

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

between buildings—but I wasn't used to seeing so much sky in every direction. Out here in the fairgrounds, I could understand why ancient people used to think the world was flat and the sky was a dome that closed in on top of it. That's what it looked like from the fairgrounds, in the middle of this huge open field.

Because we were the first school to arrive, we got to run around the field all we wanted until the teachers told us it was time to lay out our sleeping bags on the ground and get good viewing seats. We unzipped our bags and laid them down like picnic blankets on the grass in front of the giant movie screen in the middle of the field. Then we went to the row of food trucks parked at the edge of the field to load up on snacks and sodas and stuff like that. There were concession stands there, too, like at a farmers' market, selling roasted peanuts and cotton candy. And up a little farther was a short row of carnival-type stalls, the kind where you can win a stuffed animal if you throw a baseball into a basket. Jack and I both tried—and failed—to win anything, but we heard Amos won a yellow hippo and gave it to Ximena. That was the big gossip that went around: the jock and the brainiac.

From the food trucks, you could see the cornstalks in back of the movie screen. They covered about a third of the entire field. The rest of the field was completely surrounded by woods. As

the sun sank lower in the sky, the tall trees at the entrance to the woods looked dark blue.

By the time the other school buses pulled into the parking lots, we were back in our spots on the sleeping bags, right smack in front of the screen: the best seats in the whole field. Everyone was passing around snacks and having a great time. Me and Jack and Summer and Reid and Maya played Pictionary. We could hear the sounds of the other schools arriving, the loud laughing and talking of kids coming out on the field on both sides of us, but we couldn't really see them. Though the sky was still light, the sun had gone down completely, and everything on the ground had turned deep purple. The clouds were shadows now. We had trouble even seeing the Pictionary cards in front of us.

Just then, without any announcement, all the lights at the ends of the field went on at once. They were like big bright stadium lights. I thought of that scene in *Close Encounters* when the alien ship lands and they're playing that music: *duh-dah-doo-da-dunnn*. Everyone in the field started applauding and cheering like something great had just happened.

Be Kind to Nature

AN ANNOUNCEMENT CAME over the huge speakers next to the stadium lights:

“Welcome, everyone. Welcome to the twenty-third annual Big Movie Night at the Broarwood Nature Reserve. Welcome, teachers and students from ... MS 342: the William Heath School. ...” A big cheer went up on the left side of the field. “Welcome, teachers and students from Glover Academy. ...” Another cheer went up, this time from the right side of the field. “And welcome, teachers and students from ... the Beecher Prep School!” Our whole group cheered as loudly as we could. “We’re thrilled to have you as our guests here tonight, and thrilled that the weather is cooperating—in fact, can you believe what a beautiful night this is?” Again, everyone whooped and hollered. “So as we prepare the movie, we do ask that you take a few moments to listen to this important announcement. The Broarwood Nature Reserve, as you know, is dedicated to preserving our natural resources and the environment. We ask that you leave no litter behind. Clean up after yourselves. Be kind to nature and it

will be kind to you. We ask that you keep that in mind as you walk around the grounds. Do not venture beyond the orange cones at the edges of the fairgrounds. Do not go into the cornfields or the woods. Please keep the free roaming to a minimum. Even if you don’t feel like watching the movie, your fellow students may feel otherwise, so please be courteous: no talking, no playing music, no running around. The restrooms are located on the other side of the concession stands. After the movie is over, it will be quite dark, so we ask that all of you stay with your schools as you make your way back to your buses. Teachers, there’s usually at least one lost party on Big Movie Nights at Broarwood: don’t let it happen to you! Tonight’s movie presentation will be ... *The Sound of Music!*”

I immediately started clapping, even though I’d seen it a few times before, because it was Via’s favorite movie of all time. But I was surprised that a whole bunch of kids (not from Beecher) booed and hissed and laughed. Someone from the right side of the field even threw a soda can at the screen, which seemed to surprise Mr. Tushman. I saw him stand up and look in the direction of the can thrower, though I knew he couldn’t see anything in the dark.

The movie started playing right away. The stadium lights dimmed. Maria the nun was standing at the top of the mountain twirling around and around. It had gotten chilly all of a sudden,

so I put on my yellow Montauk hoodie and adjusted the volume on my hearing aids and leaned against my backpack and started watching.

The hills are alive ...

The Woods Are Alive

SOMEWHERE AROUND THE boring part where the guy named Rolf and the oldest daughter are singing *You are sixteen, going on seventeen*, Jack nudged me.

