

"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

Wrinkle in Time and *Shen of the Sea*, he noticed me but kept right on talking.

I was mostly doodling in my notebook while he talked, but every once in a while I would sneak a look at the other students. Charlotte was in this class. So were Julian and Henry. Miles wasn't.

Mr. Browne had written on the chalkboard in big block letters:

P-R-E-C-E-P-T!

"Okay, everybody write this down at the very top of the very first page in your English notebook."

As we did what he told us to do, he said: "Okay, so who can tell me what a precept is? Does anyone know?"

No one raised their hands.

Mr. Browne smiled, nodded, and turned around to write on the chalkboard again:

PRECEPTS = RULES ABOUT REALLY IMPORTANT THINGS!

"Like a motto?" someone called out.

"Like a motto!" said Mr. Browne, nodding as he continued writing on the board. "Like a famous quote. Like a line from a

fortune cookie. Any saying or ground rule that can motivate you. Basically, a precept is anything that helps guide us when making decisions about really important things."

He wrote all that on the chalkboard and then turned around and faced us.

"So, what are some *really important* things?" he asked us.

A few kids raised their hands, and as he pointed at them, they gave their answers, which he wrote on the chalkboard in really, really sloppy handwriting:

RULES. SCHOOLWORK. HOMEWORK.

"What else?" he said as he wrote, not even turning around. "Just call things out!" He wrote everything everyone called out.

FAMILY. PARENTS. PETS.

One girl called out: "The environment!"

THE ENVIRONMENT,

he wrote on the chalkboard, and added:

OUR WORLD!

"Sharks, because they eat dead things in the ocean!" said one of the boys, a kid named Reid, and Mr. Browne wrote down

SHARKS.

“Bees!” “Seatbelts!” “Recycling!” “Friends!”

“Okay,” said Mr. Browne, writing all those things down. He turned around when he finished writing to face us again. “But no one’s named the most important thing of all.”

We all looked at him, out of ideas.

“God?” said one kid, and I could tell that even though Mr. Browne wrote “God” down, that wasn’t the answer he was looking for. Without saying anything else, he wrote down:

WHO WE ARE!

“Who we are,” he said, underlining each word as he said it. “Who we are! Us! Right? What kind of people are we? What kind of person are you? Isn’t that the most important thing of all? Isn’t that the kind of question we should be asking ourselves all the time? “What kind of person am I?”

“Did anyone happen to notice the plaque next to the door of this school? Anyone read what it says? Anyone?”

He looked around but no one knew the answer.

“It says: ‘Know Thyself,’” he said, smiling and nodding. “And learning who you are is what you’re here to do.”

“I thought we were here to learn English,” Jack cracked, which made everyone laugh.

“Oh yeah, and that, too!” Mr. Browne answered, which I thought was very cool of him. He turned around and wrote in big huge block letters that spread all the way across the chalkboard:

MR. BROWNE’S SEPTEMBER PRECEPT: WHEN GIVEN THE CHOICE BETWEEN BEING RIGHT OR BEING KIND, CHOOSE KIND.

“Okay, so, everybody,” he said, facing us again, “I want you to start a brand-new section in your notebooks and call it Mr. Browne’s Precepts.”

He kept talking as we did what he was telling us to do.

“Put today’s date at the top of the first page. And from now on, at the beginning of every month, I’m going to write a new Mr. Browne precept on the chalkboard and you’re going to write it down in your notebook. Then we’re going to discuss that precept and what it means. And at the end of the month, you’re going to write an essay about it, about what it means to you. So by the end of the year, you’ll all have your own list of precepts to take away with you.

“Over the summer, I ask all my students to come up with their very own personal precept, write it on a postcard, and mail it to me from wherever you go on your summer vacation.”

“People really do that?” said one girl whose name I didn’t know.

“Oh yeah!” he answered, “people really do that. I’ve had students send me new precepts years after they’ve graduated from this school, actually. It’s pretty amazing.”

He paused and stroked his beard.

“But, anyway, next summer seems like a long way off, I know,” he joked, which made us laugh. “So, everybody relax a bit while I take attendance, and then when we’re finished with that, I’ll start telling you about all the fun stuff we’re going to be doing this year—in *English*.” He pointed to Jack when he said this, which was also funny, so we all laughed at that.

As I wrote down Mr. Browne’s September precept, I suddenly realized that I was going to like school. No matter what.

Lunch

VIA HAD WARNED me about lunch in middle school, so I guess I should have known it would be hard. I just hadn’t expected it to be this hard. Basically, all the kids from all the fifth-grade classes poured into the cafeteria at the same time, talking loudly and bumping into one another while they ran to different tables. One of the lunchroom teachers said something about no seat-saving allowed, but I didn’t know what she meant and maybe no one else did, either, because just about everybody was saving seats for their friends. I tried to sit down at one table, but the kid in the next chair said, “Oh, sorry, but somebody else is sitting here.”

So I moved to an empty table and just waited for everyone to finish stampeding and the lunchroom teacher to tell us what to do next. As she started telling us the cafeteria rules, I looked around to see where Jack Will was sitting, but I didn’t see him on my side of the room. Kids were still coming in as the teachers started calling the first few tables to get their trays and stand on