

But I could tell from the way he looked at me that he wasn't really sorry at all.

The Deal

MOM AND MR. TUSHMAN were talking when we got back to the office. Mrs. Garcia was the first to see us come back, and she started smiling her shiny smile as we walked in.

"So, August, what did you think? Did you like what you saw?" she asked.

"Yeah." I nodded, looking over at Mom.

Jack, Julian, and Charlotte were standing by the door, not sure where to go or if they were still needed. I wondered what else they'd been told about me before they'd met me.

"Did you see the baby chick?" Mom asked me.

As I shook my head, Julian said: "Are you talking about the baby chicks in science? Those get donated to a farm at the end of every school year."

"Oh," said Mom, disappointed.

"But they hatch new ones every year in science," Julian added. "So August will be able to see them again in the spring."

"Oh, good," said Mom, eyeing me. "They were so cute, August."

I wished she wouldn't talk to me like I was a baby in front of other people.

"So, August," said Mr. Tushman, "did these guys show you around enough or do you want to see more? I realize I forgot to ask them to show you the gym."

"We did anyway, Mr. Tushman," said Julian.

"Excellent!" said Mr. Tushman.

"And I told him about the school play and some of the electives," said Charlotte. "Oh no!" she said suddenly. "We forgot to show him the art room!"

"That's okay," said Mr. Tushman.

"But we can show it to him now," Charlotte offered.

"Don't we have to pick Via up soon?" I said to Mom.

That was our signal for my telling Mom if I really wanted to leave.

"Oh, you're right," said Mom, getting up. I could tell she was pretending to check the time on her watch. "I'm sorry, everybody. I lost track of the time. We have to go pick up my daughter at her new school. She's taking an unofficial tour today." This part wasn't a lie: that Via was checking out her new school today. The part that was a lie was that we were picking her up at the school, which we weren't. She was coming home with Dad later.

"Where does she go to school?" asked Mr. Tushman, getting up.

"She's starting Faulkner High School this fall."

"Wow, that's not an easy school to get into. Good for her!"

"Thank you," said Mom, nodding. "It'll be a bit of a schlep, though. The A train down to Eighty-Sixth, then the crosstown bus all the way to the East Side. Takes an hour that way but it's just a fifteen-minute drive."

"It'll be worth it. I know a couple of kids who got into Faulkner and love it," said Mr. Tushman.

"We should really go, Mom," I said, tugging at her pocketbook.

We said goodbye kind of quickly after that. I think Mr. Tushman was a little surprised that we were leaving so suddenly, and then I wondered if he would blame Jack and Charlotte, even though it was really only Julian who made me feel kind of bad.

"Everyone was really nice," I made sure to tell Mr. Tushman before we left.

"I look forward to having you as a student," said Mr. Tushman, patting my back.

"Bye," I said to Jack, Charlotte, and Julian, but I didn't look at them—or look up at all—until I left the building.

Home

AS SOON AS we had walked at least half a block from the school, Mom said: "So ... how'd it go? Did you like it?"

"Not yet, Mom. When we get home," I said.

The moment we got inside the house, I ran to my room and threw myself onto my bed. I could tell Mom didn't know what was up, and I guess I really didn't, either. I felt very sad and a tiny bit happy at the exact same time, kind of like that laughing-crying feeling all over again.

My dog, Daisy, followed me into the room, jumped on the bed, and started licking me all over my face.

"Who's a good girlie?" I said in my Dad voice. "Who's a good girlie?"

"Is everything okay, sweetness?" Mom said. She wanted to sit down beside me but Daisy was hogging the bed. "Excuse me, Daisy." She sat down, nudging Daisy over. "Were those kids not nice to you, Auggie?"

"Oh no," I said, only half lying. "They were okay."

"But were they nice? Mr. Tushman went out of his way to tell me what sweet kids they are."

"Uh-huh." I nodded, but I kept looking at Daisy, kissing her on the nose and rubbing her ear until her back leg did that little flea-scratch shake.

"That boy Julian seemed especially nice," Mom said.

"Oh, no, he was the least nice. I liked Jack, though. He was nice. I thought his name was Jack Will but it's just Jack."

"Wait, maybe I'm getting them confused. Which one was the one with the dark hair that was brushed forward?"

"Julian."

"And he wasn't nice?"

"No, not nice."

"Oh." She thought about this for a second. "Okay, so is he the kind of kid who's one way in front of grown-ups and another way in front of kids?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Ah, hate those," she answered, nodding.

"He was like, 'So, August, what's the deal with your face?'" I said, looking at Daisy the whole time. "'Were you in a fire or something?'"

Mom didn't say anything. When I looked up at her, I could tell she was completely shocked.

