

Jack Will, Julian, and Charlotte

WE FOLLOWED MR. TUSHMAN into a small room across from Mrs. Garcia's desk. He was talking as he closed the door to his office and sat down behind his big desk, though I wasn't really paying much attention to what he was saying. I was looking around at all the things on his desk. Cool stuff, like a globe that floated in the air and a Rubik's-type cube made with little mirrors. I liked his office a lot. I liked that there were all these neat little drawings and paintings by students on the walls, framed like they were important.

Mom sat down in a chair in front of Mr. Tushman's desk, and even though there was another chair right next to hers, I decided to stand beside her.

"Why do you have your own room and Mrs. G doesn't?" I said.

"You mean, why do I have an office?" asked Mr. Tushman.

"You said she runs the place," I said.

"Oh! Well, I was kind of kidding. Mrs. G is my assistant."

"Mr. Tushman is the director of the middle school," Mom explained.

“Do they call you Mr. T?” I asked, which made him smile.

“Do you know who Mr. T is?” he answered. “I pity the fool?” he said in a funny tough voice, like he was imitating someone.

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Anyway, no,” said Mr. Tushman, shaking his head. “No one calls me Mr. T. Though I have a feeling I’m called a lot of other things I don’t know about. Let’s face it, a name like mine is not so easy to live with, you know what I mean?”

Here I have to admit I totally laughed, because I knew exactly what he meant.

“My mom and dad had a teacher called Miss Butt,” I said.

“Auggie!” said Mom, but Mr. Tushman laughed.

“Now, that’s bad,” said Mr. Tushman, shaking his head. “I guess I shouldn’t complain. Hey, so listen, August, here’s what I thought we would do today. ...”

“Is that a pumpkin?” I said, pointing to a framed painting behind Mr. Tushman’s desk.

“Auggie, sweetie, don’t interrupt,” said Mom.

“You like it?” said Mr. Tushman, turning around and looking at the painting. “I do, too. And I thought it was a pumpkin, too, until the student who gave it to me explained that it is actually not a pumpkin. It is ... are you ready for this ... a portrait of me! Now, August, I ask you: do I really look that much like a pumpkin?”

“No!” I answered, though I was thinking yes. Something about the way his cheeks puffed out when he smiled made him look like a jack-o'-lantern. Just as I thought that, it occurred to me how funny that was: cheeks, Mr. Tushman. And I started laughing a little. I shook my head and covered my mouth with my hand.

Mr. Tushman smiled like he could read my mind.

I was about to say something else, but then all of a sudden I heard other voices outside the office: kids' voices. I'm not exaggerating when I say this, but my heart literally started beating like I'd just run the longest race in the world. The laughter I had inside just poured out of me.

The thing is, when I was little, I never minded meeting new kids because all the kids I met were really little, too. What's cool about really little kids is that they don't say stuff to try to hurt your feelings, even though sometimes they do say stuff that hurts your feelings. But they don't actually know what they're saying. Big kids, though: they know what they're saying. And that is definitely not fun for me. One of the reasons I grew my hair long last year was that I like how my bangs cover my eyes: it helps me block out the things I don't want to see.

Mrs. Garcia knocked on the door and poked her head inside.

“They're here, Mr. Tushman,” she said.

“Who's here?” I said.

“Thanks,” said Mr. Tushman to Mrs. Garcia. “August, I thought it would be a good idea for you to meet some students who’ll be in your homeroom this year. I figure they could take you around the school a bit, show you the lay of the land, so to speak.”

“I don’t want to meet anyone,” I said to Mom.

Mr. Tushman was suddenly right in front of me, his hands on my shoulders. He leaned down and said very softly in my ear: “It’ll be okay, August. These are nice kids, I promise.”

“You’re going to be okay, Auggie,” Mom whispered with all her might.

Before she could say anything else, Mr. Tushman opened the door to his office.

