

Part Five



Justin

Sometimes I think my head is so big
because it is so full of dreams.

— John Merrick in Bernard Pomerance's

The Elephant Man

...

Olivia's Brother

THE FIRST TIME i meet Olivia's little brother, i have to admit i'm totally taken by surprise.

i shouldn't be, of course. olivia's told me about his "syndrome." has even described what he looks like. but she's also talked about all his surgeries over the years, so i guess i assumed he'd be more normal-looking by now. like when a kid is born with a cleft lip and has plastic surgery to fix it sometimes you can't even tell except for the little scar above the lip. i guess i thought her brother would have some scars here and there. but not this. i definitely wasn't expecting to see this little kid in a baseball cap who's sitting in front of me right now.

actually there are two kids sitting in front me: one is a totally normal-looking kid with curly blond hair named jack; the other is auggie.

i like to think i'm able to hide my surprise. i hope i do. surprise is one of those emotions that can be hard to fake, though, whether you're trying to look surprised when you're not or trying to not look surprised when you are.

...

i shake his hand. i shake the other kid's hand. don't want to focus on his face. cool room, I say.

are you via's boyfriend? he says. i think he's smiling.

olivia pushes down his baseball cap.

is that a machine gun? the blond kid asks, like i haven't heard that one before. and we talk about zydeco for a bit. and then via's taking my hand and leading me out of the room. as soon as we close the door behind us, we hear them laughing.

i'm from brooklyn! one of them sings.

olivia rolls her eyes as she smiles. let's go hang out in my room, she says.

we've been dating for two months now. i knew from the moment i saw her, the minute she sat down at our table in the cafeteria, that i liked her. i couldn't keep my eyes off of her. really beautiful. with olive skin and the bluest eyes i've ever seen in my life. at first she acted like she only wanted to be friends. i think she kind of gives off that vibe without even meaning to. stay back. don't even bother. she doesn't flirt like some other girls do. she looks you right in the eye when she talks to you, like she's daring you. so i just kept looking her right in the eye, too, like i was daring her right back. and then i asked her out and she said yes, which rocked.

she's an awesome girl and i love hanging out with her.

she didn't tell me about august until our third date. i think she used the phrase "a craniofacial abnormality" to describe his face. or maybe it was "craniofacial anomaly." i know the one word she didn't use was "deformed," though, because that word would have registered with me.

so, what did you think? she asks me nervously the second we're inside her room. are you shocked?

no, i lie.

she smiles and looks away. you're shocked.

i'm not, i assure her. he's just like what you said he'd be.

she nods and plops down on her bed. kind of cute how she still has a lot of stuffed animals on her bed. she takes one of them, a polar bear, without thinking and puts it in her lap.

i sit down on the rolling chair by her desk. her room is immaculate.

when i was little, she says, there were lots of kids who never came back for a second playdate. i mean, *lots* of kids. i even had friends who wouldn't come to my birthdays because he would be there. they never actually told me this, but it would get back to me. some people just don't know how to deal with auggie, you know?

i nod.

it's not even like they know they're being mean, she adds. they were just scared. i mean, let's face it, his face is a little

scary, right?

i guess, i answer.

but you're okay with it? she asks me sweetly. you're not too freaked out? or scared?

i'm not freaked out or scared. i smile.

she nods and looks down at the polar bear on her lap. i can't tell whether she believes me or not, but then she gives the polar bear a kiss on the nose and tosses it to me with a little smile. i think that means she believes me. or at least that she wants to.

Valentine's Day

I GIVE OLIVIA a heart necklace for valentine's day, and she gives me a messenger bag she's made out of old floppy disks. very cool how she makes things like that. earrings out of pieces of circuit boards. dresses out of t-shirts. bags out of old jeans. she's so creative. i tell her she should be an artist someday, but she wants to be a scientist. a geneticist, of all things. she wants to find cures for people like her brother, i guess.

we make plans for me to finally meet her parents. a mexican restaurant on amesfort avenue near her house on saturday night.

all day long i'm nervous about it. and when i get nervous my tics come out. i mean, my tics are always there, but they're not like they used to be when i was little: nothing but a few hard blinks now, the occasional head pull. but when i'm stressed they get worse—and i'm definitely stressing about meeting her folks.

