

jaw's not wired shut. He's ten years old. He can use his words. But we circle around him like he's still the baby he used to be. We change plans, go to plan B, interrupt conversations, go back on promises depending on his moods, his whims, his needs. That was fine when he was little. But he needs to grow up now. We need to let him, help him, make him grow up. Here's what I think: we've all spent so much time trying to make August think he's normal that he actually thinks he is normal. And the problem is, he's not.

High School

WHAT I ALWAYS loved most about middle school was that it was separate and different from home. I could go there and be Olivia Pullman—not Via, which is my name at home. Via was what they called me in elementary school, too. Back then, everyone knew all about us, of course. Mom used to pick me up after school, and August was always in the stroller. There weren't a lot of people who were equipped to babysit for Auggie, so Mom and Dad brought him to all my class plays and concerts and recitals, all the school functions, the bake sales and the book fairs. My friends knew him. My friends' parents knew him. My teachers knew him. The janitor knew him. ("Hey, how ya doin', Auggie?" he'd always say, and give August a high five.) August was something of a fixture at PS 22.

But in middle school a lot of people didn't know about August. My old friends did, of course, but my new friends didn't. Or if they knew, it wasn't necessarily the first thing they knew about me. Maybe it was the second or third thing they'd hear about me. "Olivia? Yeah, she's nice. Did you hear she has a

brother who's deformed?" I always hated that word, but I knew it was how people described Auggie. And I knew those kinds of conversations probably happened all the time out of earshot, every time I left the room at a party, or bumped into groups of friends at the pizza place. And that's okay. I'm always going to be the sister of a kid with a birth defect: that's not the issue. I just don't always want to be defined that way.

The best thing about high school is that hardly anybody knows me at all. Except Miranda and Ella, of course. And they know not to go around talking about it.

Miranda, Ella, and I have known each other since the first grade. What's so nice is we never have to explain things to one another. When I decided I wanted them to call me Olivia instead of Via, they got it without my having to explain.

They've known August since he was a little baby. When we were little, our favorite thing to do was play dress up with Auggie; load him up with feather boas and big hats and Hannah Montana wigs. He used to love it, of course, and we thought he was adorably cute in his own way. Ella said he reminded her of E.T. She didn't say this to be mean, of course (though maybe it was a little bit mean). The truth is, there's a scene in the movie when Drew Barrymore dresses E.T. in a blond wig: and that was a ringer for Auggie in our Miley Cyrus heyday.

Throughout middle school, Miranda, Ella, and I were pretty much our own little group. Somewhere between super popular and well-liked: not brainy, not jocks, not rich, not druggies, not mean, not goody-goody, not huge, not flat. I don't know if the three of us found each other because we were so alike in so many ways, or that because we found each other, we've become so alike in so many ways. We were so happy when we all got into Faulkner High School. It was such a long shot that all three of us would be accepted, especially when almost no one else from our middle school was. I remember how we screamed into our phones the day we got our acceptance letters.

This is why I haven't understood what's been going on with us lately, now that we're actually in high school. It's nothing like how I thought it would be.



Major Tom

OUT OF THE three of us, Miranda had almost always been the sweetest to August, hugging him and playing with him long after Ella and I had moved on to playing something else. Even as we got older, Miranda always made sure to try to include August in our conversations, ask him how he was doing, talk to him about *Avatar* or *Star Wars* or *Bone* or something she knew he liked. It was Miranda who had given Auggie the astronaut helmet he wore practically every day of the year when he was five or six. She would call him Major Tom and they would sing “Space Oddity” by David Bowie together. It was their little thing. They knew all the words and would blast it on the iPod and sing the song out loud.

Since Miranda’s always been really good about calling us as soon as she got home from summer camp, I was a little surprised when I didn’t hear from her. I even texted her and she didn’t reply. I figured maybe she had ended up staying in the camp longer, now that she was a counselor. Maybe she met a cute guy.

Then I realized from her Facebook wall that she’d actually been back home for a full two weeks, so I sent her an IM and we chatted online a bit, but she didn’t give me a reason for not calling, which I thought was bizarre. Miranda had always been a little flaky, so I figured that’s all it was. We made plans to meet downtown, but then I had to cancel because we were driving out to visit Tata and Poppa for the weekend.