“Come on in, kids,” he said, and in walked two boys and a girl. None of them looked over at me or Mom: they stood by the door looking straight at Mr. Tushman like their lives depended on it.

“Thanks so much for coming, guys—especially since school doesn’t start until next month!” said Mr. Tushman. “Have you had a good summer?”

All of them nodded but no one said anything.

“Great, great,” said Mr. Tushman. “So, guys, I wanted you to meet August, who’s going to be a new student here this year. August, these guys have been students at Beecher Prep since kindergarten, though, of course, they were in the lower-school building, but they know all the ins and outs of the middle-school program. And since you’re all in the same homeroom, I thought it

would be nice if you got to know each other a little before school started. Okay? So, kids, this is August. August, this is Jack Will.”

Jack Will looked at me and put out his hand. When I shook it, he kind of half smiled and said: “Hey,” and looked down really fast.

“This is Julian,” said Mr. Tushman.

“Hey,” said Julian, and did the same exact thing as Jack Will: took my hand, forced a smile, looked down fast.

“And Charlotte,” said Mr. Tushman.

Charlotte had the blondest hair I’ve ever seen. She didn’t shake my hand but gave me a quick little wave and smiled. “Hi, August. Nice to meet you,” she said.

“Hi,” I said, looking down. She was wearing bright green Crocs.

“So,” said Mr. Tushman, putting his hands together in a kind of slow clap. “What I thought you guys could do is take August on a little tour of the school. Maybe you could start on the third floor? That’s where your homeroom class is going to be: room 301. I think. Mrs. G, is—”

“Room 301!” Mrs. Garcia called out from the other room.

“Room 301.” Mr. Tushman nodded. “And then you can show August the science labs and the computer room. Then work your way down to the library and the performance space on the second floor. Take him to the cafeteria, of course.”

“Should we take him to the music room?” asked Julian.

“Good idea, yes,” said Mr. Tushman. “August, do you play any instruments?”

“No,” I said. It wasn’t my favorite subject on account of the fact that I don’t really have ears. Well, I do, but they don’t exactly look like normal ears.

“Well, you may enjoy seeing the music room anyway,” said Mr. Tushman. “We have a very nice selection of percussion instruments.”

“August, you’ve been wanting to learn to play the drums,” Mom said, trying to get me to look at her. But my eyes were covered by my bangs as I stared at a piece of old gum that was stuck to the bottom of Mr. Tushman’s desk.

“Great! Okay, so why don’t you guys get going?” said Mr. Tushman. “Just be back here in ...” He looked at Mom. “Half an hour, okay?”

I think Mom nodded.

“So, is that okay with you, August?” he asked me.

I didn’t answer.

“Is that okay, August?” Mom repeated. I looked at her now. I wanted her to see how mad I was at her. But then I saw her face and just nodded. She seemed more scared than I was.

The other kids had started out the door, so I followed them.

“See you soon,” said Mom, her voice sounding a little higher than normal. I didn’t answer her.

The Grand Tour

JACK WILL, JULIAN, CHARLOTTE, and I went down a big hallway to some wide stairs. No one said a word as we walked up to the third floor.

When we got to the top of the stairs, we went down a little hallway full of lots of doors. Julian opened the door marked 301.

“This is our homeroom,” he said, standing in front of the half-opened door. “We have Ms. Petosa. They say she’s okay, at least for homeroom. I heard she’s really strict if you get her for math, though.”

“That’s not true,” said Charlotte. “My sister had her last year and said she’s totally nice.”

“Not what I heard,” answered Julian, “but whatever.” He closed the door and continued walking down the hallway.

“This is the science lab,” he said when he got to the next door. And just like he did two seconds ago, he stood in front of the half-opened door and started talking. He didn’t look at me once while he talked, which was okay because I wasn’t looking at him, either. “You won’t know who

you have for science until the first day of school, but you want to get Mr. Haller. He used to be in the lower school. He would play this giant tuba in class.”

