

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 line at the counter. Julian, Henry, and Miles were sitting at a table toward the back of the room.

Mom had packed me a cheese sandwich, graham crackers, and a juice box, so I didn't need to stand on line when my table was called. Instead, I just concentrated on opening my backpack, pulling out my lunch bag, and slowly opening the aluminum-foil wrapping of my sandwich.

I could tell I was being stared at without even looking up. I knew that people were nudging each other, watching me out of the corners of their eyes. I thought I was used to those kinds of stares by now, but I guess I wasn't.

There was one table of girls that I knew were whispering about me because they were talking behind their hands. Their eyes and whispers kept bouncing over to me.

I hate the way I eat. I know how weird it looks. I had a surgery to fix my cleft palate when I was a baby, and then a second cleft surgery when I was four, but I still have a hole in the roof of my mouth. And even though I had jaw-alignment surgery a few years ago, I have to chew food in the front of my mouth. I didn't even realize how this looked until I was at a birthday party once, and one of the kids told the mom of the birthday boy he didn't want to sit next to me because I was too messy with all the food crumbs shooting out of my mouth. I know the kid wasn't trying to be mean, but he got in big trouble later, and his mom called my mom that night to apologize. When I got home from the party, I went to the bathroom mirror and started eating a saltine cracker to see what I looked like when I was chewing. The kid was right. I eat like a tortoise, if you've ever seen a tortoise eating. Like some prehistoric swamp thing.

The Summer Table

"HEY, IS THIS seat taken?"

I looked up, and a girl I never saw before was standing across from my table with a lunch tray full of food. She had long wavy brown hair, and wore a brown T-shirt with a purple peace sign on it.

"Uh, no," I said.

She put her lunch tray on the table, plopped her backpack on the floor, and sat down across from me. She started to eat the mac and cheese on her plate.

"Ugh," she said after the swallowing the first bite. "I should have brought a sandwich like you did."

"Yeah," I said, nodding.

"My name is Summer, by the way. What's yours?"

"August."

"Cool," she said.

“Summer!” Another girl came over to the table carrying a tray. “Why are you sitting here? Come back to the table.”

“It was too crowded,” Summer answered her. “Come sit here. There’s more room.”

The other girl looked confused for a second. I realized she had been one of the girls I had caught looking at me just a few minutes earlier: hand cupped over her mouth, whispering. I guess Summer had been one of the girls at that table, too.

“Never mind,” said the girl, leaving.

Summer looked at me, shrugged-smiled, and took another bite of her mac and cheese.

“Hey, our names kind of match,” she said as she chewed.

I guess she could tell I didn’t know what she meant.

“Summer? August?” she said, smiling, her eyes open wide, as she waited for me to get it.

“Oh, yeah,” I said after a second.

“We can make this the ‘summer only’ lunch table,” she said. “Only kids with summer names can sit here. Let’s see, is there anyone here named June or July?”

“There’s a Maya,” I said.

“Technically, May is spring,” Summer answered, “but if she wanted to sit here, we could make an exception.” She said it as if she’d actually thought the whole thing through. “There’s Julian. That’s like the name Julia, which comes from July.”

I didn’t say anything.

“There’s a kid named Reid in my English class,” I said.

“Yeah, I know Reid, but how is Reid a summer name?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I just picture, like, a reed of grass being a summer thing.”

“Yeah, okay.” She nodded, pulling out her notebook. “And Ms. Petosa could sit here, too. That kind of sounds like the word ‘petal,’ which I think of as a summer thing, too.”

“I have her for homeroom,” I said.

“I have her for math,” she answered, making a face.

She started writing the list of names on the second-to-last page of her notebook.

“So, who else?” she said.

By the end of lunch, we had come up with a whole list of names of kids and teachers who could sit at our table if they wanted. Most of the names weren’t actually summer names, but they were names that had some kind of connection to summer. I even found a way of making Jack Will’s name work by pointing out that you could turn his name into a sentence about summer, like “Jack will go to the beach,” which Summer agreed worked fine.

“But if someone doesn’t have a summer name and wants to sit with us,” she said very seriously, “we’ll still let them if they’re nice, okay?”

“Okay.” I nodded. “Even if it’s a winter name.”

“Cool beans,” she answered, giving me a thumbs-up.

Summer looked like her name. She had a tan, and her eyes were green like a leaf.

One to Ten

MOM ALWAYS HAD this habit of asking me how something felt on a scale of one to ten. It started after I had my jaw surgery, when I couldn't talk because my mouth was wired shut. They had taken a piece of bone from my hip bone to insert into my chin to make it look more normal, so I was hurting in a lot of different places. Mom would point to one of my bandages, and I would hold up my fingers to show her how much it was hurting. One meant a little bit. Ten meant so, so, so much. Then she would tell the doctor when he made his rounds what needed adjusting or things like that. Mom got very good at reading my mind sometimes.

