn’t really hear what Dad had said.

“Didn’t you ask me if Mom had gone to—” Dad said to me, confused.

“Anyway!” I interrupted, turning to Mom. “Band was fine. We’re playing ‘Seven Nation Army’ for the spring concert on Wednesday. Can you still come?”

“Of course I can!” she answered. “I thought you were playing ‘The Final Countdown.’”

“‘Seven Nation Army’ is a great song,” said Dad. He started humming the bass line and playing air guitar as we waited for the elevator.

Mom smiled at him. “I remember you playing that at the Parlor.”

“What’s the Parlor?” I asked.

“The pub down the road from our dorm,” answered Mom.

“Before you were born, buddy,” said Dad.

The elevator doors opened, and we got in.

“I’m starving,” I said.

“You guys haven’t eaten dinner yet?” Mom asked, looking at Dad.

“We came straight here from school,” he answered. “When were we going to stop for dinner?”

“Can we stop for some McDonald’s on the way home?” I asked.

“Sounds good to me,” answered Dad.

We reached the lobby, and the elevator doors opened.

“Now can I push the wheelchair?” I said.

“Yep,” he answered. “You guys wait for me over there, okay?” He pointed to

the farthest exit on the left. "I'll pull the car around."

He jogged out the front entrance toward the parking lot. I pushed Mom's wheelchair to where he'd pointed.

"I can't believe it's still raining," said Mom, looking out the lobby windows.

"I bet you could pop a wheelie on this thing!" I said.

"Hey, hey! No!" Mom screamed, squeezed the sides of the wheelchair as I tilted it backward. "Chris! I've had enough excitement for the day."

I put the wheelchair down. "Sorry, Mom." I patted her head.

She rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hand. "Sorry, it's just been a really long day."

"Did you know that a day on Pluto is 153.3 hours long?" I asked.

"No, I didn't know that."

We didn't say anything for a few minutes.

"Hey, did you give Auggie a call, by the way?" she said out of the blue.

"Mom," I groaned, shaking my head.

"What?" she said. She tried to turn around in her wheelchair to look at me. "I don't get it, Chris. Did you and Auggie have a fight or something?"

"No! There's just so much going on right now."

"Chris..." She sighed, but she sounded too tired to say anything else about it.

I started humming the bass line of "Seven Nation Army."

After a few minutes, the red hatchback pulled up in front of the exit, and Dad came jogging out of the car, holding an open umbrella. I pushed Mom outside the front doors. Dad gave her the umbrella to hold, and then he pushed her down the wheelchair ramp and around to the passenger side of the car. The wind was picking up now, and the umbrella Mom was holding went inside out after a strong gust.

"Chris, get inside!" said Dad. He started picking Mom up under her arms to transfer her to the front seat of the car.

"Kind of nice being waited on," Mom joked. But I could tell she was in pain.

"Worth a broken femur?" Dad joked back, out of breath.

"What's a femur?" I asked, scooching into the backseat.

"The thighbone," answered Dad. He was soaking wet by now as he tried to help Mom find her seat belt.

“Sounds like an animal,” I answered. “Lions and tigers and femurs.”

Mom tried to laugh at my joke, but she was sweating.

Dad hurried around to the back of the car and spent a few minutes trying to figure out how to fold the wheelchair to get it inside. Then he came around to the driver’s seat, sat down, and closed the door. We all kind of sat there quietly for a second, the wind and rain howling outside the windows. Then Dad started the car. We were all soaking wet.

“Mommy,” I said after we’d been driving a few minutes, “when you got in the accident this morning, were you on your way home after dropping me off? Or were you driving back to school with my stuff?”

Mom took a second to answer. “It’s actually kind of a blur, honey,” she answered, reaching her arm behind her so that I would take her hand. I squeezed her hand.

“Chris,” said Dad, “Mommy’s kind of tired. I don’t think she wants to think about it right now.”

“I just want to know.”

“Chris, now’s not the time,” said Dad, giving me a stern look in the rearview mirror. “The only thing that’s important is that everything worked out okay and that Mommy’s safe and sound, right? We have a lot to be thankful for. Today could have been so much worse.”

It took me a second to realize what he meant. And then when I did, I felt a shiver go up my spine.

FaceChat

The first year after we moved to Bridgeport, our parents tried really hard to get Auggie and me together at least a couple of times a month—either at our place or at Auggie’s. I had a couple of sleepovers at Auggie’s house, and Auggie tried a sleepover at my place once, though that didn’t work out. But it’s a long car ride between Bridgeport and North River Heights, and eventually we only got together every couple of months or so. We started FaceChatting each other a lot around that time. Like, practically every day in third grade, Auggie and I would hang out together on FaceChat. We had decided to grow our Padawan braids before I moved away, so it was a great way to check how long they had gotten. Sometimes we wouldn’t even talk: we’d just keep the screens on while we both watched a TV show together or built the same Lego set at the same time. Sometimes we would trade riddles. Like, what has a foot but no leg? Or, what does a poor man have, a rich man need, and you would die if you ate it? Stuff like that could keep us going for hours.