“Dude, I’ve got to pee,” he said.

We both got up and kind of hopscotched over the kids who were sitting or lying down on the sleeping bags. Summer waved as we passed and I waved back.

There were lots of kids from the other schools walking around by the food trucks, playing the carnival games, or just hanging out.

Of course, there was a huge line for the toilets.

“Forget this, I’ll just find a tree,” said Jack.

“That’s gross, Jack. Let’s just wait,” I answered.

But he headed off to the row of trees at the edge of the field, which was past the orange cones that we were specifically told not to go past. And of course I followed him. And of course we didn’t have our flashlights because we forgot to bring them. It was so dark now we literally couldn’t see ten steps ahead of us

as we walked toward the woods. Luckily, the movie gave off some light, so when we saw a flashlight coming toward us out of the woods, we knew immediately that it was Henry, Miles, and Amos. I guess they hadn't wanted to wait on line to use the toilets, either.

Miles and Henry were still not talking to Jack, but Amos had let go of the war a while ago. And he nodded hello to us as they passed by.

"Be careful of the bears!" shouted Henry, and he and Miles laughed as they walked away.

Amos shook his head at us like, Don't pay attention to them.

Jack and I walked a little farther until we were just inside the woods. Then Jack hunted around for the perfect tree and finally did his business, though it felt like he was taking forever.

The woods were loud with strange sounds and chirps and croaks, like a wall of noise coming out of the trees. Then we started hearing loud snaps not far from us, almost like cap gun pops, that definitely weren't insect noises. And far away, like in another world, we could hear *Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens*.

"Ah, that's much better," said Jack, zipping up.

"Now I have to pee," I said, which I did on the nearest tree. No way I was going farther in like Jack did.

"Do you smell that? Like firecrackers," he said, coming over to me.

"Oh yeah, that's what that is," I answered, zipping up. "Weird."

"Let's go."

Alien

WE HEADED BACK the way we came, in the direction of the giant screen. That's when we walked straight into a group of kids we didn't know. They'd just come out of the woods, doing stuff I'm sure they didn't want their teachers to know about. I could smell the smoke now, the smell of both firecrackers and cigarettes. They pointed a flashlight at us. There were six of them: four boys and two girls. They looked like they were in the seventh grade.

"What school are you from?" one of the boys called out.

"Beecher Prep!" Jack started to answer, when all of a sudden one of the girls started screaming.

"Oh my God!" she shrieked, holding her hand over her eyes like she was crying. I figured maybe a huge bug had just flown into her face or something.

"No way!" one of the boys cried out, and he started flicking his hand in the air like he'd just touched something hot. And then he covered his mouth. "No freakin' way, man! No freakin' way!"

All of them started half laughing and half covering their eyes now, pushing each other and cursing loudly.

"What is that?" said the kid who was pointing the flashlight at us, and it was only then that I realized that the flashlight was pointed right at my face, and what they were talking about—screaming about—was me.

"Let's get out of here," Jack said to me quietly, and he pulled me by my sweatshirt sleeve and started walking away from them.

"Wait wait wait!" yelled the guy with the flashlight, cutting us off. He pointed the flashlight right in my face again, and now he was only about five feet away. "Oh man! Oh man!!" he said, shaking his head, his mouth wide open. "What happened to your face?"

"Stop it, Eddie," said one of the girls.

"I didn't know we were watching *Lord of the Rings* tonight!" he said. "Look, guys, it's Gollum!"

This made his friends hysterical.

Again we tried to walk away from them, and again the kid named Eddie cut us off. He was at least a head taller than Jack, who was about a head taller than me, so the guy looked huge to me.

"No man, it's *Alien*!" said one of the other kids.

"No, no, no, man. It's an orc!" laughed Eddie, pointing the flashlight in my face again. This time he was right in front of us.

"Leave him alone, okay?" said Jack, pushing the hand holding the flashlight away.

"Make me," answered Eddie, pointing the flashlight in Jack's face now.

"What's your problem, dude?" said Jack.

"Your boyfriend's my problem!"

"Jack, let's just go," I said, pulling him by the arm.

"Oh man, it talks!" screamed Eddie, shining the flashlight in my face again. Then one of the other guys threw a firecracker at our feet.

Jack tried to push past Eddie, but Eddie shoved his hands into Jack's shoulders and pushed him hard, which made Jack fall backward.

"Eddie!" screamed one of the girls.