After that, we got into the habit of doing the one-to-ten scale for anything that hurt, like if I just had a plain old sore throat, she'd ask: "One to ten?" And I'd say: "Three," or whatever it was.

When school was over, I went outside to meet Mom, who was waiting for me at the front entrance like all the other parents or babysitters. The first thing she said after hugging me was: "So, how was it? One to ten?"

"Five," I said, shrugging, which I could tell totally surprised her.

“Wow,” she said quietly, “that’s even better than I hoped for.”

“Are we picking Via up?”

“Miranda’s mother is picking her up today. Do you want me to carry your backpack, sweetness?” We had started walking through the crowd of kids and parents, most of whom were noticing me, “secretly” pointing me out to each other.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“It looks too heavy, Auggie.” She started to take it from me.

“Mom!” I said, pulling my backpack away from her. I walked in front of her through the crowd.

“See you tomorrow, August!” It was Summer. She was walking in the opposite direction.

“Bye, Summer,” I said, waving at her.

As soon as we crossed the street and were away from the crowd, Mom said: “Who was that, Auggie?”

“Summer.”

“Is she in your class?”

“I have lots of classes.”

“Is she in *any* of your classes?” Mom said.

“Nope.”

Mom waited for me to say something else, but I just didn’t feel like talking.

“So it went okay?” said Mom. I could tell she had a million questions she wanted to ask me.
“Everyone was nice? Did you like your teachers?”

“Yeah.”

“How about those kids you met last week? Were they nice?”

“Fine, fine. Jack hung out with me a lot.”

“That’s so great, sweetie. What about that boy Julian?”

I thought about that Darth Sidious comment. By now it felt like that had happened a hundred years ago.

“He was okay,” I said.

“And the blond girl, what was her name?”

“Charlotte. Mom, I said everyone was nice already.”

“Okay,” Mom answered.

I honestly don’t know why I was kind of mad at Mom, but I was. We crossed Amesfort Avenue, and she didn’t say anything else until we turned onto our block.

“So,” Mom said. “How did you meet Summer if she wasn’t in any of your classes?”

“We sat together at lunch,” I said.

I had started kicking a rock between my feet like it was a soccer ball, chasing it back and forth across the sidewalk.

“She seems very nice.”

“Yeah, she is.”

“She’s very pretty,” Mom said.

“Yeah, I know,” I answered. “We’re kind of like Beauty and the Beast.”

I didn’t wait to see Mom’s reaction. I just started running down the sidewalk after the rock, which I had kicked as hard as I could in front of me.

Padawan

THAT NIGHT I cut off the little braid on the back of my head. Dad noticed first.

“Oh good,” he said. “I never liked that thing.”

Via couldn't believe I had cut it off.

“That took you years to grow!” she said, almost like she was angry. “Why did you cut it off?”

“I don't know,” I answered.

“Did someone make fun of it?”

“No.”

“Did you tell Christopher you were cutting it off?”

“We're not even friends anymore!”

“That's not true,” she said. “I can't believe you would just cut it off like that,” she added snottily, and then practically slammed my bedroom door shut as she left the room.

I was snuggling with Daisy on my bed when Dad came to tuck me in later. He scooped Daisy over gently and lay down next to me on the blanket.

“So, Auggie Doggie,” he said, “it was really an okay day?” He got that from an old cartoon about a dachshund named Auggie Doggie, by the way. He had bought it for me on eBay when I was about four, and we watched it a lot for a while—especially in the hospital. He would call me Auggie Doggie and I would call him “dear ol’ Dad,” like the puppy called the dachshund dad on the show.

“Yeah, it was totally okay,” I said, nodding.

“You’ve been so quiet all night long.”

“I guess I’m tired.”

“It was a long day, huh?”

I nodded.

“But it really was okay?”

I nodded again. He didn’t say anything, so after a few seconds, I said: “It was better than okay, actually.”

“That’s great to hear, Auggie,” he said quietly, kissing my forehead. “So it looks like it was a good call Mom made, your going to school.”

“Yeah. But I could stop going if I wanted to, right?”

“That was the deal, yes,” he answered. “Though I guess it would depend on why you wanted to stop going, too, you know. You’d have to let us know. You’d have to talk to us and tell us how you’re feeling, and if anything bad was happening. Okay? You promise you’d tell us?”

“Yeah.”

“So can I ask you something? Are you mad at Mom or something? You’ve been kind of huffy with her all night long. You know, Auggie, I’m as much to blame for sending you to school as she is.”

“No, she’s more to blame. It was her idea.”

Mom knocked on the door just then and peeked her head inside my room.

“Just wanted to say good night,” she said. She looked kind of shy for a second.