Then, in the fourth grade, we started FaceChatting less. It wasn’t a thing we did on purpose. I just started having more things to do in school. Not only did I get more homework now, but I was doing a lot of after-school stuff. Soccer a couple of times a week. Tennis lessons. Robotics in the spring. It felt like I was always missing Auggie’s FaceChat requests, so finally we decided to schedule our chats for right before dinner on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

And that worked out fine, though it ended up being only Wednesday nights because Saturdays I had too much going on. It was somewhere toward the end of the fourth grade that I told Auggie I had cut off my Padawan braid. He didn’t say it, but I think that hurt his feelings.

Then this year, Auggie started going to school, too.

I almost couldn’t imagine Auggie at school, or how it would be for him. I mean, being a new kid is hard enough. But being a new kid that looks like Auggie? That would be insane. And not only was he starting school, he was starting *middle* school! That’s how they do it in his school—fifth graders walking down the same hallways as ninth graders! Crazy! You have to give

Auggie his props—that takes guts.

The only time I FaceChatted with Auggie in September was a few days after school had started, but he didn't seem to want to talk. I did notice he had cut off his Padawan braid, but I didn't ask him about it. I figured it was for the same reason I had cut mine off. I mean, you know, nerd alert.

I was curious to go to Auggie's bowling party a few weeks before Halloween. I got to meet his new friends, who seemed nice enough. There was this one kid named Jack Will who was pretty funny. But then I think something happened with Jack and Auggie, because when I FaceChatted with Auggie after Halloween, he told me they weren't friends anymore.

The last time I FaceChatted with Auggie was right after winter break had ended. My friends Jake and Tyler were over my place and we were playing *Age of War II* on my laptop when Auggie's FaceChat request came up on my screen.

"Guys," I said, turning the laptop toward me. "I need to take this."

"Can we play on your Xbox?" asked Jake.

"Sure," I said, pointing to where they could find the extra controllers. And then I kind of turned my back to them, because I didn't want them to see Auggie's face. I tapped "accept" on the laptop, and a few seconds later, Auggie's face came on the screen.

"Hey, Chris," he said.

"Sup, Aug," I answered.

"Long time no see."

"Yeah," I answered.

Then he started talking about something else. Something about a war at his school? Jack Will? I didn't really follow what he was saying, because I was completely distracted by Jake and Tyler, who had started nudging one another, mouths open, half laughing, the moment Auggie had come on-screen. I knew they had seen Auggie's face. I walked to the other side of the room with the laptop.

"Mm-hmm," I said to Auggie, trying to tune out the things Jake and Tyler were whispering to each other. But I heard this much:

"Did you see that?"

"Was that a mask?"

"...a fire?"

“Is there someone there with you?” asked Auggie.

I guess he must have noticed that I wasn’t really listening to him.

I turned to my friends and said, “Guys, shh!”

That made them crack up. They were very obviously trying to get a closer look at my screen.

“Yeah, I’m just with some friends,” I mumbled quickly, walking to yet another side of my room.

“Hi, Chris’s friend!” said Jake, following me.

“Can we meet your friend?” asked Tyler loudly so Auggie would hear.

I shook my head at them. “No!”

“Okay!” said Auggie from the other side of the screen.

Jake and Tyler immediately came on either side of me so the three of us were facing the screen and seeing Auggie’s face.

“Hey!” Auggie said. I knew he was smiling, but sometimes, to people who didn’t know, his smile didn’t look like a smile.

“Hey,” both Jake and Tyler said quietly, nodding politely. I noticed that they were no longer laughing.

“So, these guys are my friends Jake and Tyler,” I said to Auggie, pointing my thumb back and forth at them. “And that’s Auggie. From my old neighborhood.”

“Hey,” said Auggie, waving.

“Hey,” said Jake and Tyler, not looking at him directly.

“So,” said Auggie, nodding awkwardly. “So, yeah, what are you guys doing?”

“We were just turning on the Xbox,” I answered.

“Oh, nice!” answered Auggie. “What game?”

“*House of Asterion.*”

“Cool. What level are you on?”

“Um, I don’t know exactly,” I said, scratching my head. “Second maze, I think.”

“Oh, that’s a hard one,” Auggie answered. “I’ve almost unlocked Tartarus.”

“Cool.”

I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Jake was poking Tyler behind my back.

“Yeah, well,” I said, “I think we’re going to start playing now.”

“Oh!” said Auggie. “Sure. Good luck with the second maze!”

“Okay. Bye,” I said. “Hope the war thing works out.”