they're waiting inside when i get to the restaurant. the dad gets up and shakes my hand, and the mom gives me a hug. i give auggie a hello fist-punch and kiss olivia on the cheek before i sit down.

it's so nice to meet you, justin! we've heard so much about you!

her parents couldn't be nicer. put me at ease right away. the waiter brings over the menus and i notice his expression the moment he lays eyes on august. but i pretend not to notice. i guess we're all pretending not to notice things tonight. the waiter. my tics. the way august crushes the tortilla chips on the table and spoons the crumbs into his mouth. i look at olivia and she smiles at me. she knows. she sees the waiter's face. she sees my tics. olivia is a girl who sees everything.

we spend the entire dinner talking and laughing. olivia's parents ask me about my music, how i got into the fiddle and stuff like that. and i tell them about how i used to play classical violin but i got into appalachian folk music and then zydeco. and they're listening to every word like they're really interested. they tell me to let them know the next time my band's playing a gig so they can come listen.

i'm not used to all the attention, to be truthful. my parents don't have a clue about what i want to do with my life. they never ask. we never talk like this. i don't think they even know i traded my baroque violin for an eight-string hardanger fiddle two years ago.

after dinner we go back to olivia's for some ice cream. their dog greets us at the door. an old dog. super sweet. she'd thrown

up all over the hallway, though. olivia's mom rushes to get paper towels while the dad picks the dog up like she's a baby.

what's up, ol' girlie? he says, and the dog's in heaven, tongue hanging out, tail wagging, legs in the air at awkward angles.

dad, tell justin how you got daisy, says olivia.

yeah! says auggie.

the dad smiles and sits down in a chair with the dog still cradled in his arms. it's obvious he's told this story lots of times and they all love to hear it.

so i'm coming home from the subway one day, he says, and a homeless guy i've never seen in this neighborhood before is pushing this floppy mutt in a stroller, and he comes up to me and says, hey, mister, wanna buy my dog? and without even thinking about it, i say sure, how much you want? and he says ten bucks, so i give him the twenty dollars i have in my wallet and he hands me the dog. justin, i'm telling you, you've never smelled anything so bad in your life! she stank so much i can't even tell you! so i took her right from there to the vet down the street and then i brought her home.

didn't even call me first, by the way! the mom interjects as she cleans the floor, to see if i'm okay with his bringing home some homeless guy's dog.

the dog actually looks over at the mom when she says this, like she understands everything everyone is saying about her.

she's a happy dog, like she knows she lucked out that day finding this family.

i kind of know how she feels. i like olivia's family. they laugh a lot.

my family's not like this at all. my mom and dad got divorced when i was four and they pretty much hate each other. i grew up spending half of every week in my dad's apartment in chelsea and the other half in my mom's place in brooklyn heights. i have a half brother who's five years older than me and barely knows i exist. for as long as i can remember, i've felt like my parents could hardly wait for me to be old enough to take care of myself. "you can go to the store by yourself." "here's the key to the apartment." it's funny how there's a word like overprotective to describe some parents, but no word that means the opposite. what word do you use to describe parents who don't protect enough? underprotective? neglectful? self-involved? lame? all of the above.

olivia's family tell each other "i love you" all the time.

i can't remember the last time anyone in my family said that to me.

by the time i go home, my tics have all stopped.

OUR TOWN

WE'RE DOING THE play *our town* for the spring show this year. olivia dares me to try out for the lead role, the stage manager, and somehow i get it. total fluke. never got any lead roles in anything before. i tell olivia she brings me good luck. unfortunately, she doesn't get the female lead, emily gibbs. the pink-haired girl named miranda gets it. olivia gets a bit part and is also the emily understudy. i'm actually more disappointed than olivia is. she almost seems relieved. i don't love people staring at me, she says, which is sort of strange coming from such a pretty girl. a part of me thinks maybe she blew her audition on purpose.

the spring show is at the end of april. it's mid-march now, so that's less than six weeks to memorize my part. plus rehearsal time. plus practicing with my band. plus finals. plus spending time with olivia. it's going to be a rough six weeks, that's for sure. mr. davenport, the drama teacher, is already manic about the whole thing. will drive us crazy by the time it's over, no doubt. i heard through the grapevine that he'd been planning on doing *the elephant man* but changed it to *our town* at the last

minute, and that change took a week off of our rehearsal schedule.

not looking forward to the craziness of the next month and a half.