"Look," I said, stepping in front of Jack and holding my hands up in the air like a traffic cop. "We're a lot smaller than you guys ..."

"Are you talking to me, Freddie Krueger? I don't think you want to mess with me, you ugly freak," said Eddie. And this was the point where I knew I should run away as fast as I could, but Jack was still on the ground and I wasn't about to leave him.

"Yo, dude," said a new voice behind us. "What's up, man?"

Eddie spun around and pointed his flashlight toward the voice. For a second, I couldn't believe who it was.

"Leave them alone, dude," said Amos, with Miles and Henry right behind him.

"Says who?" said one of the guys with Eddie.

"Just leave them alone, dude," Amos repeated calmly.

"Are you a freak, too?" said Eddie.

"They're all a bunch of freaks!" said one of his friends.

Amos didn't answer them but looked at us. "Come on, guys, let's go. Mr. Tushman's waiting for us."

I knew that was a lie, but I helped Jack get up, and we started walking over to Amos. Then out of the blue, the Eddie guy grabbed my hood as I passed by him, yanking it really hard so I was pulled backward and fell flat on my back. It was a hard fall, and I hurt my elbow pretty bad on a rock. I couldn't really see what happened afterward, except that Amos rammed into the Eddie guy like a monster truck and they both fell down to the ground next to me.

Everything got really crazy after that. Someone pulled me up by my sleeve and yelled, "Run!" and someone else screamed, "Get 'em!" at the same time, and for a few seconds I actually had two people pulling the sleeves of my sweatshirt in opposite directions. I heard them both cursing, until my sweatshirt ripped and the first guy yanked me by my arm and started pulling me

behind him as we ran, which I did as fast as I could. I could hear footsteps just behind us, chasing us, and voices shouting and girls screaming, but it was so dark I didn't know whose voices they were, only that everything felt like we were underwater. We were running like crazy, and it was pitch black, and whenever I started to slow down, the guy pulling me by my arm would yell, "Don't stop!"

Voices in the Dark

FINALLY, AFTER WHAT seemed like a forever of running, someone yelled: "I think we lost them!"

"Amos?"

"I'm right here!" said Amos's voice a few feet behind us.

"We can stop!" Miles yelled from farther up.

"Jack!" I yelled.

"Whoa!" said Jack. "I'm here."

"I can't see a thing!"

"Are you sure we lost them?" Henry asked, letting go of my arm. That's when I realized that he'd been the one who was pulling me as we ran.

"Yeah."

"Shh! Let's listen!"

We all got super quiet, listening for footsteps in the dark. All we could hear were the crickets and frogs and our own crazy panting. We were out of breath, stomachs hurting, bodies bent over our knees.

"We lost them," said Henry.

"Whoa! That was intense!"

"What happened to the flashlight?"

"I dropped it!"

"How did you guys know?" said Jack.

"We saw them before."

"They looked like jerks."

"You just rammed into him!" I said to Amos.

"I know, right?" laughed Amos.

"He didn't even see it coming!" said Miles.

"He was like, 'Are you a freak, too?' and you were like, *bam!*" said Jack.

"Bam!" said Amos, throwing a fake punch in the air. "But after I tackled him, I was like, run, Amos, you schmuck, he's ten times bigger than you! And I got up and started running as fast as I could!"

We all started laughing.

"I grabbed Auggie and I was like, 'Run!'" said Henry.

"I didn't even know it was you pulling me!" I answered.

"That was wild," said Amos, shaking his head.

"Totally wild."

"Your lip is bleeding, dude."

"I got in a couple of good punches," answered Amos, wiping his lip.

"I think they were seventh graders."

"They were huge."

"Losers!" Henry shouted really loudly, but we all shushed him.

We listened for a second to make sure no one had heard him.

"Where the heck are we?" asked Amos. "I can't even see the screen."

"I think we're in the cornfields," answered Henry.

"Duh, we're in the cornfields," said Miles, pushing a cornstalk at Henry.

"Okay, I know exactly where we are," said Amos. "We have to go back in this direction. That'll take us to the other side of the field."

"Yo, dudes," said Jack, hand high in the air. "That was really cool of you guys to come back for us. Really cool. Thanks."

"No problem," answered Amos, high-fiving Jack. And then Miles and Henry high-fived him, too.

"Yeah, dudes, thanks," I said, holding my palm up like Jack just had, though I wasn't sure if they'd high-five me, too.

Amos looked at me and nodded. "It was cool how you stood your ground, little dude," he said, high-fiving me.