“Thanks. Nice meeting you guys,” Auggie added politely.

“Bye, Auggie!” Jake said, smirking.

Tyler started laughing, so I elbowed him out of screen view.

“Bye,” Auggie said, but I could tell he noticed them laughing. Auggie always noticed stuff like that, even though he pretended not to.

I clicked off. As soon as I did, both Jake and Tyler started cracking up.

“What the heck?” I said to them, annoyed.

“Oh, dude!” said Jake. “What was up with that kid?”

“I’ve never seen anything that ugly in my life,” said Tyler.

“Hey!” I answered defensively. “Come on.”

“Was he in a fire?” asked Jake.

“No. He was born like that,” I explained. “He can’t help the way he looks. It’s a disease.”

“Wait, is it contagious?” asked Tyler, pretending to be afraid.

“Come on,” I answered, shaking my head.

“And you’re friends with him?” asked Tyler, looking at me like I was a Martian. “Whoa, dude!” He was snickering.

“What?” I looked at him seriously.

He opened his eyes wide and shrugged. “Nothing, dude. I’m just saying.”

I saw him look at Jake, who squeezed his lips together like a fish. There was an awkward silence.

“Are we playing or not?” I asked after a few seconds. I grabbed one of the controllers.

We started playing, but it wasn’t a great game. I was in a bad mood, and they just continued being goofballs. It was irritating.

After they left, I started thinking about Zack and Alex, how they had ditched Auggie all those years ago.

Even after all this time, it can still be hard being friends with Auggie.

8:22 p.m.

As soon as Dad wheeled Mom into our house, I plopped down on the sofa in front of the TV with my half-finished McDonald's Happy Meal. I clicked the TV on with the remote.

"Wait," said Dad, shaking out the umbrella. "I thought you had homework to do."

"I just want to watch the rest of *Amazing Race* while I eat," I answered. "I'll do my homework when it's over."

"Is it okay for him to do that?" Dad said to Mom.

"It's almost over anyway, Mommy!" I said to Mom. "Please?"

"So long as you start right after the show's over," she answered. but I knew she wasn't really paying attention. She was looking up at the staircase, shaking her head slowly. "How am I going to do this, Angus?" she said to Dad. She looked really tired.

"That's what I'm here for," Dad answered. He turned her wheelchair around toward him, reached under her, wrapped his other arm around her back, and lifted her out of the wheelchair. This made Mom scream in a giggly sort of way.

"Wow, Dad, you're strong!" I said, popping a french fry in my mouth as I watched them. "You guys should be on *The Amazing Race*. They're always having divorced couples."

Dad started climbing the staircase with Mom in his arms. They were both laughing as they bumped into the railing and the walls on the way up. It was nice seeing them like this. Last time we were all together, they were screaming at each other.

I turned around and watched the rest of the show. Just as Phil the host was telling the last couple to arrive at the pit stop that they have been eliminated, my phone buzzed.

It was a text from Elijah.

Yo chris. so me and the guys decided we're dropping out of after school rock band. we're starting our own band. we're playing 7NationArmy on Wednesday.

I reread the text. My mouth was literally hanging open. Dropping out of the band? Could they do that? John would go ballistic when none of them showed up at band practice tomorrow. And what did that mean for the after-school rock band? Would it be just me and John playing “The Final Countdown”? That would be awful!

Then another text came through.

do you want to join our band? we want YOU to join. but ABSOLUTLY NOT john. He sucks. We're practicing at my place tomorrow after school. Bring your guitar.

Dad came downstairs. “Time for homework, Chris,” he said quietly. Then he saw my face. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” I said, clicking off the phone. I was kind of in a state of shock. They want me in their band? “I just remembered, I need to practice for the spring concert.”

“Okay, but it needs to be quiet,” answered Dad. “Mom is out like a light, and we have to let her rest, okay? Don’t make a lot of noise going up the stairs. I’m in the guest room if you need anything.”

“Wait, you’re staying here tonight?” I asked.

“For a few days,” he answered. “Until your mom can get around herself.”

He started walking back upstairs with the crutches they had given Mom in the hospital.

“Can you print out the chords for ‘Seven Nation Army’ for me?” I asked. “I have to learn them by tomorrow.”

“Sure,” he said at the top of the stairs. “But remember, keep it down!”

North River Heights

Our new house is much bigger than our old house in North River Heights. Our old house was actually a brownstone, and we lived on the first floor. We only had one bathroom, and a tiny yard. But I loved our apartment. I loved our block. I missed being able to walk everywhere. I even missed the ginkgo trees. If you don't know what ginkgo trees are, they're the trees that drop these little squishy nuts that smell like dog poop mixed with cat pee mixed with some toxic waste when you step on them. Auggie used to say they smelled like orc vomit, which I always thought was funny. Anyway, I missed everything about our old neighborhood, even the ginkgo trees.