“It was a baritone horn,” said Charlotte.

“It was a tuba!” answered Julian, closing the door.

“Dude, let him go inside so he can check it out,” Jack Will told him, pushing past Julian and opening the door.

“Go inside if you want,” Julian said. It was the first time he looked at me.

I shrugged and walked over to the door. Julian moved out of the way quickly, like he was afraid I might accidentally touch him as I passed by him.

“Nothing much to see,” Julian said, walking in after me. He started pointing to a bunch of stuff around the room. “That’s the incubator. That big black thing is the chalkboard. These are the desks. These are chairs. Those are the Bunsen burners. This is a gross science poster. This is chalk. This is the eraser.”

“I’m sure he knows what an eraser is,” Charlotte said, sounding a little like Via.

“How would I know what he knows?” Julian answered. “Mr. Tushman said he’s never been to a school before.”

“You know what an eraser is, right?” Charlotte asked me.

I admit I was feeling so nervous that I didn’t know what to say or do except look at the floor.

“Hey, can you talk?” asked Jack Will.

“Yeah.” I nodded. I still really hadn’t looked at any of them yet, not directly.

“You know what an eraser is, right?” asked Jack Will.

“Of course!” I mumbled.

“I told you there was nothing to see in here,” said Julian, shrugging.

“I have a question ...,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “Um. What exactly is homeroom? Is that like a subject?”

“No, that’s just your group,” explained Charlotte, ignoring Julian’s smirk. “It’s like where you go when you get to school in the morning and your homeroom teacher takes attendance and stuff like that. In a way, it’s your main class even though it’s not really a class. I mean, it’s a class, but —”

“I think he gets it, Charlotte,” said Jack Will.

“Do you get it?” Charlotte asked me.

“Yeah.” I nodded at her.

“Okay, let’s get out of here,” said Jack Will, walking away.

“Wait, Jack, we’re supposed to be answering questions,” said Charlotte.

Jack Will rolled his eyes a little as he turned around.

“Do you have any more questions?” he asked.

“Um, no,” I answered. “Oh, well, actually, yes. Is your name Jack or Jack Will?”

“Jack is my first name. Will is my last name.”

“Oh, because Mr. Tushman introduced you as Jack Will, so I thought ...”

“Ha! You thought his name was Jackwill!” laughed Julian.

“Yeah, some people call me by my first and last name,” Jack said, shrugging. “I don’t know why. Anyway, can we go now?”

“Let’s go to the performance space next,” said Charlotte, leading the way out of the science room. “It’s very cool. You’ll like it, August.”

The Performance Space

CHARLOTTE BASICALLY DIDN'T stop talking as we headed down to the second floor. She was describing the play they had put on last year, which was *Oliver!* She played Oliver even though she's a girl. As she said this, she pushed open the double doors to a huge auditorium. At the other end of the room was a stage.

Charlotte started skipping toward the stage. Julian ran after her, and then turned around halfway down the aisle.

"Come on!" he said loudly, waving for me to follow him, which I did.

"There were like hundreds of people in the audience that night," said Charlotte, and it took me a second to realize she was still talking about *Oliver!* "I was so, so nervous. I had so many lines, and I had all these songs to sing. It was so, so, so, so hard!" Although she was talking to me, she really didn't look at me much. "On opening night, my parents were all the way in back of the auditorium, like where Jack is right now, but when the lights are off, you can't really see that far back. So I was like, 'Where are my parents? Where are my parents?' And then Mr. Resnick, our theater-

arts teacher last year—he said: ‘Charlotte, stop being such a diva!’ And I was like, ‘Okay!’ And then I spotted my parents and I was totally fine. I didn’t forget a single line.”

While she was talking, I noticed Julian staring at me out of the corner of his eye. This is something I see people do a lot with me. They think I don’t know they’re staring, but I can tell from the way their heads are tilted. I turned around to see where Jack had gone to. He had stayed in the back of the auditorium, like he was bored.