"Yeah, Auggie," said Miles, high-fiving me, too. "You were like, 'We're littler than you guys' ..."

"I didn't know what else to say!" I laughed.

“Very cool,” said Henry, and he high-fived me, too. “Sorry I ripped your sweatshirt.”

I looked down, and my sweatshirt was completely torn down the middle. One sleeve was ripped off, and the other was so stretched out it was hanging down to my knees.

“Hey, your elbow’s bleeding,” said Jack.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. It was starting to hurt a lot.

“You okay?” said Jack, seeing my face.

I nodded. Suddenly I felt like crying, and I was trying really hard not to do that.

“Wait, your hearing aids are gone!” said Jack.

“What!” I yelled, touching my ears. The hearing aid band was definitely gone. That’s why I felt like I was underwater! “Oh no!” I said, and that’s when I couldn’t hold it in anymore. Everything that had just happened kind of hit me and I couldn’t help it: I started to cry. Like big crying, what Mom would call “the waterworks.” I was so embarrassed I hid my face in my arm, but I couldn’t stop the tears from coming.

The guys were really nice to me, though. They patted me on the back.

“You’re okay, dude. It’s okay,” they said.

“You’re one brave little dude, you know that?” said Amos, putting his arm around my shoulders. And when I kept on cry-

ing, he put both his arms around me like my dad would have done and let me cry.

The Emperor's Guard

WE BACKTRACKED THROUGH the grass for a good ten minutes to see if we could find my hearing aids, but it was way too dark to see anything. We literally had to hold on to each other's shirts and walk in single file so we wouldn't trip over one another. It was like black ink had been poured all around.

"This is hopeless," said Henry. "They could be anywhere."

"Maybe we can come back with a flashlight," answered Amos.

"No, it's okay," I said. "Let's just go back. Thanks, though."

We walked back toward the cornfields, and then cut through them until the back of the giant screen came into view. Since it was facing away from us, we didn't get any light from the screen at all until we'd walked around to the edge of the woods again. That's where we finally started seeing a little light.

There was no sign of the seventh graders anywhere.

"Where do you think they went?" said Jack.

"Back to the food trucks," said Amos. "They're probably thinking we're going to report them."

"Are we?" asked Henry.

They looked at me. I shook my head.

"Okay," said Amos, "but, little dude, don't walk around here alone again, okay? If you need to go somewhere, tell us and we'll go with you."

"Okay." I nodded.

As we got closer to the screen, I could hear *High on a hill was a lonely goatherd*, and could smell the cotton candy from one of the concession stands near the food trucks. There were lots of kids milling around in this area, so I pulled what was left of my hoodie over my head and kept my face down, hands in pockets, as we made our way through the crowd. It had been a long time since I'd been out without my hearing aids, and it felt like I was miles under the earth. It felt like that song Miranda used to sing to me: *Ground Control to Major Tom, your circuit's dead, there's something wrong ...*

I did notice as I walked that Amos had stayed right next to me. And Jack was close on the other side of me. And Miles was in front of us and Henry was in back of us. They were surrounding me as we walked through the crowds of kids. Like I had my own emperor's guard.

Sleep

Then they came out of the narrow valley and at once she saw the reason. There stood Peter and Edmund and all the rest of Aslan's army fighting desperately against the crowd of horrible creatures whom she had seen last night; only now, in the daylight, they looked even stranger and more evil and more deformed.

I STOPPED THERE. I'd been reading for over an hour and sleep still didn't come. It was almost two a.m. Everyone else was asleep. I had my flashlight on under the sleeping bag, and maybe the light was why I couldn't sleep, but I was too afraid to turn it off. I was afraid of how dark it was outside the sleeping bag.

When we got back to our section in front of the movie screen, no one had even noticed we'd been gone. Mr. Tushman and Ms. Rubin and Summer and all the rest of the kids were just watching the movie. They had no clue how something bad had almost happened to me and Jack. It's so weird how that can be, how you could have a night that's the worst in your life, but to everybody else it's just an ordinary night. Like, on my calendar

at home, I would mark this as being one of the most horrific days of my life. This and the day Daisy died. But for the rest of the world, this was just an ordinary day. Or maybe it was even a good day. Maybe somebody won the lottery today.

Amos, Miles, and Henry brought me and Jack over to where we'd been sitting before, with Summer and Maya and Reid, and then they went and sat where they had been sitting before, with Ximena and Savanna and their group. In a way, everything was exactly as we had left it before we went looking for the toilets. The sky was the same. The movie was the same. Everyone's faces were the same. Mine was the same.

