

Bear

WE CALLED THE puppy Bear because when Mom first saw him, she said he looked just like a little bear cub. I said: "That's what we should call him!" and everyone agreed that that was the perfect name.

I took the next day off from school—not because my elbow was hurting me, which it was, but so I could play with Bear all day long. Mom let Via stay home from school, too, so the two of us took turns cuddling with Bear and playing tug-of-war with him. We had kept all of Daisy's old toys, and we brought them out now, to see which ones he'd like best.

It was fun hanging out with Via all day, just the two of us. It was like old times, like before I started going to school. Back then, I couldn't wait for her to come home from school so she could play with me before starting her homework. Now that we're older, though, and I'm going to school and have friends of my own that I hang out with, we never do that anymore.

So it was nice hanging out with her, laughing and playing. I think she liked it, too.

The Shift

WHEN I WENT back to school the next day, the first thing I noticed was that there was a big shift in the way things were. A monumental shift. A seismic shift. Maybe even a cosmic shift. Whatever you want to call it, it was a big shift. Everyone—not just in our grade but every grade—had heard about what had happened to us with the seventh graders, so suddenly I wasn't known for what I'd always been known for, but for this other thing that had happened. And the story of what happened had gotten bigger and bigger each time it was told. Two days later, the way the story went was that Amos had gotten into a major fistfight with the kid, and Miles and Henry and Jack had thrown some punches at the other guys, too. And the escape across the field became this whole long adventure through a cornfield maze and into the deep dark woods. Jack's version of the story was probably the best because he's so funny, but in whatever version of the story, and no matter who was telling it, two things always stayed the same: I got picked on because of my face and Jack defended me, and those guys—Amos, Henry, and Miles—pro-

tected me. And now that they'd protected me, I was different to them. It was like I was one of them. They all called me "little dude" now—even the jocks. These big dudes I barely even knew before would knuckle-punch me in the hallways now.

Another thing to come out of it was that Amos became super popular and Julian, because he missed the whole thing, was really out of the loop. Miles and Henry were hanging out with Amos all the time now, like they switched best friends. I'd like to be able to say that Julian started treating me better, too, but that wouldn't be true. He still gave me dirty looks across the room. He still never talked to me or Jack. But he was the only one who was like that now. And me and Jack, we couldn't care less.

Ducks

THE DAY BEFORE the last day of school, Mr. Tushman called me into his office to tell me they had found out the names of the seventh graders from the nature retreat. He read off a bunch of names that didn't mean anything to me, and then he said the last name: "Edward Johnson."

I nodded.

"You recognize the name?" he said.

"They called him Eddie."

"Right. Well, they found this in Edward's locker." He handed me what was left of my hearing aid headband. The right piece was completely gone and the left one was mangled. The band that connected the two, the Lobot part, was bent down the middle.

"His school wants to know if you want to press charges," said Mr. Tushman.

I looked at my hearing aid.

"No, I don't think so." I shrugged. "I'm being fitted for new ones anyway."

"Hmm. Why don't you talk about it with your parents tonight? I'll call your mom tomorrow to talk about it with her, too."

"Would they go to jail?" I asked.

"No, not jail. But they'd probably go to juvie court. And maybe they'll learn a lesson that way."

"Trust me: that Eddie kid is not learning any lessons," I joked.

He sat down behind his desk.

"Auggie, why don't you sit down a second?" he said.

I sat down. All the things on his desk were the same as when I first walked into his office last summer: the same mirrored cube, the same little globe floating in the air. That felt like ages ago.

"Hard to believe this year's almost over, huh?" he said, almost like he was reading my mind.

"Yeah."

"Has it been a good year for you, Auggie? Has it been okay?"

"Yeah, it's been good." I nodded.

"I know academically it's been a great year for you. You're one of our top students. Congrats on the High Honor Roll."

"Thanks. Yeah, that's cool."

"But I know it's had its share of ups and downs," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Certainly, that night at the nature reserve

was one of the low points."

"Yeah." I nodded. "But it was also kind of good, too."

"In what way?"

"Well, you know, how people stood up for me and stuff?"

"That was pretty wonderful," he said, smiling.

"Yeah."

"I know in school things got a little hairy with Julian at times."

I have to admit: he surprised me with that one.

"You know about that stuff?" I asked him.

"Middle-school directors have a way of knowing about a lot of stuff."

"Do you have, like, secret security cameras in the hallways?" I joked.

"And microphones everywhere," he laughed.

"No, seriously?"

He laughed again. "No, not seriously."