“He didn’t say it in a mean way,” I said quickly. “He was just asking.”

Mom nodded.

“But I really liked Jack,” I said. “He was like, ‘Shut up, Julian!’ And Charlotte was like, ‘You’re so rude, Julian!’”

Mom nodded again. She pressed her fingers on her forehead like she was pushing against a headache.

“I’m so sorry, Auggie,” she said quietly. Her cheeks were bright red.

“No, it’s okay, Mom, really.”

“You don’t have to go to school if you don’t want, sweetie.”

“I want to,” I said.

“Auggie ...”

“Really, Mom. I want to.” And I wasn’t lying.

First-Day Jitters

OKAY, SO I admit that the first day of school I was so nervous that the butterflies in my stomach were more like pigeons flying around my insides. Mom and Dad were probably a little nervous, too, but they acted all excited for me, taking pictures of me and Via before we left the house since it was Via’s first day of school, too.

Up until a few days before, we still weren’t sure I would be going to school at all. After my tour of the school, Mom and Dad had reversed sides on whether I should go or not. Mom was now the one saying I shouldn’t go and Dad was saying I should. Dad had told me he was really proud of how I’d handled myself with Julian and that I was turning into quite the strong man. And I heard him tell Mom that he now thought she had been right all along. But Mom, I could tell, wasn’t so sure anymore. When Dad told her that he and Via wanted to walk me to school today, too, since it was on the way to the subway station, Mom seemed relieved that we would all be going together. And I guess I was, too.

Even though Beecher Prep is just a few blocks from our house, I've only been on that block a couple of times before. In general, I try to avoid blocks where there are lots of kids roaming around. On our block, everybody knows me and I know everybody. I know every brick and every tree trunk and every crack in the sidewalk. I know Mrs. Grimaldi, the lady who's always sitting by her window, and the old guy who walks up and down the street whistling like a bird. I know the deli on the corner where Mom gets our bagels, and the waitresses at the coffee shop who all call me "honey" and give me lollipops whenever they see me. I love my neighborhood of North River Heights, which is why it was so strange to be walking down these blocks feeling like it was all new to me suddenly. Amesfort Avenue, a street I've been down a million times, looked totally different for some reason. Full of people I never saw before, waiting for buses, pushing strollers.

We crossed Amesfort and turned up Heights Place: Via walked next to me like she usually does, and Mom and Dad were behind us. As soon as we turned the corner, we saw all the kids in front of the school—hundreds of them talking to each other in little groups, laughing, or standing with their parents, who were talking with other parents. I kept my head way down.

"Everyone's just as nervous as you are," said Via in my ear. "Just remember that this is everyone's first day of school.

Okay?"

Mr. Tushman was greeting students and parents in front of the school entrance.

I have to admit: so far, nothing bad had happened. I didn't catch anyone staring or even noticing me. Only once did I look up to see some girls looking my way and whispering with their hands cupped over their mouths, but they looked away when they saw me notice them.

We reached the front entrance.

"Okay, so this is it, big boy," said Dad, putting his hands on top of my shoulders.

"Have a great first day. I love you," said Via, giving me a big kiss and a hug.

"You, too," I said.

"I love you, Auggie," said Dad, hugging me.

"Bye."

Then Mom hugged me, but I could tell she was about to cry, which would have totally embarrassed me, so I just gave her a fast hard hug, turned, and disappeared into the school.

Locks

I WENT STRAIGHT to room 301 on the third floor. Now I was glad I'd gone on that little tour, because I knew exactly where to go and didn't have to look up once. I noticed that some kids were definitely staring at me now. I did my thing of pretending not to notice.

I went inside the classroom, and the teacher was writing on the chalkboard while all the kids started sitting at different desks. The desks were in a half circle facing the chalkboard, so I chose the desk in the middle toward the back, which I thought would make it harder for anyone to stare at me. I still kept my head way down, just looking up enough from under my bangs to see everyone's feet. As the desks started to fill up, I did notice that no one sat down next to me. A couple of times someone was about to sit next to me, then changed his or her mind at the last minute and sat somewhere else.

"Hey, August." It was Charlotte, giving me her little wave as she sat down at a desk in the front of the class. Why anyone would ever choose to sit way up front in a class, I don't know.

"Hey," I said, nodding hello. Then I noticed Julian was sitting a few seats away from her, talking to some other kids. I know he saw me, but he didn't say hello.

Suddenly someone was sitting down next to me. It was Jack Will. Jack.

"What's up," he said, nodding at me.

"Hey, Jack," I answered, waving my hand, which I immediately wished I hadn't done because it felt kind of uncool.

