

## Christopher's house

I was really bummed when Christopher moved away three years ago. We were both around seven then. We used to spend hours playing with our Star Wars action figures and dueling with our light sabers. I miss that.

Last spring we drove over to Christopher's house in Ridgeport. Me and Christopher were looking for snacks in the kitchen, and I heard Mom talking to Lisa, Christopher's mom, about my going to school in the fall. I had never, ever heard her mention school before.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

Mom looked surprised, like she hadn't meant for me to hear that.

"You should tell him what you've been thinking, Isabel," Dad said. He was on the other side of the living room talking to Christopher's dad.

"We should talk about this later," said Mom.

"No, I want to know what you were talking about," I answered.

"Don't you think you're ready for school, Auggie?" Mom said.

"No," I said.

"I don't, either," said Dad.

"Then that's it, case closed," I said, shrugging, and I sat in her lap like I was a baby.

"I just think you need to learn more than I can teach you," Mom said. "I mean, come on, Auggie, you know how bad I am at fractions!"

"What school?" I said. I already felt like crying.

"Beecher Prep. Right by us."

"Wow, that's a great school, Auggie," said Lisa, patting my knee.

"Why not Via's school?" I said.

"That's too big," Mom answered. "I don't think that would be a good fit for you."

"I don't want to," I said. I admit I made my voice sound a little babyish.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do," Dad said, coming over and lifting me out of Mom's lap. He carried me over to sit on his lap on the other side of the sofa. "We won't make you do anything you don't want to do."

"But it would be good for him, Nate," Mom said.

"Not if he doesn't want to," answered Dad, looking at me. "Not if he's not ready."

I saw Mom look at Lisa, who reached over and squeezed her hand.

"You guys will figure it out," she said to Mom. "You always have."

"Let's just talk about it later," said Mom. I could tell she and Dad were going to get in a fight about it. I wanted Dad to win the fight. Though a part of me knew Mom was right. And the truth is, she really was terrible at fractions.

It was a long drive home. I fell asleep in the backseat like I always do, my head on Via's lap like she was my pillow, a towel wrapped around the seat belt so I wouldn't drool all over her. Via fell asleep, too, and Mom and Dad talked quietly about grown-up things I didn't care about.

I don't know how long I was sleeping, but when I woke up, there was a full moon outside the car window. It was a purple night, and we were driving on a highway full of cars. And then I heard Mom and Dad talking about me.

"We can't keep protecting him," Mom whispered to Dad, who was driving. "We can't just pretend he's going to wake up tomorrow and this isn't going to be his reality, because it is, Nate, and we have to help him learn to deal with it. We can't just keep avoiding situations that . . ."

"So sending him off to middle school like a lamb to the slaughter . . ." Dad answered angrily, but he didn't even finish his sentence because he saw me in the mirror looking up.

"What's a lamb to the slaughter?" I asked sleepily.

"Go back to sleep, Auggie," Dad said softly.

"Everyone will stare at me at school," I said, suddenly crying.

"Honey," Mom said. She turned around in the front seat and put her hand on my hand. "You know if you don't want to do this, you don't have to. But we spoke to the principal there and told him about you and he really wants to meet you."

"What did you tell him about me?"

"How funny you are, and how kind and smart. When I told

Just you read *Dragon Rider* when you were six, he was like, "Wow, I have to meet this kid!"

"Did you tell him anything else?" I said.

Mom smiled at me. Her smile kind of hugged me.

"I told him about all your surgeries, and how brave you are," she said.

"So he knows what I look like?" I asked.

"Well, we brought pictures from last summer in Montauk," Dad said. "We showed him pictures of the whole family. And that great shot of you holding that flounder on the boat!"

"You were there, too?" I have to admit I felt a little disappointed that he was a part of this.

"We both talked to him, yes," Dad said. "He's a really nice man."

"You would like him," Mom added.

Suddenly it felt like they were on the same side.

"Wait, so when did you meet him?" I said.

"He took us on a tour of the school last year," said Mom.

"Last year?" I said. "So you've been thinking about this for a whole year and you didn't tell me?"