So I ended up not seeing either Miranda or Ella until the first day of school. And, I have to admit, I was shocked. Miranda looked so different: her hair was cut in this super-cute bob that she’d dyed bright pink, of all things, and she was wearing a striped tube top that (a) seemed way inappropriate for school, and (b) was totally not her usual style. Miranda had always been such a prude about clothes, and here she was all pink-haired and tube-topped. But it wasn’t just the way she looked that was different: she was acting differently, too. I can’t say she wasn’t nice, because she was, but she seemed kind of distant, like I was a casual friend. It was the weirdest thing in the world.

At lunch the three of us sat together like we always used to, but the dynamics had shifted. It was obvious to me that Ella and Miranda had gotten together a few times during the summer without me, though they never actually said that. I pretended not to be at all upset while we talked, though I could feel my face getting hot, my smile being fake. Although Ella wasn’t as

over-the-top as Miranda, I noticed a change in her usual style, too. It's like they had talked to each other beforehand about redoing their image at the new school, but hadn't bothered to clue me in. I admit: I had always thought I was above this kind of typical teenage pettiness, but I felt a lump in my throat throughout lunch. My voice quivered as I said "See you later" when the bell rang.

After School

"I HEAR WE'RE driving you home today."

It was Miranda in eighth period. She had just sat down at the desk right behind me. I had forgotten that Mom had called Miranda's mother the night before to ask if she could drive me home from school.

"You don't have to," I answered instinctively, casually. "My mom can pick me up."

"I thought she had to pick Auggie up or something."

"It turns out she can pick me up afterward. She just texted me. Not a problem."

"Oh. Okay."

"Thanks."

It was all a lie on my part, but I couldn't see sitting in a car with the new Miranda. After school I ducked into a restroom to avoid bumping into Miranda's mother outside. Half an hour later I walked out of the school, ran the three blocks to the bus stop, hopped on the M86 to Central Park West, and took the subway home.

"Hey there, sweetie!" Mom said the moment I stepped through the front door. "How was your first day? I was starting to wonder where you guys were."

"We stopped for pizza." Incredible how easily a lie can slip through your lips.

"Is Miranda not with you?" She seemed surprised that Miranda wasn't right behind me.

"She went straight home. We have a lot of homework."

"On your first day?"

"Yes, on our first day!" I yelled, which completely surprised Mom. But before she could say anything, I said: "School was fine. It's really big, though. The kids seem nice." I wanted to give her enough information so she wouldn't feel the need to ask me more. "How was Auggie's first day of school?"

Mom hesitated, her eyebrows still high up on her forehead from when I'd snapped at her a second earlier. "Okay," she said slowly, like she was letting out a breath.

"What do you mean 'okay'?" I said. "Was it good or bad?"

"He said it was good."

"So why do you think it wasn't good?"

"I didn't say it wasn't good! Geez, Via, what's up with you?"

"Just forget I asked anything at all," I answered, and stormed dramatically into Auggie's room and slammed the door. He was

on his PlayStation and didn't even look up. I hated how zombified his video games made him.

"So how was school?" I said, scooching Daisy over so I could sit on his bed next to him.

"Fine," he answered, still not looking up from his game.

"Auggie, I'm talking to you!" I pulled the PlayStation out of his hands.

"Hey!" he said angrily.

"How was school?"

"I said fine!" he yelled back, grabbing the PlayStation back from me.

"Were people nice to you?"

"Yes!"

"No one was mean?"

He put the PlayStation down and looked up at me as if I had just asked the dumbest question in the world. "Why would people be mean?" he said. It was the first time in his life that I heard him be sarcastic like that. I didn't think he had it in him.

The Padawan Bites the Dust

I'M NOT SURE at what point that night Auggie had cut off his Padawan braid, or why that made me really mad. I had always found his obsession with everything *Star Wars* kind of geeky, and that braid in the back of his hair, with its little beads, was just awful. But he had always been so proud of it, of how long it took him to grow it, of how he had chosen the beads himself in a crafts store in Soho. He and Christopher, his best friend, used to play with lightsabers and *Star Wars* stuff whenever they got together, and they had both started growing their braids at the same time. When August cut his braid off that night, without an explanation, without telling me beforehand (which was surprising)—or even calling Christopher—I was just so upset I can't even explain why.

I've seen Auggie brushing his hair in the bathroom mirror. He meticulously tries to get every hair in place. He tilts his head to look at himself from different angles, like there's some magic perspective inside the mirror that could change the dimensions of his face.