When we lived in North River Heights, Mom owned a little floral shop on Amesfort Avenue called Earth Laughs in Flowers. She worked really long hours, which is why they hired Lourdes to babysit me. That was another thing I missed: Lourdes. I missed her empanadas. I missed how she used to call me *papi*. But we didn't need Lourdes after we moved to Bridgeport, because Mom had sold her floral shop and no longer worked full-time. Now Mom picks me up from school on Mondays through Wednesdays. On Thursday nights, she picks me up from John's house and drops me off at Dad's place, which is where I stay until Sunday.

When we lived in North River Heights, Dad was usually home by seven p.m. But now he can't get home before nine p.m. because of the long commute from the city. Originally the plan was that that was only going to be a temporary thing, because he was going to be transferred to a Connecticut office, but it's been three years and he still has his old job in Manhattan. Mom and Dad used to argue about that a lot.

On Fridays, Dad leaves work early so that he can pick me up from school. We usually order Chinese food for dinner, jam a little on our guitars, and watch a movie. Mom gets annoyed with Dad that he doesn't make me do my homework over the weekend when I'm with him, so by the time I go back home on Sunday night, I'm always kind of grumpy as I scramble to finish my homework with her. This weekend, for instance, I should have been studying for my math test, but

Dad and I went bowling and I just never got around to doing that. My bad.

I got used to the new house in Bridgeport, though. My new friends. Luke the hamster that's not a dog. But what I miss the most about North River Heights is that my parents seemed together then.

Dad moved out of our house last summer. My parents had been fighting a lot before that, but I don't know why he moved out over the summer. Just that one day, out of nowhere, they told me that they were separating. They "needed some time apart" to figure out if they wanted to continue living together. They told me that this had nothing to do with me, and they would "both go on loving me" and seeing me as much as before. They said they still loved each other, but that sometimes marriages are like friendships that get tested, and people have to work through things.

"Good friendships are worth a little extra effort," I remember saying to them.

I don't think Mom even remembered that she's the one who told me that once.

9:56 p.m.

I listened to “Seven Nation Army” while I did my homework. And I tried not to think too much about how John would react tomorrow when I told him I was joining the other band. I mean, I didn’t think I really had a choice. If I stayed in the after-school rock band, it’d just be me and John playing “The Final Countdown” at the spring concert, with Mr. B playing drums, and we’d look like the world’s biggest dweebs. We were just not good enough to play by ourselves. I remembered how Harry was trying not to laugh when John played the guitar solo today. If it was just the two of us up there, *all* the kids in the audience would be trying not to laugh.

What I couldn’t figure out was what John would do when he found out. Any sane person would just forget about playing in the spring concert on Wednesday at all. But knowing John, I could pretty much bet that he would go ahead and play “The Final Countdown.” He didn’t care about making a fool of himself that way. I could picture him singing his heart out, strumming the guitar, with Mr. Bowles rocking out behind him on the keyboards. *Ladies and gentlemen, the after-school rock band!* Just the thought of it made me cringe for him. He would never live that down.

It was hard to concentrate on my homework, so it took me a lot longer than I thought it would. I didn’t even start studying for the math test until almost ten p.m. That’s when I remembered that I was totally screwed in math. I waited to the last minute to study, and I didn’t understand any of it.

Dad was in bed working on his laptop when I opened the door of the guest bedroom. I was holding my ridiculously heavy fifth-grade math textbook in my hands.

“Hey, Dad.”

“You’re not in bed yet?” he asked, looking at me over his reading glasses.

“I need some help studying for my math test tomorrow.”

He glanced over at the clock on the bedside table. “Kind of late to be discovering this, no?”

“I had so much homework,” I answered. “And I had to learn the new song for

the spring concert, which is the day after tomorrow. There's so much going on, Dad."

He nodded. Then he put his laptop down and patted the bed for me to sit next to him, which I did. I turned to page 151.

"So," I said, "I'm having trouble with word problems."

"Oh, well, I'm great at word problems!" he answered, smiling. "Lay it on me."

I started *reading* from the textbook. "Jill wants to buy honey at an outdoor market. One vendor is selling a twenty-six-ounce jar for \$3.12. Another vendor is selling a sixteen-ounce jar for \$2.40. Which is the better deal, and how much money per ounce will Jill save by choosing it?"

I put the textbook down and looked at Dad, who looked at me blankly.

"Okay, um...", he said, scratching his ear. "So, that was twenty-six ounces for...what again? I'm going to need a piece of paper. Pass me my notebook over there?"

I reached over to the other end of the bed and passed him his notebook. He started scribbling in it, asked me to repeat the question again, and then kept scribbling.

"Okay, okay, so...", he said, turning his notebook around for me to look at his scribbled numbers. "So, first you want to divide the numbers to figure out what the cost per ounce is, then you want..."

