

Awards

I LIKED MR. TUSHMAN'S speech, but I have to admit: I kind of zoned out a little during some of the other speeches.

I tuned in again as Ms. Rubin started reading off the names of the kids who'd made the High Honor Roll because we were supposed to stand up when our names were called. So I waited and listened for my name as she went down the list alphabetically. Reid Kingsley. Maya Markowitz. August Pullman. I stood up. Then when she finished reading off the names, she asked us all to face the audience and take a bow, and everyone applauded.

I had no idea where in that huge crowd my parents might be sitting. All I could see were the flashes of light from people taking photos and parents waving at their kids. I pictured Mom waving at me from somewhere even though I couldn't see her.

Then Mr. Tushman came back to the podium to present the medals for academic excellence, and Jack was right: Ximena Chin won the gold medal for "overall academic excellence in the fifth grade." Charlotte won the silver. Charlotte also won a gold medal for music. Amos won the medal for overall excellence in

sports, which I was really happy about because, ever since the nature retreat, I considered Amos to be like one of my best friends in school. But I was really, really thrilled when Mr. Tushman called out Summer's name for the gold medal in creative writing. I saw Summer put her hand over her mouth when her name was called, and when she walked up onto the stage, I yelled: "Woo-hoo, Summer!" as loudly as I could, though I don't think she heard me.

After the last name was called, all the kids who'd just won awards stood next to each other onstage, and Mr. Tushman said to the audience: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am very honored to present to you this year's Beecher Prep School scholastic achievers. Congratulations to all of you!"

I applauded as the kids onstage bowed. I was so happy for Summer.

"The final award this morning," said Mr. Tushman, after the kids onstage had returned to their seats, "is the Henry Ward Beecher medal to honor students who have been notable or exemplary in certain areas throughout the school year. Typically, this medal has been our way of acknowledging volunteerism or service to the school."

I immediately figured Charlotte would get this medal because she organized the coat drive this year, so I kind of zoned out a

bit again. I looked at my watch: 10:56. I was getting hungry for lunch already.

“... Henry Ward Beecher was, of course, the nineteenth-century abolitionist—and fiery sermonizer for human rights—after whom this school was named,” Mr. Tushman was saying when I started paying attention again.

“While reading up on his life in preparation for this award, I came upon a passage that he wrote that seemed particularly consistent with the themes I touched on earlier, themes I’ve been ruminating upon all year long. Not just the nature of kindness, but the nature of *one’s* kindness. The power of *one’s* friendship. The test of *one’s* character. The strength of *one’s* courage—”

And here the weirdest thing happened: Mr. Tushman’s voice cracked a bit, like he got all choked up. He actually cleared his throat and took a big sip of water. I started paying attention, for real now, to what he was saying.

“The strength of *one’s* courage,” he repeated quietly, nodding and smiling. He held up his right hand like he was counting off. “Courage. Kindness. Friendship. Character. These are the qualities that define us as human beings, and propel us, on occasion, to greatness. And this is what the Henry Ward Beecher medal is about: recognizing greatness.

“But how do we do that? How do we measure something like greatness? Again, there’s no yardstick for that kind of thing.

How do we even define it? Well, Beecher actually had an answer for that.”

He put his reading glasses on again, leafed through a book, and started to read. “‘Greatness,’ wrote Beecher, ‘lies not in being strong, but in the right using of strength. ... He is the greatest whose strength carries up the most hearts ...’”

And again, out of the blue, he got all choked up. He put his two index fingers over his mouth for a second before continuing.

“‘He is the greatest,’” he finally continued, “‘whose strength carries up the most hearts by the attraction of his own.’ Without further ado, this year I am very proud to award the Henry Ward Beecher medal to the student whose quiet strength has carried up the most hearts.

“So will August Pullman please come up here to receive this award?”