Mom knocked on my door after dinner. She looked drained, and I realized that between me and Auggie, today had been a tough day for her, too.

"So you want to tell me what's up?" she asked nicely, softly.

"Not now, okay?" I answered. I was reading. I was tired. Maybe later I'd be up to telling her about Miranda, but not now.

"I'll check in before you go to bed," she said, and then she came over and kissed me on the top of my head.

"Can Daisy sleep with me tonight?"

"Sure, I'll bring her in later."

"Don't forget to come back," I said as she left.

"I promise."

But she didn't come back that night. Dad did. He told me Auggie had had a bad first day and Mom was helping him through it. He asked me how my day had gone and I told him fine. He said he didn't believe me for a second, and I told him Miranda and Ella were acting like jerks. (I didn't mention how I took the subway home by myself, though.) He said nothing tests friendships like high school, and then proceeded to poke fun at the fact that I was reading *War and Peace*. Not real fun, of course, since I'd heard him brag to people that he had a "fifteen-year-old who is reading Tolstoy." But he liked to rib me about where I was in the book, in a war part or in a peace part, and if there was anything in there about Napoleon's days as a hip-hop dancer. It

was silly stuff, but Dad always managed to make everyone laugh. And sometimes that's all you need to feel better.

"Don't be mad at Mom," he said as he bent down to give me a good-night kiss. "You know how much she worries about Auggie."

"I know," I acknowledged.

"Want the light on or off? It's getting kind of late," he said, pausing by the light switch at the door.

"Can you bring Daisy in first?"

Two seconds later he came back with Daisy dangling in his arms, and he laid her down next to me on the bed.

"Good night, sweetheart," he said, kissing my forehead. He kissed Daisy on her forehead, too. "Good night, girlie. Sweet dreams."

An Apparition at the Door

ONCE, I GOT up in the middle of the night because I was thirsty, and I saw Mom standing outside Auggie's room. Her hand was on the doorknob, her forehead leaning on the door, which was ajar. She wasn't going in his room or stepping out: just standing right outside the door, as if she was listening to the sound of his breathing as he slept. The hallway lights were out. The only thing illuminating her was the blue night-light in August's bedroom. She looked ghostlike standing there. Or maybe I should say angelic. I tried to walk back into my room without disturbing her, but she heard me and walked over to me.

"Is Auggie okay?" I asked. I knew that sometimes he would wake up choking on his own saliva if he accidentally turned over on his back.

"Oh, he's fine," she said, wrapping her arms around me. She walked me back into my room, pulled the covers over me, and kissed me good night. She never explained what she was doing outside his door, and I never asked.



I wonder how many nights she's stood outside his door. And I wonder if she's ever stood outside my door like that.

Breakfast

"CAN YOU PICK me up from school today?" I said the next morning, smearing some cream cheese on my bagel.

Mom was making August's lunch (American cheese on whole-wheat bread, soft enough for Auggie to eat) while August sat eating oatmeal at the table. Dad was getting ready to go to work. Now that I was in high school, the new school routine was going to be that Dad and I would take the subway together in the morning, which meant his having to leave fifteen minutes earlier than usual, then I'd get off at my stop and he'd keep going. And Mom was going to pick me up after school in the car.

"I was going to call Miranda's mother to see if she could drive you home again," Mom answered.

"No, Mom!" I said quickly. "You pick me up. Or I'll just take the subway."

"You know I don't want you to take the subway by yourself yet," she answered.

"Mom, I'm fifteen! Everybody my age takes the subway by themselves!"

"She can take the subway home," said Dad from the other room, adjusting his tie as he stepped into the kitchen.

"Why can't Miranda's mother just pick her up again?" Mom argued with him.

"She's old enough to take the subway by herself," Dad insisted.

Mom looked at both of us. "Is something going on?" She didn't address her question to either one of us in particular.

"You would know if you had come back to check on me," I said spitefully, "like you *said* you would."

"Oh God, Via," said Mom, remembering now how she had completely ditched me last night. She put down the knife she was using to cut Auggie's grapes in half (still a choking hazard for him because of the size of his palate). "I am so sorry. I fell asleep in Auggie's room. By the time I woke up ..."

"I know, I know." I nodded indifferently.

Mom came over, put her hands on my cheeks, and lifted my face to look at her.

"I'm really, really sorry," she whispered. I could tell she was.