"Oh!"

"But teachers know more than kids think, Auggie. I wish you and Jack had come to me about the mean notes that were left in your lockers."

"How do you know about that?" I said.

"I'm telling you: middle-school directors know *all*."

"It wasn't that big a deal," I answered. "And we wrote notes, too."

He smiled. "I don't know if it's public yet," he said, "though it will be soon anyway, but Julian Albans is not coming back to Beecher Prep next year."

"What!" I said. I honestly couldn't hide how surprised I was.

"His parents don't think Beecher Prep is a good fit for him," Mr. Tushman continued, raising his shoulders.

"Wow, that's big news," I said.

"Yeah, I thought you should know."

Then suddenly I noticed that the pumpkin portrait that used to be behind his desk was gone and my drawing, my *Self-Portrait as an Animal* that I drew for the New Year Art Show, was now framed and hanging behind his desk.

"Hey, that's mine!" I pointed.

Mr. Tushman turned around like he didn't know what I was talking about. "Oh, that's right!" he said, tapping his forehead. "I've been meaning to show this to you for months now."

"My self-portrait as a duck." I nodded.

"I love this piece, Auggie," he said. "When your art teacher showed it to me, I asked her if I could keep it for my wall. I hope that's okay with you."

"Oh, yeah! Sure. What happened to the pumpkin portrait?"

"Right behind you."

"Oh, yeah. Nice."

"I've been meaning to ask you since I hung this up ...," he said, looking at it. "Why did you choose to represent yourself as a duck?"

"What do you mean?" I answered. "That was the assignment."

"Yes, but why a duck?" he said. "Is it safe to assume that it was because of the story of the ... um, the duckling that turns into a swan?"

"No," I laughed, shaking my head. "It's because I think I look like a duck."

"Oh!" said Mr. Tushman, his eyes opening wide. He started laughing. "Really? Huh. Here I was looking for symbolism and metaphors and, um ... sometimes a duck is just a duck!"

"Yeah, I guess," I said, not quite getting why he thought that was so funny. He laughed to himself for a good thirty seconds.

"Anyway, Auggie, thanks for chatting with me," he said, finally. "I just want you to know it's truly a pleasure having you here at Beecher Prep, and I'm really looking forward to next year." He reached across the desk and we shook hands. "See you tomorrow at graduation."

"See you tomorrow, Mr. Tushman."

The Last Precept

THIS WAS WRITTEN on Mr. Browne's chalkboard when we walked into English class for the last time:

MR. BROWNE'S JUNE PRECEPT:

**JUST FOLLOW THE DAY AND REACH FOR
THE SUN!**

(The Polyphonic Spree)

Have a great summer vacation, Class 5B!

It's been a great year and you've been a wonderful group of students.

If you remember, please send me a postcard this summer with YOUR personal precept. It can be something you made up for yourself or something you've read somewhere that means something to you. (If so, don't forget

the attribution, please!) I really look forward to getting them.

**Tom Browne
563 Sebastian Place
Bronx, NY 10053**

The Drop-Off

THE GRADUATION CEREMONY was held in the Beecher Prep Upper School auditorium. It was only about a fifteen-minute walk from our house to the other campus building, but Dad drove me because I was all dressed up and had on new shiny black shoes that weren't broken in yet and I didn't want my feet to hurt. Students were supposed to arrive at the auditorium an hour before the ceremony started, but we got there even earlier, so we sat in the car and waited. Dad turned on the CD player, and our favorite song came on. We both smiled and started bobbing our heads to the music.

Dad sang along with the song: "*Andy would bicycle across town in the rain to bring you candy.*"

"Hey, is my tie on straight?" I said.

He looked and straightened it a tiny bit as he kept on singing: "*And John would buy the gown for you to wear to the prom ...*"

"Does my hair look okay?" I said.

He smiled and nodded. "Perfect," he said. "You look great, Auggie."

"Via put some gel in it this morning," I said, pulling down the sun visor and looking in the little mirror. "It doesn't look too puffy?"

"No, it's very, very cool, Auggie. I don't think you've ever had it this short before, have you?"

"No, I got it cut yesterday. I think it makes me look more grown-up, don't you?"

"Definitely!" He was smiling, looking at me and nodding. "*But I'm the luckiest guy on the Lower East Side, 'cause I got wheels, and you want to go for a ride.*"

"Look at you, Auggie!" he said, smiling from ear to ear. "Look at you, looking so grown-up and spiffy. I can't believe you're graduating from the fifth grade!"