But something was different. Something had changed.

I could see Amos and Miles and Henry telling their group what had just happened. I knew they were talking about it because they kept looking over at me while they were talking. Even though the movie was still playing, people were whispering about it in the dark. News like that spreads fast.

It was what everyone was talking about on the bus ride back to the cabins. All the girls, even girls I didn't know very well, were asking me if I was okay. The boys were all talking about getting revenge on the group of seventh-grade jerks, trying to figure out what school they were from.

I wasn't planning on telling the teachers about any of what had happened, but they found out anyway. Maybe it was the torn

sweatshirt and the bloody elbow. Or maybe it's just that teachers hear everything.

When we got back to the camp, Mr. Tushman took me to the first-aid office, and while I was getting my elbow cleaned and bandaged up by the camp nurse, Mr. Tushman and the camp director were in the next room talking with Amos and Jack and Henry and Miles, trying to get a description of the troublemakers. When he asked me about them a little later, I said I couldn't remember their faces at all, which wasn't true.

It's their faces I kept seeing every time I closed my eyes to sleep. The look of total horror on the girl's face when she first saw me. The way the kid with the flashlight, Eddie, looked at me as he talked to me, like he hated me.

Like a lamb to the slaughter. I remember Dad saying that ages ago, but tonight I think I finally got what it meant.

Aftermath

MOM WAS WAITING for me in front of the school along with all the other parents when the bus arrived. Mr. Tushman told me on the bus ride home that they had called my parents to tell them there had been a "situation" the night before but that everyone was fine. He said the camp director and several of the counselors went looking for the hearing aid in the morning while we all went swimming in the lake, but they couldn't find it anywhere. Broarwood would reimburse us the cost of the hearing aids, he said. They felt bad about what happened.

I wondered if Eddie had taken my hearing aids with him as a kind of souvenir. Something to remember the orc.

Mom gave me a tight hug when I got off the bus, but she didn't slam me with questions like I thought she might. Her hug felt good, and I didn't shake it off like some of the other kids were doing with their parents' hugs.

The bus driver started unloading our duffel bags, and I went to find mine while Mom talked to Mr. Tushman and Ms. Rubin, who had walked over to her. As I rolled my bag toward her, a lot

of kids who don't usually say anything to me were nodding hello, or patting my back as I walked by them.

"Ready?" Mom said when she saw me. She took my duffel bag, and I didn't even try to hold on to it: I was fine with her carrying it. If she had wanted to carry me on her shoulders, I would have been fine with that, too, to be truthful.

As we started to walk away, Mr. Tushman gave me a quick, tight hug but didn't say anything.

Home

MOM AND I didn't talk much the whole walk home, and when we got to the front stoop, I automatically looked in the front bay window, because I forgot for a second that Daisy wasn't going to be there like always, perched on the sofa with her front paws on the windowsill, waiting for us to come home. It made me kind of sad when we walked inside. As soon as we did, Mom dropped my duffel bag and wrapped her arms around me and kissed me on my head and on my face like she was breathing me in.

"It's okay, Mom, I'm fine," I said, smiling.

She nodded and took my face in her hands. Her eyes were shiny.

"I know you are," she said. "I missed you so much, Auggie."

"I missed you, too."

I could tell she wanted to say a lot of things but she was stopping herself.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Starving. Can I have a grilled cheese?"

"Of course," she answered, and immediately started to make the sandwich while I took my jacket off and sat down at the kitchen counter.

"Where's Via?" I asked.

"She's coming home with Dad today. Boy, did she miss you, Auggie," Mom said.

"Yeah? She would have liked the nature reserve. You know what movie they played? *The Sound of Music*."

"You'll have to tell her that."

"So, do you want to hear about the bad part or the good part first?" I asked after a few minutes, leaning my head on my hand.

"Whatever you want to talk about," she answered.

"Well, except for last night, I had an awesome time," I said. "I mean, it was just awesome. That's why I'm so bummed. I feel like they ruined the whole trip for me."

"No, sweetie, don't let them do that to you. You were there for more than forty-eight hours, and that awful part lasted one hour. Don't let them take that away from you, okay?"

"I know." I nodded. "Did Mr. Tushman tell you about the hearing aids?"

"Yes, he called us this morning."

"Was Dad mad? Because they're so expensive?"