Ladybug

OLIVIA AND I are sitting on her front stoop. she's helping me with my lines. it's a warm march evening, almost like summer. the sky is still bright cyan but the sun is low and the sidewalks are streaked with long shadows.

i'm reciting: yes, the sun's come up over a thousand times. summers and winters have cracked the mountains a little bit more and the rains have brought down some of the dirt. some babies that weren't even born before have begun talking regular sentences already; and a number of people who thought they were right young and spry have noticed that they can't bound up a flight of stairs like they used to, without their heart fluttering a little. ...

i shake my head. can't remember the rest.

all that can happen in a thousand days, olivia prompts me, reading from the script.

right, right, right, i say, shaking my head. i sigh. i'm wiped, olivia. how the heck am i going to remember all these lines?

you will, she answers confidently. she reaches out and cups her hands over a ladybug that appears out of nowhere. see? a good luck sign, she says, slowly lifting her top hand to reveal the ladybug walking on the palm of her other hand.

good luck or just the hot weather, i joke.

of course good luck, she answers, watching the ladybug crawl up her wrist. there should be a thing about making a wish on a ladybug. auggie and I used to do that with fireflies when we were little. she cups her hand over the ladybug again. come on, make a wish. close your eyes.

i dutifully close my eyes. a long second passes, then I open them.

did you make a wish? she asks.

yep.

she smiles, uncups her hands, and the ladybug, as if on cue, spreads its wings and flits away.

don't you want to know what I wished for? i ask, kissing her.

no, she answers shyly, looking up at the sky, which, at this very moment, is the exact color of her eyes.

i made a wish, too, she says mysteriously, but she has so many things she could wish for I have no idea what she's thinking.

The Bus Stop

OLIVIA'S MOM, AUGGIE, jack, and daisy come down the stoop just as i'm saying goodbye to olivia. slightly awkward since we are in the middle of a nice long kiss.

hey, guys, says the mom, pretending not to see anything, but the two boys are giggling.

hi, mrs. pullman.

please call me isabel, justin, she says again. it's like the third time she's told me this, so i really need to start calling her that.

i'm heading home, i say, as if to explain.

oh, are you heading to the subway? she says, following the dog with a newspaper. can you walk jack to the bus stop?

no problem.

that okay with you, jack? the mom asks him, and he shrugs. justin, can you stay with him till the bus comes?

of course!

we all say our goodbyes. olivia winks at me.

you don't have to stay with me, says jack as we're walking up the block. i take the bus by myself all the time. auggie's mom is

way too overprotective.

he's got a low gravelly voice, like a little tough guy. he kind of looks like one of those little-rascal kids in old black-and-white movies, like he should be wearing a newsboy cap and knickers.

we get to the bus stop and the schedule says the bus will be there in eight minutes. i'll wait with you, i tell him.

up to you. he shrugs. can i borrow a dollar? i want some gum.

i fish a dollar out of my pocket and watch him cross the street to the grocery store on the corner. he seems too small to be walking around by himself, somehow. then i think how i was that young when i was taking the subway by myself. way too young. i'm going to be an overprotective dad someday, i know it. my kids are going to know i care.

i'm waiting there a minute or two when i notice three kids walking up the block from the other direction. they walk right past the grocery store, but one of them looks inside and nudges the other two, and they all back up and look inside. i can tell they're up to no good, all elbowing each other, laughing. one of them is jack's height but the other two look much bigger, more like teens. they hide behind the fruit stand in front of the store, and when jack walks out, they trail behind him, making loud throw-up noises. jack casually turns around at the corner to see

who they are and they run away, high-fiving each other and laughing. little jerks.

jack crosses the street like nothing happened and stands next to me at the bus stop, blowing a bubble.

friends of yours? i finally say.

ha, he says. he's trying to smile but i can see he's upset.

just some jerks from my school, he says. a kid named julian and his two gorillas, henry and miles.

do they bother you like that a lot?

