

## **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 contains 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.