

Nate came over and we had basically the same exact conversation. Then Isabel said: "Look, we're going to have a late-night dinner to celebrate the show. Are you feeling up to joining us? We'd love to have you!"

"Oh, no ...," I started to say.

"Pleeease?" said Auggie.

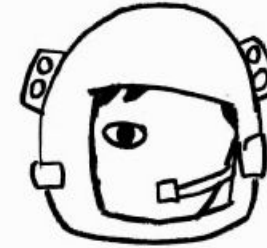
"I should go home," I said.

"We insist," said Nate.

By now Via and Justin had come over with Justin's mom, and Via put her arm around me.

"You're definitely coming," she said, smiling her old smile at me. They started leading me out of the crowd, and I have to admit, for the first time in a very, very long time, I felt absolutely happy.

Part Eight



AUGUST

You're gonna reach the sky

Fly . . . Beautiful child

—Eurythmics, "Beautiful Child"

The Fifth-Grade Nature Retreat

EVERY YEAR IN the spring, the fifth graders of Beecher Prep go away for three days and two nights to a place called the Broarwood Nature Reserve in Pennsylvania. It's a four-hour bus drive away. The kids sleep in cabins with bunk beds. There are campfires and s'mores and long walks through the woods. The teachers have been prepping us about this all year long, so all the kids in the grade are excited about it—except for me. And it's not even that I'm not excited, because I kind of am—it's just I've never slept away from home before and I'm kind of nervous.

Most kids have had sleepovers by the time they're my age. A lot of kids have gone to sleepaway camps, or stayed with their grandparents or whatever. Not me. Not unless you include hospital stays, but even then Mom or Dad always stayed with me overnight. But I never slept over Tata and Poppa's house, or Aunt Kate and Uncle Po's house. When I was really little, that was mainly because there were too many medical issues, like my trache tube needing to be cleared every hour, or reinserting my feeding tube if it got detached. But when I got bigger, I just

never felt like sleeping anywhere else. There was one time when I half slept over Christopher's house. We were about eight, and we were still best friends. Our family had gone for a visit to his house, and me and Christopher were having such a great time playing Legos *Star Wars* that I didn't want to leave when it was time to go. We were like, "Please, please, please can we have a sleepover?" So our parents said yes, and Mom and Dad and Via drove home. And me and Christopher stayed up till midnight playing, until Lisa, his mom, said: "Okay, guys, time to go to bed." Well, that's when I kind of panicked a bit. Lisa tried to help me go to sleep, but I just started crying that I wanted to go home. So at one a.m. Lisa called Mom and Dad, and Dad drove all the way back out to Bridgeport to pick me up. We didn't get home until three a.m. So my one and only sleepover, up until now, was pretty much of a disaster, which is why I'm a little nervous about the nature retreat.

On the other hand, I'm really excited.

Known For

I ASKED MOM to buy me a new rolling duffel bag because my old one had *Star Wars* stuff on it, and there was no way I was going to take that to the fifth-grade nature retreat. As much as I love *Star Wars*, I don't want that to be what I'm known for. Everyone's known for something in middle school. Like Reid is known for really being into marine life and the oceans and things like that. And Amos is known for being a really good baseball player. And Charlotte is known for having been in a TV commercial when she was six. And Ximena's known for being really smart.

My point is that in middle school you kind of get known for what you're into, and you have to be careful about stuff like that. Like Max G and Max W will never live down their Dungeons & Dragons obsession.

So I was actually trying to ease out of the whole *Star Wars* thing a bit. I mean, it'll always be special to me, like it is with the doctor who put in my hearing aids. It's just not the thing I wanted to be known for in middle school. I'm not sure what I want to be known for, but it's not that.

That's not exactly true: I do know what I'm *really* known for. But there's nothing I can do about that. A *Star Wars* duffel bag I could do something about.

Packing

MOM HELPED ME pack the night before the big trip. We put all the clothes I was taking on my bed, and she folded everything neatly and put it inside the bag while I watched. It was a plain blue rolling duffel, by the way: no logos or artwork.

“What if I can’t sleep at night?” I asked.

“Take a book with you. Then if you can’t sleep, you can pull out your flashlight, and read for a bit until you get sleepy,” she answered.