"Wait, wait," I said, shaking my head. "That's the part I don't get. When do you know you have to divide? What do you need to do? How do you know?"

He looked down at the scribbles on his notebook again, as if the answer were there.

"Let me see the question?" he said, pushing his reading glasses back up on his nose and looking at where I pointed in the textbook. "Okay, well, you know you have to divide, because, um, well, you want to figure out the price per ounce... because it says so right here." He pointed to the problem.

I looked quickly at where he pointed but shook my head. "I don't get it."

"Well, look, Chris. Right there. It asks how much the cost per ounce is."

I shook my head again. "I don't get it!" I said loudly. "I hate this. I suck at this."

"No, you don't, Chris," he answered calmly. "You just have to take a deep breath and—"

“No! You don’t understand,” I said. “I don’t get this at all!”

“Which is why I’m trying to explain it to you.”

“Can I ask Mom?”

He took his eyeglasses off and rubbed his eyes with his wrist. “Chris, she’s asleep. We should just let her rest tonight,” he answered slowly. “I’m sure we can figure this out ourselves.”

I started poking my knuckles into my eyes, so he pulled my hands down off my face gently. “Why don’t you call one of your friends at school? How about John?”

“He’s in the fourth grade!” I said impatiently.

“Okay, well, someone else,” he said.

“No!” I shook my head. “There’s no one I can call. I’m not friends with anyone like that this year. I mean, my *friend* friends aren’t in the same math class I’m in. And I don’t know the kids in this math class that well.”

“Then call your other friends, Chris,” he said, reaching over for his cell phone. “What about Elijah and those guys in the band? I’m sure they’ve all taken that class.”

“No! Dad! Ugh!” I covered my face with my hands. “I’m totally going to fail this test. I don’t get it. I just don’t get it.”

“Okay, calm down,” he said. “What about Auggie? He’s kind of a math whiz, isn’t he?”

“Never mind!” I said, shaking my head. I took the textbook from him. “I’ll figure it out myself!”

“Christopher,” he said.

“It’s fine, Dad,” I said, getting up. “I’ll just figure it out. Or I’ll text someone. It’s fine.”

“Just like that?”

“It’s fine. Thanks, Dad.” I closed the textbook and got up.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you,” he answered, and for a second, I felt sorry for him. He sounded a little defeated. “I mean, I think we can figure it out together if you give me another chance.”

“No, it’s okay!” I answered, walking toward the door.

“Good night, Chris.”

“Night, Dad.”

I went to my room, sat at my desk, and opened the textbook to page 151 again. I tried rereading the word problem, but all I could hear in my head were the words to “Seven Nation Army.” And those made no sense to me, either.

No matter how hard I stared at the problem, I just couldn’t think of what to do.

Pluto

A few weeks before we moved to Bridgeport, Auggie's parents were over at our house helping my parents pack for the big move. Our entire apartment was filled with boxes.

Auggie and I were having a Nerf war in the living room, turning the boxes into hostile aliens on Pluto. Occasionally, one of our Nerf darts would hit Via, who was trying to read her book on the sofa. Okay, maybe we were doing it a little bit on purpose, *tee-hee*.

"Stop it!" she finally screamed when one of my darts zinged her book. "Mom!" she yelled.

But Isabel and Nate were all the way on the other side of the apartment with my parents, taking a coffee break in the kitchen.

"Can you guys please stop?" Via said to us seriously.

I nodded, but Auggie shot another Nerf dart at her book.

"That's a fart dart," said Auggie. This made us both crack up.

Via was furious. "You guys are such geeks," she said, shaking her head. "*Star Wars*."

"Not *Star Wars*. Pluto!" answered Auggie, pointing his Nerf blaster at her.

"That's not even a real planet," she said, opening her book to read.

Auggie shot another Nerf dart at her book. "What are you talking about? Yes, it is."

"Stop it, Auggie, or I swear I'll..."

Auggie lowered his Nerf blaster. "Yes, it is," he repeated.

"No, it's not," answered Via. "It *used* to be a planet. I can't believe you two geniuses don't know that after all the space videos you've watched!"

Auggie didn't answer right away, like he was processing what she just said. "But my very educated mother just showed us nine planets! That's how Mommy said people remember the planets in our solar system."

"My very educated mother just served us nachos!" answered Via. "Look it up.

I'm right." She started looking it up on her phone.

It may be that in all our reading science books and watching videos, this information had made its way to us before. But I guess we never really understood what it meant. We were still little kids when we were in our space phase. We barely knew how to read.

Via started reading aloud from her phone: "From Wikipedia: 'The understanding that Pluto is only one of several large icy bodies in the outer solar system prompted the International Astronomical Union (IAU) to formally define "planet" in 2006. This definition excluded Pluto and reclassified it as a member of the new "dwarf planet" category (and specifically as a plutoid).' Do I need to go on? Basically what that means is that Pluto was considered too puny to be a real planet, so there. I'm right."