"Okay, kids, okay, everybody! Settle down," said the teacher, now facing us. She had written her name, Ms. Petosa, on the chalkboard. "Everybody find a seat, please. Come in," she said to a couple of kids who had just walked in the room. "There's a seat there, and right there."

She hadn't noticed me yet.

"Now, the first thing I want everyone to do is stop talking and ..."

She noticed me.

"... put your backpacks down and quiet down."

She had only hesitated for a millionth of a second, but I could tell the moment she saw me. Like I said: I'm used to it by now.

"I'm going to take attendance and do the seating chart," she continued, sitting on the edge of her desk. Next to her were three neat rows of accordion folders. "When I call your name, come up and I'll hand you a folder with your name on it. It con-

tains your class schedule and your combination lock, which you should *not* try to open until I tell you to. Your locker number is written on the class schedule. Be forewarned that some lockers are not right outside this class but down the hall, and before anyone even thinks of asking: no, you cannot switch lockers and you can't switch locks. Then if there's time at the end of this period, we're all going to get to know each other a little better, okay? Okay."

She picked up the clipboard on her desk and started reading the names out loud.

"Okay, so, Julian Albans?" she said, looking up.

Julian raised his hand and said "Here" at the same time.

"Hi, Julian," she said, making a note on her seating chart. She picked up the very first folder and held it out toward him. "Come pick it up," she said, kind of no-nonsense. He got up and took it from her. "Ximena Chin?"

She handed a folder to each kid as she read off the names. As she went down the list, I noticed that the seat next to me was the only one still empty, even though there were two kids sitting at one desk just a few seats away. When she called the name of one of them, a big kid named Henry Joplin who already looked like a teenager, she said: "Henry, there's an empty desk right over there. Why don't you take that seat, okay?"

She handed him his folder and pointed to the desk next to mine. Although I didn't look at him directly, I could tell Henry did not want to move next to me, just by the way he dragged his backpack on the floor as he came over, like he was moving in slow motion. Then he plopped his backpack up really high on the right side of the desk so it was kind of like a wall between his desk and mine.

"Maya Markowitz?" Ms. Petosa was saying.

"Here," said a girl about four desks down from me.

"Miles Noury?"

"Here," said the kid that had been sitting with Henry Joplin. As he walked back to his desk, I saw him shoot Henry a "poor you" look.

"August Pullman?" said Ms. Petosa.

"Here," I said quietly, raising my hand a bit.

"Hi, August," she said, smiling at me very nicely when I went up to get my folder. I kind of felt everyone's eyes burning into my back for the few seconds I stood in the front of the class, and everybody looked down when I walked back to my desk. I resisted spinning the combination when I sat down, even though everyone else was doing it, because she had specifically told us not to. I was already pretty good at opening locks, anyway, because I've used them on my bike. Henry kept trying to open

his lock but couldn't do it. He was getting frustrated and kind of cursing under his breath.

Ms. Petosa called out the next few names. The last name was Jack Will.

After she handed Jack his folder, she said: "Okay, so, everybody write your combinations down somewhere safe that you won't forget, okay? But if you do forget, which happens at least three point two times per semester, Mrs. Garcia has a list of all the combination numbers. Now go ahead, take your locks out of your folders and spend a couple of minutes practicing how to open them, though I know some of you went ahead and did that anyway." She was looking at Henry when she said that. "And in the meanwhile, I'll tell you guys a little something about myself. And then you guys can tell me a little about yourselves and we'll, um, get to know each other. Sound good? Good."

She smiled at everyone, though I felt like she was smiling at me the most. It wasn't a shiny smile, like Mrs. Garcia's smile, but a normal smile, like she meant it. She looked very different from what I thought teachers were going to look like. I guess I thought she'd look like Miss Fowl from *Jimmy Neutron*: an old lady with a big bun on top of her head. But, in fact, she looked exactly like Mon Mothma from *Star Wars Episode IV*: haircut kind of like a boy's, and a big white shirt kind of like a tunic.

She turned around and started writing on the chalkboard.

Henry still couldn't get his lock to open, and he was getting more and more frustrated every time someone else popped one open. He got really annoyed when I was able to open mine on the first try. The funny thing is, if he hadn't put the backpack between us, I most definitely would have offered to help him.

Around the Room

MS. PETOSA TOLD US a little about who she was. It was boring stuff about where she originally came from, and how she always wanted to teach, and she left her job on Wall Street about six years ago to pursue her “dream” and teach kids. She ended by asking if anyone had any questions, and Julian raised his hand.

“Yes ...” She had to look at the list to remember his name. “Julian.”

“That’s cool about how you’re pursuing your dream,” he said.