no, they've never done that before. they'd never do that in school or they'd get kicked out. julian lives two blocks from here, so i guess it was just bad luck running into him.

oh, okay. i nod.

it's not a big deal, he assures me.

we both automatically look down amesfort avenue to see if the bus is coming.

we're sort of in a war, he says after a minute, as if that explains everything. then he pulls out this crumpled piece of loose-leaf paper from his jean pocket and gives it to me. i unfold it, and it's a list of names in three columns. he's turned the whole grade against me, says jack.

not the whole grade, i point out, looking down at the list.

he leaves me notes in my locker that say stuff like *everybody hates you*.

you should tell your teacher about that.
jack looks at me like i'm an idiot and shakes his head.
anyway, you have all these neutrals, i say, pointing to the list.
if you get them on your side, things will even up a bit.
yeah, well, that's really going to happen, he says sarcastically.
why not?
he shoots me another look like i am absolutely the stupidest
guy he's ever talked to in the world.
what? i say.
he shakes his head like i'm hopeless. let's just say, he says,
i'm friends with someone who isn't exactly the most popular kid
in the school.
then it hits me, what's he's not coming out and saying:
august. this is all about his being friends with august. and he
doesn't want to tell me because i'm the sister's boyfriend. yeah,
of course, makes sense.
we see the bus coming down amesfort avenue.
well, just hang in there, i tell him, handing back the paper.
middle school is about as bad as it gets, and then it gets better.
everything'll work out.
he shrugs and shoves the list back into his pocket.
we wave bye when he gets on the bus, and i watch it pull
away.

when i get to the subway station two blocks away, i see the
same three kids hanging out in front of the bagel place next
door. they're still laughing and yuck-yucking each other like
they're some kind of gangbangers, little rich boys in expensive
skinny jeans acting tough.

don't know what possesses me, but i take my glasses off, put
them in my pocket, and tuck my fiddle case under my arm so the
pointy side is facing up. i walk over to them, my face scrunched
up, mean-looking. they look at me, laughs dying on their lips
when they see me, ice cream cones at odd angles.

yo, listen up. don't mess with jack, i say really slowly, gritting
my teeth, my voice all clint eastwood tough-guy. mess with him
again and you will be very, *very* sorry. and then i tap my fiddle
case for effect.

got it?

they nod in unison, ice cream dripping onto their hands.

good. i nod mysteriously, then sprint down the subway two
steps at a time.

Rehearsal

THE PLAY IS taking up most of my time as we get closer to opening night. lots of lines to remember. long monologues where it's just me talking. olivia had this great idea, though, and it's helping. i have my fiddle with me onstage and play it a bit while i'm talking. It's not written that way, but mr. davenport thinks it adds an extra-folksy element to have the stage manager plucking on a fiddle. and for me it's so great because whenever i need a second to remember my next line, i just start playing a little "soldier's joy" on my fiddle and it buys me some time.

i've gotten to know the kids in the show a lot better, especially the pink-haired girl who plays emily. turns out she's not nearly as stuck-up as i thought she was, given the crowd she hangs out with. her boyfriend's this built jock who's a big deal on the varsity sports circuit at school. it's a whole world that i have nothing to do with, so i'm kind of surprised that this miranda girl turns out to be kind of nice.

one day we're sitting on the floor backstage waiting for the tech guys to fix the main spotlight.

so how long have you and olivia been dating? she asks out of the blue.

about four months now, i say.

have you met her brother? she says casually.

it's so unexpected that i can't hide my surprise.

you know olivia's brother? i ask.

via didn't tell you? we used to be good friends. i've known auggie since he was a baby.

oh, yeah, i think i knew that, i answer. i don't want to let on that olivia had not told me any of this. i don't want to let on how surprised i am that she called her via. nobody but olivia's family calls her via, and here this pink-haired girl, who i thought was a stranger, is calling her via.

miranda laughs and shakes her head but she doesn't say anything. there's an awkward silence and then she starts fishing through her bag and pulls out her wallet. she rifles through a couple of pictures and then hands one to me. it's of a little boy in a park on a sunny day. he's wearing shorts and a t-shirt—and an astronaut helmet that covers his entire head.

it was like a hundred degrees that day, she says, smiling at the picture. but he wouldn't take that helmet off for anything. he wore it for like two years straight, in the winter, in the summer, at the beach. it was crazy.

yeah, i've seen pictures in olivia's house.

i'm the one who gave him that helmet, she says. she sounds a little proud of that. she takes the picture and carefully inserts it back into her wallet.

cool, i answer.

so you're okay with it? she says, looking at me.

i look at her blankly. okay with what?

she raises her eyebrows like she doesn't believe me. you know what i'm talking about, she says, and takes a long drink from her water bottle. let's face it, she continues, the universe was not kind to auggie pullman.