Auggie looked really upset.

"Mommy!" he yelled out.

"It's not a big deal, Auggie," said Via, seeing how upset he was getting.

"Yes, it is!" he said, running down the hallway.

Via and I followed him to the kitchen, where our parents were sitting around the table over a bagel and cream cheese spread.

"You said it was 'my very educated mother just showed us nine planets'!" said Auggie, charging over to Isabel.

Isabel almost spilled her coffee. "What—" she said.

"Why are you making such a big deal about this, Auggie?" Via interrupted.

"What's going on, guys?" asked Isabel, looking from Auggie to Via.

"It is a big deal!" Auggie screamed at the top of his lungs. It was so loud and unexpected, that scream, that everyone in the room just looked at one another.

"Whoa, Auggie," said Nate, putting his hand on Auggie's shoulder. But Auggie shrugged it off.

"You told me Pluto was one of the nine planets!" Auggie yelled at Isabel. "You said it was the littlest planet in the solar system!"

"It is, sweetness," Isabel answered, trying to get him to calm down.

"No, it's not, Mom," Via said. "They changed Pluto's planetary status in 2006. It's no longer considered one of the nine planets in our solar system."

Isabel blinked at Via, and then she looked at Nate. "Really?"

"I knew that," Nate answered seriously. "They did the same thing to Goofy a

few years ago.”

This made all the adults laugh.

“Daddy, this isn’t funny!” Auggie shrieked. And then, out of the blue, he started to cry. Big tears. Sobbing crying.

No one understood what was happening. Isabel wrapped her arms around Auggie, and he sobbed into her neck.

“Auggie Doggie,” Nate said, gently rubbing Auggie on the back. “What’s going on here, buddy?”

“Via, what happened?” Isabel asked sharply.

“I have no idea!” said Via, opening her eyes wide. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Something must have happened!” said Isabel.

“Chris, do you know why Auggie’s so upset?” asked Mom.

“Because of Pluto,” I answered.

“But what does that mean?” asked Mom.

I shrugged. I understood why he was so upset, but I couldn’t explain it to them exactly.

“You said...it was...a planet...,” Auggie finally said in between gulps. Even under ordinary circumstances, Auggie could be hard to understand sometimes. In the middle of a crying fit, it was even harder.

“What, sweetness?” whispered Isabel.

“You said...it was...a planet,” Auggie repeated, looking up at her.

“I thought it was, Auggie,” she answered, wiping his tears with her fingertips. “I don’t know, sweetness. I’m not a real science teacher. When I was growing up, there were nine planets. It never even occurred to me that that could change.”

Nate knelt down beside him. “But even if it’s not considered a planet anymore, Auggie, I don’t understand why that should upset you so much.”

Auggie looked down. But I knew he couldn’t explain his Plutonian tears.

10:28 p.m.

By about ten-thirty, I was getting desperate about the math test tomorrow. I had texted Jake, who's in my math class, and messaged a few other kids on Facebook. When my phone buzzed, I assumed it was one of these kids, but it wasn't. It was Auggie.

Hey, Chris. Just heard about your mom being in hospital. Sorry, hope she's ok.

I couldn't believe he was texting me, just when I'd been thinking about him. Kind of psychic.

Hey, Aug, I texted back. Thx. She's ok. She broke her femur. She has this huge cast.

He texted me a sad-face emoticon.

I texted: *My dad had to carry her up the stairs! They kept bumping into the wall.*

Ha ha. He texted me a laughing-face icon.

I texted: *I was going to call u today. To tell u sorry about Daisy. :((((*

Oh yeah. Thx. He texted a string of crying-face emoticons.

Hey, remember the Galactic Adventures of Darth Daisy? I texted.

This was a comic strip we used to draw together about two astronauts named Gleebo and Tom who lived on Pluto and had a dog named Darth Daisy.

Ha ha. Yeah, Major Gleebo.

Major Tom.

Good times good times, he texted back.

Daisy was the GR8EST DOG IN UNIVERSE! I thumbed loudly. I was smiling.

He texted me a picture of Daisy. It had been such a long time since I had seen her. In the picture, her face had gotten completely white, and her eyes were kind of foggy. But her nose was still pink and her tongue was still super long as it hung out of her mouth.

So cute! Daisy!!!!!! I texted.

DARTH Daisy!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Ha ha. Take that, Via! I wrote.

Remember those fart darts?

Hahahahaha. I was smiling a lot at this point. It was the happiest part of my day, to be truthful. *That was when we were still into Pluto.*

Were we into Star Wars yet?

Getting into it. Do you still have all your miniatures?

Yeah but I put some away too. So anyway, Gleebo, my mom's telling me I gots to go to bed now. Glad your mom is okay.