“Thank you!”

“You’re welcome!” He smiled proudly.

“Okay, so why don’t you tell us a little about yourself, Julian? Actually, here’s what I want everyone to do. Think of two things you want other people to know about you. Actually, wait a minute: how many of you came from the Beecher lower school? About half the kids raised their hands. “Okay, so a few of you already know each other. But the rest of you, I guess, are new to the school, right? Okay, so everyone think of two things you

want other people to know about you—and if you know some of the other kids, try to think of things they don’t already know about you. Okay? Okay. So let’s start with Julian and we’ll go around the room.”

Julian scrunched up his face and started tapping his forehead like he was thinking really hard.

“Okay, whenever you’re ready,” Ms. Petosa said.

“Okay, so number one is that—”

“Do me a favor and start with your names, okay?” Ms. Petosa interrupted. “It’ll help me remember everyone.”

“Oh, okay. So my name is Julian. And the number one thing I’d like to tell everyone about myself is that ... I just got Battleground Mystic for my Wii and it’s totally awesome. And the number two thing is that we got a Ping-Pong table this summer.”

“Very nice, I love Ping-Pong,” said Ms. Petosa. “Does anyone have any questions for Julian?”

“Is Battleground Mystic multiplayer or one player?” said the kid named Miles.

“Not those kinds of questions, guys,” said Ms. Petosa. “Okay, so how about you. ...” She pointed to Charlotte, probably because her desk was closest to the front.

“Oh, sure.” Charlotte didn’t hesitate for even a second, like she knew exactly what she wanted to say. “My name is Char-

lotte. I have two sisters, and we just got a new puppy named Suki in July. We got her from an animal shelter and she's so, so cute!"

"That's great, Charlotte, thank you," said Ms. Petosa. "Okay, then, who's next?"

Lamb to the Slaughter

"LIKE A LAMB to the slaughter": Something that you say about someone who goes somewhere calmly, not knowing that something unpleasant is going to happen to them.

I Googled it last night. That's what I was thinking when Ms. Petosa called my name and suddenly it was my turn to talk.

"My name is August," I said, and yeah, I kind of mumbled it.

"What?" said someone.

"Can you speak up, honey?" said Ms. Petosa.

"My name is August," I said louder, forcing myself to look up. "I, um ... have a sister named Via and a dog named Daisy. And, um ... that's it."

"Wonderful," said Ms. Petosa. "Anyone have questions for August?"

No one said anything.

"Okay, you're next," said Ms. Petosa to Jack.

"Wait, I have a question for August," said Julian, raising his hand. "Why do you have that tiny braid in the back of your hair? Is that like a Padawan thing?"

“Yeah.” I shrug-nodded.

“What’s a Padawan thing?” said Ms. Petosa, smiling at me.

“It’s from *Star Wars*,” answered Julian. “A Padawan is a Jedi apprentice.”

“Oh, interesting,” answered Ms. Petosa, looking at me. “So, are you into *Star Wars*, August?”

“I guess.” I nodded, not looking up because what I really wanted was to just slide under the desk.

“Who’s your favorite character?” Julian asked. I started thinking maybe he wasn’t so bad.

“Jango Fett.”

“What about Darth Sidious?” he said. “Do you like him?”

“Okay, guys, you can talk about *Star Wars* stuff at recess,” said Ms. Petosa cheerfully. “But let’s keep going. We haven’t heard from *you* yet,” she said to Jack.

Now it was Jack’s turn to talk, but I admit I didn’t hear a word he said. Maybe no one got the Darth Sidious thing, and maybe Julian didn’t mean anything at all. But in *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*, Darth Sidious’s face gets burned by Sith lightning and becomes totally deformed. His skin gets all shriveled up and his whole face just kind of melts.

I peeked at Julian and he was looking at me. Yeah, he knew what he was saying.

Choose Kind

THERE WAS A lot of shuffling around when the bell rang and everybody got up to leave. I checked my schedule and it said my next class was English, room 321. I didn’t stop to see if anyone else from my homeroom was going my way: I just zoomed out of the class and down the hall and sat down as far from the front as possible. The teacher, a really tall man with a yellow beard, was writing on the chalkboard.

Kids came in laughing and talking in little groups but I didn’t look up. Basically, the same thing that happened in homeroom happened again: no one sat next to me except for Jack, who was joking around with some kids who weren’t in our homeroom. I could tell Jack was the kind of kid other kids like. He had a lot of friends. He made people laugh.

When the second bell rang, everyone got quiet and the teacher turned around and faced us. He said his name was Mr. Browne, and then he started talking about what we would be doing this semester. At a certain point, somewhere between A