"We didn't know if you'd even get in, Auggie," answered Mom. "It's a very hard school to get into. There's a whole admissions process. I didn't see the point in telling you and having you get all worked up about it unnecessarily."

"But you're right, Auggie, we should've told you when we found out last month that you got in," said Dad.

"In hindsight," sighed Mom, "yes, I guess."

"Did that lady who came to the house that time have something to do with this?" I said. "The one that gave me that test?"

"Yes, actually," said Mom, looking guilty. "Yes."

"You told me it was an IQ test," I said.

"I know, well, that was a white lie," she answered. "It was a test you needed to take to get into the school. You did very well on it, by the way."

"So you lied," I said.

"A white lie, but yes. Sorry," she said, trying to smile, but when I didn't smile back, she turned around in her seat and faced forward.

"What's a lamb to the slaughter?" I said.

Mom sighed and gave Daddy a "look."

"I shouldn't have said that," Dad said, looking at me in the rearview mirror. "It's not true. Here's the thing: Mommy and I love you so much we want to protect you any way we can. It's just sometimes we want to do it in different ways."

"I don't want to go to school," I answered, folding my arms.

"It would be good for you, Auggie," said Mom.

"Maybe I'll go next year," I answered, looking out the window.

"This year would be better, Auggie," said Mom. "You know why? Because you'll be going into fifth grade, and that's the first year of middle school—for everyone. You won't be the only new kid."

"I'll be the only kid who looks like me," I said.

"I'm not going to say it won't be a big challenge for you, because you know better than that," she answered. "But it'll be good for you, Auggie. You'll make lots of friends. And you'll learn things you'd never learn with me." She turned in her seat again and looked at me. "When we took the tour, you know what they had in their science lab? A little baby chick that was just hatching out of its egg. It was so cute! Auggie, it actually kind of reminded me of you when you were a little baby . . . with those big brown eyes of yours . . ."

I usually love when they talk about when I was a baby, but sometimes I want to curl up into a little tiny ball and let them

hug me and kiss me all over. I miss being a baby, not knowing stuff. But I wasn't in the mood for that now.

"I don't want to go," I said.

"How about this? Can you at least meet Mr. Tushman before making up your mind?" Mom asked.

"Mr. Tushman?" I said.

"He's the principal," answered Mom.

"Mr. Tushman?" I repeated.

"I know, right?" Dad answered, smiling and looking at me in the rearview mirror. "Can you believe that name, Auggie? I mean, who on earth would ever agree to have a name like Mr. Tushman?"

I smiled even though I didn't want to let them see me smile. Dad was the one person in the world who could make me laugh no matter how much I didn't want to laugh. Dad always made everyone laugh.

"Auggie, you know, you should go to that school just so you can hear his name said over the loudspeaker!" Dad said excitedly. "Can you imagine how funny that would be? Hello, hello! Paging Mr. Tushman!" He was using a fake high, old-lady voice. "Hi, Mr. Tushman! I see you're running a little behind today! Did your car get rear-ended again? What a bum rap!"

I started laughing, not even because I thought he was being that funny but because I wasn't in the mood to stay mad anymore.

"It could be worse, though!" Dad continued in his normal voice. "Mommy and I had a professor in college called Miss Butt."

Mom was laughing now, too.

"Is that for real?" I said.

"Roberta Butt," Mom answered, raising her hand as if to swear. "Bobbie Butt."

"She had huge cheeks," said Dad.

"Nate!" said Mom.

"What! She had big cheeks is all I'm saying."

Mom laughed and shook her head at the same time.

"Hey hey, I know!" said Dad excitedly. "Let's fix them up on a blind date! Can you imagine! Miss Butt, meet Mr. Tushman. Mr. Tushman, here's Miss Butt. They could get married and have a bunch of little Tushes."

"Poor Mr. Tushman," answered Mom, shaking her head. "Auggie hasn't even met the man yet, Nate!"

"Who's Mr. Tushman?" Via said groggily. She had just woken up.

"He's the principal of my new school," I answered.