Floating

PEOPLE STARTED APPLAUDING before Mr. Tushman's words actually registered in my brain. I heard Maya, who was next to me, give a little happy scream when she heard my name, and Miles, who was on the other side of me, patted my back. "Stand up, get up!" said kids all around me, and I felt lots of hands pushing me upward out of my seat, guiding me to the edge of the row, patting my back, high-fiving me. "Way to go, Auggie!" "Nice going, Auggie!" I even started hearing my name being chanted: "Auggie! Auggie! Aug-gie!" I looked back and saw Jack leading the chant, fist in the air, smiling and signaling for me to keep going, and Amos shouting through his hands: "Woo-hoo, little dude!"

Then I saw Summer smiling as I walked past her row, and when she saw me look at her, she gave me a secret little thumbs-up and mouthed a silent "cool beans" to me. I laughed and shook my head like I couldn't believe it. I really couldn't believe it.

I think I was smiling. Maybe I was beaming, I don't know. As I walked up the aisle toward the stage, all I saw was a blur of

happy bright faces looking at me, and hands clapping for me. And I heard people yelling things out at me: "You deserve it, Auggie!" "Good for you, Auggie!" I saw all my teachers in the aisle seats, Mr. Browne and Ms. Petosa and Mr. Roche and Mrs. Atanabi and Nurse Molly and all the others: and they were cheering for me, *woo-hooing* and whistling.

I felt like I was floating. It was so weird. Like the sun was shining full force on my face and the wind was blowing. As I got closer to the stage, I saw Ms. Rubin waving at me in the front row, and then next to her was Mrs. G, who was crying hysterically—a happy crying—smiling and clapping the whole time. And as I walked up the steps to the stage, the most amazing thing happened: everyone started standing up. Not just the front rows, but the whole audience suddenly got up on their feet, whooping, hollering, clapping like crazy. It was a standing ovation. For me.

I walked across the stage to Mr. Tushman, who shook my hand with both his hands and whispered in my ear: "Well done, Auggie." Then he placed the gold medal over my head, just like they do in the Olympics, and had me turn to face the audience. It felt like I was watching myself in a movie, almost, like I was someone else. It was like that last scene in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* when Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Chewbacca are being applauded for destroying the Death Star. I could almost

hear the *Star Wars* theme music playing in my head as I stood on the stage.

I wasn't even sure why I was getting this medal, really.

No, that's not true. I knew why.

It's like people you see sometimes, and you can't imagine what it would be like to be that person, whether it's somebody in a wheelchair or somebody who can't talk. Only, I know that I'm that person to other people, maybe to every single person in that whole auditorium.

To me, though, I'm just me. An ordinary kid.

But hey, if they want to give me a medal for being me, that's okay. I'll take it. I didn't destroy a Death Star or anything like that, but I did just get through the fifth grade. And that's not easy, even if you're not me.

Pictures

AFTERWARD THERE WAS a reception for the fifth and sixth graders under a huge white tent in the back of the school. All the kids found their parents, and I didn't mind at all when Mom and Dad hugged me like crazy, or when Via wrapped her arms around me and swung me left and right about twenty times. Then Poppa and Tata hugged me, and Aunt Kate and Uncle Po, and Uncle Ben—everyone kind of teary-eyed and wet-cheeked. But Miranda was the funniest: she was crying more than anyone and squeezed me so tight that Via had to practically pry her off of me, which made them both laugh.

Everyone started taking pictures of me and pulling out their Flips, and then Dad got me, Summer, and Jack together for a group shot. We put our arms around each other's shoulders, and for the first time I can remember, I wasn't even thinking about my face. I was just smiling a big fat happy smile for all the different cameras clicking away at me. *Flash, flash, click, click*: smiling away as Jack's parents and Summer's mom started clicking. Then Reid and Maya came over. *Flash, flash, click, click*. And then

Charlotte came over and asked if she could take a picture with us, and we were like, “Sure, of course!” And then Charlotte’s parents were snapping away at our little group along with everyone else’s parents.