I nodded. “What if I have a nightmare?”

“Your teachers will be there, sweetie,” she said. “And Jack. And your friends.”

“I can bring Baboo,” I said. That was my favorite stuffed animal when I was little. A small black bear with a soft black nose.

“You don’t really sleep with him anymore, do you?” said Mom.

“No, but I keep him in my closet in case I wake up in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep,” I said. “I could hide him in my bag. No one would know.”

“Then let’s do that.” Mom nodded, getting Baboo from inside my closet.

“I wish they allowed cell phones,” I said.

“I know, me too!” she said. “Though I know you’re going to have a great time, Auggie. You sure you want me to pack Baboo?”

“Yeah, but way down where no one can see him,” I said.

She stuck Baboo deep inside the bag and then stuffed the last of my T-shirts on top of him. “So many clothes for just two days!”

“Three days and two nights,” I corrected her.

“Yep.” She nodded, smiling. “Three days and two nights.” She zipped up the duffel bag and picked it up. “Not too heavy. Try it.”

I picked up the bag. “Fine.” I shrugged.

She sat on the bed. “Hey, what happened to your *Empire Strikes Back* poster?”

“Oh, I took that down ages ago,” I answered.

She shook her head. “Huh, I didn’t notice that before.”

“I’m trying to, you know, change my image a bit,” I explained.

“Okay.” She smiled, nodding like she understood. “Anyway, honey, you have to promise me you won’t forget to put on the

bug spray, okay? On the legs, especially when you're hiking through the woods. It's right here in the front compartment."

"Uh-huh."

"And put on your sunscreen," she said. "You do not want to get a sunburn. And don't, I repeat, do *not* forget to take your hearing aids off if you go swimming."

"Would I get electrocuted?"

"No, but you'd be in real hot water with Daddy because those things cost a fortune!" she laughed. "I put the rain poncho in the front compartment, too. Same thing goes if it rains, Auggie, okay? Make sure you cover the hearing aids with the hood."

"Aye, aye, sir," I said, saluting.

She smiled and pulled me over.

"I can't believe how much you've grown up this year, Auggie," she said softly, putting her hands on the sides of my face.

"Do I look taller?"

"Definitely." She nodded.

"I'm still the shortest one in my grade."

"I'm not really even talking about your height," she said.

"Suppose I hate it there?"

"You're going to have a great time, Auggie."

I nodded. She got up and gave me a quick kiss on the forehead. "Okay, so I say we get to bed now."

"It's only nine o'clock, Mom!"

"Your bus leaves at six a.m. tomorrow. You don't want to be late. Come on. Chop chop. Your teeth are brushed?"

I nodded and climbed into bed. She started to lie down next to me.

"You don't need to put me to bed tonight, Mom," I said. "I'll read on my own till I get sleepy."

"Really?" She nodded, impressed. She squeezed my hand and gave it a kiss. "Okay then, goodnight, love. Have sweet dreams."

"You too."

She turned on the little reading light beside the bed.

"I'll write you letters," I said as she was leaving. "Even though I'll probably be home before you guys even get them."

"Then we can read them together," she said, and threw me a kiss.

When she left my room, I took my copy of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* off the night table and started reading until I fell asleep.

... though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation.

Daybreak

THE NEXT DAY I woke up really early. It was still dark inside my room and even darker outside, though I knew it would be morning soon. I turned over on my side but didn't feel at all sleepy. That's when I saw Daisy sitting near my bed. I mean, I knew it wasn't Daisy, but for a second I saw a shadow that looked just like her. I didn't think it was a dream then, but now, looking back, I know it must have been. It didn't make me sad to see her at all: it just filled me up with nice feelings inside. She was gone after a second, and I couldn't see her again in the darkness.

The room slowly started lightening. I reached for my hearing aid headband and put it on, and now the world was really awake. I could hear the garbage trucks clunking down the street and the birds in our backyard. And down the hallway I heard Mom's alarm beeping. Daisy's ghost made me feel super strong inside, knowing wherever I am, she'd be there with me.

I got up out of bed and went to my desk and wrote a little note to Mom. Then I went into the living room, where my

packed bag was by the door. I opened it up and fished inside until I found what I was looking for.