"It's okay!" I said.

"Via ..."

"Mom, it's fine." This time I meant it. She looked so genuinely sorry I just wanted to let her off the hook.

She kissed and hugged me, then returned to the grapes.

"So, is something going on with Miranda?" she asked.

"Just that she's acting like a complete jerk," I said.

"Miranda's not a jerk!" Auggie quickly chimed in.

"She can be!" I yelled. "Believe me."

"Okay then, I'll pick you up, no problem," Mom said decisively, sweeping the half-grapes into a snack bag with the side of her knife. "That was the plan all along anyway. I'll pick Auggie up from school in the car and then we'll pick you up. We'll probably get there about a quarter to four."

"No!" I said firmly, before she'd even finished.

"Isabel, she can take the subway!" said Dad impatiently. "She's a big girl now. She's reading *War and Peace*, for crying out loud."

"What does *War and Peace* have to with anything?" answered Mom, clearly annoyed.

"It means you don't have to pick her up in the car like she's a little girl," he said sternly. "Via, are you ready? Get your bag and let's go."

"I'm ready," I said, pulling on my backpack. "Bye, Mom! Bye, Auggie!"

I kissed them both quickly and headed toward the door.

"Do you even have a MetroCard?" Mom said after me.

"Of course she has a MetroCard!" answered Dad, fully exasperated. "Yeesh, Momma! Stop worrying so much! Bye," he said,

kissing her on the cheek. “Bye, big boy,” he said to August, kissing him on the top of his head. “I’m proud of you. Have a good day.”

“Bye, Daddy! You too.”

Dad and I jogged down the stoop stairs and headed down the block.

“Call me after school before you get on the subway!” Mom yelled at me from the window. I didn’t even turn around but waved my hand at her so she’d know I heard her. Dad did turn around, walking backward for a few steps.

“*War and Peace*, Isabel!” he called out, smiling as he pointed at me. “*War and Peace!*”

Genetics 101

BOTH SIDES OF Dad’s family were Jews from Russia and Poland. Poppa’s grandparents fled the pogroms and ended up in NYC at the turn of the century. Tata’s parents fled the Nazis and ended up in Argentina in the forties. Poppa and Tata met at a dance on the Lower East Side while she was in town visiting a cousin. They got married, moved to Bayside, and had Dad and Uncle Ben.

Mom’s side of the family is from Brazil. Except for her mother, my beautiful Grans, and her dad, Agosto, who died before I was born, the rest of Mom’s family—all her glamorous aunts, uncles, and cousins—still live in Alto Leblon, a ritzy suburb south of Rio. Grans and Agosto moved to Boston in the early sixties, and had Mom and Aunt Kate, who’s married to Uncle Porter.

Mom and Dad met at Brown University and have been together ever since. Isabel and Nate: like two peas in a pod. They moved to New York right after college, had me a few years later, then moved to a brick townhouse in North River Heights, the

hippie-stroller capital of upper *upper* Manhattan, when I was about a year old.

Not one person in the exotic mix of my family gene pool has ever shown any obvious signs of having what August has. I've pored over grainy sepia pictures of long-dead relatives in babushkas; black-and-white snapshots of distant cousins in crisp white linen suits, soldiers in uniform, ladies with beehive hairdos; Polaroids of bell-bottomed teenagers and long-haired hippies, and not once have I been able to detect even the slightest trace of August's face in their faces. Not a one. But after August was born, my parents underwent genetic counseling. They were told that August had what seemed to be a "previously unknown type of mandibulofacial dysostosis caused by an autosomal recessive mutation in the *TCOF1* gene, which is located on chromosome 5, complicated by a hemifacial microsomia characteristic of OAV spectrum." Sometimes these mutations occur during pregnancy. Sometimes they're inherited from one parent carrying the dominant gene. Sometimes they're caused by the interaction of many genes, possibly in combination with environmental factors. This is called multifactorial inheritance. In August's case, the doctors were able to identify one of the "single nucleotide deletion mutations" that made war on his face. The weird thing is, though you'd never know it from looking at them: both my parents carry that mutant gene.

And I carry it, too.



The Punnett Square

IF I HAVE children, there's a one-in-two chance that I will pass on the defective gene to them. That doesn't mean they'll look like August, but they'll carry the gene that got double-dosed in August and helped make him the way he is. If I marry someone who has the same defective gene, there's a one-in-two chance that our kids will carry the gene and look totally normal, a one-in-four chance that our kids will not carry the gene at all, and a one-in-four chance that our kids will look like August.