"I know, it's pretty awesome, right?" I nodded.

"It feels like just yesterday that you started."

"Remember I still had that *Star Wars* braid hanging from the back of my head?"

"Oh my gosh, that's right," he said, rubbing his palm over his forehead.

"You hated that braid, didn't you, Dad?"

"Hate is too strong a word, but I definitely didn't love it."

"You hated it, come on, admit it," I teased.

"No, I didn't hate it." He smiled, shaking his head. "But I will admit to hating that astronaut helmet you used to wear, do

you remember?"

"The one Miranda gave me? Of course I remember! I used to wear that thing all the time."

"Good God, I hated that thing," he laughed, almost more to himself.

"I was so bummed when it got lost," I said.

"Oh, it didn't get lost," he answered casually. "I threw it out."

"Wait. What?" I said. I honestly didn't think I heard him right.

"The day is beautiful, and so are you," he was singing.

"Dad!" I said, turning the volume down.

"What?" he said.

"You threw it out?!"

He finally looked at my face and saw how mad I was. I couldn't believe he was being so matter-of-fact about the whole thing. I mean, to me this was a major revelation, and he was acting like it was no big deal.

"Auggie, I couldn't stand seeing that thing cover your face anymore," he said clumsily.

"Dad, I loved that helmet! It meant a lot to me! I was bummed beyond belief when it got lost—don't you remember?"

"Of course I remember, Auggie," he said softly. "Ohh, Auggie, don't be mad. I'm sorry. I just couldn't stand seeing you

wear that thing on your head anymore, you know? I didn't think it was good for you." He was trying to look me in the eye, but I wouldn't look at him.

"Come on, Auggie, please try to understand," he continued, putting his hand under my chin and tilting my face toward him. "You were wearing that helmet all the time. And the real, real, real truth is: I missed seeing your face, Auggie. I know *you* don't always love it, but you have to understand ... I love it. I love this face of yours, Auggie, completely and passionately. And it kind of broke my heart that you were always covering it up."

He was squinting at me like he really wanted me to understand.

"Does Mom know?" I said.

He opened his eyes wide. "No way. Are you kidding? She would have killed me!"

"She tore the place apart looking for that helmet, Dad," I said. "I mean, she spent like a week looking for it in every closet, in the laundry room, everywhere."

"I know!" he said, nodding. "That's why she'd kill me!"

And then he looked at me, and something about his expression made me start laughing, which made him open his mouth wide like he'd just realized something.

"Wait a minute, Auggie," he said, pointing his finger at me.

"You have to promise me you will *never* tell Mommy anything

about this."

I smiled and rubbed my palms together like I was about to get very greedy.

"Let's see," I said, stroking my chin. "I'll be wanting that new Xbox when it comes out next month. And I'll definitely be wanting my own car in about six years, a red Porsche would be nice, and ..."

He started laughing. I love it when I'm the one who makes Dad laugh, since he's usually the funnyman that gets everybody else laughing.

"Oh boy, oh boy," he said, shaking his head. "You really have grown up."

The part of the song we love to sing the most started to play, and I turned up the volume. We both started singing.

"I'm the ugliest guy on the Lower East Side, but I've got wheels and you want to go for a ride. Want to go for a ride. Want to go for a ride. Want to go for a riinnnnnnnnide."

We always sang this last part at the top of our lungs, trying to hold that last note as long as the guy who sang the song, which always made us crack up. While we were laughing, we noticed Jack had arrived and was walking over to our car. I started to get out.

"Hold on," said Dad. "I just want to make sure you've forgiven me, okay?"

"Yes, I forgive you."

He looked at me gratefully. "Thank you."

“But don’t ever throw anything else of mine out again without telling me!”

"I promise."

I opened the door and got out just as Jack reached the car.

“Hey, Jack,” I said.

"Hey, Auggie. Hey, Mr. Pullman," said Jack.

"How you doin', Jack?" said Dad.

"See you later, Dad," I said, closing the door.

“Good luck, guys!” Dad called out, rolling down the front window. “See you on the other side of fifth grade!”

We waved as he turned on the ignition and started to pull away, but then I ran over and he stopped the car. I put my head in the window so Jack wouldn't hear what I was saying.

“Can you guys not kiss me a lot after graduation?” I asked quietly. “It’s kind of embarrassing.”

"I'll try my best."

"Tell Mom, too?"

"I don't think she'll be able to resist, Auggie, but I'll pass it along."

"Bye, dear ol' Dad."

He smiled. "Bye, my son, my son."