I nodded. There was no way I could ask him for help in math at this point. It would just be too lame. I sat down on the edge of my bed and started responding to his text.

Before I could finish, he texted: *my mom actually wants to talk to you. she wants to FaceChat. R U free?*

I stood up. *Sure.*

Two seconds later, I got a request to FaceChat. I saw Isabel on the phone.

"Oh, hey, Isabel," I said.

"Hi, Chris!" she answered. I could tell she was in her kitchen. "How are you? I talked to your mom earlier. I wanted to make sure you guys got home okay."

"Yeah, we did."

"And she's doing okay? I didn't want to wake her if she's sleeping."

"Yeah, she's sleeping," I answered.

"Oh good. She needs her rest. That was a big cast!"

"Dad's staying here tonight."

"Oh, that's so great!" she answered happily. "I'm so glad. And how are you doing, Chris?"

"I'm good."

"How's school?"

"Good."

Isabel smiled. "Lisa told me you got her beautiful flowers today."

"Yeah," I answered, smiling and nodding.

"Okay. Well, I just wanted to check in on you and say hello, Chris. I want you

to know we're thinking about you guys, and if there's anything we can do—"

"I'm sorry about Daisy," I blurted out.

Isabel nodded. "Oh. Thank you, Chris."

"You guys must be so sad."

"Yeah, it's sad. She was such a presence in our house. Well, you know. You were there when we first got her, remember?"

"She was so skinny!" I said. I was smiling, but suddenly, out of the blue, my voice got a little shaky.

"With that long tongue of hers!" She laughed.

I nodded. I felt a lump in my throat, like I was going to cry.

She looked at me carefully. "Oh, sweetie, it's okay," she said quietly.

Auggie's mom had always been like a second mom to me. I mean, aside from my parents, and maybe my grandmother, Isabel Pullman knew me better than anyone.

"I know," I whispered. I was still smiling, but my chin was trembling.

"Sweetie, where's your dad?" she asked. "Can you put him on the phone?"

I shrugged. "I think...he might be asleep by now."

"I'm sure he won't care if you wake him up," she answered softly. "Go get him. I'll wait on the phone."

Auggie nudged his way into view on the screen.

"What's the matter, Chris?" he asked.

I shook my head, fighting back tears. I couldn't talk. I knew if I did, I'd start to cry.

"Christopher," Isabel said, coming close to the screen. "Your mom is going to be fine, sweetie."

"I know," I said, my voice cracking, but then it just came out of me. "But she was in the car because of me! Because I forgot my trombone! If I hadn't forgotten my stuff, she wouldn't have gotten into an accident! It's my fault, Isabel! She could have died!"

This all came pouring out of me in a string of messy crying bursts.

10:52 p.m.

Isabel put Auggie on the phone while she called Dad's cell phone to let him know I was crying hysterically in my room. A minute later, Dad came into my room and I hung up on Auggie. Dad put his arms around me and hugged me tightly.

"Chris," said Dad.

"It was my fault, Daddy! It was my fault she was driving."

He untangled himself from my hug and put his face in front of my face.

"Look at me, Chris," he said. "It's not your fault."

"She was on her way back to school with my stuff." I sniffled. "I told her to hurry. She was probably speeding."

"No, she wasn't, Chris," he answered. "I promise you. What happened today was just an accident. It wasn't anyone's fault. It was a fluke. Okay?"

I looked away.

"Okay?" he repeated.

I nodded.

"And the most important thing is that no one got seriously hurt. Mom is fine. Okay, Chris?"

He was wiping my tears away as I nodded.

"I kept calling her Lisa," I said. "She hates when I do that. The last thing she said to me was 'Love you!' and all I answered was 'Bye, Lisa.' And I didn't even turn around!"

Dad cleared his throat. "Chris, please don't beat yourself up," he said slowly. "Mom knows you love her so much. Listen, this was a scary thing that happened today. It's natural for you to be upset. When something scary like this happens, it acts like a wake-up call, you know? It makes us reassess what's important in life. Our family. Our friends. The people we love." He was looking at me while he was talking, but I almost felt like he was talking to himself. His eyes were very moist. "Let's just be grateful she's fine, okay, Chris? And we'll take really good care of her together, okay?"

I nodded. I didn't try to say anything, though. I knew it would just come out as more tears.

Dad pulled me close to him, but he didn't say anything, either. Maybe for the same reason.

10:59 p.m.

After Dad had gotten me to calm down a bit, he called Isabel back to let her know everything was fine. They chatted, and then Dad handed the phone to me.

It was Auggie on the line.

“Hey, your dad told my mom you need some help with math,” he said.

“Oh yeah,” I answered shyly, blowing my nose. “But it’s so late. Don’t you need to go to bed?”