If August has children with someone who doesn't have a trace of the gene, there's a 100 percent probability that their kids will inherit the gene, but a zero percent chance that their kids will have a double dose of it, like August. Which means they'll carry the gene no matter what, but they could look totally normal. If he marries someone who has the gene, their kids will have the same odds as my kids.

This only explains the part of August that's explainable. There's that other part of his genetic makeup that's not inherited but just incredibly bad luck.

Countless doctors have drawn little tic-tac-toe grids for my parents over the years to try to explain the genetic lottery to them. Geneticists use these Punnett squares to determine inheritance, recessive and dominant genes, probabilities and chance. But for all they know, there's more they don't know. They can try to forecast the odds, but they can't guarantee them. They use terms like "germline mosaicism," "chromosome rearrangement," or "delayed mutation" to explain why their science is not an exact science. I actually like how doctors talk. I like the sound of science. I like how words you don't understand explain things you can't understand. There are countless people under words like "germline mosaicism," "chromosome rearrangement," or "delayed mutation." Countless babies who'll never be born, like mine.



Out with the Old

MIRANDA AND ELLA blasted off. They attached themselves to a new crowd destined for high school glory. After a week of painful lunches where all they would do was talk about people that didn't interest me, I decided to make a clean break for it. They asked no questions. I told no lies. We just went our separate ways.

I didn't even mind after a while. I stopped going to lunch for about a week, though, to make the transition easier, to avoid the fake Oh, shoot, there's no room for you at the table, Olivia! It was easier just to go to the library and read.

I finished *War and Peace* in October. It was amazing. People think it's such a hard read, but it's really just a soap opera with lots of characters, people falling in love, fighting for love, dying for love. I want to be in love like that someday. I want my husband to love me the way Prince Andrei loved Natasha.

I ended up hanging out with a girl named Eleanor who I'd known from my days at PS 22, though we'd gone to different middle schools. Eleanor had always been a really smart girl—a

little bit of a crybaby back then, but nice. I'd never realized how funny she was (not laugh-out-loud Daddy-funny, but full of great quips), and she never knew how lighthearted I could be. Eleanor, I guess, had always been under the impression that I was very serious. And, as it turns out, she'd never liked Miranda and Ella. She thought they were stuck-up.

I gained entry through Eleanor to the smart-kids' table at lunch. It was a larger group than I'd been accustomed to hanging out with, and a more diverse crowd. It included Eleanor's boyfriend, Kevin, who would definitely become class president someday; a few techie guys; girls like Eleanor who were members of the yearbook committee and the debate club; and a quiet guy named Justin who had small round glasses and played the violin, and who I had an instant crush on.

When I'd see Miranda and Ella, who were now hanging out with the super-popular set, we'd say "Hey, what's up," and move on. Occasionally Miranda would ask me how August was doing, and then say "Tell him I say hello." This I never did, not to spite Miranda, but because August was in his own world these days. There were times, at home, that we never crossed paths.



October 31

GRANS HAD DIED the night before Halloween. Since then, even though it's been four years, this has always been a sad time of year for me. For Mom, too, though she doesn't always say it. Instead, she immerses herself in getting August's costume ready, since we all know Halloween is his favorite time of year.

This year was no different. August really wanted to be a *Star Wars* character called Boba Fett, so Mom looked for a Boba Fett costume in August's size, which, strangely enough, was out of stock everywhere. She went to every online store, found a few on eBay that were going for an outrageous amount, and finally ended up buying a Jango Fett costume that she then converted into a Boba Fett costume by painting it green. I would say, in all, she must have spent two weeks working on the stupid costume. And no, I won't mention the fact that Mom has never made any of my costumes, because it really has no bearing on anything at all.

The morning of Halloween I woke up thinking about Grans, which made me really sad and weepy. Dad kept telling me to

hurry up and get dressed, which just stressed me out even more, and suddenly I started crying. I just wanted to stay home.