I took Baboo back to my room, and I laid him in my bed and taped the little note to Mom on his chest. And then I covered him with my blanket so Mom would find him later. The note read:

Dear Mom, I won't need Baboo, but if you miss me, you can cuddle with him yourself. XO Auggie

Day One

THE BUS RIDE went really fast. I sat by the window and Jack was next to me in the aisle seat. Summer and Maya were in front of us. Everyone was in a good mood. Kind of loud, laughing a lot. I noticed right away that Julian wasn't on our bus, even though Henry and Miles were. I figured he must be on the other bus, but then I overheard Miles tell Amos that Julian ditched the grade trip because he thought the whole nature-retreat thing was, quote unquote, dorky. I got totally pumped because dealing with Julian for three days in a row—and two nights—was a major reason that I was nervous about this whole trip. So now without him there, I could really just relax and not worry about anything.

We got to the nature reserve at around noon. The first thing we did was put our stuff down in the cabins. There were three bunk beds to every room, so me and Jack did rock, paper, scissors for the top bunk and I won. Woo-hoo. And the other guys in the room were Reid and Tristan, and Pablo and Nino.

After we had lunch in the main cabin, we all went on a two-hour guided nature hike through the woods. But these were not woods like the kind they have in Central Park: these were real woods. Giant trees that almost totally blocked out the sunlight. Tangles of leaves and fallen tree trunks. Howls and chirps and really loud bird calls. There was a slight fog, too, like a pale blue smoke all around us. So cool. The nature guide pointed everything out to us: the different types of trees we were passing, the insects inside the dead logs on the trail, the signs of deer and bears in the woods, what types of birds were whistling and where to look for them. I realized that my Lobot hearing aids actually made me hear better than most people, because I was usually the first person to hear a new bird call.

It started to rain as we headed back to camp. I pulled on my rain poncho and pulled the hood up so my hearing aids wouldn't get wet, but my jeans and shoes got soaked by the time we reached our cabins. Everyone got soaked. It was fun, though. We had a wet-sock fight in the cabin.

Since it rained for the rest of the day, we spent most of the afternoon goofing off in the rec room. They had a Ping-Pong table and old-style arcade games like *Pac-Man* and *Missile Command* that we played until dinnertime. Luckily, by then it had stopped raining, so we got to have a real campfire cookout. The log benches around the campfire were still a little damp, but we

threw our jackets over them and hung out by the fire, toasting s'mores and eating the best roasted hot dogs I have ever, ever tasted. Mom was right about the mosquitoes: there were tons of them. But luckily I had spritzed myself before I left the cabin, and I wasn't eaten alive like some of the other kids were.

I loved hanging out by the campfire after dark. I loved the way bits of fire dust would float up and disappear into the night air. And how the fire lit up people's faces. I loved the sound the fire made, too. And how the woods were so dark that you couldn't see anything around you, and you'd look up and see a billion stars in the sky. The sky doesn't look like that in North River Heights. I've seen it look like that in Montauk, though: like someone sprinkled salt on a shiny black table.

I was so tired when I got back to the cabin that I didn't need to pull out the book to read. I fell asleep almost as fast as my head hit the pillow. And maybe I dreamed about the stars, I don't know.

The Fairgrounds

THE NEXT DAY was just as great as the first day. We went horseback riding in the morning, and in the afternoon we rappelled up some ginormous trees with the help of the nature guides. By the time we got back to the cabins for dinner, we were all really tired again. After dinner they told us we had an hour to rest, and then we were going to take a fifteen-minute bus ride to the fairgrounds for an outdoor movie night.

I hadn't had the chance to write a letter to Mom and Dad and Via yet, so I wrote one telling them all about the stuff we did that day and the day before. I pictured myself reading it to them out loud when I got back, since there was just no way the letter would get home before I did.

When we got to the fairgrounds, the sun was just starting to set. It was about seven-thirty. The shadows were really long on the grass, and the clouds were pink and orange. It looked like someone had taken sidewalk chalk and smudged the colors across the sky with their fingers. It's not that I haven't seen nice sunsets before in the city, because I have—slivers of sunsets