

Paging Mr. Tushman

I WOULD HAVE been more nervous about meeting Mr. Tushman if I'd known I was also going to be meeting some kids from the new school. But I didn't know, so if anything, I was kind of giggly. I couldn't stop thinking about all the jokes Daddy had made about Mr. Tushman's name. So when me and Mom arrived at Beecher Prep a few weeks before the start of school, and I saw Mr. Tushman standing there, waiting for us at the entrance, I started giggling right away. He didn't look at all like what I pictured, though. I guess I thought he would have a huge butt, but he didn't. In fact, he was a pretty normal guy. Tall and thin. Old but not really old. He seemed nice. He shook my mom's hand first.

"Hi, Mr. Tushman, it's so nice to see you again," said Mom. "This is my son, August."

Mr. Tushman looked right at me and smiled and nodded. He put his hand out for me to shake.

"Hi, August," he said, totally normally. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

“Hi,” I mumbled, dropping my hand into his hand while I looked down at his feet. He was wearing red Adidas.

“So,” he said, kneeling down in front of me so I couldn’t look at his sneakers but had to look at his face, “your mom and dad have told me a lot about you.”

“Like what have they told you?” I asked.

“Sorry?”

“Honey, you have to speak up,” said Mom.

“Like what?” I asked, trying not to mumble. I admit I have a bad habit of mumbling.

“Well, that you like to read,” said Mr. Tushman, “and that you’re a great artist.” He had blue eyes with white eyelashes. “And you’re into science, right?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, nodding.

“We have a couple of great science electives at Beecher,” he said. “Maybe you’ll take one of them?”

“Uh-huh,” I said, though I had no idea what an elective was.

“So, are you ready to take a tour?”

“You mean we’re doing that now?” I said.

“Did you think we were going to the movies?” he answered, smiling as he stood up.

“You didn’t tell me we were taking a tour,” I said to Mom in my accusing voice.

“Auggie ...,” she started to say.

“It’ll be fine, August,” said Mr. Tushman, holding his hand out to me. “I promise.”

I think he wanted me to take his hand, but I took Mom’s instead. He smiled and started walking toward the entrance.

Mommy gave my hand a little squeeze, though I don’t know if it was an “I love you” squeeze or an “I’m sorry” squeeze. Probably a little of both.

The only school I’d ever been inside before was Via’s, when I went with Mom and Dad to watch Via sing in spring concerts and stuff like that. This school was very different. It was smaller. It smelled like a hospital.

Nice Mrs. Garcia

WE FOLLOWED MR. TUSHMAN down a few hallways. There weren't a lot of people around. And the few people who were there didn't seem to notice me at all, though that may have been because they didn't see me. I sort of hid behind Mom as I walked. I know that sounds kind of babyish of me, but I wasn't feeling very brave right then.

We ended up in a small room with the words OFFICE OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL DIRECTOR on the door. Inside, there was a desk with a nice-seeming lady sitting behind it.

"This is Mrs. Garcia," said Mr. Tushman, and the lady smiled at Mom and took off her glasses and got up out of her chair.

My mother shook her hand and said: "Isabel Pullman, nice to meet you."

"And this is August," Mr. Tushman said. Mom kind of stepped to the side a bit, so I would move forward. Then that thing happened that I've seen happen a million times before. When I looked up at her, Mrs. Garcia's eyes dropped for a second. It was so fast no one else would have noticed, since the rest of her face stayed exactly the same. She was smiling a really shiny smile.

“Such a pleasure to meet you, August,” she said, holding out her hand for me to shake.

“Hi,” I said quietly, giving her my hand, but I didn’t want to look at her face, so I kept staring at her glasses, which hung from a chain around her neck.

“Wow, what a firm grip!” said Mrs. Garcia. Her hand was really warm.

“The kid’s got a killer handshake,” Mr. Tushman agreed, and everyone laughed above my head.

“You can call me Mrs. G,” Mrs. Garcia said. I think she was talking to me, but I was looking at all the stuff on her desk now. “That’s what everyone calls me. Mrs. G, I forgot my combination. Mrs. G, I need a late pass. Mrs. G, I want to change my elective.”

“Mrs. G’s actually the one who runs the place,” said Mr. Tushman, which again made all the grown-ups laugh.

“I’m here every morning by seven-thirty,” Mrs. Garcia continued, still looking at me while I stared at her brown sandals with small purple flowers on the buckles. “So if you ever need anything, August, I’m the one to ask. And you can ask me anything.”

“Okay,” I mumbled.

“Oh, look at that cute baby,” Mom said, pointing to one of the photographs on Mrs. Garcia’s bulletin board. “Is he yours?”

“No, my goodness!” said Mrs. Garcia, smiling a big smile now that was totally different from her shiny smile. “You’ve just made my day. He’s my grandson.”

“What a cutie!” said Mom, shaking her head. “How old?”

“In that picture he was five months, I think. But he’s big now. Almost eight years old!”

“Wow,” said Mom, nodding and smiling. “Well, he is absolutely beautiful.”

“Thank you!” said Mrs. Garcia, nodding like she was about to say something else about her grandson. But then all of a sudden her smile got a little smaller. “We’re all going to take very good care of August,” she said to Mom, and I saw her give Mom’s hand a little squeeze. I looked at Mom’s face, and that’s when I realized she was just as nervous as I was. I guess I liked Mrs. Garcia—when she wasn’t wearing her shiny smile.