So Dad took August to school that morning and Mom said I could stay home, and the two of us cried together for a while. One thing I knew for sure: however much I missed Grans, Mom must have missed her more. All those times August was clinging to life after a surgery, all those rush trips to the ER: Grans had always been there for Mom. It felt good to cry with Mom. For both of us. At some point, Mom had the idea of our watching *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* together, which was one of our all-time favorite black-and-white movies. I agreed that that was a great idea. I think I probably would have used this weeping session as an opportunity to tell Mom everything that was going on at school with Miranda and Ella, but just as we were sitting down in front of the DVD player, the phone rang. It was the nurse from August's school calling to tell Mom that August had a stomach ache and should be picked up. So much for the old movies and the mother-daughter bonding.

Mom picked August up, and the moment he came home, he went straight to the bathroom and threw up. Then he went to his bed and pulled the covers over his head. Mom took his temperature, brought him some hot tea, and assumed the "August's mom" role again. "Via's mom," who had come out for a little



while, was put away. I understood, though: August was in bad shape.

Neither one of us asked him why he had worn his Bleeding Scream costume to school instead of the Boba Fett costume Mom had made for him. If it annoyed Mom to see the costume she had worked on for two weeks tossed on the floor, unused, she didn't show it.

Trick or Treat

AUGUST SAID HE wasn't feeling well enough to go trick-or-treating later in the afternoon, which was sad for him because I know how much he loved to trick-or-treat—especially after it got dark outside. Even though I was well beyond the trick-or-treating stage myself, I usually threw on some mask or other to accompany him up and down the blocks, watching him knocking on people's doors, giddy with excitement. I knew it was the one night a year when he could truly be like every other kid. No one knew he was different under the mask. To August, that must have felt absolutely amazing.

At seven o'clock that night, I knocked on his door.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," he said back. He wasn't using his PlayStation or reading a comic book. He was just lying in his bed looking at the ceiling. Daisy, as always, was next to him on the bed, her head draped over his legs. The Bleeding Scream costume was crumpled up on the floor next to the Boba Fett costume.



"How's your stomach?" I said, sitting next to him on the bed.

"I'm still nauseous."

"You sure you're not up for the Halloween Parade?"

"Positive."

This surprised me. Usually August was such a trouper about his medical issues, whether it was skateboarding a few days after a surgery or sipping food through a straw when his mouth was practically bolted shut. This was a kid who's gotten more shots, taken more medicines, put up with more procedures by the age of ten than most people would have to put up with in ten lifetimes, and he was sidelined from a little nausea?

"You want to tell me what's up?" I said, sounding a bit like Mom.

"No."

"Is it school?"

"Yes."

"Teachers? Schoolwork? Friends?"

He didn't answer.

"Did someone say something?" I asked.

"People always say something," he answered bitterly. I could tell he was close to crying.

"Tell me what happened," I said.

And he told me what happened. He had overheard some *very* mean things some boys were saying about him. He didn't care about what the other boys had said, he expected that, but he was hurt that one of the boys was his "best friend" Jack Will. I remembered his mentioning Jack a couple of times over the past few months. I remembered Mom and Dad saying he seemed like a really nice kid, saying they were glad August had already made a friend like that.

"Sometimes kids are stupid," I said softly, holding his hand. "I'm sure he didn't mean it."

"Then why would he say it? He's been pretending to be my friend all along. Tushman probably bribed him with good grades or something. I bet you he was like, hey, Jack, if you make friends with the freak, you don't have to take any tests this year."

"You know that's not true. And don't call yourself a freak."

"Whatever. I wish I'd never gone to school in the first place."

"But I thought you were liking it."

"I hate it!" He was angry all of a sudden, punching his pillow. "I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!" He was shrieking at the top of his lungs.

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say. He was hurt. He was mad.

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I let him have a few more minutes of his fury. Daisy started licking the tears off of his face.

"Come on, Auggie," I said, patting his back gently. "Why don't you put on your Jango Fett costume and—"

"It's a Boba Fett costume! Why does everyone mix that up?"

"Boba Fett costume," I said, trying to stay calm. I put my arm around his shoulders. "Let's just go to the parade, okay?"

"If I go to the parade, Mom will think I'm feeling better and make me go to school tomorrow."

"Mom would never make you go to school," I answered. "Come on, Auggie. Let's just go. It'll be fun, I promise. And I'll let you have all my candy."

He didn't argue. He got out of bed and slowly started pulling on his Boba Fett costume. I helped him adjust the straps and tighten the belt, and by the time he put his helmet on, I could tell he was feeling better.