Take Your Seats, Everyone

JACK AND I walked right behind a couple of sixth graders into the building, and then followed them to the auditorium.

Mrs. G was at the entrance, handing out the programs and telling kids where to go.

"Fifth graders down the aisle to the left," she said. "Sixth graders go to the right. Everyone come in. Come in. Good morning. Go to your staging areas. Fifth graders to the left, sixth grade to the right ..."

The auditorium was huge inside. Big sparkly chandeliers. Red velvet walls. Rows and rows and rows of cushioned seats leading up to the giant stage. We walked down the wide aisle and followed the signs to the fifth-grade staging area, which was in a big room to the left of the stage. Inside were four rows of folding chairs facing the front of the room, which is where Ms. Rubin was standing, waving us in as soon as we walked in the room.

"Okay, kids, take your seats. Take your seats," she was saying, pointing to the rows of chairs. "Don't forget, you're sitting

alphabetically. Come on, everybody, take your seats." Not too many kids had arrived yet, though, and the ones who had weren't listening to her. Me and Jack were sword-fighting with our rolled-up programs.

"Hey, guys."

It was Summer walking over to us. She was wearing a light pink dress and, I think, a little makeup.

"Wow, Summer, you look awesome," I told her, because she really did.

"Really? Thanks, you do, too, Auggie."

"Yeah, you look okay, Summer," said Jack, kind of matter-of-factly. And for the first time, I realized that Jack had a crush on her.

"This is so exciting, isn't it?" said Summer.

"Yeah, kind of," I answered, nodding.

"Oh man, look at this program," said Jack, scratching his forehead. "We're going to be here all freakin' day."
I looked at my program.

Headmaster's Opening Remarks:

Dr. Harold Jansen

Middle-School Director's Address:

Mr. Lawrence Tushman

“Light and Day”:

Middle-School Choir

Fifth-Grade Student Commencement Address:

Ximena Chin

Pachelbel: “Canon in D”:

Middle-School Chamber Music Ensemble

Sixth-Grade Student Commencement Address:

Mark Antoniak

“Under Pressure”:

Middle-School Choir

Middle-School Dean’s Address:

Ms. Jennifer Rubin

Awards Presentation (see back)

Roll Call of Names

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

“Because Mr. Jansen’s speeches go on forever,” said Jack.
“He’s even worse than Tushman!”

“My mom said she actually dozed off when he spoke last year,” Summer added.

“What’s the awards presentation?” I asked.

“That’s where they give medals to the biggest brainiacs,” Jack answered. “Which would mean Charlotte and Ximena will win everything in the fifth grade, like they won everything in the fourth grade and in the third grade.”

“Not in the second grade?” I laughed.

“They didn’t give those awards out in the second grade,” he answered.

“Maybe you’ll win this year,” I joked.

“Not unless they give awards for the most Cs!” he laughed.

“Everybody, take your seats!” Ms. Rubin started yelling louder now, like she was getting annoyed that nobody was listening. “We have a lot to get through, so take your seats. Don’t forget you’re sitting in alphabetical order! A through G is the first row! H through N is the second row; O through Q is the third row; R through Z is the last row. Let’s go, people.”

“We should go sit down,” said Summer, walking toward the front section.

“You guys are definitely coming over my house after this, right?” I called out after her.

“Definitely!” she said, taking her seat next to Ximena Chin.

“When did Summer get so hot?” Jack muttered in my ear.

“Shut up, dude,” I said, laughing as we headed toward the third row.

“Seriously, when did that happen?” he whispered, taking the seat next to mine.

“Mr. Will!” Ms. Rubin shouted. “Last time I checked, *W* came between *R* and *Z*, yes?”

Jack looked at her blankly.

“Dude, you’re in the wrong row!” I said.

“I am?” And the face he made as he got up to leave, which was a mixture of looking completely confused and looking like he’s just played a joke on someone, totally cracked me up.

A Simple Thing

ABOUT AN HOUR later we were all seated in the giant auditorium waiting for Mr. Tushman to give his “middle-school address.” The auditorium was even bigger than I imagined it would be—bigger even than the one at Via’s school. I looked around, and there must have been a million people in the audience. Okay, maybe not a million, but definitely a lot.

“Thank you, Headmaster Jansen, for those very kind words of introduction,” said Mr. Tushman, standing behind the podium on the stage as he talked into the microphone. “Welcome, my fellow teachers and members of the faculty. ...

“Welcome, parents and grandparents, friends and honored guests, and most especially, welcome to my fifth- and sixth-grade students. ...