“Hi, Momma,” Dad said, picking up my hand and waving it at her.

“I heard you cut off your braid,” Mom said to me, sitting down at the edge of the bed next to Daisy.

“It’s not a big deal,” I answered quickly.

“I didn’t say it was,” said Mom.

“Why don’t you put Auggie to bed tonight?” Dad said to Mom, getting up. “I’ve got some work to do anyway. Good night, my son, my son.” That was another part of our Auggie Doggie routine, though I wasn’t in the mood to say Good night, dear ol’ Dad. “I’m so proud of you,” said Dad, and then he got up out of the bed.

Mom and Dad had always taken turns putting me to bed. I know it was a little babyish of me to still need them to do that, but that’s just how it was with us.

“Will you check in on Via?” Mom said to Dad as she lay down next to me.

He stopped by the door and turned around. "What's wrong with Via?"

"Nothing," said Mom, shrugging, "at least that she would tell me. But ... first day of high school and all that."

"Hmm," said Dad, and then he pointed his finger at me and winked. "It's always something with you kids, isn't it?" he said.

"Never a dull moment," said Mom.

"Never a dull moment," Dad repeated. "Good night, guys."

As soon as he closed the door, Mom pulled out the book she'd been reading to me for the last couple of weeks. I was relieved because I really was afraid she'd want to "talk," and I just didn't feel like doing that. But Mom didn't seem to want to talk, either. She just flipped through the pages until she got to where we had left off. We were about halfway through *The Hobbit*.

"Stop! stop!" shouted Thorin," said Mom, reading aloud, "but it was too late, the excited dwarves had wasted their last arrows, and now the bows that Beorn had given them were useless.

"They were a gloomy party that night, and the gloom gathered still deeper on them in the following days. They had crossed the enchanted stream; but beyond it the path seemed to straggle on just as before, and in the forest they could see no change."

I'm not sure why, but all of a sudden I started to cry.

Mom put the book down and wrapped her arms around me. She didn't seem surprised that I was crying. "It's okay," she whispered in my ear. "It'll be okay."

"I'm sorry," I said between sniffles.

"Shh," she said, wiping my tears with the back of her hand. "You have nothing to be sorry about. ..."

"Why do I have to be so ugly, Mommy?" I whispered.

"No, baby, you're not ..."

"I know I am."

She kissed me all over my face. She kissed my eyes that came down too far. She kissed my cheeks that looked punched in. She kissed my tortoise mouth.

She said soft words that I know were meant to help me, but words can't change my face.

Wake Me Up when September Ends

THE REST OF September was hard. I wasn't used to getting up so early in the morning. I wasn't used to this whole notion of homework. And I got my first "quiz" at the end of the month. I never got "quizzes" when Mom homeschooled me. I also didn't like how I had no free time anymore. Before, I was able to play whenever I wanted to, but now it felt like I always had stuff to do for school.

And being at school was awful in the beginning. Every new class I had was like a new chance for kids to "not stare" at me. They would sneak peeks at me from behind their notebooks or when they thought I wasn't looking. They would take the longest way around me to avoid bumping into me in any way, like I had some germ they could catch, like my face was contagious.

In the hallways, which were always crowded, my face would always surprise some unsuspecting kid who maybe hadn't heard about me. The kid would make the sound you make when you hold your breath before going underwater, a little "uh!" sound. This happened maybe four or five times a day for the first few weeks: on the stairs, in front of the lockers, in the library. Five

hundred kids in a school: eventually every one of them was going to see my face at some time. And I knew after the first couple of days that word had gotten around about me, because every once in a while I'd catch a kid elbowing his friend as they passed me, or talking behind their hands as I walked by them. I can only imagine what they were saying about me. Actually, I prefer not to even try to imagine it.

I'm not saying they were doing any of these things in a mean way, by the way: not once did any kid laugh or make noises or do anything like that. They were just being normal dumb kids. I know that. I kind of wanted to tell them that. Like, it's okay, I'm know I'm weird-looking, take a look, I don't bite. Hey, the truth is, if a Wookiee started going to the school all of a sudden, I'd be curious, I'd probably stare a bit! And if I was walking with Jack or Summer, I'd probably whisper to them: Hey, there's the Wookiee. And if the Wookiee caught me saying that, he'd know I wasn't trying to be mean. I was just pointing out the fact that he's a Wookiee.

It took about one week for the kids in my class to get used to my face. These were the kids I'd see every day in all my classes.

It took about two weeks for the rest of the kids in my grade to get used to my face. These were the kids I'd see in the cafeteria, yard time, PE, music, library, computer class.

It took about a month for the rest of the kids in the entire school to get used to it. These were the kids in all the other grades. They were big kids, some of them. Some of them had crazy hair-cuts. Some of them had earrings in their noses. Some of them had pimples. None of them looked like me.