And the next thing I knew, the two Maxes had come over, and Henry and Miles, and Savanna. Then Amos came over, and Ximena. And we were all in this big tight huddle as parents clicked away like we were on a red carpet somewhere. Luca. Isaiah. Nino. Pablo. Tristan. Ellie. I lost track of who else came over. Everybody, practically. All I knew for sure is that we were all laughing and squeezing in tight against each other, and no one seemed to care if it was my face that was next to theirs or not. In fact, and I don’t mean to brag here, but it kind of felt like everyone wanted to get close to me.

The Walk Home

WE WALKED TO our house for cake and ice cream after the reception. Jack and his parents and his little brother, Jamie. Summer and her mother. Uncle Po and Aunt Kate. Uncle Ben, Tata and Poppa. Justin and Via and Miranda. Mom and Dad.

It was one of those great June days when the sky is completely blue and the sun is shining but it isn’t so hot that you wish you were on the beach instead. It was just the perfect day. Everyone was happy. I still felt like I was floating, the *Star Wars* hero music in my head.

I walked with Summer and Jack, and we just couldn’t stop cracking up. Everything made us laugh. We were in that giggly kind of mood where all someone has to do is look at you and you start laughing.

I heard Dad’s voice up ahead and looked up. He was telling everyone a funny story as they walked down Amesfort Avenue. The grown-ups were all laughing, too. It was like Mom always said: Dad could be a comedian.

I noticed Mom wasn't walking with the group of grown-ups, so I looked behind me. She was hanging back a bit, smiling to herself like she was thinking of something sweet. She seemed happy.

I took a few steps back and surprised her by hugging her as she walked. She put her arm around me and gave me a squeeze.

"Thank you for making me go to school," I said quietly.

She hugged me close and leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"Thank you, Auggie," she answered softly.

"For what?"

"For everything you've given us," she said. "For coming into our lives. For being you."

She bent down and whispered in my ear. "You really are a wonder, Auggie. You are a wonder."

APPENDIX

MR. BROWNE'S PRECEPTS

SEPTEMBER

When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind. —Dr. Wayne W. Dyer

OCTOBER

Your deeds are your monuments. —inscription on an Egyptian tomb

NOVEMBER

Have no friends not equal to yourself. —Confucius

DECEMBER

Audentes fortuna iuvat. (Fortune favors the bold.) —Virgil

JANUARY

No man is an island, entire of itself. —John Donne

FEBRUARY

It is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers. —James Thurber

MARCH

Kind words do not cost much. Yet they accomplish much. —
Blaise Pascal

APRIL

What is beautiful is good, and who is good will soon be beautiful. —Sappho

MAY

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as you ever can.
—John Wesley's Rule

JUNE

Just follow the day and reach for the sun! —The Polyphonic
Spree, "Light and Day"

POSTCARD PRECEPTS

CHARLOTTE CODY'S PRECEPT

It's not enough to be friendly. You have to be a friend.

REID KINGSLEY'S PRECEPT

Save the oceans, save the world! —Me!

TRISTAN FIEDLEHOLTZEN'S PRECEPT

If you really want something in this life, you have to work for it.
Now quiet, they're about to announce the lottery numbers! —
Homer Simpson

SAVANNA WITTENBERG'S PRECEPT

Flowers are great, but love is better. —Justin Bieber

HENRY JOPLIN'S PRECEPT

Don't be friends with jerks. —Henry Joplin

MAYA MARKOWITZ'S PRECEPT

All you need is love. —The Beatles

AMOS CONTI'S PRECEPT

Don't try too hard to be cool. It always shows, and that's uncool.
—Amos Conti

XIMENA CHIN'S PRECEPT

To thine own self be true. —*Hamlet*, Shakespeare

JULIAN ALBANS'S PRECEPT

Sometimes it's good to start over. —Julian Albans

SUMMER DAWSON'S PRECEPT

If you can get through middle school without hurting anyone's feelings, that's really cool beans. —Summer Dawson

JACK WILL'S PRECEPT

Keep calm and carry on! —some saying from World War II

AUGUST PULLMAN'S PRECEPT

Everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their life because we all overcometh the world. —Auggie

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