“Welcome to the Beecher Prep Middle School graduation ceremonies!!!”

Everyone applauded.

“Every year,” continued Mr. Tushman, reading from his notes with his reading glasses way down on the tip of his nose, “I am

charged with writing two commencement addresses: one for the fifth- and sixth-grade graduation ceremony today, and one for the seventh- and eighth-grade ceremony that will take place tomorrow. And every year I say to myself, Let me cut down on my work and write just one address that I can use for both situations. Seems like it shouldn't be such a hard thing to do, right? And yet each year I still end up with two different speeches, no matter what my intentions, and I finally figured out why this year. It's not, as you might assume, simply because tomorrow I'll be talking to an older crowd with a middle-school experience that is largely behind them—whereas your middle-school experience is largely in front of you. No, I think it has to do more with this particular age that you are right now, this particular moment in your lives that, even after twenty years of my being around students this age, still moves me. Because you're at the cusp, kids. You're at the edge between childhood and everything that comes after. You're in transition.

"We are all gathered here together," Mr. Tushman continued, taking off his glasses and using them to point at all of us in the audience, "all your families, friends, and teachers, to celebrate not only your achievements of this past year, Beecher middle schoolers—but your endless possibilities.

"When you reflect on this past year, I want you all to look at where you are now and where you've been. You've all gotten a

little taller, a little stronger, a little smarter ... I hope."

Here some people in the audience chuckled.

"But the best way to measure how much you've grown isn't by inches or the number of laps you can now run around the track, or even your grade point average—though those things are important, to be sure. It's what you've done with your time, how you've chosen to spend your days, and whom you have touched this year. That, to me, is the greatest measure of success.

"There's a wonderful line in a book by J. M. Barrie—and no, it's not *Peter Pan*, and I'm not going to ask you to clap if you believe in fairies...."

Here everyone laughed again.

"But in another book by J. M. Barrie called *The Little White Bird* ... he writes ..." He started flipping through a small book on the podium until he found the page he was looking for, and then he put on his reading glasses. "Shall we make a new rule of life ... always to try to be a little kinder than is necessary?"

Here Mr. Tushman looked up at the audience. "Kinder than is necessary," he repeated. "What a marvelous line, isn't it? Kinder than is *necessary*. Because it's not enough to be kind. One should be kinder than needed. Why I love that line, that concept, is that it reminds me that we carry with us, as human beings, not just the capacity to be kind, but the very choice of kindness. And what does that mean? How is that measured? You can't use a

yardstick. It's like I was saying just before: it's not like measuring how much you've grown in a year. It's not exactly quantifiable, is it? How do we know we've been kind? What is being kind, anyway?"

He put on his reading glasses again and started flipping through another small book.

"There's another passage in a different book I'd like to share with you," he said. "If you'll bear with me while I find it. ... Ah, here we go. In *Under the Eye of the Clock*, by Christopher Nolan, the main character is a young man who is facing some extraordinary challenges. There's this one part where someone helps him: a kid in his class. On the surface, it's a small gesture. But to this young man, whose name is Joseph, it's ... well, if you'll permit me ..."

He cleared his throat and read from the book: "It was at moments such as these that Joseph recognized the face of God in human form. It glimmered in their kindness to him, it glowed in their keenness, it hinted in their caring, indeed it caressed in their gaze."

He paused and took off his reading glasses again.

"It glimmered in their kindness to him," he repeated, smiling. "Such a simple thing, kindness. Such a simple thing. A nice word of encouragement given when needed. An act of friendship. A passing smile."

He closed the book, put it down, and leaned forward on the podium.

"Children, what I want to impart to you today is an understanding of the value of that simple thing called kindness. And that's all I want to leave you with today. I know I'm kind of infamous for my ... um ... verbosity ..."

Here everybody laughed again. I guess he knew he was known for his long speeches.

"... but what I want you, my students, to take away from your middle-school experience," he continued, "is the sure knowledge that, in the future you make for yourselves, anything is possible. If every single person in this room made it a rule that wherever you are, whenever you can, you will try to act a little kinder than is necessary—the world really would be a better place. And if you do this, if you act just a little kinder than is necessary, someone else, somewhere, someday, may recognize in you, in every single one of you, the face of God."

He paused and shrugged.

"Or whatever politically correct spiritual representation of universal goodness you happen to believe in," he added quickly, smiling, which got a lot of laughs and loads of applause, especially from the back of the auditorium, where the parents were sitting.