"Oh my gosh, of course not, Auggie. He just wanted to know that you were all right. That's all that matters to us. And that

you don't let those ... thugs ... ruin your trip."

I kind of laughed at the way she said the word "thugs."

"What?" she asked.

"Thugs," I teased her. "That's kind of an old-fashioned word."

"Okay, jerks. Morons. Imbeciles," she said, flipping over the sandwich in the pan. "*Cretinos*, as my mother would have said. Whatever you want to call them, if I saw them on the street, I would ..." She shook her head.

"They were pretty big, Mom." I smiled. "Seventh graders, I think."

She shook her head. "Seventh graders? Mr. Tushman didn't tell us that. Oh my goodness."

"Did he tell you how Jack stood up for me?" I said. "And Amos was like, bam, he rammed right into the leader. They both crashed to the ground, like in a real fight! It was pretty awesome. Amos's lip was bleeding and everything."

"He told us there was a fight, but ...," she said, looking at me with her eyebrows raised. "I'm just ... *phew* ... I'm just so grateful you and Amos and Jack are fine. When I think about what could have happened ...," she trailed off, flipping the grilled cheese again.

"My Montauk hoodie got totally shredded."

"Well, that can be replaced," she answered. She lifted the grilled cheese onto a plate and put the plate in front of me on

the counter. "Milk or white grape juice?"

"Chocolate milk, please?" I started devouring the sandwich. "Oh, can you do it that special way you make it, with the froth?"

"How did you and Jack end up at the edge of the woods in the first place?" she said, pouring the milk into a tall glass.

"Jack had to go to the bathroom," I answered, my mouth full. As I was talking, she spooned in the chocolate powder and started rolling a small whisk between her palms really fast. "But there was a huge line and he didn't want to wait. So we went toward the woods to pee." She looked up at me while she was whisking. I know she was thinking we shouldn't have done that. The chocolate milk in the glass now had a two-inch froth on top. "That looks good, Mom. Thanks."

"And then what happened?" she said, putting the glass in front of me.

I took a long drink of the chocolate milk. "Is it okay if we don't talk about it anymore right now?"

"Oh. Okay."

"I promise I'll tell you all about it later, when Dad and Via come home. I'll tell you all every detail. I just don't want to have to tell the whole story over and over, you know?"

"Absolutely."

I finished my sandwich in two more bites and gulped down the chocolate milk.

"Wow, you practically inhaled that sandwich. Do you want another one?" she said.

I shook my head and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Mom? Am I always going to have to worry about jerks like that?" I asked. "Like when I grow up, is it always going to be like this?"

She didn't answer right away, but took my plate and glass and put them in the sink and rinsed them with water.

"There are always going to be jerks in the world, Auggie," she said, looking at me. "But I really believe, and Daddy really believes, that there are more good people on this earth than bad people, and the good people watch out for each other and take care of each other. Just like Jack was there for you. And Amos. And those other kids."

"Oh yeah, Miles and Henry," I answered. "They were awesome, too. It's weird because Miles and Henry haven't even really been very nice to me at all during the year."

"Sometimes people surprise us," she said, rubbing the top of my head.

"I guess."

"Want another glass of chocolate milk?"

"No, I'm good," I said. "Thanks, Mom. Actually, I'm kind of tired. I didn't sleep too good last night."

"You should take a nap. Thanks for leaving me Baboo, by the way."

"You got my note?"

She smiled. "I slept with him both nights." She was about to say something else when her cell phone rang, and she answered. She started beaming as she listened. "Oh my goodness, really? What kind?" she said excitedly. "Yep, he's right here. He was about to take a nap. Want to say hi? Oh, okay, see you in two minutes." She clicked it off.

"That was Daddy," she said excitedly. "He and Via are just down the block."

"He's not at work?" I said.

"He left early because he couldn't wait to see you," she said. "So don't take a nap quite yet."

Five seconds later Dad and Via came through the door. I ran into Dad's arms, and he picked me up and spun me around and kissed me. He didn't let me go for a full minute, until I said, "Dad, it's okay." And then it was Via's turn, and she kissed me all over like she used to do when I was little.

It wasn't until she stopped that I noticed the big white cardboard box they had brought in with them.

"What is that?" I said.

"Open it," said Dad, smiling, and he and Mom looked at each other like they knew a secret.

"Come on, Auggie!" said Via.

I opened the box. Inside was the cutest little puppy I've ever seen in my life. It was black and furry, with a pointy little snout and bright black eyes and small ears that flopped down.