Bird

WHY DIDN'T YOU tell me that you and miranda navas used to be friends? i say to olivia the next day. i'm really annoyed at her for not telling me this.

it's not a big deal, she answers defensively, looking at me like i'm weird.

it is a big deal, i say. i looked like an idiot. how could you not tell me? you've always acted like you don't even know her.

i don't know her, she answers quickly. i don't know who that pink-haired cheerleader is. the girl i knew was a total dork who collected american girl dolls.

oh come on, olivia.

you come on!

you could have mentioned it to me at some point, i say quietly, pretending not to notice the big fat tear that's suddenly rolling down her cheek.

she shrugs, fighting back bigger tears.

it's okay, i'm not mad, i say, thinking the tears are about me.

i honestly don't care if you're mad, she says spitefully.

oh, that's real nice, i fire back.
she doesn't say anything. the tears are about to come.
olivia, what's the matter? i say.
she shakes her head like she doesn't want to talk about it,
but all of a sudden the tears start rolling a mile a minute.
i'm sorry, it's not you, justin. i'm not crying because of you,
she finally says through her tears.
then why are you crying?
because i'm an awful person.
what are you talking about?
she's not looking at me, wiping her tears with the palm of
her hand.
i haven't told my parents about the show, she says quickly.
i shake my head because i don't quite get what she's telling
me. that's okay, i say. it's not too late, there are still tickets avail-
able—
i don't want them to come to the show, justin, she interrupts
impatiently. don't you see what i'm saying? i don't want them to
come! if they come, they'll bring auggie with them, and i just
don't feel like ...
here she's hit by another round of crying that doesn't let her
finish talking. i put my arm around her.
i'm an awful person! she says through her tears.
you're not an awful person, i say softly.

yes i am! she sobs. it's just been so nice being in a new
school where nobody knows about him, you know? nobody's
whispering about it behind my back. it's just been so nice,
justin. but if he comes to the play, then everyone will talk about
it, everyone will know. ... i don't know why i'm feeling like this.
... i swear i've never been embarrassed by him before.
i know, i know, i say, soothing her. you're entitled, olivia.
you've dealt with a lot your whole life.
olivia reminds me of a bird sometimes, how her feathers get
all ruffled when she's mad. and when she's fragile like this, she's
a little lost bird looking for its nest.
so i give her my wing to hide under.

The Universe

I CAN'T SLEEP tonight. my head is full of thoughts that won't turn off. lines from my monologues. elements of the periodic table that i'm supposed to be memorizing. theorems i'm supposed to be understanding. olivia. auggie.

miranda's words keep coming back: the universe was not kind to auggie pullman.

i'm thinking about that a lot and everything it means. she's right about that. the universe was not kind to auggie pullman. what did that little kid ever do to deserve his sentence? what did the parents do? or olivia? she once mentioned that some doctor told her parents that the odds of someone getting the same combination of syndromes that came together to make auggie's face were like one in four million. so doesn't that make the universe a giant lottery, then? you purchase a ticket when you're born. and it's all just random whether you get a good ticket or a bad ticket. it's all just luck.

my head swirls on this, but then softer thoughts soothe, like a flattened third on a major chord. no, no, it's not all random, if it

really was all random, the universe would abandon us completely. and the universe doesn't. it takes care of its most fragile creations in ways we can't see. like with parents who adore you blindly. and a big sister who feels guilty for being human over you. and a little gravelly-voiced kid whose friends have left him over you. and even a pink-haired girl who carries your picture in her wallet. maybe it is a lottery, but the universe makes it all even out in the end. the universe takes care of all its birds.