“We put on a play every year,” said Charlotte.

“I don’t think he’s going to want to be in the school play, Charlotte,” said Julian sarcastically.

“You can be in the play without actually being ‘in’ the play,” Charlotte answered, looking at me. “You can do the lighting. You can paint the backdrops.”

“Oh yeah, whoopee,” said Julian, twirling his finger in the air.

“But you don’t have to take the theater-arts elective if you don’t want to,” Charlotte said, shrugging. “There’s dance or chorus or band. There’s leadership.”

“Only dorks take leadership,” Julian interrupted.

“Julian, you’re being so obnoxious!” said Charlotte, which made Julian laugh.

“I’m taking the science elective,” I said.

“Cool!” said Charlotte.

Julian looked directly at me. “The science elective is supposedly the hardest elective of all,” he said. “No offense, but if you’ve never, *ever* been in a school before, why do you think you’re sud-

denly going to be smart enough to take the science elective? I mean, have you ever even studied science before? Like real science, not like the kind you do in kits?"

"Yeah." I nodded.

"He was homeschooled, Julian!" said Charlotte.

"So teachers came to his house?" asked Julian, looking puzzled.

"No, his mother taught him!" answered Charlotte.

"Is she a teacher?" Julian said.

"Is your mother a teacher?" Charlotte asked me.

"No," I said.

"So she's not a real teacher!" said Julian, as if that proved his point. "That's what I mean.

How can someone who's not a real teacher actually teach science?"

"I'm sure you'll do fine," said Charlotte, looking at me.

"Let's just go to the library now," Jack called out, sounding really bored.

"Why is your hair so long?" Julian said to me. He sounded like he was annoyed.

I didn't know what to say, so I just shrugged.

"Can I ask you a question?" he said.

I shrugged again. Didn't he just ask me a question?

"What's the deal with your face? I mean, were you in a fire or something?"

"Julian, that's so rude!" said Charlotte.

"I'm not being rude," said Julian, "I'm just asking a question. Mr. Tushman said we could ask questions if we wanted to."

"Not rude questions like that," said Charlotte. "Besides, he was born like that. That's what Mr. Tushman said. You just weren't listening."

"I was so listening!" said Julian. "I just thought maybe he was in a fire, too."

"Geez, Julian," said Jack. "Just shut up."

"You shut up!" Julian yelled.

"Come on, August," said Jack. "Let's just go to the library already."

I walked toward Jack and followed him out of the auditorium. He held the double doors open for me, and as I passed by, he looked at me right in the face, kind of daring me to look back at him, which I did. Then I actually smiled. I don't know. Sometimes when I have the feeling like I'm almost crying, it can turn into an almost-laughing feeling. And that must have been the feeling I was having then, because I smiled, almost like I was going to giggle. The thing is, because of the way my face is, people who don't know me very well don't always get that I'm smiling. My mouth doesn't go up at the corners the way other people's mouths do. It just goes straight across my face. But somehow Jack Will got that I had smiled at him. And he smiled back.

"Julian's a jerk," he whispered before Julian and Charlotte reached us. "But, dude, you're gonna have to talk." He said this seriously, like he was trying to help me. I nodded as Julian and

Charlotte caught up to us. We were all quiet for a second, all of us just kind of nodding, looking at the floor. Then I looked up at Julian.

“The word’s ‘supposedly,’ by the way,” I said.

“What are you talking about?”

“You said ‘supposably’ before,” I said.

“I did not!”

“Yeah you did,” Charlotte nodded. “You said the science elective is *supposably* really hard. I heard you.”

“I absolutely did not,” he insisted.

“Whatever,” said Jack. “Let’s just go.”

“Yeah, let’s just go,” agreed Charlotte, following Jack down the stairs to the next floor.

I started to follow her, but Julian cut right in front of me, which actually made me stumble backward.

“Oops, sorry about that!” said Julian.

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