

## 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

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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?"

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"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.

## Home

As soon as we had walked at least half a block from the school, Mom said: "So . . . how'd it go? Did you like it?"

"Not yet, Mom. When we get home," I said.

The moment we got inside the house, I ran to my room and threw myself onto my bed. I could tell Mom didn't know what was up, and I guess I really didn't, either. I felt very sad and a tiny bit happy at the exact same time, kind of like that laughing-crying feeling all over again.

My dog, Daisy, followed me into the room, jumped on the bed, and started licking me all over my face.

"Who's a good girlie?" I said in my Dad voice. "Who's a good girlie?"

"Is everything okay, sweetness?" Mom said. She wanted to sit down beside me but Daisy was hogging the bed. "Excuse me, Daisy." She sat down, nudging Daisy over. "Were those kids not nice to you, Auggie?"

"Oh no," I said, only half lying. "They were okay."

"But were they nice? Mr. Tushman went out of his way to tell me what sweet kids they are."

"Uh-huh." I nodded, but I kept looking at Daisy, kissing her on the nose and rubbing her ear until her back leg did that little flea-scratch shake.

"That boy Julian seemed especially nice," Mom said.

"Oh, no, he was the least nice. I liked Jack, though. He was nice. I thought his name was Jack Will but it's just Jack."

"Wait, maybe I'm getting them confused. Which one was the one with the dark hair that was brushed forward?"

"Julian."

"And he wasn't nice?"

"No, not nice."

"Oh." She thought about this for a second. "Okay, so is he the kind of kid who's one way in front of grown-ups and another way in front of kids?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Ah, hate those," she answered, nodding.

"He was like, 'So, August, what's the deal with your face?'" I said, looking at Daisy the whole time. "'Were you in a fire or something?'"

Mom didn't say anything. When I looked up at her, I could tell she was completely shocked.

"He didn't say it in a mean way," I said quickly. "He was just asking."

Mom nodded.

"But I really liked Jack," I said. "He was like, 'Shut up, Julian!' And Charlotte was like, 'You're so rude, Julian!'"

Mom nodded again. She pressed her fingers on her forehead like she was pushing against a headache.

"I'm so sorry, Auggie," she said quietly. Her cheeks were bright red.

"No, it's okay, Mom, really."

"You don't have to go to school if you don't want, sweetie."

"I want to," I said.

"Auggie . . ."

"Really, Mom. I want to." And I wasn't lying.