Time to Think

AUGUST PLAYED UP the stomach ache the next day so he wouldn't have to go to school. I admit I felt a little bad for Mom, who was genuinely concerned that he had a stomach bug, but I had promised August I wouldn't tell her about the incident at school.

By Sunday, he was still determined not to go back to school.

"What are you planning on telling Mom and Dad?" I asked him when he told me this.

"They said I could quit whenever I wanted to." He said this while he was still focused on a comic book he was reading.

"But you've never been the kind of kid who quits things," I said truthfully. "That's not like you."

"I'm quitting."

"You're going to have to tell Mom and Dad why," I pointed out, pulling the comic book out of his hands so he'd have to look up at me while we were talking. "Then Mom will call the school and everyone will know about it."

"Will Jack get in trouble?"

"I would think so."

“Good.”

I have to admit, August was surprising me more and more. He pulled another comic book off his shelf and started leafing through it.

“Auggie,” I said. “Are you really going to let a couple of stupid kids keep you from going back to school? I know you’ve been enjoying it. Don’t give them that power over you. Don’t give them the satisfaction.”

“They have no idea I even heard them,” he explained.

“No, I know, but ...”

“Via, it’s okay. I know what I’m doing. I’ve made up my mind.”

“But this is crazy, Auggie!” I said emphatically, pulling the new comic book away from him, too. “You have to go back to school. Everyone hates school sometimes. I hate school sometimes. I hate my friends sometimes. That’s just life, Auggie. You want to be treated normally, right? This is normal! We all have to go to school sometimes despite the fact that we have bad days, okay?”

“Do people go out of their way to avoid touching you, Via?” he answered, which left me momentarily without an answer. “Yeah, right. That’s what I thought. So don’t compare your bad days at school to mine, okay?”

“Okay, that’s fair,” I said. “But it’s not a contest about whose days suck the most, Auggie. The point is we all have to put up with the bad days. Now, unless you want to be treated like a baby the rest of your life, or like a kid with special needs, you just have to suck it up and go.”

He didn’t say anything, but I think that last bit was getting to him.

“You don’t have to say a word to those kids,” I continued. “August, actually, it’s so cool that you know what they said, but they don’t know you know what they said, you know?”

“What the heck?”

“You know what I mean. You don’t have to talk to them ever again, if you don’t want. And they’ll never know why. See? Or you can pretend to be friends with them, but deep down inside you know you’re not.”

“Is that how you are with Miranda?” he asked.

“No,” I answered quickly, defensively. “I never faked my feelings with Miranda.”

“So why are you saying I should?”

“I’m not! I’m just saying you shouldn’t let those little jerks get to you, that’s all.”

“Like Miranda got to you.”

“Why do you keep bringing Miranda up?” I yelled impatiently. “I’m trying to talk to you about your friends. Please keep



mine out of it.”

“You’re not even friends with her anymore.”

“What does that have to do with what we’re talking about?”

The way August was looking at me reminded me of a doll’s face. He was just staring at me blankly with his half-closed doll eyes.

“She called the other day,” he said finally.

“What?” I was stunned. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“She wasn’t calling you,” he answered, pulling both comic books out of my hands. “She was calling me. Just to say hi. To see how I was doing. She didn’t even know I was going to a real school now. I can’t believe you hadn’t even told her. She said the two of you don’t hang out as much anymore, but she wanted me to know she’d always love me like a big sister.”

Double-stunned. Stung. Flabbergasted. No words formed in my mouth.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I said, finally.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged, opening the first comic book again.

“Well, I’m telling Mom and Dad about Jack Will if you stop going to school,” I answered. “Tushman will probably call you into school and make Jack and those other kids apologize to you in front of everyone, and everyone will treat you like a kid who should be going to a school for kids with special needs. Is that

what you want? Because that’s what’s going to happen. Otherwise, just go back to school and act like nothing happened. Or if you want to confront Jack about it, fine. But either way, if you—”

“Fine. Fine. Fine,” he interrupted.

“What?”

“Fine! I’ll go!” he yelled, not loudly. “Just stop talking about it already. Can I please read my book now?”

“Fine!” I answered. Turning to leave his room, I thought of something. “Did Miranda say anything else about me?”

He looked up from the comic book and looked right into my eyes.

“She said to tell you she misses you. Quote unquote.”

I nodded.

“Thanks,” I said casually, too embarrassed to let him see how happy that made me feel.