“Mom’s totally fine with my helping you. Let’s FaceChat.”

Two seconds later, he was on-screen.

“So, I’m having trouble with word problems,” I said, opening my textbook. “I just...I’m not getting how you know what operation to use. When do you multiply and when do you divide. It’s so confusing.”

“Oh, that.” He nodded. “Yeah, I definitely had trouble with that, too. Have you memorized the clue words, though? That helped me a lot.”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Let me send you a PDF,” he said.

Two seconds later, I printed out the PDF he sent me, which listed a whole bunch of different math words.

“If you know what clue words to look for in the word problem,” Auggie explained, “you know what operation to use. Like ‘per’ or ‘each’ or ‘equally’ means you have to divide. And ‘at this rate’ or ‘doubled’ means multiplication. See?”

He went over the whole list of words with me, one by one, until it finally began to make some sense. Then we went over all the math problems in the textbook. We started with the sample problems first, and it turned out he was right: once I found the clue word in each problem, I knew what to do. I was able to do most of the worksheet problems on my own, though we went over each and every one of them after I was done, just to be sure I had really gotten it.

11:46 p.m.

My favorite types of books have always been mysteries. Like, you don't know something at the beginning of the book. And then at the end of the book, you know it. And the clues were there all along, you just didn't know how to read them. That's what I felt like after talking to Auggie. Like this colossal mystery I couldn't understand before was now completely, suddenly solved.

"I can't believe I'm finally getting this now," I said to him after we had gone over the last problem. "Thank you so much, Aug. Seriously, thank you."

He smiled and got in close to the screen. "It's cool beans," he said.

"I totally owe you one."

Auggie shrugged. "No problem. That's what friends are for, right?"

I nodded. "Right."

"G'night, Chris. Talk soon!"

"Night, Aug! Thanks again! Bye!"

He hung up. I closed my textbook.

I went to the guest room to tell Dad that Auggie had helped me figure out all the math stuff, but he wasn't in the room. I knocked on the bathroom door, but he wasn't in there, either. Then I noticed Mom's bedroom door was open. I could see Dad's legs stretched out on the chair next to the dresser. I couldn't see his face from the hallway, so I walked in quietly to let him know that I was finished talking with Auggie.

That's when I saw that he had fallen asleep in the chair. His head was drooping to one side. His glasses were on the edge of his nose, and his computer was on his lap.

I tiptoed to the closet, got a blanket, and placed it over his legs. I did it really softly so he wouldn't wake up. I took the computer from his lap and put it on the dresser.

Then I walked over to the side of the bed where Mom was sleeping. When I was little, Mom used to fall asleep reading to me at bedtime. I would nudge her awake if she fell asleep before finishing the book, but sometimes, she just

couldn't help it. She'd fall asleep next to me, and I would listen to her soft breathing until I fell asleep, too.

It had been a long time since I'd seen her sleeping, though. As I looked at her now, she seemed kind of little to me. I didn't remember the freckle on her cheek. I'd never noticed the tiny lines on her forehead.

I watched her breathing for a few seconds.

"I love you, Mommy."

I didn't say this out loud, though, because I didn't want to wake her up.

11:59 p.m.

It was almost midnight by the time I went back to my room. Everything was exactly the way I had left it this morning. My bed was still unmade. My pajamas were jumbled up on the floor. My closet door was wide open. Usually, Mom would make my room look nice after she dropped me off at school in the morning, but today, of course, she never got the chance to do that.

It felt like days had passed since Mom woke me up this morning.

I closed the closet door, and that's when I noticed the trombone resting against the wall. So the accident didn't happen as she was bringing me my stuff this morning! I don't know why exactly, but this made me feel so much better.

I put the trombone right next to the bedroom door so I wouldn't forget it again on my way to school tomorrow, and I packed my science paper and gym shorts inside my backpack.

Then I sat down at my desk.

Without thinking anything more about it, I replied to Elijah's text.

Hey, Elijah. Thanks for the offer to join your band. But I'm going to stick with John at the spring concert. Good luck with Seven Nation Army.

Even if I looked like a total dweeb at the spring concert, I couldn't let John down like that. That's what friends are for, right? *It's the final countdown!*

Sometimes friendships are hard.

I put my pajamas on, brushed my teeth, and got into bed. Then I turned off the lamp on my nightstand. The stars on my ceiling were glowing bright neon green now, as they always did right after I turned the lights off.

I turned over on my side, and my eyes fell on a small star-shaped green light on my floor. It was the star Mom had placed on my forehead this morning, which I had flicked across the room.

I got out of bed, picked it up, and stuck it on my forehead. Then I got back in my bed and closed my eyes.

We're leaving together

*But still it's farewell
And maybe we'll come back
To Earth, who can tell
I guess there is no one to blame
We're leaving ground
Will things ever be the same again?*

It's the final countdown....

The End